Makoto no Monogatari: Ikigai

by bg3929, ShadowAccio6181, UncertainAngel

Summary

Ikigai. A reason for being. A purpose for life; the thing that one lives for. It can also be considered an encompassing joy, a sense of purpose and meaning and a feeling of well-being.

In possibly the most ridiculous—and fortunate—of circumstance, I have finally find mine.

It might just a hallucination, but... I love everything about this world. I love my family, my friends, the cultures... and especially all of the new opportunities that I didn't have before. I've finally found my *ikigai*. Maybe that's why I get so annoyed when circumstances try to ruin that.

This is my story.

Notes
I have a discord now! \(^{\wedge}_{\wedge})/ -> https://discord.gg/zHQw7Eq
Wishes and hopes and dreams don't always come true. That's life. Life's not really nice, or fair. And sometimes, when they do come true, people end up wishing that they'd never made that wish in the first place.

However, sometimes... sometimes you get lucky.

I think I did.

I'm not sure when it started. My memories of the transition are really fuzzy. That's probably because of the circumstances behind everything, to be honest. Have you ever experienced that lazy lethargy in the mornings? When you didn't set your alarm, because you don't have anything to do, and you're free to wake up when you wish, as you wish? And you don't want to wake up, you don't want to have to face everything, so you just stay in that warm, drowsy embrace of your duvet cover and pillow?

That's kind of how I felt for the longest time.

In that state where you don't have to worry about anything, where you don't want to care about anything, where you just don't want to move in fear that you'd lose that state. And when someone tries to pull you out of it, you get grumpy and sulky and just try to burrow farther into the nest of blankets? Time doesn't seem to apply in that situation. Neither do worries or stresses or... anything, really.

And when you're a stressed high-school student who only recently realized the gravitas of the world in what basically amounts to mentally aging about half a decade in less than one year... and already having a midlife crisis? Well... I basically was regretting every decision in my life, before hand. I felt like I'd wasted so much time, that I wasted my life. I wished that I could have learned things earlier, that I could have gone back to... probably around third, fourth grade? I'd had so many opportunities... and I didn't take any of them. I wasted so much time.

And so, when nothing came to shake me out of that state of grumpy lethargy? Well, it just lasted. And lasted. And lasted longer.

I should have probably realized sooner, but... I'm not the most observant person.

No, that's not an exaggeration. Once, my family set up a Christmas tree in the living room... which is connected to our kitchen, where I eat dinner. I only realized it was there halfway through dinner,
about three hours after it arrived, and only after my parents pointed it out. I'd been wondering when
they got new pine-scented air fresheners.

Yeah… that's not really an air freshener, though it does smell pretty good.

And then… I have two little brothers. They shared a room… and I only realize that my youngest
brother finally got his own bed about five months after the bed arrived.

In my defense, we co-exist via mutual ignorance… and I never really go into their room. That time,
I'd been looking for a book or something, I think.

There were also other examples, like when I thought Justin Bieber was Justin Beaver, and something
like Mickey Mouse, or Elmo, or Barney, or the Groundhog… for almost four years? Over four years.
I realized in 6th grade… only after the others girls at school started feuding over the One Direction
versus Justin Bieber thing.

I don't watch a lot of TV… or really do a lot of anything involving socializing or what's popular. I
usually kept my head in my books. They were more interesting.

(I also have difficulty understanding sarcasm, certain jokes, and various references, but that's another
story. Funnily enough, the incomprehension of sarcasm goes both ways— I don't understand when
others use sarcasm… and they almost never get it when I do, either.)

And… did you know that infants can't see clearly until they're about… I actually don't know. But I
got kicked out of my drowsy state… sometime. Several months after I was born. It could have been
one… or five. I was too busy trying to not wake up to actively register time.

But how do I know? Because that's when my new parents took me to see a doctor.

...

...yeah. Apparently, it's not normal for babies to… essentially, not do anything, including not
tracking toys. That's what they were. I thought it was something like a weird dream, you know?
Those half-remembered snippets that you ignore and go back to sleep when you hit the 'snooze'
button?

That was probably the first time I went outside the house, which marked an end to my… let's call it,
'mini-sleep coma.'

But… I won't go into details.

Let's just say… for some reason, everything seems really loud, and really big, and just really…
overwhelming. I… I cried. I'll admit it. I started crying. And that really panicked large human
transportation device #2. Who handed me to large human transportation device #1. Who I realized I
should probably call 'mom.'

And I realized that no, I legitimately did not understand a single word of what was going on.

Even for me, that's a bit of a record.

I cried more.

The good news, I managed to (eventually) figure out that the language going around me was
Japanese. No, I'm not a miracle baby (actually, on second thought, I kind of am… I think? But… no!
No thought tangents! Back to the point!). It's not too hard. I was exposed to quite a few languages in
my past life, and it wasn't English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or... well, Japanese has a distinct sound. The romantic languages (which come from Latin) have a... almost watery, or... no, not watery. Machine-gun feel. But... like a machine-water-gun feel. It's this continuous flow of words, with longer vowels held for emphasis at times.

Germanic languages, on the other hand, are more... guttural. Consonant-filled. Chinese is... Chinese. It's really quickly-paced, too, but in a different way than Spanish. How do I know? Well... in my other life, I was Chinese. I don't think I died... so, I don't think I can call it my 'past life.' Though, that would also work, I suppose... it's not like I have anyone to argue with what I decide.

I had long black hair and brown eyes. I had a few friends. Not a lot, but... more than sufficient. I was not a stereotypical Asian, despite the fact that I liked anime and had decently high grades. They weren't good... they usually hovered in the low A- to A range, but... they weren't bad. They just weren't that good. I had a good life, with nice parents. I never took Chinese lessons, though, though I was... 'homeschooled' in that aspect. Not really. I could barely read anything, and my vocabulary was about that of a preschooler's. I was relatively fluent, though— I was fluent enough for many people around me to use me as a translator, sometimes. I started learning Spanish in fourth grade, and... I think I was my school's Accelerated Spanish III course. I was... was I planning on learning AP Spanish next year? I don't really remember, but... it doesn't matter now. And, to be honest, that's a bit of a shock... but a nice shock. It's like a breath of fresh air. I don't have to worry about school.

I also studied singing privately, so I know—or at least how to pronounce— German, Italian, French, and... that's it, I think?

Yeah.

And one of my friends was half-Japanese. Is half-Japanese. Wait... my friends and family. I should worry, I guess? Did I just... disappear or something?

...I don't want to think about that, though. This is like... a really nice dream. I don't want to wake up from it. And... we were drifting apart, anyways, so... I don't really feel that regretful. For anything. I should probably feel more, but... I'm just kind of... apathetic. The memories... they're not really associated with emotions. I don't know why. But I think I'm relieved. I want to be happy.

But... that's not the point. The point is that her mother spoke Japanese. And I also watched anime. The point is, I know how Japanese sounds. And I'm pretty sure this is it.

My next big shock was realizing that... yup. I'm in the Naruto-verse... I think. I'm pretty sure that's the only place those terrifying... medic-nin-uniform-things exist. To be fair, I might have recognized some things earlier. That might be the Hokage monument that I saw flashes of.

But I'm myopic. Nearsighted.

...rather, I was myopic. Now... infants' eyes don't fully develop until they're... I'll hazard a guess and say, 'toddlers?' I don't know. I don't know how to speak... this. But I'm pretty sure that I might not be myopic. That's awesome.

I'm not joking. That is awesome. I really don't like glasses, and hard contact lens are annoying... and often hurt. As for why I don't like glasses... I'm clumsy. I lose them and/or break them. That's... not good. Plus, my mother often harped on about my eyes and... let's just say that I am thrilled. To be able to see, clearly...

I thank whichever higher being decided to smile upon me and give me this opportunity from the bottom of my heart.
Wait… opportunity. Will… will this end? I don't know. I don't want it to. I had always envied some anime characters. They had interesting lives. They had motivation, a clear-cut goal that they could see. They had bonds of friendship tested by fire. I… I want that. Maybe it's selfish of that, but… I want to be selfish.

I love it so much here… I want another chance, a restart. Besides, it's not they'd miss me for long, anyways.

So… please, whatever let this happen. Whether my grandma really is looking out for me… or there is some higher deity. Thank you, and… please don't take this away from me. Please?

...Apart from my internal revelations, I also have some external revelations. Things are… awkward… when you're not in that hazy sorta-asleep state. Life got so much harder. It's not boring. I've longed for this state of nothing-much-to-do. Though, to be honest… I have quite a bit to do.

For one, I have so much trouble with just… moving. My arms, legs… general body. And don't get me started on my fingers. I used to play piano. I used to dance. This is… highly not acceptable. (And improvement is really slow. I also get easily discouraged. But then I just sleep.)

Seriously. I love sleeping. And it's quite nice having two… well, they're kind of like servants. I make sure to not make a fuss, and they normally leave me alone in this child-proofed room (and baby bed) for long periods of time, but… it makes you feel really powerful when all you have to do is scream, and then someone comes running.

I'm not kidding. I thought I saw a spider crawling in front of me once, when I woke up, and… well, luckily, the spider wasn't on the bar of the bed. It was on the window, and what I saw was the shadow. Unluckily… let's just say that my parents panicked, and smothered me for the two hours after. Two entire hours of getting my… lower extremities… inspected for a rash and of having large giants invading my personal space is not fun.

And it's also one of the worst ways to discover that you've switched… um… reproductive organs. Yes. I now have the anatomically accurate body of a male infant.

It just looks weird. It doesn't feel too weird… the male part, that is. The infant part's too overwhelmingly weird for me to worry about anything else. Again… I'm more surprised it took me this long to realize. Then again… I have a diaper. Oh, and that reminds me… diaper rash is the worst. No, I'm not describing it, but… it's really not comfortable.

Other than the general awkwardness on my part, my new parents are really nice. Like… really nice. And they're really affectionate, too. It's weird.

Currently, I've been trying to act normal, which means crying, pooing, getting my diaper changed, and eating but… I'm also doing my best to not bleach my mind sometimes.

I have a new sympathy for my little brothers. My new parents… they coo at me. And blow raspberries on my stomach. And tickle me. And have I mentioned that, for some reason, just like in my past life, I'm super ticklish?

And… all while I'm naked?

But they are nice. But a bit weird. Like, a while after my birth, I remember going on this… trip? That was my first no-don't-freak-out moment. There was a cart… and some large animal. I think it was a horse, but I couldn't actually see it clearly.
There was also a shinobi with really pretty hair and a nice voice. Okaa-san knew… her? Him? I actually don't know, but Okaa-san knew shinobi-san really well. I really liked shinobi-san's hair. We went to this… I think it was a shrine. I met my… "Obaa-san," my grandmother. I only remember warm brown eyes, a rather wrinkled face, and gray hair in a bun. I spent most of my time with her grabbing at her necklace, which was this jade pendant on a string with some beads. I remember being dressed up in something a bit heavier and stiffer than normal. It was a formal outfit. I think it was a kimono, though thankfully tied with a cord. Obaa-san carried me up a set of steps, a guy with a kimono and weird hat-thing said something, and we left. So, it was cool, but… rather uneventful. I think I like Obaa-san though. I think she's nice. I wish I could have spent a bit longer with her.

Another time, they made this really big deal out of dinner. I'm not sure whether the red plates are important, but they were pretty, I'll admit that.

As another example, sometime during… late spring, I think? They gave me this samurai doll, and put up these fish-shaped banners. I just smiled, giggled, and tried to wonder why.

It's also weird that I have have, like… at least one doctor's appointment every week. I'm not sure when it started? Maybe because of my sleep-coma? The good news is that language immersion programs really work, and my parents are awesome… even if I haven't left the house to do anything more than visit the doctor's, yet. But through a bit of previous vocabulary, and hearing everything repeated constantly, as well as my parents' patience—and many, many flashcards— I've figured out the language to the point where I understand what everyone's saying. Mostly.

However, I have no clue how I'll start talking. Or when I should. I've started gurgling sometimes, now, though, after the medic-nin started checking my mouth and throat and tickling me to make noises. I'm not sure what to do, but… I try. I laugh. I pout. I make funny faces. I try and get my tongue to twist, to fold. By this point, I'm getting a little bored, but… my first tooth arrives. And suddenly, I'm wishes for the sweet, merciful grasp of boredom.

It hurts. I've always been a little bit of a crybaby, but now that I am actually a baby… I see no reason to hold back the waterworks. I've also gotten a bit spoiled, admittedly, but that's nothing new. I gnaw at everything in an effort to ignore the pain. I prefer my sheets, because they're convenient. Sometime during that haze of pain and discomfort, my second tooth arrives… then my third… and by the time my first birthday rolls around, I'm the proud owner of seven baby teeth.

My first birthday. That was… also weird. I realized that I should be crawling several months ago, during… I think around fall? All I know is that it was really, really warm… and sticky… and just several degrees of not fun. Crawling around helped that, and then walking, too. The walking was especially useful when the days started to get colder, and I needed to grab my blanket from wherever in the room I'd left it.

Usefulness aside, though… learning to walk was not fun. My butt hurt so much… and I'm pretty sure I bruised my tailbone at least once. Thankfully, babies are quite resilient.

I've also managed to figure out a bit of the helicopter-parenting- I think I was born after the Kyūbi attack, and… something happened that makes everyone worry about whether I'm healthy. All I know… is that I somehow have white hair, even though my mother, my Okaa-san, is really pretty, with shiny brown hair that reaches to her shoulders and equally warm eyes. My Otou-san, my father, is a tall man, with black hair already streaked lightly with gray at the temples and lightly sun-tanned skin, along with these amazing amber, almost orange-ish eyes that twinkle with laughter. Me? White hair. Ghost-pale skin. And blue eyes. I think.

My eyes are… unique. They're kind of this blue-green mix, and it's really, really weird. In fact, everything about me is a pretty weird. My new coloration is probably something that can only be
found in an anime. For one, my hair is white, and it practically glows when under direct sunlight. My eyes, as mentioned before, are a scarly-bright bluish-green that looks pretty unnatural. That's helped by the fact that my eyes themselves are light, but have a really dark, thick ring around the iris—I think it's called the limbal ring? And… I'm actually still annoyed that boys always have the nicest eyelashes. I mean, it's pretty awesome now that I am a boy, but… it's still so unfair for Before-me.

I mentioned before my eyes are scary? They are. I scare myself sometimes. Like, this one time Okaa-san was carrying me into the bathroom, but the lights were off (except for what came in through the window), and I thought I was a ghost.

Apart from that, though… my face actually looks pretty similar to what I had before… I think. Or at least, similar to my younger photos… not my baby pictures. Before, I looked liked a meter-long sausage squashed into baby clothes. Now… I'm a lot smaller, a bit more delicate, a lot softer and pudgier due to the baby fat… but I think I'll end up with a similar bone structure, at least before puberty in this body hits.

Oh, no. Even my ears are the same. I hated my ears! I still hate my ears. The tops are folded in, I have no ear lobes, and they're just smaller than they should be.

I hope they'll change.

I am still young, so hopefully that changes. Babies normally have small ears, right? And my nose is still too big. Maybe it's just insecurities speaking, but… gah! Then again, I am just a baby, so it'll probably change… at least a little. I hope. Because right now, it looks especially wide. Okay, I'll admit, it's mainly just insecurities talking. According to my mother before, my nose was probably the most auspicious feature on my face, according to some esoteric branch of Chinese fortune-telling. I had a good nose, my younger brother had good eyebrows, and my youngest brother had a good head shape. I have no idea what most of them mean, but… yay?

Other than that… my hair seems a bit too light, and even a bit thin… but that might just be because I'm not used to how short it is, compared to what I'm used to.

So, all in all… I look both the same and very, very different. I'm not sure if that's good or not, but… it's me, now, I guess. So… meh. I'm not unhappy with anything, thankfully. It's easy to complain, but I'm actually pretty grateful. My body functions more-or-less correctly, to the best of my knowledge. Of course, I currently don't really look like I have eyebrows, but… I'm praying that that also changes.

For the most part, though… I look like a really weird baby.

I'm not sure why I don't resemble either of my parents, though. I'm pretty sure I'm not adopted… I think that the medic-nin attributed my characteristics to the Kyūbi no Kitsune, the Nine-Tailed Fox. I was born after the attack, from what I can decipher, and… I think something happened during my gestational period? I think the best decision is just to roll with it. It's not like weird hair colors are uncommon in anime, either… I'm hoping that's it, and not some weird, deep, nefarious reason. It probably doesn't matter, right?

Back to the subject— my first birthday party. It's… a bit weird. I'm not even talking about the fancy clothes I'm dressed up in, or the ridiculously large quantities of food that my new mother, my Okaa-san, cooked. I'm talking about the insanely heavy block of… something… that my parents attached to my back and encouraged me to walk with.

The weirdest thing? Unless my ears are deceiving me, I'm pretty sure that 'something' was mochi. As
in, that sticky, sweet, dessert-thing made from rice that you eat?

The candles and mochi (that I got to eat) were a nice touch, though. Even being a baby doesn't really change my sweet tooth.

One of the most anxiety-inducing parts of the entire day, however, was the erabitori ceremony… thing. Okaa-san and Otou-san had surrounded me with this circle of objects. There was a brush pen, money, a ruler, chopsticks… and more stuff that I can't remember or name. This is something that's more for fun than anything, and it's supposed to "predict" what a child will do later in life. I panicked. I grabbed the brush pen… then the money… and then just decided to grab everything. Hey, I can be pretty indecisive, okay?

My second year of life… was a bit more boring. But at the same time, less boring.

Pretty early in the year, I'd gotten sick. Very sick. It was a really miserable time, and… well, it turns out that my lungs are a bit weak. I'm still mildly allergic to pollen, and I (again) have asthma. I think. I'm pretty sure it's asthma.

I practically went to the doctor's office every day, and let me tell you, getting poked with glowing hands, despite the initial novelty, gets a bit annoying after a while.

After I recovered, my parents got even more protective. I didn't really leave the house that often, though they did carry me outside sometimes, and pointed out various objects, teaching me their names. I practiced the pronunciation diligently.

It's also around this time that they moved me from my raised baby-bed to a fūton, which is basically a mattress and a duvet that are laid on the floor. Okaa-san or Otou-san fold it and store it inside of the closet during the day. There are two parts—a shikibuton (the mattress) and a kakebuton (the duvet). I normally only get to use the shikibuton, because my parents are afraid… that I'll suffocate myself? I think that was the word they used.

Learning a language is a bit easier when you have an idea about what people are probably saying.

Being the only child of a rather well-off couple has its perks. My bedroom is enormous. I love it, to be honest. The floor is currently carpeted in this thick material that I can fall face-first on and still not get hurt. It's not really a carpet though— just a rug. A wonderful, soft, thick, plush rug in a beautiful soft grey. Okaa-san and Otou-san, my new mother and father, added the rug when I started walking, after several scares. I'm… not the most graceful as a toddler.

It's around this age that I learn more about my parents. You see, my parents own a tea shop. And they worry if I'm out of their sight. This wouldn't be as big a problem had I been older, since we live right above the tea shop, but… well, I now have a "playpen" in the corner of the tea shop, behind the counter.

I… feel a bit like a cute little pet, or animal, with how visitors come over and coo over me.

I don't like that. As a result, I normally just try to close my eyes, drift off slightly, and either disconnect myself or lose myself in trying to make plans and remember the timeline. Basically, anything that keeps me motionless and allows me to pretend that I'm not there. I get even better at not thinking. It turns out that this is similar to meditating, because after I got really good at clearing my mind and not thinking, I discovered my chakra.

Yes, that chakra. The physical and mental energies found in all living things.

Maybe it's because I'm used to a body and a world without chakra, but the bright blue pathways are
clear as day after I shake off some distractions. Playing with the flow of chakra becomes my new favorite pastime, and highly addicting. It takes time, but I've got almost too much of it. I'm very thankful for my weak body at these times, because it gives me an excuse for not being "awake" a majority of the time.

I follow my chakra mentally, tracing each coil. The tenketsu are easy to "see" after a little time. Or... a lot of time. They're pretty hard to find and pin down, especially in the context of their actual locations, but... they shine like little stars. It's hard to actually locate them, though, when I'm not tracing my chakra channels. I circulate the chakra, trying to speed up the flow and sometimes trying to stop it. When I stop it, I feel like I'm practicing my splits as the buildup stretches the pathways. The stretch is painful, but in a good way, and it only becomes overwhelming after I hold it too long. It's surprisingly fun.

Chakra manipulation is mentally exhausting, though, and I'm never able to do this for long before I actually fall asleep. I plan on seeing whether I can reverse the flow next, or send chakra out from the tenketsu.

But... aside from giving me motivation to avoid attracting attention, my playpen also introduces me to some very interesting people over the course of the following months.

Of course, there are some things you should probably know, first. For one, my new family is quite... traditional. I'm pretty sure both of my parents come from old money, but... I'm not sure why they run a tea shop, if that's the case. The thing is, some things don't add up, even when you add in the fact that our tea shop includes services for tea ceremonies. For example, Okaa-san loves ikebana. Both of my parents are great at calligraphy, but Otou-san prefers ink painting.

Our shop... it's actually normal-sized for a large... shop. Most restaurants are about this size, the grocery stores and clothes shops are about the same size, apparently. I think. About 16 meters by 9 meters? So... that's 144 meters, or about 1500 square feet. We just use our space differently.

For one, we don't need that much storage, nor do we need a large kitchen. About two-thirds of the first floor is divided into different tea rooms, lined with tatami. The walls are thicker than normal, though, even if they are covered in rice paper, so a lot of people come here for meetings and stuff. There are three rooms that are about two meters by (a little under than two) meters, which only fit about two people; two rooms that are about 3.5 by 1.5, and three rooms that are large, extra-large, and extra-extra-large (4 x 4.5, 6 x 4, and 6 x 4.5). Mind you, my space perception is probably off, and I'm not usually allowed in there, so... the measurements are estimates only.

There are two entrances— one in the front, by the actual shop part, and the other is at the back. Most people who use the rooms come in from the back, while those who just want to buy tea (or drink tea at a small table while staring outside) come in from the front. Also, if you come from the back, it usually means that Okaa-san or Otou-san knows you.

I'm by the front, so I usually don't see what's happening back there, but from what little I have seen... the people who come in that way are... interesting. There's shinobi, and people in formal clothing and businessmen and pretty geisha and maiko with their thick face paint and colorful kimono.

There's a storage room, and a small "kitchen" area (it's just got a stove for teapots, a sink, several cabinets with teacups and pots, and a small refrigerator with the stuff that people eat as they drink tea) by the desk/checkout area/help desk where Okaa-san or Otou-san usually sit, and I'm on the other side of that, tucked into a corner next to a shelf with— you guessed it— tea.

It smells really nice here, all the time.
We live above the shop. The stairway connecting the upper and lower floors is in a small room right next to the back entrance, in the corner. It goes up to the living room, which is right next to the kitchen/dining room. Right past that is my room, with windows overlooking the street in front of the shop. Next to that is Okaa-san and Otou-san's room, and then, next to the living room, is a guest room that's… pretty barren. It's literally just a really big square room with a really large, room-length closet. Otou-san uses it as his office, though, so there's a cabinet and desk overflowing with paper, too.

My room is… about the same size as the guest room, but that's accounting for my bedroom, wardrobe, and bathroom. It's really big, though it's only a bit more than half the size of Otou-san and Okaa-san's bedroom. I'm happy with it, though. Any bigger, and I'd feel dwarfed by it.

I think I'm very lucky.

The bookshelf of stuffed animals is really a bit much, though. Okaa-san and Otou-san keep on worrying that I was bored, or didn't have enough things to play with… and they overcompensated. I don't think they actually know that much about raising children. I am perfectly happy with my blocks and my pillow. The stuffed animals and more… uh… collectible toys aren't really ideal to sleep with, which I think was the intended function. They're very nice and well-made, sure, but… they're not really… cuddly? They do make really nice decorations, though, and I have fun organizing them and rearranging them and… you know what, I do play with them. I have no shame in admitting that. Mock tea ceremonies are fun, and flowers in general are nice. Plus, the porcelain dolls are pretty, and their little costumes are really colorful and pretty.

I'm a pre-toddler, and even Before, I was a child at heart. I don't care about you, societal opinions, and you can't make me stop being a kid!

But, seriously, learning how to perform tea ceremonies is pretty fun. As is arranging flowers for ikebana. And tea smells nice.

So… back to the topic of my playpen. To be fair, it's more of a pen and bed and chest of drawers and table all mixed into one. It looks expensive. Like, why-on-earth-are-you-giving-this-to-a-toddler expensive. It's a nice, dark wood with pretty carvings and nice drawers and some extra flat space they can leave stuff on, with space for me inside.

I can just get my head over the bars if I stand up, but I can't get myself out of it… or at least, I couldn't when they first got it. But that was when I wasn't even one year old, and by now, I've grown quite a bit (thankfully). Now, with a little care and some maneuvering, I can sit on the flat area at the head and foot of the playpen. It helps that Okaa-san took the mattress out during the summer when I was two.

I don't do that when anyone can see, though. I'd rather not spark a panic and the re-emergence of the helicopter parents.

But even my spot inside the pen is is a nice place to people-watch… and hide from people. The customers are interesting to watch. There's the old lady who comes once a week and always gets green tea and something either fruity or flowery. There's the other old lady… and the other old lady… there are a lot of old ladies. To be fair, there are a lot of old people, in general. It's just the old ladies I'm more familiar with since they come over and pinch my cheeks.

The non-elderly customers… well, they fit into four categories. The largest are the Hyūga. They're kind of easy to pick out after a while. (Yes, they actually have white eyes, and yes, they look rather terrifying. Of course, that's more because they seem so… polite? Cold? Not cold, but… not particularly warm and cuddly.) Next are the other shinobi. They come in a variety of shapes, sizes,
and color, but… they all have that hitai-ate and don't usually make that much noise. They're also scary, but just in the sense that it's terrifying when you're lying down and suddenly someone sticks their face over the edge and ahhhh...where'd you come from!?!?

There are quite a few Yamanaka. They usually deliver flowers, or other plant-related stuff, but they don't come that often. Yamanaka Inoichi-sama is quite nice. He comes about once a month, and Okaa-san often visits Yamanaka Flowers for her ikebana. A lot of flowers have meanings in hanakotoba, the language of flowers, and it's really interesting. There's a lot of symbolism in general, to be honest. For example, wagashi, traditional sweets often served with tea, which are made from mochi and anko, sweet azuki bean paste, is often formed into shapes that represent the season. The ikebana in the rooms also is important, as well as the artwork on the scrolls that Okaa-san hangs on the walls of the tea rooms.

I'm mainly a bit annoyed that it took me three months to figure out who he was.

It took me considerably less time to figure out that another semi-frequent customer, who visits about once every two months, is the head of the Hyūga clan, Hyūga Hiashi-sama. He's very different from Yamanaka Inoichi-sama. He's... really, really intimidating. Thankfully, he isn't the one who arranges for purchase of large quantities of tea. Instead, that task belongs to his twin brother, Hyūga Hizashi-san, who is also intimidating, but not as much. Instead, Hyūga Hiashi-sama and various other Hyūga, who are pretty recognizable, just come by every once in a while to occupy our largest tea room. By 'once in a while,' I mean, about once every few months. It's not that common, and I'm thankful. They're a bit scary... though after that one visit where Hyūga Hiashi-sama discussed traditional painting and calligraphy with Okaa-san, a subject that came from his comments on a new hanging scroll Okaa-san just hung up. Anyone who likes art that much can't possibly be bad.

I established a pretty nice routine. I woke up, ate, got carried downstairs, napped, woke up, watched people, tried to eavesdrop on what they were saying, napped, woke up, watched more people, maybe ate a snack, and just repeated that pattern until someone carried me upstairs to take a bath and sleep.

Sometime during that routine, my second birthday passed... and things changed.

For one, my "routine" stopped really being routine. For example, along the way, I learn that Ichiraku Teuchi-san owns a nearby store, when he comes in to buy some black tea in bulk, along with a set of tea cups. That was interesting, but not that interesting. Like most customers, he's kinda old. And it's not like he has electric blue hair or something. He looks normal. He acts normal. His daughter is kind of shy, but rather nice... even if she really doesn't have much interaction with toddlers. I remember her more than Ichiraku-san. We don't get a lot of younger kids in here.

The most interesting thing, though, happened in April. There was a sudden storm early in the morning, before most of the customers arrived. Okaa-san had run off to... get something(?)... and Otou-san had run upstairs to close all the windows. That was weird in and of itself. Most storms don't start in the morning, and most of them aren't that heavy, either. But... I remember two people running inside. Well, one person. He was carrying the other "person". I remember him well because he was pretty short and... well, he wore black, and only black, from head to toe. His hair was black. His eyes were black. His shirt was black. His pants were black. His shoes were black. Everything else was pale, like an off-white shade. His skin. The bandages just above his shoes. Etcetera.

Oh, and the little "person" was whining. Loudly. He was annoying. He was the loudest thing that had come inside the shop in a while. We don't get a lot of loud people in the shop, and what loud things we do get are usually infants. Like, younger-than-me infants. This was not an infant.

I just remember that he had weird hair. The taller short person also had kinda-weird hair, though, too.
Honestly, a lot of people have weird hair here.

I don't remember what I was thinking, but for one of the first times in my relatively-short life, I raised my voice. "Ohayō!" I called. 'Morning!

It was also funny seeing how the older person slipped in the puddle that had formed around him and barely managed to catch himself.

"Ah… ohayō gozaimasu," he responded. He had a nice voice.

"He's loud," I told him, pointing at the shorter short-person. "Tell him to stop whining. Please?"

"Right. Yes. Shitsureishimashita," he apologized, quickly whispering something to the short person.


"Ah… arigatō," taller person murmured, quickly squelching over and grabbing two, pausing. It makes sense. They're the nice towels. "What towels should I use to… clean up the water?"

I pointed at the cabinet with the rags Okaa-san and Otou-san use to mop up spills. "There."

I paused, watching him quickly towel himself and the really-small person off, before mopping up most of the water.

"Okaa-san and Otou-san should be back soon," I called, deciding to be helpful for some obscure reason.

Taller short person nodded. "May we wait here until the storm dies down?"

I blinked, nodding. "Yup!" I mean, it's not like I can say, 'no, I forbid you from staying here and force you and your…'

"Is he your brother?" I asked, pointing at the shorter short-person. That's the most logical guess, even if they don't really look that alike. The shortest person has bluish tints in his hair that the taller one doesn't have.

"Hai," the taller person nodded. "Oh, my apologies. My name is Uchiha Itachi. This is my brother, Sasuke. It's nice to meet you. Thank you for letting us stay."

"Uh… you're welcome?" I responded, staring slightly. Well. That's… interesting.

And pretty soon, Okaa-san and Otou-san came back, fussied over the two, and brought them inside for larger towels. Then, when the wind quieted down a little, Okaa-san sent them off with an umbrella.

It's really amazing how much just three-to-five minutes can completely baffle a person.

After that, I just... stared at the door. I spent the next week wondering if that had really happened.

Over the course of the next few months, it's as if someone up there decided that I'd had enough peace. I meet Ino-chan, who stops over with Yamanaka-sama for about half-an-hour during a weekend when Otou-san is sick and Okaa-san needs to run an errand.

I am now terrified of her. She decided that I was "cute," tried to give me a makeover, and almost
managed to kidnap me.

I don't know how she managed to get her hands on lipstick, and I'm pretty sure I don't want to know either. What I do know is that I spend the rest of that day glued to Okaa-san.

When summer starts, Okaa-san also starts to bring me outside on walks when she goes to get groceries, and stops by the park for about half-an-hour to let me "play." I don't play. Instead, I go crouch by ant-trail (of which there are many) to watch them instead. I don't like insects that much, and I probably never will, but ant-trails are fascinating to watch when they're not in your house. They're also fun to follow.

I hate getting them on me, though. Ants aren't like bees or ladybugs or butterflies. They're more like spiders. As in, "stay away from me and don't move, and I won't scream or try to kill you." I hate killing spiders. They also creep me out, but they're not that bad when I can pretend they're not there. Their webs are also really cool.

In fact, it's sometime after summer, around September, when I meet Aburame Shino. There was a large spider web at the edge of the park, with an interesting spider perched right in the middle. It was a really pretty web, too, with dew making the entire thing sparkle. I'd been absorbed in looking at it when I looked down… to see a little kid, about my height, in a hooded coat and dark, round sunglasses, also looking at it. I practically jump out of my skin, and for a while, I stare at him instead of the spider web.

I debate just walking away. Instead, I walk around and extend my hand. "Hello. I'm Kobayashi Makoto. Who are you?"

He hesitates before slowly, gingerly accepting my hand and shaking once. "I am Aburame Shino." Then, as if he's used up his social quota of the day, he retreats back into his shell.

"Nice to meet you, Shino-san," I reply, before pausing as I try desperately to fish for an icebreaker. "I think the web is really pretty. What do you think?"

And so begins about ten minutes of companionship. We talk about the spider web, and I show him the trail of ants (which now has an offshoot leading to a discarded apple core).

That was the second time that I decided that I wanted to see someone again. The first time was… with Itachi-san. He was interesting. But he didn't come back, and I couldn't find him. I was determined not to leave any more loose ends behind me. And so I introduced Shino-san to Okaa-san, and we made plans to meet the next morning.

And I was determined. I dragged Okaa-san and Shino-san to find his father, and made sure to get him to promise to bring Shino the next day.

Aburame-sama is very intimidating, but I think he's pretty nice. At the very least, he agreed to bring Shino the next day.

And then, the next day, we meet up again and look at the ants again. Again, I make Aburame-sama promise the bring Shino the day after, and sure enough, the day after, we meet again. And for another half-hour or so, we look at stuff and just… talk. That repeats, and it becomes a pattern. August turns to September, and the leaves turn red and brown and crunchy as the days shorten and get colder. There are hiccups, of course. Sometimes, Shino can't make it one day. Another time, I get sick. Still other times, Okaa-san or Aburame-sama have something they need to do. And other times, I stay with Shino for longer than a half-hour.
Things change in November, when snow starts falling. It gets really cold, really quickly. Our playdates move to the shop and take place less often, around twice a week instead of every day. It's not that bad, though. Shino stays over for longer for when he does visit, and I spend a lot of time just… watching the snow.

I love snow. It seems weirdly heavy, though, and Okaa-san and Otou-san agree. I hear them talking. It's still fun to watch. And it's also fun to watch the people clearing the snow. There aren't cars or anything, so everyone clears the snow by hand. It's fun seeing the fresh, clean blanket in the morning, then the people as they start shoveling little pathways through it, then the little bits of color as the layers of snow thin.

Shino doesn't like the snow as much. He's always cold, and seems a bit slower and grumpier than before. I think it might be because of the bugs? I don't know.

It's during a visit in early December that I invite Shino to my birthday party. It's also in December, not too long after I invited Shino to my birthday party, that I first meet "Ojii-sama." He's probably best known as Hokage-sama or Sandaime-sama. He knows Okaa-san well. He even calls her "Kimiko-chan," which is weird, because she's my Okaa-san. He came over for tea. Because, apparently Okaa-san's birthday is also in December. Cool.

I spent most of that (pretty short) meeting gnawing grumpily on a rice cracker and staring at the weird old man. He's surprisingly short.

He didn't stay for long, either, which I guess makes sense. He dropped by before the shop opened, there was a round of greetings, I was introduced to him, and the adults shared a cup of tea. The only interesting thing I got was that, apparently, the snow was really, really heavy this year. And to be honest, I kinda figured that out for myself.

I did like the weird monkey plushie he gave me, though. It's not furry— it's either knit or crocheted or something— or overstuffed— in fact, it's more the opposite— but I actually like that. It also has a cool storage pouch in its stomach… where I found a toy shuriken. I deadpanned so hard at that.

After he left, I decided to take a nap. I probably shouldn't have. When I woke up, I found a small "pillow" stuffed with ammunition, in the form of small bean bags. I also found a set of two wooden kunai and three shuriken… and Okaa-san and Otou-san arguing over a doll. I only understood little bits and pieces of their conversation. It's something about a friend of Okaa-san, something that's "too expensive" and… it's a bit of a muddle. What I did know was that the doll is pretty and I wanted to hold it. And so, I asked.

Okaa-san and Otou-san broke apart, and Okaa-san rushed over. I asked for the doll. After a brief moment of hesitation, she carefully brought it over and explained that it was a gift to me from a friend of hers, but that there must have been a mistake or somet—

I promptly decided that I liked it and asked to keep it.

And thus began an hour-long conversation about the differences between boys and girls and an explanation of a festival called "Hinamatsuri," which is what the doll was for. There was a long, long "argument" consisting of me stubbornly refusing to relinquish my new toy and Otou-san trying to convince me that it wasn't a toy, and Okaa-san trying to mediate.

Celebrated each year on 3 March, platforms covered with a red carpet-material are used to display a set of ornamental dolls, hina-ningyō, representing the Emperor, Empress, attendants, and musicians in traditional court dress of the Heian period.
So, first off… Hinamatsuri is one of the five seasonal festivals that were held on auspicious dates of the lunar calendar: the first day of the first month, the third day of the third month, and so on. Now, it's just 1 January, 3 March, 5 May, 7 July, and 9 September. This festival was traditionally known as the Peach Festival (桃の節句 Momo no Sekku), as peach trees typically began to flower around the time, and although that's no longer really true, the name stayed the same, as did the symbolism of peaches.

The primary aspect of Hinamatsuri is the display of seated male and female dolls, obina and mebina, usually on red cloth. More elaborate displays will include a multi-tiered doll stand (hinadan) of dolls that represent ladies of the court, musicians, and other attendants, with all sorts of other stuff. The entire set of dolls and accessories is called the hinazakari, and the number of tiers and dolls usually depends on how much money someone wants to spend.

According to Okaa-san, the two main dolls are handed down in her family, and she actually has two that were meant for me… before they realized that I wasn't a girl. Usually, the hinazakari spends most of the year in storage, and girls and their mothers begin setting up the display a few days before 3 March (boys normally do not participate, as 5 May is supposed to be their— sorry, our— festival). Traditionally, the dolls were supposed to be put away by the day after Hinamatsuri. Historically, the dolls were used as toys, but now they're more for display only. The display of dolls usually discontinues when the girls reach 10 years old. According to Okaa-san, that's when the girls in her family get their own personal obina and mebina, so that they can save the traditional ones for their children.

There's also a bunch of traditional foods and so on during the days before the festival, but I don't remember most of the names. There's just something about chirashizushi and mochi and daifuku and… yeah, I forgot the rest. There was something about clams, though.

Basically, the problem here is that I am not a girl. Apparently, Okaa-san's friend is a shinobi, and rather socially awkward, too, so he didn't realize that the hinamatsuri dolls were supposed to be for girls only, and thus not for me. He also, apparently, doesn't have much experience with kids, hence the assortment of presents. I barely had enough time to hide a kunai and shuriken inside my new pillow before Okaa-san and Otou-san confiscated those. They left the pillow, thankfully.

I think I like the pillow. It's made of this tough, canvas-thread-like material and looks as if someone picked all of the brightest threads they could find and wove them together. It's got all my favorite colors, alizarin crimson and viridian green and pthalo blue. Personally, I think the person just picked the most colorful thing they could find. I like this person.

Later on, I drag the pillow and knit-monkey into my room. By then, I've managed to get my way, and I could tell that Okaa-san's really excited. She found the obina and mebina, and she helped carry the dolls to my room. Okaa-san let me hold them, and then showed me how to pack them carefully, promising to leave them inside my closet and help me set them up come May. She made me promise to keep them a secret. I agreed, thrilled to have such pretty dolls.

On my third birthday, I wake up smiling. I even make an effort to put away my fūton— though that's more along the lines of folding it in half and awkwardly dragging it into my closet.

I run to my chair, awkwardly pulling myself. "Ohayō!" I call to Okaa-san and Otou-san. Good morning.

"Ohayō, Makoto-kun!" Okaa-san calls from where she's setting plates down at the table. "Happy birthday!" Otou-san's over by the stove, and he waves.
Soon, Okaa-san passes me a bowl of soup, and another bowl of rice with a tea-stained egg— my favorite! I also get a plate with cold tofu (with negi, chopped green onions, and soy sauce) and grilled saba— mackerel. I love fish, but the bones can sometimes be pretty tricky without Okaa-san's help.

I wait until everyone's sitting down before starting in on the food. "Itadakimasu!" I murmur, clapping my hands together. I'm starving and these are some of my favorite foods!

After breakfast, I brush my teeth and change into the clothes that Okaa-san picked out as she brushes my hair (a pretty simple task, given how short it is) and tugs a majority of it into a small high ponytail. Okaa-san arranges the strands that aren't long enough so that they "frame my face."

I just sit through it. I like it when Okaa-san plays with my hair. It's soothing.

Afterwards, she buttons up the thick, high-collared, fur-lined, knee-length coat that she got for me when snow started falling. It's my favorite. It's this beautiful blue-grey color, and it matches my… general color scheme really well, and it's soft and pretty and… I just really like it, okay? It was a bit loose two months ago, but now it's a bit too tight if I wear more than two layers underneath.

I head over to the front of the shop, taking a seat at one of the tables by a window. The heaters aren't on, so it's nice and chilly. I keep an eye out the window, though my focus moves from the road to the condensation forming on the window. Using my finger, I draw lines and shapes in the window. I'm working on a rather decent rendition of a cat, when the a bell tinkles. My head snaps over to the door. My face breaks into a smile, and I hop off the chair, rushing over to the front.

I bounce on my feet as Shino-kun and his father come in. "Yōkoso," I chirp, bowing quickly. Welcome! "Sorry it's a bit cold out here. I know we usually stay out here… and I know you just got in… but… if you would follow me? There's a back entrance."

I slip on my shoes (which I'd brought just for this reason), holding my slippers in one hand and lead them back out the shop with another tinkle of the bell hanging at the door. After taking two rights, I quickly scramble through the alley, take another right, and quickly slip in through the back door. It is cold.

I trade my shoes for slippers, leaving them on the rack, and gesture for Shino-kun and his father to do the same. Here, it's a bit warmer, and they also leave their coats on the hooks. I fold mine over my arm, shivering a bit, and scurry up the stairs.

"Tadaima, Okaa-san," I call. I'm back!


Shino-kun shifts a little, evidently awkward, before holding out… "A present? For me?" He nods. "Oh, thanks!" I grin excitedly. "Can I open it now, or…"

He nods again, and I almost squeal. Instead I blurt, "Okaa-san, can we go to my room? Please?"

She smiles, and I immediately grab Shino-kun's hand, practically dragging him over to my room.

After introducing Shino-kun to all of my toys, unwrapping his present (a really pretty wire-and-glass butterfly of the type that you usually find in garden shops, but nicer), we sit down at the kitchen table for… the traditional way of celebrating birthdays in Konohagakure. Normally, people here don't
really celebrate birthdays, especially in the more rural regions. However, shinobi villages make a pretty big deal out of birthdays, apparently. I think that the low life expectancies have something to do with that.

A lot of people just spend effort cooking something nice, maybe get a new set of clothes, or spend some time on themself. A lot of people, especially children get sweets. There's an entire set of stuff that represents long life, too. There's also a thing with writing a wish on a leaf and burning it, but that's a bit hard to do year-round, so people often just substitute leaf-shaped pieces of paper.

I just draw a picture, and Otou-san burns it carefully in a bowl.

Then, we get cake and daifuku (mochi stuffed with anko, sweetened red bean paste) and taiyaki (a fish-shaped… pastry?… also filled with red bean paste) and cream anmitsu, a dessert made of small cubes of a type of jelly in a bowl with anko, boiled peas, soft mochi, and fruit, as well as mitsu, a type of sweet black syrup, and in this case, ice cream on top!

I especially like the cake. I got to watch Okaa-san make it, and it's hundreds of… I think crepes… stacked on top of each other with layers of home-whipped semi-sweet cream blended with matcha powder, with more matcha sprinkled on top.

I've seen Youtube videos of this thing Before, and I can assure you, it tastes amazing. It tastes better than it looks, and it already looks awesome. Seriously, I think this is my new favorite type of cake.

After the cake and other sweets, Shino and I go back to my room to play around some more. When you're small, it's surprisingly easy to play hide-and-go seek in your room, especially when you can make the person who's It stay outside the room. Shino's… good at hiding, in the sense that he's very good at making himself small and not moving or making any noise, but… he's not as creative as me. Considering how I routinely find the weirdest— and most uncomfortable, and dangerous— hiding spots, that's probably a good thing. Seriously, while I can fit inside a drawer… and in the cupboard under the sink… and behind clothes on a shelf… I do get a bit claustrophobic at times. It gets warm, hard to breathe… and then I kind of panic. That's not really good. I'm trying to work on that.

When I'm trying to catch Shino after finding him behind the door, a knock sounds. I turn to see Okaa-san and Otou-san with Aburame-sama.

"Oh." I slump. "Is it time for Shino to go?"

Aburame-sama nods, and Shino quickly gets up. "Ah… goodbye, Makoto-san. Happy birthday… and thank you for inviting me," he murmurs quietly, shuffling over to his father. But he pauses, tugging on his father's sleeve. He whispers something, and after a short whispered exchange, he brightens up.

His father turns to face us. "Shino would like to ask whether Makoto-kun would free to visit the Aburame compound on the twenty-third of this month."

I gasp. "Right, it's Shino's birthday, isn't it?"

Shino nods, hunching over slightly. "Since you've been so nice as to invite me… I thought…"

I smile widely, bouncing on my toes. I run over to Okaa-san and Otou-san. "Please? May I go? Pleeeeeaaase?"

Okaa-san relents. "Of course!" She turns to Aburame-sama. "Oh, where should I drop Makoto-kun off? Or…"
"We can come pick Makoto-kun up at… 9:30 in the morning," Aburame-sama suggests. "Would that be agreeable?"

Okaa-san thinks a little, then nods. "Definitely. We shall see you then," she smiles. "Oh, and would you like any of the remaining sweets?"

Shino tugs on his father's sleeve again, and his father responds, "If you have any *taiyaki* left…"

"Of course," Okaa-san responds, heading over to the kitchen.

Otou-san steps out. "No need. I have some right here," he gestures, handing over a foil package.

"Thank you, Kobayashi-san," Shino murmurs.

Otou-san laughs a little. "You're welcome."

Shino pauses… then rushes over. I stiffen in surprise as he hugs me. "Thanks, Makoto."

I smile, returning it. "You're welcome. Really, thanks for coming."

Okaa-san, Otou-san, and I see them down the stairs and to the door, where they bundle up again. I stand in the doorway, waving.

As they leave, I see Shino-kun turning doing the same, and I call, "See you in a few days!"

When they turn the corner, I turn and head back in after Okaa-san. I'm tired. I stretch, yawning behind my hand, as I slump back up the stairs. I brush my teeth, splash some water on my face, and change into pajamas, before wishing Okaa-san and Otou-san goodnight.

That night, wrapped in my *fūton*, I grin.

I get to visit a shinobi compound.

That… is so cool!

---

Though I do not want

To stay in this floating world,

If I should remain here,

No doubt I shall remember fondly

The bright moon of this dark night.

— Emperor Sanjo

心にも

あらで浮世に

ながらへば

恋しかるべき
夜半の月かな
— 三条院

Kokoro ni mo
Arade ukiyo ni
Nagaraeba
Koishikaru beki
Yowa no tsuki kana
— Sanjo In

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Hi everyone! This is ShadowAccio6181. Thank you so much for taking the time to read my story! It's my first story, but I'm really invested in it—this is my third rewrite of this chapter already, and there is a reason I'm posting what is technically the same story again. (-_-)

The poem is from Hyakunin Isshu, an anthology of poems. I borrowed elements from two individual translations of the poem in an effort to make it better suit the tone of this chapter.

Speaking of reviews, though, please review! Even if it's just "hi." Reviews encourage me to keep writing. For reviews with constructive criticism and/or questions, I try to respond whenever possible.

Now, for a little bit of my writing style. The Naruto culture is… an interesting one, to say the least, and I will be diving into it. For example, I plan to introduce and explain a few of the cultural festivals in Japan, especially if they often appear in popular culture—like cherry-blossom-viewing, also known as Hanami. And there are other things that need explaining—for example, Makoto's not going to have pancakes and waffles for breakfast. However, at the same time, unless you ask, I won't be putting a glossary of terms in the Author’s Notes section. (If you ask, I'm perfectly willing, but… yeah.) Though… by that same vein… if anyone is familiar with Japanese language and/or culture, I would highly appreciate it if that person could contact me (provided they they want to help me out).

The next few chapters will, essentially, be educational, introductory filler. Naruto has a large cast of characters, and Konohagakure is a big place. Plus, there are a
bunch of Japanese and Naruto-specific terms that need defining. If it helps, though, the first "arc" will be in chapter 7.

Best regards,

ShadowAccio6181
Of Friendships and Accidents

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto visits the Aburame compound, realizes his parents were in an accident, meets the Hokage, meets a certain protagonist, gets a tour of some parts of Konoha, and realizes that shinobi and chaos go hand in hand with each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the break of day,

As though the light of the lingering moon

Lightened the dim scene,

The village in the leaves lay

In a haze of falling snow.

About three weeks later, I'm practically bouncing at the prospect of finally getting to visit the Aburame compound. Shino's been super secretive about stuff, as in, even more than usual, so I'm metaphorically dying from the anticipation. A couple of days earlier, I went shopping with Okaa-san, and we found this enormous caterpillar plushie to serve as a present! It's like two meters long, and my arms can barely fit around it. Luckily, it's squishy enough that we've managed to fold it in thirds and squeeze it into a box I can actually carry.

It's a beautiful day, too— sunny and delightfully balmy. A surprise, especially for the usually slightly-milder weather of early January. Must be a thaw day.

That should have been warning number one. When something seems too good to be true, it usually is.

Okaa-san dresses me, and I twirl in the mirror. I've got my favorite coat on along with soft grey boots, this amazingly fluffy, dark scarf, and a white knit hat and gloves.

Otou-san is the first to notice.

With a spew of coffee, followed by a series of racking coughs, Otou-san chokes out, "Makoto-kun's not seriously going to Aburame compound in… that?"

"Otou-san, what's wrong?" I ask. I'm confused.

Otou-san takes a deep breath. "Kimiko... anata... I can accept you buying clothes in pastel colors... and bright kimonos... even clothes with floral patterns. But... okay, I know you wanted a girl, but Makoto's..."

Okaa-san pouts. "But Makoto-chan looks so much cuter this way, and I wanted him to make a good
impression. Besides, he's prettier than most girls!"

He sighs. "At least get rid of the sable-fur scarf. Honestly. Why did you put your sable-fur scarf on him? He's three."

I mentally facepalm. Ah, right. This is one of the reasons that my new gender doesn't bother me. Much. I've never really placed much stock in gender. The majority of my clothes in my previous life were mostly neutral tones. Add that to the fact that I had a very not-feminine build, and … yeah.

Using the restroom was something I had first tried to mentally blank out. Honestly, I was too busy trying to ignore the fact that my parents were watching and, occasionally, trying to help me! Then, it had somehow just become second nature… practice does make perfect. Of course, it's still fine to sit on the toilet seat. I just usually need to remember to… aim. MOVING ON!

The point, regardless, is that compared to my one-hundred-and-one worries, I hadn't had much time for worrying about… that. And honestly, that's the only distinction in kids of my age, apart from the clothing.

And my Kaa-san didn't help in regards to the clothing. It's kinda ridiculous that I just realized, but Okaa-san had progressed slowly, and I had made a promise early on to be as good a child to my new parents as possible. So, I hadn't put up a continued fuss to anything.

Apparently, I should have. Oh, well.

But honestly, I prefer this to the onesies. Those are only cute when they're loose, animal-themed, and completely cover the body. The leotard-esque ones for babies do not count. They're uncomfortable and they chafe.

I wait downstairs, at the same table where I'd waited for Shino on my birthday. It's a nice, surprisingly warm, sunny day… and the sunlight streams in through the window, warming the table. It's warm. In fact, it's so warm that I take off my gloves and hat and scarf.

I'm tired. I'd been so excited last night that I didn't get much sleep… and I'd woken up way too early.

I yawn, rubbing my face, before slumping forward. It's still pretty early… surely just closing my eyes for a while will be fine?

Pretty soon, I'm conked out.

I startle awake when an unfamiliar hand starts petting my hair.

"Chichi-ue, she's drooling. Is that normal?"

"Shino…" a voice sighs.

Wait, what? I jolt upright.

Ouch!

My head smacks into something hard… and I hear a loud crack!

I blink groggily. I'm at the table… Aburame-same is sitting next to me… and Shino's on the other side of the table, sitting right opposite me… and I just accidentally headbutted Aburame Shibi-sama.
"I am so, *so* sorry."

I hear a choked cough, and I turn… to see Otou-san doing his best not to laugh. I deadpan, turning back to Aburame-sama.

"I am so sorry, I didn't realize…" that you were there. "Sorry, I was really excited yesterday… and I didn't sleep that much… and…" I pause. "…yeah."

More silence filled with completely unsubtle laughter. I'm very noticeably *not* looking away from the table. The wood grain is really interesting. Still… "I'm sorry for falling asleep and accidentally headbutting you in the face and maybe breaking your nose?"

More silence follows, before I hear the scraping of a chair against the floor and a hand ruffles my hair.

"I will be fine. I *have* had worse… as hard as your skull is, it is not quite strong enough to match an angry Iwa-nin's jutsu. Besides that, the high neckline of our coats is… more than sufficient to… disguise any… discoloration."

I drop my head back into my minds. "Sorry again. Can… we… just go? Please?" I mumble, words muffled by my hands. "Please."

I hear a low chuckle, before there's a tinkle at the door.

"Let's go," Shino calls softly. "I want to show you the butterfly greenhouse. And the spider webs are prettiest in the morning, while there's still dew on them."

I smile in relief, grateful at the lifeline he just threw me. "Yeah, that would be awesome! Let's go!"

---

I think I like this compound. Not because I love bugs. In fact, I used to despise flies. I'm pretty sure I still do. I put a respectful between me and just about everything else.

Except spiders.

I try to stay away… they just always find me.

And I mean, always. I think my mild phobia started when they started following me everywhere.

Everywhere.

At first, it was just the spiders in my bathroom. One, maybe two a year. Then, at least one every month. I hated killing them. At first, I'd tried flushing them down the toilet, but I always felt so guilty afterwards. Sometimes, I'd even cry.

After a while, I either got my Dad, or wrapped them up in a tissue and set them free outside. At some point, they'd stopped.

I chalked my experiences up to coincidence and moved on.

One day, many years later, I opened up my textbook and found two little spiders scrambling between the pages. I shook out my textbook outside, by a tree, during recess and moved on.

Several days later, I was doing homework. At one point, I'd leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling. Well, I'd meant to. I got kinda distracted by this enormous spider that was falling towards me. No, not falling. Descending via a piece of thread… correction, webbing. I'd shrieked and ran to find...
Dad. We moved it outside.

A week or so later, I woke up to find my basil plant, my one basil plant, playing host to over nine little orb spiders and their nests. I just watered the plant and silently freaked out.

I got desensitized very quickly.

That web in the backyard monkey bars that spanned the better part of a square meter? Okay. I left it alone.

That beautiful dew-encrusted spectacle that appeared overnight at school? I admired the artistry from afar.

Perhaps most telling was the past September. On my last day of an overnight, three-day-long field trip with my grade, I had decided that I wanted to take a shower. I opened the shower curtains. There were two spiders. I calmly closed the curtains, washed my hands, and exited the bathroom.

I told my friends, and stayed perched on my sleeping bag while one of my roommates went to dispose of the spiders. I had asked for them to be simply removed, but several of my roommates wanted their deaths, and killing them was, unfortunately, the easiest way.

It turns out, however, that there weren't only two spiders. Another somehow appeared on the other side of the shower stall, one was perched on the walls, one was on the shower curtain, and four fell from the ceiling. There were ten spiders in all. I soon stuffed that in the "do not think" section of my brain and moved on.

Now, though, I can just get Shino or Aburame-sama to help when insects get inside the house. They can actually "talk" with them and shoo them outside the house so the insects don't just keep running themselves into glass windows and lightbulbs.

Anyways back to the subject. Yes. Wait, first let me remedy my earlier statement. My aforementioned "polite distance" did/does not apply to bees. I love(d) bees. They're so vibrant, so industrious, and they make the most delicious honey… ahem. Right.

Back to the compound.

Not all of the compounds are this closely-linked, apparently. Many clans, like the Akimichi or Yamanaka, are very spread-out and don't really have a compound, so much as a general area they occupy. Some have a general area and a central building/house where a lot of them live/work. The Aburame have… a series of houses… the all surround this park-like-place with buildings for… I think research?… and greenhouses and other stuff. There's also a lot of parts underground, so the compound is really big, even if it doesn't look like much.

There are lots of individual sections, like one for arachnids, one for termites, mosquitoes, dragonflies, butterflies, moths, flies (normal, house, and horse), and other rarer creatures. Apart from all being technically "bugs", or "insects," they all have one important thing in common- they have a characteristic that the Aburame are trying to breed into the kikaichū (the insects the Aburame control), they're a species that the Aburame are studying, or have a peculiarity that somehow helps Aburame children develop control of kikaichū.

They never tell me what traits they're trying to develop, why they're studying a species, or how the Aburame actually control the kikaichū, to my disappointment, but I do learn that Shino-kun's currently trying to control spider. He's first trying to get them to weave words into their webs, then entire messages.
Of course, once I heard this, I got really excited. Spider silk is very, very strong. Even in the other world, I had heard of a large piece of clothing being made out of spider silk. Of course, the weaving and everything would have to be done by humans… or maybe not.

I tap Shino on the shoulder. "When you make them spell things, can you also control whether the string is sticky?"

I'm lucky. He's intelligent, but not enough realize that these sentence structures are just a little too mature. Yeah, I probably shouldn't have taken the risk, but I had already exhausted most of my patience for babying. I tried to dumb it down as much as I could… I'm not sure of how much I succeeded.

His answer is concise. "Yes."

I press my train of thought. "Could you also make them put their strings on a spool or something?"

"Webbing. And spools… the ones for sewing?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Would it also be harder to also use, say… ants… to weave things? Like fabrics? So it would also be good practice!"

"Your point?"

"You can use ants to weave spider-silk into fabric! And you told me that spider silk is strong, so it would make really strong clothes!" I mentally wince at my wording, but I'm pretty sure my point is clear.

"... let me ask Chichi-ue."

That's a maybe!

And it turns out that my idea was rather novel, but easily doable. Aburame Shibi-sama was rather intrigued. And Shino's also excited.

The end result is that Shino wants to get started on trying that right away, and if he's successful, I might get a spider-silk scarf on my next birthday. If he's not, it might just be a handkerchief or something, but we're being positive.

It's also them that an Aburame enters the room with an urgent message for Aburame-sama

The message isn't good.

"Makoto-kun… I am afraid that your parents are in the emergency operating room at the Konoha Hospital."

I didn't actually get exactly what happened, but from the hysterical ramblings of Kaa-san's many, many friends, who stopped by the shop, I managed to piece together that Kaa-san and Tou-san were shopping, a cart was skidding out of control due to the icy mess on the streets, and the cart ran into my parents when they rounded a corner, burdened with their many bags.

When I first heard, well, I felt like the universe had a sense of cruel irony. Because the shinobi who
was waiting in the living room of Aburame-sama's house introduced himself as Yamanaka Santa.
Santa!

Well, Santa, I daresay that this is a rather… unwelcome… present.

By now, I've passed the stage of disbelief and have moved on to worry. Slightly hysterical worry.

I chew the fried rice angrily. It's good fried rice, don't get me wrong— Aburame-sama is very nice in cooking, and while he says he's not that good at it, his fried rice is pretty good.

I let out a muffled whine, dropping my head onto the table.


I'm a teenager and… no, I'm actually not anymore, huh? Well, I'm a mature individual, mentally if not physically, and I demand answers!

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I turn around.

Aburame-sama is there, and he pats me on the head. I'm thankful for him. He walked me home and stayed with me as I tried to understand everything that was happening. Shino was tired, so he stayed at his home, but… Aburame-sama is a nice person.

"Do not worry, Makoto-kun. Your parents will be okay."

---

*Knock, knock, knock*

Someone's knocking?

I peek around the banister. Aburame-sama follows behind me.

Wow, the ANBU uniform is really creepy.

"Good afternoon, ANBU-san," I murmur, bowing. "Is… is there something you need?"

My mind immediately flashes to what happened to Okaa-san and Otou-san, but…

"No, Kobayashi-san, merely a task." He pauses. "Has Hyūga Hizashi arrived yet? Or… Mitarashi… Anko?"

I blink, trying to remember their faces amidst the crowd. "No? I don't think so… they might have stopped by, but… do you need them or something?"

Aburame-sama coughs, interrupting. "Hokage-sama is taking charge of this… situation?" he asks ANBU-san.


Aburame-sama nods slowly, before crouching down in front of me. "I should be returning home soon, Makoto. The ANBU will take care of you, and I have confidence that Hokage-sama has everything well in hand. Will you be okay on your own?"

I nod, smiling. "Thank you, Aburame-sama. For everything. Tell Shino I'm sorry that… this interrupted his birthday. I hope he likes the caterpillar."
Aburame-sama gives me a hug, squeezing tightly. "Do not worry, Makoto-kun. I have full confidence that your parents will be okay. And… you will always be welcome at the Aburame compound, if you need us."

My eyes tear up, and I squeeze back, even tighter. "Thank you, Aburame-sama," I whisper.

He gives one last comforting squeeze, then releases me, straightening up. "Call me Shibi, Makoto-kun. I… will be off then. Stay safe." He looks over at the ANBU, who nods, then turns to leave the shop.

"Bye, bye, Shibi-sama!" I call.

The door shuts softly with a tinkle of the bell, and I turn to ANBU-san. "So… do you need Anko-san or Hizashi-san for something?"

The ANBU responds, "No… not precisely." He pauses. "Mitarashi Anko-san enthusiastically accepted a D-rank mission assigned by Hokage-same to… take care of this shop. Hyūga Hiashi-sama was worried about the maturity of Mitarashi-san and her capacity for public relations, and thus assigned Hyūga Hizashi-san to the mission as well."

I blink.

I have a great deal of respect for Hokage-sama. That being said, I'm also starting to believe that the craziness of his shinobi is contagious.

Why? Because I'm pretty sure that having Mitarashi Anko-san man the counter of a tea shop that caters to a primarily civilian clientele is a recipe for a rather big mess… and that reminds me, I should probably put out a sign on the back door.

And while Hyūga Hiashi-sama had undoubtedly good intentions, I have a bad feeling that adding Hyūga Hizashi-san in an effort to rein in Mitarashi Anko-san's… antics… will have the exact opposite result. Anko-san visited only occasionally, mostly for free samples of some of the tea and/or treats or to gawk, but… that's been enough to give me an idea of her character.

Oh, wait. Speaking of the sign… I can't write. As in, I don't know how. I bite my lip, frowning. Hmmmm…

"ANBU-san, did you have anything else you need to do?" I ask.

"I have been ordered to wait until Hyūga Hizashi arrives, then bring you to Hokage-sama to arrange for your… living arrangements," he replies formally.

I suddenly remember my manners. "Oh, wait, ANBU-san, do you want something to drink in the meantime? We have some water, fruit juice, tea, rice crackers…"

The ANBU seems a little shocked, but I have no idea why.

"May I please have some green tea? Sencha, that is," the Anbu asks after a few moments.

"Sure," I chirp, "Asamushi or fukamushi? And hot, right?" Asamushi sencha is "light-steamed" sencha, which means it's steamed for about 30-60 seconds. Fukamushi, or "deep-steamed," on the other hand, is steamed for 1-2 minutes. Asamushi is usually more popular, but…

"Fukamushi, please, and yes, if possible," ANBU-san replies. After a moment, he adds, awkwardly, "...do you need any help?"
I shake my head. "You don't need to. Though, if possible, could you write something for me? I need to put a sign on the back door, and... I don't know how to write," I mumble under my breath.

I quickly grab a mug and kettle from the cupboard, pulling over a stool while I'm at it. In a matter of minutes, I've filled the kettle and left it to heat on the stove.

In the minute or so that it takes for the kettle to start whistling, I've dragged my very tall stool over to the tea cabinets and started rooting around, careful to look at the symbols my parents use as labeling.

Matcha... sweetened matcha... black... rosehip... oolong... oh, that's where the jasmine tea went... chamomile... mint... aha! Sencha!

Thank goodness that sencha is one of the more common teas. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have learned to brew it yet. As it is, the brewing process is rather simple, and one of the first things Kaa-san taught me, apart from the names of the most common teas.

I quickly spoon the leaves into a teapot, a white ceramic one with a filter and handle, before carefully crawling off my stool and going over to the stove as the kettle whistles. I take out another two cups and, pouring some in one cup, pour the water from one to the other to cool the water slightly.

I then place the cup of water on the edge of the counter, hop off my stool, and carry the cup over to the teapot, pouring it carefully over the leaves. I set a small timer as I carefully arrange some senbei on a platter and carry it over to the table.

Turning around, I crawl back onto the stool and grab one of the nice ceramic cups, wiping it with one of the clean cloth squares on the counter. When the timer goes off, I carefully pour the sencha into the cup, careful to get every drop out, gently tap the back of the teapot, and put the lid on, making sure to prop it up so as to not oversteam the tea leaves.

I shuffle over to the guest and present the ANBU with the tea, grabbing a bowl and filling it with some rice crackers as an afterthought. "Here's your sencha, ANBU-san. I also hope you like the senbei. I'll go get some paper and a pen now."

I hurry up the stairs and to Otou-san's office, where I look in the drawers for a sheet of paper and some tape and grab a pen off the desk. I quickly scramble back down the stairs.

"ANBU-san, here's paper and a pen," I murmur. "Could you please write, 'Sorry, we're closed until Okaa-san and Otou-san get out of the hospital. They had an accident.'?"

ANBU-san nods and does as requested... or so I assume. He could be writing the secret of life, and I wouldn't know any better. Still... he is remarkably silent. After he's done writing, I grab the paper. "Thanks, ANBU-san! I'll go put it on the back door, now."

"Do you need any help, Kobayashi-san?" ANBU-san asks.

"...I think I'll be okay," I decide, going to grab my trusty stool. 'Kobayashi-san?' That's... that's my parents, not me. ANBU-san is way too formal.

I carry it down the hall, careful not to bump it against the walls. Let's see... should I tape it on the door? It's paper, though, and I'm not sure it'd stay there.

At the back entrance, I plop the stool down and look around. Let's see... when people first come in, they put their sandals here, then... they go...

Oh, that could work.
I could tape the paper on the wall above the sandals, but people might not read that. I could also tape it to the top of the sandal rack… but it might be better to tape it at eye-level on the noren, the fabric divider we have hanging at the entrance to the hallway. And if I also tape the divider closed, people probably won't walk in.

I'll put it there.

Setting my stool near the wall, I climb up it, keeping a hand on the wall to stabilize myself. Once on it, I wobble a little, but I don't fall. Carefully leaning over, I tape the sign to the fabric, using extra tape to tape the gap in the center of the noren shut.

Hopping off the stool, I examine my handiwork. Yeah. I think that'll do.

I rush back over to the front of the shop… but ANBU-san's not alone. There are… two other people with him. There's a short girl with purple hair, and I squeal. "Anko-san!"

"Hey, little guy," she grins, crouching down. "Isn't this a welcome surprise? I like the new Makoto-kun!"

Yeah… a bit of background info. Until that April last year, I hadn't really bothered talking to people. I'd just smiled, cooed, and waved, for the most part. After April, I tried to change things. I met Shino, and got more outspoken, more like I was Before, and… things changed a bit. I haven't seen Anko-san in a while, though. And even now, I don't talk much with the shinobi customers. I'm too nervous that they'll end up realize I'm… different… and… stuff will happen that I don't want.

I grin at Anko-chan, before turning and waving to Hyūga Hizashi-san. He sometimes gives me sweets.

"Konnichiwa, Hizashi-san!" I chirp, bowing.

"Hello, Makoto-kun," he replies. "Mitarashi-san and I will be helping out at the shop until your Otou-san and Okaa-san get better, okay?"

I nod. "But there are rules!" I count on my fingers. Let's see… to be fair, there's only really one big one. "No going into the rooms, 'kay? Only the three small ones and the storage room and this room." I look at Anko-san especially when I'm saying this. "Otou-san gets upset when you try to sneak in."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

I bite my cheek. I know I'm only a three-year-old, but…

A hand ruffles my hair. "Don't worry, Makoto-kun," Hizashi-san says gently. "I'll make sure Anko-san behaves, okay?"

To my embarrassment, my eyes get shiny, and I hug Hizashi-san, burying my face in the side of his leg. "Thanks," I mumble, voice muffled by the cloth.

"Daijōbu," he responds, patting my head. It's okay.

"Kobayashi-kun, we should be going. Hokage-sama is waiting for you," ANBU-san says.

I huff. "ANBU-san, just call me Makoto. Makoto-kun, if you have to, but Ma-ko-to. Kobayashi-san is Okaa-san or Otou-san."

I grab my jacket from the hanger by the door. "ANBU-san, where are we going?"

"The Hokage tower," ANBU-san responds abruptly.

"Okay," I decide. "Are we just going to… walk there, or…"

An idea hits me. "Can you use some fancy ninja technique?"

"No." The reply is brusk and to the point.

"Please, please, pleeeaaasse? It's really cold."

I put on my best puppy-dog eyes.

"Those won't work on me. I actually have puppies who try and use them when begging for treats. My answer is still no," he responds.

I crank up the cuteness with a slight pout and quivering bottom lip.

"Pleeeeaaasse?"

"No… that… wouldn't be…"

I pinch my hand hard in an effort to bring some tears to my eyes.

"I…" He hesitates, before sighing. "Fine."

ANBU-san looks away, and I hear him mumbling. "How did I succumb to… to puppy-dog eyes?"

I smile brightly. "Thank you so much, ANBU-san!"

He looks away again, and I hear more mumbling. "... that combination technique of yours is deadly."

The ANBU shunshins me to the Hokage Residence. It's awesome. The shunshin, that is. It's almost like flying, but there's none of that stomach-in-throat feeling that you get on roller coasters, just wind in your face and that's awesome because I love going fast.

Oh, right, I haven't mentioned that yet. I'll say that again— I love going fast. In my past life, skiing was one of my favorite hobbies because I loved the feeling of the wind on my face. I hadn't planned on it, but now I really want to learn the Body Flicker Technique.

I'm grinning when ANBU-san comes to a halt on a rooftop, then hops down to the road.

I squeak, tightening my grip. That feeling of free-fall… let's just say my stomach still feels as if it's on top of the roof.

ANBU-san sets me down, dusting me off carefully. "Thanks, ANBU-san," I giggle. "That was fun!"

"You're welcome," ANBU-san responds, before taking my hand and leading me inside the building. It's… really busy. There's lot of shinobi rushing around, some with what seem like mugs of coffee or tea, and others with piles of paper. It's so cool.

ANBu-san steers me around the mess until we've reached a door. He knocks loudly.

A voice grumbles, "Who is it?"

I tilt my head. Wait… isn't that…

"Come in," the voice calls.

ANBU-san opens the door, and pushes me inside. When he goes to close the door, though, the voi—sorry, Hokage-sama, calls, "Ah, Ryōken-san, stay."

ANBU-san… or Ryōken-san bows, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

I poke his leg. "ANBU-san? Is that your name? Ryoken? Isn't that… like, a type of inn or something?"

I suddenly freeze. Oh, wait… oops, I forgot my manners. I immediately spin around and bow to Hokage-sama. "Konnickiwa, Hokage-sama." I rub the back of my neck as I straighten up. "Sorry about that… I was just curious. Oh, and thanks for the monkey! It's really cute!"

Hokage-sama laughs. "Don't worry, Makoto-kun. The inn is actually a ryokan. A ryōken is actually a type of dog. It's a hunting dog." He gets up, walking over. "All of the ANBU are named after animals."

So… like a hound? Ah. That makes sense… I guess.

Hokage-sama crouches down in front of me. "So… you know your parents… have… gotten into an accident."

My mood drops immediately. I nod. "Hai… I know they're in the Hospital, and that they'll be there for a long time, but…" I scowl at the ground. "How… how hurt are they?" I ask, looking up.

Hokage-sama sighs. "They broke some bones and have some… really big cuts. Your Okaa-san and Otou-san will need to stay in the hospital for a while."

I took this to mean that there were lacerations and maybe even a compound fracture, and I sigh. "They'll… they'll be okay, though… right?"

Hokage-sama straightens up, smiling gently. "Of course. You don't have to worry, Makoto-kun."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama." I meant it. Thank you for not being like Kaa-san's friends, who still speak in that babyish voice when talking to me. "So… what should I do? You wanted me here… but…"

"Normally, you would be taken care of by a family member, or a close friend, or… in your case, your kyōfu." Wait, what's that? "However… he's currently on a mission, and so he can't take care of you." He puffs on his pipe. "I, on the other hand, am right here, am more than capable of taking care of a child, and owe Kimiko-chan for doing the same for Asuma in the past." He smiles. "So, what do you think? Do you think you can tolerate being with Hiruzen-ojiisan for a day?"

"Hai!" I laugh, before calming myself and bowing again. "Arigatō… Hokage-sama."

"Just call me Ojii-san," he insists. "I've spent far too many missions babysitting Kimi-chan. I insist."


"Ah." Hokage-sama rubs his chin. "Well, I guess I won't get anything better than that. And Kimiko is your Okaa-san's first name. But Kimi-chan sounds cuter, wouldn't you agree?"
Okay. Now I feel really awkward. I didn't even know my Okaa-san's first name! Wait… my eyes widen in horror. "Then… what's Otou-san's name?"


I whimper, plopping down on the floor and curling up into a ball. Just… let me sink into the floor right now. If I don't see them, maybe they don't see me?

"Hokage-sama?" I ask, voice muffled. "Is there a jutsu to make someone disappear?"

"Yes. Yes there is."

"Can I learn it?" I whine.

"...Maybe later," he concedes. "For now, there's another individual around your age who I think you might like to meet. Why don't you get up?"

Still embarrassed, I obey, albeit hesitantly. Hokage-sama turns to ANB—Ryōken-san. "Please escort Makoto-kun to… to the room. You may remove the cloak, while you're at it." He chuckles. "I know how much you despise that thing."

"Hai, Hokage-sama." And with that, the scary black cape-thingy is removed, and quickly stuffed into a scroll with a puff of smoke. Sorry, sealed.

I practically choke on my tongue. It's Kakashi!

I mean, ANBU-san's got that hair! And even the name fits!

...Well, here's hoping that this won't set a precedent for any future encounters with shinobi!

"Follow me. You can play in this room, here." Hokage-ojiisama opens a door, gesturing for me to walk in. "Feel free to use the chairs. I have some other toys left over from when Asuma was young in a box."

"Thanks," I chirp, walking in… only to freeze as my eyes land on a spiky mop of yellow hair.

"Makoto-kun?" Hokage-sama asks. "Is… something wrong?"

I blink. Somehow, I don't think saying 'Yeah. That's the main character of this series.' would go well… so I go with my other train of thought. "That hair is yellow."

Two blue eyes blink, and I hear a strangled cough from the direction of Hokage-sama.

I continue. "Did you fall into paint or something? Because I refuse to believe that hair that shade of yellow is natural." I tilt my head. "And I think you had an very neat accident with markers, too… though you should be careful. It's not good if you get them too close to your eyes."

Behind me, ANBU-san makes a sound a bit like a chicken.

I nod decisively. I've dug myself in this far, I may as well keep going. "It's either that or you're a weird Inuzuka who likes cats instead of dogs." I think. "Maybe one of your parents is an Inuzuka and the other is a Yamanaka? That might explain the yellow hair…"

ANBU-san runs out the room, and I hear choked laughter from outside. When I look up at Hokage-sama, he's covering his eyes and shaking his head.
"Makoto-kun… I can assure you, Naruto-kun is not related to the Inuzuka or Yamanaka in any way that I know. His yellow hair is natural, as are the… markings… on his face."

After a deep breath, he removes his hand, though very noticeably does not look at me… or Naruto. Instead, he turns around. "Naruto-kun, this is Makoto-kun. He will be… keeping you company for a while today, since his parents are in the Hospital. Play nicely!" With that, he leaves, shutting the door.

And just like that, we're alone in the room.

I turn to Naruto-san, but before I can make the first move, he interrupts.

"How old're you? When's your birthday? Why's your hair white? I know ANBU’s hair's white, but he's probably old, like the Old Man. Your eyes're really pretty. They look like mine, but a bit darker! What's'at about a dog? I don't really like dogs, since they sometimes bite, but I really don't like cats, 'cause their claws are super sharp and hurt, like, a lot. I like ramen, though! Do you like ramen? Ooh, what's your favorite flavor? How many bowls can you eat? I like tonkotsu! I really don't like the bamboo shoots, but I really like meat! Oh, and I want to be the Hokage when I grow up, and an awesome ninja! What 'bout you?"

Bombarded by the questions, I take a moment to sort things out, then take a deep breath.

"I'm three. My birthday was in December. My hair is white because of something that happened before I was born. I'm pretty sure that ANBU-san isn't that old. Thank you. The Inuzuka are a shinobi clan whose members usually have dogs. They often have these red triangles on their faces." I take a deep breath. "I haven't had ramen yet, so I don't know my favorite flavor, or how many bowls I can eat. I don't really like menma, bamboo sprouts, either, but I really like tea-stained eggs. I also like sweets, but only when they're not too sweet. What I want to be when I grow up? I don't really know, yet."

Naruto somehow manages to follow all of this.

"Wow, you seem super smart! You know lots of words grown-ups use!" He pauses, and a look of shock sinks over his face. "Wait, you've never had RAMEN?!"

I can practically hear the capital letters. I'm too stunned to do much more than nod. However, Naruto grabs my hand as he swings around and dashes for the door. Wow. He is strong… or I'm just a bit weak and probably too light for my age.

"OldManOldManOldManOldMan… Makoto's never had RAMEN before! NEVER! We have to fix this!"

I shakily regain my feet and try to hold Naruto back. "Naruto…-san," I hiss, trying to drag him back to the playroom, "Hokage-sama is busy!"

Luckily, Hokage-sama isn't offended. He just laughs, waving off my concerns. Apparently, Naruto does this a lot.

"You have already had lunch at Ichiraku, Naruto-kun," Hokage-sama sighs. "And I think… have you eaten yet, Makoto-kun?"

I nod. "Aburame-sama made fried rice."

He smiles. "In that case… maybe some other time, Naruto-kun, okay?"
Naruto grumbles and looks to be on the verge of protesting, but Hokage-sama manages to appease him with an offer. "Now, instead, why don't I show you two around some of the places in Konoha that you probably haven't been to before? I daresay you haven't been to the Library yet, and if my shinobi are any good, you shouldn't have been allowed into the Academy or Mission Assignment, much less the Aviary."

I bit my cheek. "Aren't… aren't you busy, Hokage-sama? I wouldn't want to be a bother…"

"I think I have enough time to take a break. Besides…” he winks. "It would be a shame to spend such a nice day indoors."

The Library is awesome. It's just across the street from the Hokage Residence, and it's enormous. It's three stories tall, has a basement on top of that, and covers practically every topic, ninja or civilian. There are also tables where people can read, though not many people are in here now.

It looks like… like… like the coolest thing ever.

"This is awesome," I breathe out in awe, spinning around.

Naruto, however, does not quite share my awe.

"This is boring. When're we goin' to do something fun?"

"Patience, Naruto-kun," the Hokage replies, "Let Makoto-kun have his fun. We'll be going back to the Hokage Tower now, but I plan to show you some of the… harder to access areas. After all, you know where my office is, but the Tower also contains the Academy and Mission Assignment. You want to become Hokage, correct, Naruto-kun? If so, you had better know what being a shinobi means, first."

"Umm…. Hokage-sama?" I ask, tugging on his robe.

He turns to me. "Yes, Makoto-kun?"

"We can go to the Hokage Tower now, if Naruto-san wants… and you can just call me Makoto! But… how do you take books out of the Library?" A question strikes me. "And where did ANBU-san go?"

He smiles. "Thank you, Makoto. And I'm sure that Naruto-kun is very pleased to hear that. As for checking books out, well, civilians can get a card with a registration number which allows them to check out all civilian books. Academy students can get a pass with a registration number and seal that will let them into the shinobi section, though they can only check out basic books. As shinobi progress up the ranks, they are allowed to access more of the books. And as for Inu-san… well, he's taking the opportunity to read a book he's been waiting a long time for. Don't worry, I gave him permission, and he'll catch up us soon."

"Okay. And that's really cool! Do you think I can get a card now? But I also want to read stuff about being a shinobi… even though I actually can't read anything now," I sigh. "Still… everyone says that being a shinobi is cool, but I don't know anything about it!"

I scowl, biting back the urge to complain more. Because seriously, information is scarce in this world. For me, a kid who grew up in the digital age of internet, who's accustomed to being able to Google basically anything, a scarcity of information is frustrating.

Naruto frowns. "Why? Books are boring…"
Hokage-sama, on the other hand, thinks over my request. "Well… I understand your point, Makoto-kun. It is true that you might find it difficult to find a shinobi with the time and ability to answer many of your questions… and it is not as if I don't trust Kimiko-chan... " He sighs. "Well, I suppose I do have the authority to sign off on such a card… so Makoto-kun, I see no problem. Think of it as another birthday present." He crouches down, setting a hand on my shoulder, "You will have to promise me, however, that you do not lose this card. In addition, you should not give other people the books you check out… or lose them. Indeed, if I give you this card, I would prefer it if you did not tell anyone about the card, or take books out of the Library."

He sounds really serious. I nod. "Promise."

He straightens up, smiling. "Besides, as a teacher, I must encourage your eagerness to learn. And I feel you would find some of the material here much too advanced for your age, though it will provide an incentive to learn to read and write soon, right?"

I blink. "Uh… learn to read and write?" I ask, trying to mentally decipher everything he just said. I rub my face. "Yeah. I can already write my name in hiragana… and I know some hiragana…" I flush. Maybe I got a bit ahead of myself. "I might need to ask Okaa-san for help… a lot of help… and I probably won't be able to actually do anything with the card for a long, long time… but…" I bury my head in my hands. "It's fine if you don't actually give me a card now… I wasn't really thinking…"

Hokage-sama chuckles, patting my head. "Do not worry. Come, let us get your library card sorted out." I look up, eyes widening. He smiles. "An investment for the future is always a wise choice. Then, why don't we explore the Hokage Tower? I think you will want to see the Academy." The Hokage holds out his hand.

I smile and take it.

With my library card attached to a lanyard around my neck, I scamper alongside Hokage-sama and Naruto-san as they walk through the deserted hallways of the Academy.

It's so cool!

Naruto's amazed by the taijutsu and jutsu practice stations that he can see through the window, but I'm more awed by the enormous classrooms.

I'm currently sitting at one of the desks, which is just a little too big for me. Even discounting my size, however, the desk is really big. There are all these drawers and places for storage, and I have a clear view of the blackboard at the front.

Naruto's at the window, looking outside, and the Hokage puffs calmly on his pipe beside him.

As I lean my head on my arms, I think of how peaceful the scene is. I like this, I realize.

And of course, the peaceful scene ends right there as we hear rapid footsteps outside, in the hall. The door slams open to a gasping… chūnin? Well, he's definitely a shinobi.

"Hokage-sama! New influx of paperwork! So many people have arrived at the mission desk that we've had to call in some of the chūnin on break. Mostly D-ranks, but it seems that bandits took advantage of the annual visit to various shrines by civilians to raid some towns, and the messengers with those C-ranks were delayed by the earlier snowfall, but they've arrived now, and there's at least one B-rank in the stack, too! I apologize for disturbing you on your day off, but we need you at your desk!"
The Hokage sighs as the messenger runs off again.
"I am sorry children, but it seems that I must resume the duties of a Hokage… maybe we could continue this some other time?"

I chirp up, "Can't Naruto-san and I watch you? Or play quietly in a separate room? I promise that we'll do our best to be quiet. Won't you, Naruto-san?"

I elbow him slightly, and he squirms away. "Right, Jii-chan!"

He sighs. "Well, I admit that it would be faster than walking you two back to my office. Just… stay out of the way of the shinobi, okay?"

---

Well, it turns out that receiving missions is very different from assigning missions.

The building is more like two building under the same roof. The Academy is on the first two floors, and the Hokage Tower/Mission Assignment are mostly above that, though it has a separate entrances by the street. Mission request desks are on the the first floor, and everything else is above that.

Still, the architecture isn't what catches my attention first… it's the desk. Or more specifically, the mountain of paper on top of it and around it.

I'm not even exaggerating as much as I could be. There's foot-tall stacks of paper on the table, and stacks of various heights all around it.

I'm not sure if that's "paperwork," but I'm still very intimidated. Even if Hokage-sama only has to just read through everything… well… there's a reason why I had never wanted to be a lawyer, even if I probably could have. No offence to lawyers, but reading through pages, and pages, and pages of legalese?

Don't get me wrong, I love books. And learning. But even I balk at that much paper.

…and they don't even have computers…

…and everything has to be handwritten...

… … poor, poor Hokage-sama.

---

Luckily, Naruto and I don't have to worry about the paper, or be anywhere near it, for that matter. We're playing by this little coffee-table-like-thingy in front of the desk. It's got these really comfortable green armchairs off to the side, and Hokage-sama sent a chūnin to go get some paper and crayons.

He drops them off with a guarded body language. When I thank him, he smiles slightly, but where Naruto does the same, albeit a lot louder, he turns hostile and stops smiling. He isn't mean, per say, but he is a lot less friendly.

For a moment, I'm confused. Then I remember the rather big issue of Naruto being the jinchuriki of the Kyūbi.

… uh… I kinda sorta forgot?

Naruto's entire demeanor changes, and I'm actually rather shocked.
He… I'm not sure how to describe this… but… he kinda… shrinks in on himself. Earlier, he'd seemed so bright, so energetic, so… so big. Now is one of the first times that I recognize how he's just a little kid.

And my mood kinda takes a turn downwards as reality kicks in.

"Are… are you okay, Naruto-san?" I tentatively ask.

He pastes on a smile that I'm certain is fake. "What do you mean, dattebayo? I'm awesome!"

He accompanies that with a burst of hollow laughter that almost sounds like crying and a grin that closes his eyes.

"Don't lie," I hiss.

"What? I'm not lying! What do you mean?" he forces out between clenched teeth.

I take a deep breath… and hug him.

It's awkward and I'm pretty sure I'm being too forward, but then again, I've always assaulted my friends with hugs. And this is usually my default reaction with my little brothers when they were sad. (Usually though, I'm not smaller than them.)

Naruto just sits, stiff as a board, before he slumps slightly and starts crying. Well, maybe not crying, but sobbing. He's kinda shaking, but he's not making a sound beyond these small gasping noises.

I can feel my shirt getting slightly wet, but I just continue patting Naruto on the back. After a few seconds, I pull away slightly. "Are… are you feeling better?" I ask.

He nods, pulling away and scrubbing at his face. I return to my seat.

He looks ups with a snotty nose (ew) and puffy red eyes, but I'm more focused on his question. "Why… why are you doing this?" he asks in a small voice. "Most people don't even notice."

I look away, grimacing. Dammit. I hate having to verbalize stuff like this, and no one ever actually understands my explanations, but… "I'm not good with… emotions. But… I don't like seeing people so… so obviously sad."

"Wow, you're really nice!" Naruto beams.

I don't look at him. 'I'm really not,' I think.

That is what finally breaks the ice between Naruto and me, and we finally start actually talking.

Before, it was kind of a mix between an interview and reading things off a list. Now? I learn a lot about Naruto, the person.

Maybe it's because I'm also three, but I can actually understand the entirety of his babbling. For my little brothers in my past life, well… my success rate was only about 70%.

Naruto loves orange. That's not too different. He likes Ichiraku ramen. He already wants to be Hokage.

As for me? My answers were blue, not sure, and… uh… to be a shinobi? Technically, I want to live. But I don't just want to survive. But how to explain that difference without arousing suspicions… or
just explain it to Naruto, period…? So here's what I say: "I think I might want to be a shinobi. But I'm not sure yet."

"You should! The Old Man's a shinobi, and he's awesome!"

"Well… I don't know enough about being a shinobi, yet. That's why I asked Hokage-sama for the library card."

"Oh. Do you like pranks?" Naruto accompanies this with a really serious expression, and I'm a little scared about how I should answer.

I choose the most diplomatic answer that is also the truth. "Well, I've never tried, but I want to."

Naruto gasps. "That's horrible. Don't worry, I'll teach you!"

And those words mark the start of a rather confusing lecture on all of the different animals one can find in Konoha and then stuff into someone's shoes/bed/food.

I'm honestly not sure what happened, but I remember that I was so happy, and Naruto's chakra felt the same. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much and my sides were cramping from just how much laughing I'd done. I'm not sure how… or even if Hokage-sama managed to concentrate well on his paperwork, but soon, I don't really care.

I wake up to a hand shaking me gently. I blink. The light's a bit dimmer and more orangey than I remember, and Naruto's a lump on the other couch, drooling onto a pillow.

ANBU-san is the one who woke me up.

I yawn, covering my mouth. "Wha…"

"It has just past 0500… uh… 5:00 in the afternoon. It's time for Naruto to go home, and I believe… well, the sun is starting to set. It will be dark within the hour, and you should be home before then."

I nod, stretching, before making sure I have everything. I pat down the pillows so they look a bit more like how they were before we arrived, and straighten out the mess of papers. I look at ANBU-san, but he just shrugs from where he stands, carrying a sleeping Naruto.

"I'll take the pictures," I decide. "If Naruto wants them, just…" I shrug. "...but, can I say goodbye to Hokage-sama?"

ANBU-san nods and I run over to the desk, where Hokage-sama looks out the window.

I tug on his robe.

"Ah, Makoto-kun, you're awake," he remarks.

I nod. "Hai! Thanks for letting me stay here today, Hokage-s… Hokage-ojiisama!" I chirp, bowing.

"You're welcome, Makoto-kun." Hokage-sama smiles. "Have a safe journey. Starting tomorrow, there will be a genin team checking in for their D-rank mission to take care of you for the next week." He puffs on his pipe. "Their jōnin instructor requested a series of babysitting or grocery shopping missions as part of the recovery from a C-ranked bandit extermination mission."

He smiles mysteriously. "I think you will enjoy meeting Team 2."
I smile and nod, waving goodbye, but a question stays on my head out the door and down the hall and down through the building... Why was Hokage-sama smiling. And... why am I so unsettled by that smile?

No, I'm imagining things. I have to be imagining things.

...probably imagining things.

...hopefully?

ANBU-sama walks me home. It's... peaceful. Konohagakure is really pretty in the sunset.

It's only when ANBU-san agrees that I realize I said that aloud.

Oh! "I think you can go drop off Naruto-kun now," I decide. "My house is just around that corner."

"...In that case, I'll see you tomorrow, Makoto-kun," ANBU-san responds, jumping away.

...Huh. I blink. That was... abrupt.

I shrug it off as I head back, waving to some of the people I recognize when they pass me by. There's the old lady who comes in every Tuesday just before lunch... there's that one guy with the really boring taste in tea... there's the grandfather with the seven grandkids who always buys extra sweets and takes the table by the window for an hour on Fridays...

I turn the corner happily, walk up to the front door... and get hit by noise the moment I open the door.

My eyes widen in horror and I rush in, not bothering to take off my shoes. What greets me... I stand, stunned.

What?

How?

When? Why?

... I shouldn't have left.

Even shinobi should not be capable of causing this much trouble. Especially in just... what, five hours? And I think trouble is an understatement. I whimper.

Why? Well, according to the report turned in to Hokage-sama, Hizashi made twenty-four children cry when he was too strict. And you know how parents are like when someone makes their kids cry... so there's an additional forty-one people who are also ticked off. At least.

Anko... forcibly retrieved her dango... on multiple occasions... which led to the rather... visible expressions of sadness... of another eight or so children.

Oh, yes, I'd also forgotten to mention that they smashed a majority of our ceramics, broke several sliding doors, left scorch marks on the tatami mats in one room, tipped over several of the ikebana displays, and dented many of the shelves. I think I've already forgotten my recent scare. This... is a lot more worrying.

Admittedly, most of the structural damage came from one Maito Gai-san, or so Kakashi-san says...
but he wouldn't even have been there if it weren't for Kakashi-san's bunshin... who'd only come because Hokage-sama wanted him to tell Anko-san to stop causing complaints and Hizashi-san to, in Hokage-sama's words, "BLEEEEEEEP and stop making little kids cry, or I will make you in charge of handling all of the paperwork from your inability to reign Anko in!" Yeah... Hokage-sama must have been really annoyed. And I discovered that it's pretty easy to tell when someone's cursing. There's this universal... inflection... that they use.

Anyways, I've got bigger problems. Like the shop. And the shinobi who are still in it!

Anko-san's arguing with Hizashi-san who's yelling at Maito-san, who's still trying to challenge Kakashi-san... well, Kakashi-san's not-illusionary bunshin... to a challenge. At least, I think that's Kakashi-san. Because I thought Kakashi-san was ANBU-san and ANBU-san should still be with Naruto and...

I take a shuddering breath. Breathe, I think. Don't panic. Don't panic. It'll be fine. It'll be fine.

My words don't work. I can barely hear myself think over the cacophony. "Please, be quiet!" I try. Nope. No use. I can't even hear myself.

I try a louder, if considerably ruder, approach. "Please, SHUT UP!" I scream, eyes starting to gloss over.

I blink furiously. I'm scared, panicking, way out of my depth, on the verge of bursting out in tears, and... no one's listening. I take a hiccupping breath, and pat my pockets down to see if there's anything I can use.

Inside my front pocket, I find something hard. I grab the whistle that Tou-san insisted that I wear at all times and told me to only use in emergencies. You know what, I think this is an emergency. My parents are hospitalized, I need to make a group of very loud, very strong, arguably scary shinobi just listen to me. I cover my ears. Taking a deep breath, I blow as hard as I can.

...little did I know, that was a rape whistle. To be honest, I only found out that the whistle was a "rape whistle" many hours later. I mean, that's my interpretation. My limited vocabulary in this language doesn't really cover that word, but "a whistle you should only blow when people touch you in your private areas or act super creepy" only really has one definition.

And it's not like I had a whistle like that before. Hey, I wasn't kidding when I said that my past life was a rather privileged one. Not to mention innocent and naive.

Though I guess those adjectives still apply...

Now, I'm not sure what people know about rape whistles, but the basic premise is that it's a lot louder and... well, scarier than normal whistles and can scare civilians. But with a resounding PEEEEEEEEEP from the whistle, Kakashi-san's widening eyes, and the puff of smoke of a dispelling bunshin, chaos ensues.

...It's rather unfortunate that the house/shop is located within a civilian neighborhood.

And even more unfortunate that most women, not to mention their husbands, are rather good at recognizing the sound. Why? ... I'm not sure yet, and I don't think I want to know.

The worst part? I was crying, and still puffing a bit on the whistle, but the shinobi had heard and were trying to "comfort" me. And the even worse part? Let's just say that Gai does everything very enthusiastically... and thinks that hugs can solve any problem. And it's Gai— the weirdo in a seemingly-spandex leotard. (Though, it's not spandex. It's too thick to be that, and not nearly shiny
And so, an already bad situation got really, really bad.

Let's just say that the incoming flood of worried civilians got the entirely wrong idea.

... and I was still crying. An entire street of people saw me puffy-eyed and snotty-nosed and bawling my eyes out. That's embarrassing like you wouldn't believe.

Well, I certainly had not expected to be introduced to so many Uchiha so soon.

Here's the basic gist of my headache:

Civilians storm the shop. Next, they misunderstand the situation. Then, they decide to get the Military Police to deal with the problem. Finally, cowed by the righteous fury of many pissed-off females and several whipped husbands, they just decide to bring everyone in.

Now? Well, it turns out that Uchiha Fugaku-san is very nice, even if he doesn't look it, and is surprisingly good at comforting small children.

...or maybe that's just me. But he gave me a pillow and a pack of tissues and let me hiccup my way through my emotional baggage and patted my back and offered some good advice.

...yeah, he's probably only good at comforting emotionally-distraught, arguably prodigious children who have a significant mental maturity. Though, considering his family… that actually makes sense.

It's after my tears dry up when I finally realize how much time has passed. I wince. I've spent a good half-hour or so, at least, just bawling my eyes out. The sun's already past the horizon, and the sky is dark over the Hokage monument.

I'm blowing my nose when a knock sounds on the door and a voice asks, "Otou-san? Okaa-san sent me to get you. Dinner's getting cold."

Uchiha-sama sighs, and I duck my head. "Come in, Itachi. I'm just… just finishing up." He pats my head. "Here… why don't you go with Itachi and… wash your face?"

"Shi-shitsureishimashita," I hiccup. I was rude. "I'm sorry for… for… for taking up so… hic much of your time, Uchiha-chama… Uchiha-sama!" I immediately correct, before ducking my head again.

A hand pats me on the head, and I look up through wisps of hair.

"You'll be fine. Don't worry." Uchiha-sama says softly.

"A-arigatō," I hiccup, waving slightly as he walks out the door.

A hand appears in front of me with a tissue.

"Here," Itachi smiles. "If you tell me what is wrong, I might be able to help."

I blow my nose, shaking my head. "Uchiha-sama already helped…" I suddenly realize that my response might come across as rude, and I add, "but it would be really nice if you could show me where the bathroom is, later?" Quickly changing the subject, I ask, "You're… you came to the tea shop during that storm a little while ago, right?"

"Hai." Itachi nods. "Thank you for your… hospitality then. Did you get the umbrella back?"
"Mm… I think so." I flush. "I don't remember when, but…"

"That's good to hear," Itachi smiles.

I grasp wildly for another train of thought. "Oh, I don't know if I introduced myself…" I wince, before smiling. "I'm Kobayashi Makoto. Please just call me Makoto. It's nice to meet you again, Uchiha-san… ah… do you mind if I call you Itachi-san?" I rub my neck. "There's… a lot… of Uchiha here."

Itachi-san nods. "Of course. I don't mind."

An awkward silence ensues, and Itachi-san coughs lightly. "So… if I may ask… what happened?"

I bury my head in my hands with a whine. "It's… a bit… of a long story." I fold my hands in my lap, still looking down. "But… in short… well… Otou-san had given me this whistle, and I didn't… realize… ah…"

I pull out the whistle to show him.

Itachi-san nods slowly. "Ah. I think I understand. But… if I may… what made you use it?"

I flush. "There were a bunch of shinobi in the shop… they were arguing and making a mess and everything was broken and they were loud and…" I take a deep breath. "It was a long day. I needed to get them to stop, but…" I gesture blankly at myself. "I'm… well… they didn't hear me when I tried, so…"

"Oh." Itachi-san blinks. "But in that case… where were your parents?" He pauses. "Actually… where—"

"They're in the Hospital," I mumble. "There was an accident… and…" Realizing what that might infer, I quickly backtrack. "Oh, they'll get better soon! It's… just…" I shrug.

Itachi-san frowns slightly. "But then…"

"Oh, it's not like I'll be home alone," I laugh awkwardly. "There's a genin team that's supposed to be taking care of me for… for the next week, I think."

Itachi-san blinks. "...the next week?"

"Yeah!" I grin sheepishly. "I think they only got their mission a little while ago… but they had a C-rank recently or something, so their jōnin-sensei wanted something a bit… ah… easier?"

"Hn." Itachi-san nods, before pausing. "Do you know which team?"

I frown, trying to remember. "I think… Hokage-sama said… Team… 2?"

Itachi-san smiles. "Ah. I know them. I think you will be in good hands for the next week."


Itachi-san frowns again. "Makoto-san? Have… When did you last eat?"

I squirm in my seat, but Itachi doesn't let me duck the subject. "...lunch," I finally admit. "But really, it's fine! don't think there's any damage above the shop, and I should have leftovers in the fridge."
Itachi-san continues frowning. "You should come over to my house for dinner. Okaa-san's a really good cook, and I'm sure she would be happy to have a guest."

I wince. "I wouldn't want to be a bother…"

But Itachi-san presses on. "The sun has already set. It is dark outside. I would not feel… comfortable letting you walk home alone. Besides…" He pauses. "How old are you, Makoto-san?"

"Uh…" I blink. "I just turned three?"

Itachi-san stares at me for a moment. "...In that case, I absolutely must insist." Seeing my reluctance, he sighs. "It would be unfortunate if my client injured himself, especially when I could have prevented it."

My eyes widen. "You're on Team 2?!

Itachi-san nods. "It appears that my mission will start earlier than anticipated."

I look down. "Won't your parents mind?"

He shakes his head. "I doubt it. Besides, Otou-san would be more disappointed if I failed such a simple mission."

I sigh. "I suppose… I can't convince you otherwise?"

Itachi-san nods firmly.

"...fine," I grumble. "For someone as mild-mannered and quiet as you seem, you can be very stubborn, you know that?"

Itachi-san smiles faintly.

I slump. "At least… ask your father first?"

At the break of day,

As though the light of the lingering moon

Lightened the dim scene,

The village of Yoshino lay

In a haze of falling snow.

— Sakanoue no Korenori

朝ぼらけ
有明の月と
みるまでに
吉野の里に
ふれる白雪

— 坂上是則
Author's Note: Yay! I've fixed this chapter, too! Sorry it's a few days late... I'm trying to upload every Friday evening, but... sometimes stuff like this happens.

So yeah, as you can tell... I took some liberties with the poem, though mainly just in what if referred to.

Moving on! If there is anyone who is familiar with the Japanese language and/or culture... I would very much appreciate any corrections and/or advice. By the way, I... have no idea how to write vernacular. I did my best with Naruto to convey the impression that he's not exactly in the best of circumstances, but...

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Thanks to everyone who reviewed! \(^{(^_^})/\)

I welcome any and all reviews, even if they're just "hi." Or random nonsense. It means a lot to me that you're reading my story. As a side note, however, if you want a response, please make sure I can PM (Private Message) you by making an account. I have a lot planned out, but I don't want to spoil the plot for those who don't want spoilers. (;_-;)

In addition, if anyone has ideas for Konoha genin, Konoha chūnin, or honestly, shinobi or civilians from any place in the elemental nations, I gladly welcome them. I might change them a little to fit in best, but I really appreciate names and physical descriptions. This story will do a fair bit of world-building, and while Kishimoto has many good characters, the fact is that the elemental nations are very big. Here's an example template:

Name: (Note: Please make sure this is a Japanese name.)

Physical Description:
- Age: (I need people anywhere from 0-30. Maybe even forty. But mainly adults from 20-30. Though, children ages 5-13 would be useful, as well as genin ages 10-15.)
- Hair Color: (literally anything is possible for this, but black/brown is the most common and useful)
- **Eye Color:** Brown/Blue/Green/Other
- **Skin Tone:** What + why (eg. tanned- spends a lot of time in the sun)

**Occupation:** Genin/Chunin/Jonin/ANBU/Civilian

**Loyalty:** Konoha/Kumo/Kiri/Suna/Iwa/Other

**Abilities:**
- **Specialization:** Taijutsu/Ninjutsu/Genjutsu/Kenjutsu/Fuinjutsu/Etc
- **Chakra Nature:** Fire/Wind/Water/Earth/Lightning (please choose one or two, maximum)
- **Weapons:** Kunai/Shuriken/Wire/Senbon/Sword/Other

---

**COMING NEXT:** So, Makoto meets Team 2! And has absolutely zero parental supervision for an entire week!

Gee... I wonder what could happen?
Of D-ranks and Expanding Horizons

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto meets Team 2 and becomes good friends with Itachi... and actually learns how to write.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

It is because of you
That I walk the fields in spring,
Gathering green herbs,
While my hanging sleeves
Are speckled with falling snow.

---

I wake up in a different room than I'm used to. The ceiling… it's not that blueish-purple I'm used to. I sit up slowly, confused, looking around.

Perhaps most disorienting, my point of view is significantly higher than I'm used to.

I blink.

Ah. I'm currently in a raised bed, like the ones Before.

The weirdest part is that it's somehow both really similar and yet, really different. It's… probably most like… if you moved away from a place for three years, then came back… and realized that it's still the same… but not.

"Ohayō, Makoto-kun," a soft voice calls. I cover a yawn with my hand, turning to face the door.


She smiles. "Breakfast is ready. Would you mind waking up Sasuke?"

I nod. "Hai, Mikoto-obasan!"

Several minutes later, after I've shaken the lump on the blankets next to me awake, I drag a half-asleep Sasuke along the open-air-hallway-thing to the kitchen. Itachi-san's house… or rather, I guess, Fugaku-sama and Mikoto-obasan's house, is a very traditional single-storied home with all of that architectural stuff that I don't know the name to.

Half-way through, as I'm debating where to turn right or left at the cabinet with the surprisingly ugly
blue vase, Sasuke-kun wakes up enough to grumpily drag me over to the kitchen, before he drops onto a *zabuton* pillow and slumps forward onto the *chabudai*, the low table.

"Did you sleep well, Makoto-san?" Itachi-san asks.

"Didn't I tell you to just call me Makoto?" I frown. "It's weird, especially since you're doing so much for me."

"You are the client. It would be disrespectful," Itachi responds, before frowning slightly. "And I had asked that you call me Itachi."

"According to the mission guidelines, I believe that you're essentially my caretaker. It's only polite to address you as Itachi-san," I shoot back, still half-asleep and grumpy.

"I am only a genin," Itachi responds, probably feigning modesty.

I stare back, dead-pan. "That makes you an adult."

"I am but eight years old." And eight-year-olds shouldn't have to say that.

I shrug. "So?"

"As an eight-year-old at home, I insist you call me Itachi, Makoto-san," Itachi replies.

"Itachi-san, I am three years old," I sigh. "You don't call your *otōto* Sasuke-san."

"But you're a client," Itachi responds, unperturbed, sipping slowly on his tea.

I let my head rest on the table, wishing I were still asleep. A raised bed feels different from a *fūton*, and I wish I could have enjoyed it for longer. "I highly doubt you give other three-year-olds those suffixes."

"And you are a guest," Itachi replies, sipping at his tea and resembling nothing so much as a little old man.

I raise my head to stare bleary-eyed at Itachi. "Which is why I should give you respect. Besides, you're the heir to one of the five noble clans of Konohagakure."

"It is improper to stand on formality."

"It's *respectful* to use formality," I grumble.

"It is antiquated." Itachi's face softens in a barely-there smile that might be a trick of the light… or him tasting victory. "And as a friend would say, stuffy."

I grin. "Ooh, big words! See? You are basically an adult, and so I should treat you as one." I beam.

Itachi stares at me. "...you have a friend who is heir to the Aburame clan. You address him without any suffix." Okay, now Itachi's just being stubborn. Still…

"...Point to you." I scrunch my nose. "Very well, then." I sigh dramatically. "Itachi-san, I will call you Itachi… if you call me Makoto."

After a pause…

"...very well." Itachi pushes over a steaming teacup. "Makoto."
I graciously accept the gesture of goodwill for what it is. "Itachi."

"Are you done, now?" Mikoto-san asks, brow arched.

I nearly spit out my tea. Across from me, Itachi seems suspiciously stiff.

I turn my head to look at Mikoto-sama, an embarrassed smile on my face. "H-hai?"

Mikoto-sama addresses Itachi instead. "You will be late to meet your team if you keep arguing with Makoto-kun, Itachi." She turns to me. "Oh, and Makoto-kun? Please come by again for dinner, okay?"

I bite my lip.

Mikoto-sama smiles, and a chill runs down my spine. "Okay, Makoto-kun?"

I blanche, nodding hesitantly. "H-hai?"

Across the table, Fugaku-sama clears his throat, leaning forward as if to protest and I shrink, curling up a bit… and Mikoto-sama smiles. "You don't have any objections… right, anata?"

I blink at the use of the term of endearment… and in shock, as Fugaku-sama immediately sits back. "Of course not."

Trying to ignore the awkward silence and that terrifyingly nice smile, I quickly down the cooled-down miso soup, chomping down on the plate of onigiri, rice balls, and tamagoyaki, egg omelet, that Mikoto-sama had set in front of me at one point in the earlier… discussion. When those are cleared, I quickly dash back to the room to change into my clothes from yesterday, then grab Itachi on my way out.

"Thanks for everything, Mikoto-obasama, Fugaku-sama!" I call, slipping on my shoes. "See you again later, Sasuke-kun!"

The journey from the Uchiha compound to the shop is longer than I remembered, and it looks different in the sunlight. What had been dark and slightly ominous now looks… a bit drab, almost.

The road for most of the way is hard-packed dust and earth that disappears into weeds and underbrush on its sides. At first, it's narrow, but eventually widens out, and the trees to each side disappear. The cliff is to our right, and… the dense buildings that in the night had been brightly lit with pretty red lanterns now also looks a bit old and run-down. We're at the outskirts of Konoha, and I see buildings just up ahead… but to our right, between the road the mountain and spilling over from the busier parts of the village…

Itachi had told me not to go there yesterday when I asked. But now… "Are you sure it's dangerous there?" I ask. "It doesn't look that dangerous… and it not like there's bandits or rouge-nin here."

Itachi hesitates. "It's… not dangerous for those reasons. But regardless, it isn't a place young children should go… it's really only a place for adults."

I frown, but let the subject go. "So, what's your genin team like?"

"YOU'RE SO CUTE!"

Oh. I see now what Itachi meant. The squeal came from the girl, who's being restrained by the jōnin-
sensei. She wears her hitai-ate like a bandanna and has brownish-greyish hair in two braided pigtails, which stick out, so she looks a little like Pippi Longstocking. She’s Inari Shinko.

There’s a boy, a little taller than her, with gray hair that’s spiked to his right side and bangs, which frame his face, covering the sides of the hitai-ate on his forehead. That’s Izumo Tenma.

The jōnin has spiky brown hair pulled into a short ponytail and a goatee. His uniform is plain, just a flak jacket over a blue turtleneck and pants, all Konohagakure regulation for shinobi. His name is Minazuki Yūki.

"Please, everyone, follow me." I open the door and move to one side, nervously shifting from foot to foot.

…I really hope nothing goes wrong.

The silence that ensues is extremely awkward.

After what seems like an eternity of small shifts and the too-loud crunch of senbei, I decide to break it.

"Good morning, shinobi-san. Thank you so much for coming, I hope you will look after me!" I smile. "My name is Kobayashi Makoto. Please, just call me Makoto."

The girl with the pigtails pipes up first, "Oh, you're adorable! I'm Inari Shinko!"

"It's nice to meet you, Inari-san. Would you prefer for me to call you Inari-san, or…" my voice trails off.

She beams. "Oh, just call me Shinko!"

She nudges the gray-haired one.

"Fine, Shinko!" He turns to me. "I'm Izumo Tenma. Don't call me Tenma" He looks around. "So… where's your parents, shortie?"

I grimace at the nickname… and at the thought of having to delve back into yesterday's mess.

Itachi-san saves me. "Makoto-san, do you have any questions regarding the mission?"

"Oh. Uh… yeah. What… exactly… are we supposed to do?" I ask awkwardly.

No one answers. An even more awkward silence ensues.

"Do… you want to go to the park or something?" Jōnin-san asks. "When do you normally… uh… nap?"

I stare at him blankly, then sigh. Looks like I'll have to do this myself. "First… I don't know how to cook. And… we're kinda out of groceries," I tug at my shirt anxiously. "I'll need help with that. We normally eat lunch at 12:00… and dinner at 7:00, but I don't know how long your mission is supposed to last. if possible, I would like to learn more about what shinobi do, what the Academy is like, and so on… and I would also like to…" I bite my lip. "I don't know how to read but I want to," I rush out, not looking at Itachi.

The gray haired kid bursts out laughing, and I duck my head, blinking furiously.
Shinko-san immediately tries to ambush me with a hug, cooing over how cute I am and how of course they can help such a cute wittle kid, and… I bite my cheek in an effort not to snap at the babish tones she uses and duck her attempts to squish my cheeks.

In my efforts, I overbalance, and my chair tips sideways… and a hand latches around my wrist, yanking.

I stumble on my feet, almost crashing into Itachi, as Shinko-san tumbles to the ground— thankfully without squashing me.

She immediately pops up, growling at the gray-hai— ah… at Izumo-san, who shouts right back. I flinch at the noise, and shuffle to inch behind Itachi as the jōnin tries to mediate their argument.

Itachi gently tugs me over to the stairs, grabbing my jacket from the hanger. "If you want, Makoto, I can go get groceries now. My teammates… will probably be… talking… for… a while," he ends. He grimaces. "I apologize for my teammates. Normally, Shinko-san works best with children on the babysitting D-ranks we take… however…"

"It's fine," I interrupt, grinning. "It's not really her fault… and honestly, it's kinda fun to watch from a distance. Besides, as long as they don't break anything— and I trust Jōnin-san to be capable enough of making sure of that— it's really fine. Just… let me grab some things."

I scramble around the argument, grabbing a tote bag from the cupboard and the grocery money from where Otou-san keeps it in the box in the drawer.

"Okay!" I smile. "I'm ready when you are!"

As we go outside, Itachi explains a bit about the layout of Konoha at my prodding, and adds in a bit of the history, too. The shop is located a street away from the Main Street, which stretches all the way from the main gates of Konohagakure to the Hokage Tower, from where it separates into two separate streets in what, to me, looks like a T-junction.

Konohagakure is located in a bit of a valley, with how it's surrounded by hills and cliffs. There's a river, the Naka river, that forks a ways behind the Hokage Monument into two separate streams that border Konohagakure. The older districts in Konoha are to the left of the Hokage faces, and they're mainly residential areas and training grounds for the smaller clans, and non-clan shinobi. The larger clans got more space along the river, because they served a bit as the first line of defense at first. Now, Konoha's expanded, so that's no longer the case, but even the grounds on the other side of the river are mostly empty training grounds.

On the other side of the Main Street, to the right of the Hokage faces… well, that's mainly for the Akimichi, Nara, and Yamanaka. It's also an area that's mostly full of civilian businesses, but also less dense. A lot of the clans along the border are those that need space— the Nara clan, for example, has a forest for their deer, the Inuzuka have a smaller tract of land, and so on. Farther away from Konohagakure, on both sides of the Main Street, there's also farmland on both sides, though people tend to stay close to the street.

However, Konoha imports most of its staples, though the food doesn't travel very far— maybe a day, a week at maximum, even for civilians. There are, apparently, quite a few D-ranks dedicated to just that— importing food.

Our shop, Kobayashi Tea, is apparently located in one of the higher-end districts, being relatively close to the Hokage faces and close to the center of the Akimichi area, but also not too close the cliffs
and hills.

The branch of the Main Street that splits to the right heads all the way to the Uchiha district, and as Itachi already told me earlier, I'm not supposed to go into the area on the cliff side of the road, even if it seems interesting.

Apart from that... the shops that cater to shinobi tend to be close to the Hokage tower and a lot are to the left of the Main Street, with the weapons and armor and supply shops being the closest. The fabric and textiles, especially those for civilians, tend to be a bit further out, and more in the civilian districts, though there are a few to the left of the Main Street.

Though, apparently the Main Street is actually pretty interesting. Because of how wide it is, sometimes the smaller shops set up a stall along it on special events.

The interesting thing to note is that there aren't actually any grocery stores. Farmers come in to bring food during the day and there's a few streets deliberately for the stalls they set up. Most shops have an arrangement to import food with... people...

...

I mean, I guess it makes sense, since it's a military dictatorship, but... it's a bit weird for what I'm used to.

But the producer/consumer system isn't the only source of cultural shock. Oh, no. *That* came when counting groceries.

Because... for all the universality of math in our world, there's a very simple thing that very few people (or, at least, that I), had considered— we learn so much about how the Chinese and Japanese and blah blah blah had made such important advances in the field of mathematics/geometry/astrology... but everything we learn about math is with Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0. We count with Arabic numerals... we do everything with Arabic numerals (unless you count those who learn arithmetic with cookies and that weird dot/line/box system). Even in eastern countries... math is math. Everywhere.

Except for, apparently, a possibly-imaginary separate dimension where colorful ninja defy gravity using a magic-like thing called chakra.

A.k.a., the Elemental Nations.

Of which I can currently a resident of.

FML.

As Itachi stacks the cartons of eggs and milk, careful not to bruise the vegetables, even as he passes me the box of fish, I stay silent, lost in my thoughts.

Apart from learning an entirely new language and at least three different writing systems... I have to learn a new *number* system, too?

I metaphorically whack myself over the head. Repeatedly.

Duh! It's even in the name. It's the *Arabic* numeral system... even though I think it started in India or something? But looking back, it didn't start that way either, right? Of course it's not going to exist here.
It's just… mathematics used to be so… so universal that… I just… simply hadn't…

I groan. This is going to be a pain. New language? Check! New writing systems? Double, even triple check. New way of doing math? Ngh… do I have to?

A thought strikes me, and my eyes widen.

What if I… forget?

The word echoes in my brain. Forget. There's no internet here. Forget. That would be… permanent. There's nothing to remind me. If I forget how to spell a word, how to do anything… it's gone. Poof. Disappeared. I'm alone, here.

I'm alone.

It sinks in now, more than ever, that I am very far away from home, and… I don't want to lose who I was. I didn't really like that life, or who I was, but… it was me. I don't what to forget that, to lose that.

My stomach twists, and I almost want to throw up… or cry. Just curl up in a ball, right there on the street, and bawl my eyes out. I feel like there's something stuck in my throat, and my breath hitches. Suddenly, I feel cold, despite the sun on my back and head. I cling on tighter to my handful of cloth, even as my free hand digs crescents into my palm.

"Makoto?" Itachi asks, and I flinch slightly. "Are you… are you okay?"

As if rudely awoken from a daze, I suddenly register what I've been doing. I'm in the middle of busy street. I wasn't moving. My hand is still wrapped in the hem of Itachi's jacket. I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. My shoulders shake slightly.

"I… I'm fine," I manage to force out. "Just… can we get some notebooks? Please? And… and stuff to write with."

"Of course," Itachi responds. "But… if I may ask… are you sure that you're… feeling okay?"

I nod shakily. "Y-yeah. Don't worry. I'm… I'll be fine."

---

I take a deep breath, relishing in the quiet of the Library's bathroom… and a small comfort of familiarity at the fact that at least public restrooms are the same… or really, to be honest, they're better. It's cleaner, better-ventilated, doesn't smell that bad… but then again, maybe shinobi just tend to be more polite than the people I remember from Before.

Yeah, they're a bit different, but… they're similar enough. And Konoha's even nice enough to have a smaller one for younger kids!

I rub at my face from where I'm perched on the toilet seat, and I stare at the cloth bag hanging from the hook.

I bought five notebooks, two of which are small enough to be tucked into my shirt, along with a few scrolls (and oh, wasn't that another headache-and-a-half, learning that loose-leaf paper isn't really a thing in this world), along with some pencils, erasers, pens, and a simply cloth pencil bag.

Is this what cultural shock feels like? So much is similar… and yet not. The pencils aren't the yellow #2 pencils with the pink eraser on the back that I expected. If anything, they're more like art
pencils… except that they're not painted. The pens aren't what I'm used to, either— for whatever reason, it's ridiculously hard to find anything made of plastic. The only things I recognize are bottled drinks.

The pens are completely metal, from what I can tell. There are ballpoint pens… but it seems that softer, felt pens are more popular. There's even calligraphy dip pens and ink and… that stuff. Some things are so different that it's a bit… overwhelming. It's subtle, but when you look for them, the differences are clear.

I don't want to forget anything.

As a result, I'm planning on going against my better judgement and every instinct that screams not to do it… and write everything down.

The two smaller notebooks are going to be for that. One's for my old world, for recording memories. The other's for making sure I don't forget some things… skills, mainly.

I start planning.

I'll definitely need to dedicate some pages to math. Everything from PEMDAS to algebra to… oh, now I really wish I paid better attention to geometry… and trigonometry and what I remember about Calculus and limits and differentiation, integration, position/velocity/acceleration stuff… oh, and vectors. And that little bit of physics that Dad was trying to teach me… and vectors and maybe probability? But… I don't remember… and maybe chemistry? But… like… I don't really remember the periodic table… and it probably won't help me… but…

I grab the nicer one of the two smaller notebooks and a pencil and the new pencil sharpener… only to realize that my fingers are clumsy and my handwriting would probably be a mess.

I suck in a breath, holding it as I wait for the panic to subside.

Later, then. But… I replace the notebook and grab the other one. This one will be my diary. I'll improve my handwriting, at least to the point where I can read it comfortably. And then… and then I'll just have to pray that I don't forget anything.

I'll write what I can in English… and maybe the grammatical rules and some of the vocabulary for Spanish, too?

I chew at the inside of my cheek. I'll have trouble with it, that's for sure. And honestly, forgetting about it doesn't really bother me. I mean, it was just a subject in school. However… at the same time… if I don't have to forget something… well, why forget it? It would be a bit of a waste. I'll just put it at the back of the… the nicer notebook.

I bite down on my knuckle. Okay. I'm good now. I have a plan. I'll be fine. And… worst case scenario, I won't bemoan what I forget. Yes, it'll be a shame, but… I made my decision a long time ago, didn't I? I want this. I want this second chance, I want this new life.

And change… isn't bad. I'll learn, I promise myself. For everything I forget, I'll learn something else. I won't waste a second. I'll learn and learn and… and I'll take every opportunity I get. I won't repeat the mistakes I've made before.

I exhale sharply, bringing my hands to my cheeks with a slap that's more noise than pain, and helps clear what remains of my daze.

I'll go out, apologize to Itachi for making him wait this long and stop panicking. Stop sulking. Stop
with the regrets. Stop worrying about what-ifs and maybes and stuff that I can't really change that much.

I hop off the porcelain seat, grab my bag, and go over to wash my hands… and hopefully my face, too.

Alright, Makoto. You can do this. I can do this.

… I can't do this.

I whimper at the unfamiliar surroundings, and the labyrinth of shelves. Luckily, there'd been a stool big enough to elevate me to the sink, but…

I think I came out the wrong door and Itachi's not there and I'M LOST AND I'M PANICKING AND I'M…

I gulp. I'm lost. I am very, very… very very very very very very lost.

Good news? I'm pretty sure I'm still in the Library. Bad news? I am most definitely lost.

Oh… why did Itachi have to leave? He said that he'd only be gone for a little while… and that he was getting something… but the important thing to ask is whether he's still getting something or not. I much prefer the latter, but…

If I were taller… or could actually read, I'd be less lost… but… well… I am short. I am three years old. I'm barely taller than the second shelf! And I honestly can't read. Not hiragana, not katakana, and… not kanji. Not enough to do me any good at least. To be fair, that's actually a bit weird for existing, since I know that kanji came from Chinese characters… which, you know, came from China… which probably doesn't exist in this world… but you know what? That's fine. For all I know, the Land of Fire developed in more-or-less the same way that China did… holy cow, that actually looks a lot like East Asia.

I managed to find a wall. Well, the wall. You know, the thing that buildings, and thus libraries, usually have? That.

And there's a very nice, colorful map of what I would assume are the Elemental Nations, considering that that's the character for fire… and that's water… and stone… and I think that's wind? Yeah. Land of Fire, Land of Water, Land of Stone… but doesn't that last one mean snow? Except… there's only five characters… and based on the process of elimination, I think that's supposed to be lightning. Huh.

I sigh. This doesn't really help me. To be fair, walking randomly has a pretty low success rate, but… well, time to actually make a plan. Okay, I know that all of the rules about children getting lost say that the kid should wait in one spot for their parent/guardian to find them, or go to the nearest authority figure. Unfortunately, I have no idea where Itachi is, and I can't find an authority figure, because of the very simple fact that I am lost and thus have no clue where I even am, much less them.

So I guess I'll stay here and start… working on my journals? I mean, if I can't find anyone, it's probably at least a relatively private and thus, safe, locati—

Wait a second, is that someone coughing?

I wince. Make that more like someone trying to hack their lungs out.
Still… a metaphorical light bulb turns on in my head. Coughing = person = someone who possibly knows what's going on because I sure do no.

I follow the sound.

"Umm… excuse me, but are you alright? That cough… do you need to see the doctor or something?" I ask, as I round a final bookshelf… and yeah, I think he needs a hospital or something. The first thing I notice is that the person I found isn't really an adult. He has pronounced lines under his eyes. His clothing looks like the standard Konoha shinobi outfit, with a flak jacket and everything, and he wears his forehead protector as a bandanna. The only thing that stands out? He also has something that looks a bit… like… a sword… attached to his back/

Wait a second, he kinda looks famili— My thoughts are promptly interrupted by another series of hacking coughs.

"...Are you sure you're alright?" I ask hesitantly.

"I'm fine," the person with the bandanna chokes out, leaning against the bookshelf. "Wait… what's a kid doing here?"

"Hey, you're still a kid, too!" I protest, crossing my arms with a huff.

"Sorry, but I'm a genin, so I'm technically an adult." Bandanna-san breaks into another coughing fit.

"Are you sure that you shouldn't go to the hospital or something?" I ask, concerned.

"Nah. I've had this cough for a long time. And see? It's already gone away." Bandanna-Person-san smiles. "And… uh… how old are you?"

"I'm three years old!" I hold up three fingers, just to make sure the bandanna-person-san would understand correctly.

"Uh… where are your parents? Or guardian, or caretaker? Unless… are you lost?" Bandanna-Person-san asks.

"...it's that obvious?" I groan. "Uh… yeah… I was with someone else… but they're not here right now… so could you please… help me a little?" I ask, together with my practiced puppy-dog eyes.

"Find the exit? Sure. It's just over there." Bandanna-san points, but I shake my head.

"Actually," I look down, shifting from side to side and nervously twisting the hem of my jacket, "I'm kind of here with someone, but I don't know where he is… and he'll probably come find me… eventually… so can I just… just follow you around for now?"

"Uh… you do realize that…"

"I know that you're probably busy, but I really don't want to get lost again."

"Well, I'm not actually that busy. My jōnin-sensei wanted my team to just look through the library to find some techniques we were interested in before the end of the week. I've already found everything I need, since I come to the library a lot, so I'll also be just waiting around for a little bit. It's just…” he hesitates.

"Just what?" I ask, tilting my head to one side.

"You are three, right?" He squints a bit, as if to see me better.
"Uh huh." I nod. "And?"

Bandanna-san chuckles nervously. "Uh… no reason."

"Yay!" I beam. "Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome. Hey, what's your name, chibi-chan?"

I pout at the nickname, but I can't refute the very clear fact that, yes, I am very short. And small. But seriously, I'm three. "I'm Makoto! And, uh," I rub the back of my neck, "what's yours? I mean, I've been calling you Bandanna-san in my head… but I'm pretty sure that that's not your name."

"Well, you guessed correctly. I'm Gekkō Hayate."

Huh… I think I recognize that name… must just be a coincidence. I wave the thought aside. "Well, Gekkō-san, what's that sword on your back for?"

"So, should I call you Gekkō-sensei or something?" I ask from my perch on the desk, feet swinging. "I mean, you've been teaching me a lot about shinobi stuff and even how the Library's organized…"

"I really don't care."

"Alright!" I grin impishly. "You'll be Hayate-sempai, kay?"

His head whips around. "…sempai?"

"Well, you're not old enough to be a sensei, yet." I giggle.

"Thanks, chibi. You've asked me a lot of questions about shinobi. If I'm your sempai… I was wondering, are you planning on joining the Academy?"

"Yup!" I nod vigorously.

"Hmm… who are your parents, again?"

"Oh. No, they're not shinobi, if you're wondering that. We own the Kobayashi Tea Shop, just off the main street. It's pretty close to Yamanaka Flowers?"

Hayate-sempai's quiet for a moment. "Well, if you have any questions about shinobi that your parents can't answer, being civilians and all, you can always ask me. I'm usually in the Library on weekends, especially before lunch."

"Huh? But you're probably busy, Hayate-sempai."

He laughs. "It's not like I'm doing anything productive. You're interesting, chibi-chan. Besides, teaching you stuff is fun. And those in the Academy who don't belong to a clan usually have a harder time of it than clan children. Just please don't ask me questions about the kunoichi classes. I have next-to-no clue regarding flower arrangements, or things like that."

I tilt my head. "...kunoichi classes? Are those mandatory for girls?"

"Yup. Good luck in those, chibi-chan," he chuckles, breaking into a coughing fit.

I shrug. "Don't worry, I won't be attending."
Hayate-sempai looks up from bookshelf he's perusing. "Huh? You have to."

"Only if you're a girl."

Hayate-sempai looks me up and down. "... I don't think that dressing up like a boy would help. Besides, they do have Academy records and everything, you know?"

I sweatdrop. "Gekkō-san. You don't seriously think that I'm a girl, do you?"

He blinks. "Huh?"

"I'm a boy," I deadpan. Well, physically, at least, I amend in my head.

Hayate-sempai blinks again, regarding me as though I'm insane. "No, you're not."

I sigh. "Yes, I am."

"Uh… no."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Okay, I've already accidentally got a shinobi in trouble for pedophilia, and that was due to an accident with a whistle. I am not pulling down my pants to prove it to you, and... that's mainly for your sake."

A voice coughs. "Makoto… I sincerely hope that what I just hear makes more sense once placed in context. While defending the client against perverts is not be part of the explicit mission parameters…"

"Itachi!" I grin. "Please tell Gekkō-san that I'm not a girl, and thus, am incapable of being a kunoichi or forced into kunoichi classes in the Academy?"

Itachi blinks, before looking at Gekkō-san. "Makoto-san is not a girl."

I facepalm, before I grab Itachi's hand. "Bye Hayate-sempai! Thanks for everything!"

Hayate-sempai blinks, before he waves a hand. "Bye chibi-chan, hope to see you again."

"See you again sometime!" I wave back, before promptly dragging Itachi out the store.

---

"I apologize for my… absence," Itachi replies in response to my unspoken question once we exit the library. "I had gone to run an errand, and it took me longer than I expected."

He swings his bag over his shoulder, and I realize that it looks smaller than before. "I went to drop off the groceries at Kobayashi Tea, and Minazuki-sensei would like me to tell you that Tenma-san and Shinko-san are very sorry for their behavior earlier. As an apology, he wished for me to ask you as to whether you would like yakiniku for lunch, his treat."

I blink. I… don’t know that word. But… I’ve had yakitori, grilled children, and yakisoba, stir-fried
noodles before, so… grilled meat? So… like a barbecue, then?

"So… your jōnin-sensei wants to apologize to me, so he's treating us to barbecue?"

"Hai," Itachi replies.

"...okay, then. I guess." I pause. "Have you been there before? Is it good?"

Itachi pauses. "...I don't particularly like having too much meat, but the food there is good. It's relatively close to your shop, as a matter of fact."

"If you don't want to go, we don't really have to."

"Don't worry." Itachi brushes my concern off. "But my errand took a longer time than expected mainly because I also went to find my Academy history textbook. Given that you wanted to learn to read, I thought it would be best to have something interesting at hand." He looks down. "I apologize again for being late."

"Don't worry, really!" I smile. "Thanks for doing this, you really didn't have to. I really appreciate that you did, though! And I got to meet Hayate-san, so it's all good!"

"Hn."

We arrive back at Kobayashi Tea shortly.

"Kobayashi-kun, we should be done cleaning up in about half an hour," Minazuki-san informs me. "We'll leave for lunch then?"

"Thank you so much," I smile. "I'll just be in my room, then."

I head up to my room to put away my new books… and maybe get started practicing my writing. It's a bit more complicated than just that, though. I'll need to find a good hiding spot for my books. I probably should ask Otou-san if I can get a bookshelf or something for my room… and probably a ladder or step-stool or something else like that.

But for now… I survey my room. I can't just tuck it in somewhere— the books might get damaged or be accidentally discovered when Okaa-san cleans up. So nothing that would need to get washed either… I frown.

My eyes light up as they land on an incongruous shape lying by the wall. My birthday present! The rough, multicolored, reddish pillow is perfect. No one washes things like that! They're usually for decoration, anyways.

I frown. The hard part is making a pocket out of that. I need to be able to sew. And get supplies. I can't do any of that right now. However… for now, I should be able to just carry the thinner one with me. The other I can probably stash away in the pantry or something… and it's not like it's that important… right? I mean, Okaa-san and Otou-san are usually pretty good about stuff like that. For now, if I just tuck it to the side of my closet… that works, I guess.

Now for the other one. What to write. Well… what about the basics? My name is Kobayashi Makoto. I am three years old. I live in Konoha. My parents were in an accident and...and as a result, they were severely injured. Konoha is green. It has many trees…

No, that's childish.
Konoha is a beautiful place situated in a lush valley, surrounded by primarily deciduous trees. It's a rather mild climate, but I can actually experience and see all four seasons—very different from southern California. I was reborn. I like it here, though, despite all the... complications.

... 

... 

...I give up. I can't. I just... can't. It's like trying to write with my left hand or something.

...though actually while I'm on that train of thought, I should learn to do that. I mean, it's probably not much harder than what I'm already trying to do, and it's not like I don't have time. But I digress.

This is infuriating. It's slow, messy, my words are poorly formed, my wrist is hard, my fingers are basically frozen, and it's like I'm writing from my shoulder. Even holding the pencil is hard. HOLDING THE PENCIL.

To my shame, I feel tears well up in my eyes, and I drop my pencil as I try and rub them away.

No, Makoto. Don't get frustrated. This is perfectly normal. You're physically a three-year-old. Of course you won't be the most dexterous. But it's normal. Be patient with yourself. Don't get frustrated. Just keep practicing. It's norm—

But even as part of me immediately categorizes the emotions and tries to diffuse everything, part of me just wants to bawl my eyes out.

Everything... lost.

My handwriting, which wasn't perfect but still nice... definitely my art skills, too. I can't draw a smooth line to save my life right now. Everything... everything I like about myself...

And you'll lose more if you don't calm down, stop being frustrated, and practice, part of me snarks.

I bite down on my knuckle, gnawing a little on my index finger. Calmdowncalmdowncalmdowncalmdown... calm down... calm... down...

Okay. I'm fine. I'll be fine.

I slump over onto the reddish pillow, rubbing my cheek against the rough canvas-like texture.

This... is going to take a while.

Itachi finds me puffy-eyed and sprawled on a pillow, a page of random doodles open in front of me. Hey, it's less weird than the alphabet, and it's not like it doesn't help. I'm dejected, but also a bit happier— I can draw rough circles (though not yet with my fingers alone), some cross-hatches (so far only by moving my wrist, but that's a start!), and some very basic flowers.

It's considerably better than how I was when I first started... kinda. My hand gets tired very quickly, so I can write maybe a line before my handwriting gets sloppy again, and I need to take a break. Weirdly enough, I think it's easier to write with my left hand. Regardless, half-way through, after realizing the fact that I can't write for very long, I started trying to see if I could learn to write with both hands. Because... quite frankly, why not?

Still... it's discouraging.
Itachi accepts my mumble that I was a bit upset because my flowers didn't look nice, and just helps me wash my face. Then, after a change of clothes— because apparently the smoke smell tends to stay in clothes… and sometimes ruins nice ones— we go downstairs and get ready to go. Barbecue. Yay.

I groan as I stumble out of the yakiniku shop.

I feel bloated. My stomach is basically a small beach ball, and from the looks of it, I probably ate significantly more than what most little three-year-olds normally eat.

It was definitely worth it, though. That barbecue was good. I like the thin beef the best, the kind that cooks quickly. I forgot the name, but it was really good.

Now… I'm a bit tired, but I think that's from the food. Still, I don't really want to sleep yet. My stomach's too full for that to be remotely comfortable.

I tug on Itachi's sleeve.

He turns to face me."Yes, Makoto?"

"Are you and your team too full?" I ask.

"Well, we ate a portion that's proportionally smaller than yours, and… no, I am not too full. I… don't think Shinko-san or Izumo-san are, either." Itachi pauses. "Was there something you wanted?"

I chew on my cheek. "Do you… could I see what a typical training session is like for your team? Just so I have a better idea… of like… you know… shinobi stuff. I know you're super strong and everything, but…" I gesture futilely with my hands. I don't know the words, but… "I kinda want a more… a more…"

"A more concrete or solid image of what being a shinobi is like?" Itachi asks.

I mentally store the words away, before nodding. "Exactly!"

"Well, I'll have to ask sensei, but I don't see why not."

I sit on a tree root in the shade as I watch Team 2 running laps, before they start their stretches and exercises. It's pretty easy to tell that they've done this many, many times, but… it's kind of intimidating. A typical, light warm-up is 50 laps. And the training ground isn't that small. That's probably at least… I'm guessing ten miles, but that's probably a bit skewed based on my size in comparison to everything. Still, though… that number's probably not too far off. And even Shinko-san only really started showing a bit of physical exertion on her… I think 30-somethingth lap? Itachi barely broke a light sweat.

That was followed by stretches that made me wince (apparently splits are normal, and Shinko-san and Itachi are a bit into oversplits, though Izumo-san isn't quite there, and joint flexibility is also very important) and 50 push-ups (and not lame pushups like at the place I learned taekwondo, either), 100 sit-ups (that were intimidatingly fast), and then the kicks and punches and they practice on wooden poles wrapped in rope and ow that looks like it really hurts. Rope. Not soft leather-y punching bags. Nope. Rope.

And seriously, they're strong and have really good stamina… for what I'm used to, at least. The scariest part is that this probably isn't even mediocre amongst shinobi. They're genin. What about the
chūnin, or the jōnin… or the true monsters, like the Akatsuki? Things that seem so straightforward in lines and blocks of color and voices and sound-effects and background music on a screen… that's not real. Until it is.

When they start on tree-walking and Itachi goes off to find a lake for water-walking, I silently shift to sit down there, but I don't really see it. Part of me is awestruck, especially when he pulls out shuriken and kunai and later trades that for hand-seals and fireballs that reflect off the ripples in the pond, but…

The other part of me is terrified. Especially when they join up again for sparring. Because I learned taekwondo *Before*. And yeah, I was a black belt, but… that honestly didn't really mean much. I was good. My forms were good, I was strong, but… for sparring? I was… good. Not great. Just… good. Kind of. And that was mostly at the end, before… *This*. Sparring for… even a minute-and-a-half, even when I finally became a semblance of "good," was… exhausting. And that was with a light warm-up that seems infantile compared to *this*. And that was with foam padding and a chest-guard and arm-guards and shin-guards and padded gloves and a helmet… and a designated target area… and even *then* there were opponents who's kicks really hurt.

There's no padding here. The floor is hard. And the point is to put down the other person, not score points. Attacks are meant to hurt. And later on? Probably to kill. If I want to be a shinobi, if I want to… to even survive… I'm going to have to be better than them. Better than this. And… that's a daunting idea.

But then Itachi sits down next to me when Izumo-san and Shinko-san are assigned to spar, and I turn my attention to him, asking questions one after the other.

And I think… this is worth it. Because I might actually have friends. Good friends. Friends that become like a family and that you don't have to hedge on niceties and etiquette and social standards around. And I can have everything that I wanted. And maybe I can actually eventually feel the emotions that I only really read about in books and manga and watched in movies and anime.

Maybe I can actually be something. Someone.

Maybe… just maybe… I can be someone special.

I wake slowly, to orangey-red light that shines through my eyelids and the sun… through… my window?

I sit up, rubbing my eyes, and find find Itachi with a book and a small stack of leaves. I'm… in my room. I yawn, rubbing my eyes.

"Itachi-san?" I mumble.

"Ah, you've woken up," Itachi comments. "You've been sleeping for a while, Makoto-san. It's been… about two-and-a-half koku since noon." Part of my mind settles on the unfamiliar term. I've know I've heard koku before… but… it's a measurement of time, but not like hours. I think.

Meanwhile, Itachi continues. "I took the initiative to wash your clothes. And…” After a pause, he reaches around for a sheaf of papers. "I remembered what you said earlier, about wanting to learn to write. I understand that you are currently simply trying to become comfortable with a pencil by simply drawing, so this might be a bit too much for you right right now… but I took the time to make some worksheets for you to reference."

He hands over the bundle.
"As you can see, I wrote down the hiragana for various objects next to an… understandable drawing for each of them." He grimaces slightly. "I… am not quite the best at art, but… I managed to cover all of the hiragana, and I think you can understand what I mean with the pictures?"

I stare at the papers, bug-eyed. All that effort… for me?

My nose tingles and my eyes start to moisten and I sniff, smiling widely at Itachi through watery eyes. "Thank you so much Itachi. You must have put so much effort into this… thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you thankyouthankyou…" I mumble, wiping at my eyes with my pillow and sniffling loudly. I won't cry. I absolutely won't cry, even though this is probably one of the nicest things someone has done for me and Itachi is too kind for humanity… because Itachi's already starting to look a bit uneasy with my display of emotions and I really don't want to make him feel awkward. Still…

I glance at the stack of papers. I am never throwing this away.

As the sun sets, Itachi leads me back to the Uchiha Compound, where he has somehow managed to coerce me into staying again.

The… hour-or-so before had been occupied with Itachi helping me to memorize a rough map of Konoha, along with a set of common signs used around Konoha. I also learned how to write (really badly) "Kobayashi Makoto," "Uchiha Itachi," Okaa-san's name, and Otou-san's name in hiragana… and my last name in kanji. Which is kinda scary, because it's literally my previous last name, with a "小" in front of it. So, my last name is "small forest." There's two of the first kanji in "Konohagakure no Sato" when it's written in kanji: 木, which means "tree."

To be fair, that doesn't mean anything. My last name was one of the most common last names in east Asia. Still… it's kinda creepy. But here's the list:

Kobayashi (in kanji) — 小林
Kobayashi Makoto — こばやし まこと
Uchiha Itachi — うちは いたち
Kobayashi Kimiko — こばやし きみこ
Kobayashi Hiroya — こばやし ひろや
Konohagakure no Sato (also in kanji) — 木ノ葉隠れの里

I'm actually kind of proud of myself.

Itachi also explained what on earth a *koku* was. Apparently, the day is divided into six *koku* (刻), and the night another six *koku*, for a total of 12 *koku* corresponding to each full day-night cycle.

So, they're each basically about two hours long… but here's the catch— they're not set. Like, they grow longer and shorter as the length of the day shifts with the seasons. So, in winter, when the days are shorter and nights are longer, the daytime *koku* (昼刻) are shorter, and the nighttime *koku* (夜刻) longer.

(I literally only know what those kanji look like because Itachi scribbled them down in the margins. Don't ask me them again, I probably won't know unless I find this page again. And I think they're in the right order, but don't quote me on that. But back to explaining time.)
In summer, the reverse is the case.

And apparently in some of the larger cities (like the capital), the koku are announced by a series of bell towers. For example (again in the capital, which is apparently actually named Keishi, or 京師, which is super lame since that literally means "capital" and I've been calling it that forever without actually knowing), the a bell is rung for each koku at this one place in the city (whose name I already forgot, which isn't good but, like... meh), and it's then re-announced by a series of eight bells located in other places around that city.

The bells would be rung nine times at midnight and noon, stepping down to eight bell strokes one koku later, then seven, then six bell strokes to announce dawn or dusk, followed by five, then four, and then all the way down until it jumps back up to nine at midnight or noon.

Apparently there's also other names for this stuff, so like the koku period of nine bells around midnight can be called the Hour of the Rat, and the period of six bells around dawn is the Hour of the Hare, but it's kinda confusing and apparently not really used, a bit like the case with the calendar.

So, basically, for that, there's a normal name and fancy name for each month. For example, what I'm pretty sure is August is either hachigatsu, literally "eighth month," or hazuki, which means "leaf month." Yeah. Creative, I get it, but it's better than September/kugatsunagatsukil"long month."

But really, some can get pretty weird. Like December's "Priests Running."

It's pretty cool, but... really, there's a pretty good reason most people just go with _th month, or _zuki name.

So I guess it'd be six bell strokes now, since the sun's setting.

Itachi's being nice and carrying the bag. I would have insisted on being the one to carry the bag (it's polite, you know), except for the minor inconvenience that I'm not even tall enough to lift the strap of the duffel, which contains two sets of clothing (pajamas and stuff for tomorrow), toiletries, a towel, and my pillow.

No, really. I tried, but I had to lift my arms above my head to get the bag off the floor, and well...

So... yeah. That's why Itachi's carrying the bag.

But that's not the important thing— the important part of the story is the Itachi actually laughed. Well, not like, full-body-guffaw-laugh or rolling-on-the-floor-laughing, but... he smiled. A bit. It was faint, but there. And he snorted, a bit? Like that huff of air you sometimes make when you're amused?

It's a bit like finding you're the one who managed to find a bird hidden in a tree or the toy that your entire family was panicking over loosing or when you get a friend who doesn't like hugs to hug you back for a moment before threatening to judo-flip you... or even just getting a good grade. It's this weird sense of victory in something that's arguably not that important, so you shouldn't really feel that proud, but, like, you do. And it's awesome.

Itachi's what... eight? Seriously... like, it's cool, but... he doesn't smile nearly as much as an eight-year-old should. Or can. I should know. I knew a lot of five-, six-, seven-, eight-, nine-, ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds. Itachi's somewhere in that age range. And even my mostly-emotionless friend (the one who threatened to judo-flip me) smiled and laughed.

I sigh, slumping slightly.
We once again pass the place with the glowing red lanterns. It's so pretty in the sunset, but… it's dangerous and I promised Itachi so… I'll just be happy looking at it from a distance right now and seriously wishing I could paint it.

Dinner is a bit of a train wreck. And it's entirely Sasuke's fault.

On the list of interesting and/or important stuff that's happened today… I can actually blush now. That's one very interesting side-effect of having really, really pale skin.

…and that discover was also entirely Sasuke's fault.

Long story short, dinner started out really nicely. Mikoto-obasama's an amazing cook, and the sukiyaki was delicious, as were the miso soup and rice. I mean, the last two aren't that special, but… they were still good.

I love sukiyaki. It's one of the best parts of winter. It's consist of meat, usually thinly sliced beef, which is slowly cooked or simmered alongside vegetables and other ingredients in a shallow iron pot in a mixture of soy sauce, sugar, mirin, which is kinda like a sweet cooking sake, and dashi, a type of stock. This mixture… I think Okaa-san called it warishita. There's also usually tofu, negi (green onions), some leafy greens, mushrooms (I like shiitake mushrooms best), and noodles. The ingredients are usually dipped in a small bowl of raw, beaten eggs after being cooked in the pot— we normally just use the yolk—and then eaten.

Mikoto-obasama's sukiyaki was really good.

But then Sasuke did that little-kid thing where they try to whisper but fail… and whisper-asked loudly whether the "pretty onee-san [who] has hair like… like snow! Or gohan! And onigiri!" is going to come over more often.

Even my hands turned red.

So, after that awkward moment, the conversation had shifted to talking about me visiting my parents in the Hospital. Embarrassingly (and shamefully) enough, I hadn't actually thought about that.

But apparently I actually can visit them (and arguably should), and after a few minutes "we've" decided that tomorrow, Itachi will bring me to visit my parents in the Hospital.

Though, honestly, there wasn't really a "we." It was more like… Mikoto-obasama requested and we obeyed. She's the benevolent, all-mighty ruler of this household and I bow in terror and awe at her power.

Later on, after I've offered to help with the dishes (and been rebuffed with a bit of laughing… which is fair), I brush my teeth, take a well-need bath, and… I discover that Sasuke's a typical kid in that he can't actually fall asleep easily. And that he's very easily woken up. And that he's probably a bit in love with my hair.

Half-way through trying to endure a whispered conversation, I just get up and get out, using the excuse that I was just going to get some water because I was thirsty… which then changed to using the restroom after Sasuke went with me and I had to suffer nearly ten minutes of awkwardness.

I drag my pillow a door or so down to Itachi's bedroom because I'd honestly rather not sleep on the floor and Itachi probably knows if they have any extra fūton or something.

I knock once, gently, then creak open the door. There's a light on, and I see Itachi kneeling at the low
"...Itachi? I'm sorry for bothering you, but..." I grimace. "Sasuke's... a bit excited to have... someone over, and... he keeps playing my hair and that's fine but then he actually falls asleep and I try to move and it's uncomfortable and he wakes up."

"Do you not like it when people touch your hair?" Itachi asks. "I can ask him to stop if it's bothering you.

I shake my head. "That's fine... but my hair's scratchy against my face and neck, and it's a bit uncomfortable when my head's tilted in a weird way and I can't move. And he also moves a lot, which is a bit weird. And... and he keeps whispering, but he can't actually whisper, so it's really loud."

Itachi hums, still scanning the page, evidently thinking. I'm about to ask if there's an extra fūton that I can use or something when he sets the book down and turns. "Stay here."

I blink. That's really not what I was expecting, but... "...is that okay? You don't mind? Because... I'm perfectly fine with an extra fūton or something."

"Not at all," Itachi responds. "I'm used to it. Sasuke sometimes comes over during storms, or when he just feels scared in his room." He pauses. "Provided you don't mind the light, of course. I still have a few things I've been meaning to do."

I wince. "Oh. Sorry if everything during the day kept you from it..."

Itachi waves my concerns off. "Oh, not at all. I usually set aside some personal projects for this time. I rarely sleep before two and a half." Koku, my mind supplies. So... before nine.

"Okay then, if you don't mind." I agree.

Itachi smiles faintly, and it might be a trick of the light again, but... "And quite frankly, it's easier than finding and setting up a fūton."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense," I grin. "So I'll just..." I point to the bed. "So... is there a side you prefer I don't take, or..."

"I don't mind. Pick whatever side you want," Itachi replies.

"Okay," I yawn, rubbing at my eyes, shuffling over to the raised bed. I toss my pillow up, then clamber up with the help of the sheets and tucking myself in. Ah, it's a duvet. That's nice. I burrow into the blankets. "O... Oyasuminasai," I murmur. Goodnight.

"Oyasumi, Makoto."

On the second day of the baby-sitting D-ranks, I wake to a hand shaking my shoulder and a stack of clothes, along with a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a towel, set beside me.

Breakfast is nice, with miso soup, rice, nattō (a strong side dish with fermented soybeans, which Sasuke turns up his nose at, but I kinda like) with karashi (a bit like mustard) and chopped spring onions, and tamagoyaki (rolled up egg omelet). Afterwards, I quickly go change into my new clothes, folding the others up somewhat-nicely, and toss my toiletries into.

Sasuke-san again refers to me as "pretty onee-san" when asking me to pass the bowl of chopped-up
spring onions. Apparently, no one felt brave enough to correct his assumption that I was an older girl the day before.

...No one honestly feels brave enough to break the awkwardness by correcting him today, either, and we just ignore the elephant in the room. I feel more flattered than embarrassed though, now.

After breakfast, Itachi and I leave to meet up with the rest of Team 2 at the tea shop, and, in short order, we make plans to go to the hospital.

It's a pretty building, with a turquoise-y roof with pipes over it and soft white walls. There are shiny wooden slats across the bottoms of the windows, which have greenish shutters over them. It's three stories high, but that's not counting the part covered by the roof, and I'm guessing there's more underground, because it doesn't seem that big. It covers a lot of ground, though, and there's even something like backyard in the back.

The entrance is kind of intimidating, though. There's something a bit like an awning in the front, made of what seems to be the same stuff as the roof, and just above it is a green sign, lined in yellow, surrounding a massive character in a red circle that's also lined in yellow.

(医)

That thing's almost on the third story, and the character's probably bigger than I am.

When I ask, Itachi explains that it's the kanji for ishi (医), which means "medicine" or "healing"

There's also a sign underneath the awning that's less flashy, reading 木ノ葉病院, which is…”Konoha Byōin,” which literally translates to “Tree Leaf Hospital.” Guess they really weren't in the mood for something original. Still… it's straightforward and makes sense, so… maybe they were on to something.

Through the doors, we immediately head to the check-in area. Minazuki-san and Shinko-san offer to go with me, but…

I'd feel kinda awkward with them there, too.

"Is it okay if I just go with Itachi? He's met Okaa-san and Otou-san before, and…” And it would be less awkward, my mind fills in.

Luckily, they seem to be okay with it, and simply go to sit in the waiting area. Minazuki-san and Shinko-san offer to go with me, but…

My legs hurt. It's one thing climbing stairs when you're 5'6". It's another thing entirely when the stair steps are higher than your knee. My face is red— partially with exertion, partially with embarrassment that Itachi needs to stop and wait for me every few seconds.

When I reach the top, I pointedly refuse to look Itachi in the eye. I had resorted to crawling the last quarter of the way.

Itachi tactfully doesn't comment, though a ghost of a smile seems to flit over his face. No. It was a trick of the light. It wasn't a trick of the light...
"Is… is there somewhere I can wash my hands?" I choke out, face burning.

A nice passerby… I think probably a nurse… helpfully points us to the bathroom, and I hurry over.

I quickly wash my hands, also splashing some water on my face. When I step out, I'm almost bowled over by a cart. Luckily, a hand helpfully pulls me out of the way. I luckily, I trip, and only barely manage not to face plant.

"Thanks, Itachi," I squeak, wide eyes following the cart that nearly… ran me over. "They seem… in a bit of a rush. Do you know which room Okaa-san and Otou-san are in?"

"Yes. If you are ready?"

I nod.

"Ah… sorry about that, Itachi," I murmur when we walk out the room about half-an-hour later. "I think Otou-san might just have been tired… or maybe he's in pain or something. Okaa-san likes you, though, I think."

"They seem to be recovering well," Itachi smiles. "I think your Okaa-san and Otou-san will be released by the end of the week."

I chew at my cheek. "If a shinobi got injured the same, how long would it take for them?"

"Well, with a capable medic-nin… perhaps a matter of hours," Itachi replies.

"Is that because shinobi are stronger than civilians? Or because they have chakra?" I ask.

"Shinobi are more used to channeling chakra," Itachi explains. "It would be dangerous to use medical ninjutsu on a civilian because they're simply not used to channeling chakra."

"Mm," I hum. "I guess that makes sense."

I think back to what Okaa-san and Otou-san had looked like. They'd both had lots of bandages and a cast on a limb or three, but Otou-san had been more severely injured than Okaa-san. They'd seemed in good spirits, but… they'd also seemed a bit bored. And…

"Ne, Itachi?" I ask. "What's the food like in the hospital?"

"…from what I have heard, it's… rather bland," Itachi admits. "Why?"

"Can we visit tomorrow? And bring… maybe some books or something?" I ask. "It seems… a bit boring in the hospital. I'm not sure if we're allowed to bring food in there, though."

"That's a very good idea, Makoto," Itachi replies. "I'm sure they would appreciate that. Do you know if they have books they prefer? And I think they would also like a get-well card from you."

I laugh. "As long as you teach me how." I bite my lip. "I've looked a bit at what you made yesterday, but… is there a bigger list of all the hiragana or something? And isn't there also… what was it called… oh! Yeah, there's also katakana, right? And kanji?"

Itachi smiles, and it's faint, but it's definitely not a trick of the light. "Of course."

I beam.
A few steps later, he continues. "Why don't we first get out of the hospital?"

I cover my face with a hand. "Yeah. That's… probably important. Probably a good first step."

I am so embarrassed.

…

…Oh, no. I have to go down the stairs now.

I groan softly.

I flop backwards on my rug, groaning.

My head hurts.

So, the fifty basic hiragana are apparently usually arranged in something like a table. I think it'll be easier once I can make one for reference with, like, what they sound like or something in English (because I'm pretty sure I saw something like that at one point when I was Googling some things), but… that'll have to come later, like at some time when I can actually write legibly. For now… my head just kind of hurts from trying to imagine everything mentally.

So, first, for hiragana, the curlier kind, there are the "basic" vowel sounds: a, i, u, e, o.

They're represented by あ, い, う, え, お.

Then there are what are basically the basic vowel sounds, but with what sounds like a constant in front:

ka (か), ki (き), ku (く), ke (け), ko (こ)
sa (さ), si (し), su (す), se (せ), so (そ)
ta (た), ti (ち), tu (つ), te (て), to (と)
na (な), ni (に), nu (ぬ), ne (ね), no (の)
ha (は), hi (ひ), hu (ふ), he (へ), ho (ほ)
ma (ま), mi (み), mu (む), me (め), mo (も)
ra (ら), ri (り), ru (る), re (れ), ro (ろ)

There are also some weird ones, which doesn't use all the vowel sounds.

ya (や), yu (ゆ), yo (よ)
wa (わ), wo (を)

And there's also n (ん) that's sometimes put at the end of words.

It's almost the same, pronunciation-wise at least, for katakana.

There are the "basic" vowel sounds: a, i, u, e, o.

They're represented by ア, イ, ウ, エ, オ.
Then there's everything else:

ka (カ), ki (キ), ku (ク), ke (ケ), ko (コ)

sa (サ), si (シ), su (ス), se (セ), so (ソ)

ta (タ), ti (チ), tu (ツ), te (テ), to (ト)

na (ナ), ni (ヌ), nu (ヌ), ne (ネ), no (ノ)

ha (ハ), hi (ヒ), hu (フ), he (ヘ), ho (ホ)

ma (マ), mi (ミ), mu (ム), me (メ), mo (モ)

ra (ラ), ri (リ), ru (ル), re (レ), ro (ロ)

ya (ヤ), yu (ユ), yo (ヨ)

wa (ワ), wo (ヲ)

And "n" (ン)

Some, like the hiragana "he" (へ) and the katakana "he" (ヘ) look really similar, which makes me thankful that they can be used almost interchangeably.

That's the basics.

There's also some other things that are important, like… the fact that there is exactly one correct way to write each kana, or character. To be fair, that's the case for most characters, especially kanji… or at least, if they're anything like Chinese characters… which I'm pretty sure they are.

I can write all of them… mostly. I know how to write each of them, provided I have a reference, but… memorizing all of them is going to be a pain. And there's still more to go!

A handkerchief-wrapped box appears in my sights and I grab it eagerly, rolling back upright.

"Thanks Itachi!" I beam. "Wait… this was what Mikoto-sama gave you in the morning before we left, right? Because I know you're super-human, but I'm pretty sure you didn't leave for long enough to make a bento."

Itachi smiles softly, unwrapping an identical bento. "Yes. She also hopes you will come over for dinner again. Apparently, she does not have the greatest faith in the child-rearing capabilities of a genin team."

I nod, shoving away the memory of her smile after a shudder, too focused on unwrapping the bento to answer verbally. I take of the lid, and…

"Awww… this is so cool! Are those… the octopus-shaped things are sausages, right? The onigiri are so cute! Mikoto-sama made them look like a cat!" I take a bite, and beam. "Mmmm! It's okaka, right?"

Okaka are bonito flakes (dried flakes of a type of fish), moistened with soy sauce.

Itachi nods. "Your onigiri are filled with either okaka or kombu. Okaka is Sasuke's favorite, though he likes when it's mixed with tomatoes, and I personally prefer kombu. Haha-ue wasn't sure which you prefered."
I hum. "I like both of those, I think. If Mikoto-sama really wants to know, though… the only thing I don't really like is umeboshi." I scrunch my nose. Blergh. Umeboshi, pickled plum, is really sour, and I really don't like it. I've tried to like it, but… it's right up there with brussel sprouts on the list of things I don't like, but kinda wish I did.

"I'll let her know," Itachi nods again, smiling faintly.

The next few minutes are simply dedicated to enjoying the bento, but soon a question crosses my mind.

"Your team's… took a break for lunch, right?"

Itachi nods.

"I was wondering…" I start slowly, "The shop's almost back to new. I don't want what happened before to happen again, but… how hard do you think it would be to open the shop?"

Itachi chews slowly, before he sets down his chopsticks. "It… would depend on what exactly is needed to do to run the shop. For example, I would assume that my team has the capabilities to run, for example, a weapons shop, if given an idea of the pricing and with at least one supervisor. On the other hand, I would not assume that my team has to capabilities to run… let us assume… a restaurant."

I frown. "Well… we sell tea. We don't just sell the dried tea, in bags, though. Sometimes, people want to stay and drink tea, so we also serve cups and pots of tea. In addition to tea, we also serve senbei, dango, higashi, and wagashi. I know that higashi and wagashi usually served in tea ceremonies, but we offer them in a casual setting. And we also have the tea ceremony rooms. The walls are a bit thicker than normal rice paper, and I think there's stuff there for privacy, but I'm not exactly sure what. There are lots of differently-sized rooms. Some people also use them for their own stuff, and we get money for letting them use the room and for the supplies."

Itachi nods slowly. "May I ask which people?"

"I think… maiko and geiko, uh… geisha." I frown. "The pretty onee-san with the painted faces and fancy kimono? They serve tea, and sometimes hold small parties… and I think it depends on the party, but we usually prepare the food. I think. In front of them? Okaa-san said something like 'shinobi wa higaimōzō desu.'" I scrunch my nose. "I don't know what that means, though."

Itachi covers his mouth with a hand, and I stare grumpily at him. He's laughing at me. I'm sure of it. Or… to be technical, smiling at me. But… still, laughing. Just… not?

"Your Okaa-san means that shinobi tend to… not trust strangers with their food. Or with their back, for that matter. It makes shinobi feel better if they can make sure that no one, for example, poisons their food during preparation."

"Ah," I nod. So, basically, shinobi are paranoid. "But…" I tilt my head. "They sometimes trust people… right? Because sometimes Okaa-san and Otou-san bring in food that's already prepared, and the plates come out empty."

Itachi's eyebrows lift, ever-so-slightly. "Then those shinobi trust your parents. That is… quite impressive."

I duck into my shoulders. "But… maybe it's probably best not to do that this week. I don't think they'll mind too much, but… I don't want anything bad to happen. Plus, a lot of the people like their privacy." I wince. "No offense to Shinko-chan or Tenma-san, but…"
Itachi shakes his head. "No, I understand."

I chew my cheek. "If Shinko-san and Izumo-san can help wash up and clean and Minazuki-san can work at the register… we can sell tea. We might need to take dango off the menu, though…"

"I can make dango," Itachi nods, "so there shouldn't be a problem there. Though… if I may ask, where do you get your senbei?"

"Our… senbei?" I flush, rubbing at my neck. "We normally ship senbei in, in bulk, about once every month. They aren't bad, but… as a result, the senbei usually aren't that fresh." I grimace. "I mean, we try to keep them dry and crunchy and… you know, yummy, and they're pretty good… but…" I sigh. "I actually asked Okaa-san and Otou-san about that. The problem with making our own is that we don't have an charcoal grill, and we definitely don't have the space required for one that's large enough to make the amount of senbei we need, much less all of the materials." I flop backwards. "Also, we definitely don't have the time to make that many senbei."

"I think… should your parents agree, then, I may have a solution," Itachi offers.

I sit up. "Wait, what? You do?"

"In the Uchiha district, there is a senbei store, owned by this old couple. If we visit your parents again tomorrow, I can ask, and… perhaps they can reach an agreement." Itachi smiles.

"That could be really nice!" I beam. "Then, let's get started! If we hurry… I think we might be able to open tomorrow!"

What seems like an eternity later, I've once again flopped face-first into my wonderful birthday pillow.

Even just katakana and hiragana are so complicated.

Apart from the basics, there's also these… kinda like slide-y sounds.

Like a sound like "kya" would be きゃ, which is basically the kana for "ki" and "ya" smushed together, and with the latter one shrunken slightly.

So, like you might have guessed, there's a new list of... stuff. A lot of it's self-explanatory, but...

kyā (きゃ), kyū (きゅ), kyō (きょ)
sha (しゃ), shu (しゅ), sho (しょ)
cha (ちゃ), chu (ちゅ), cho (ちょ)
nya (にゃ), nyu (にゅ), nyo (にょ)
hya (ひゃ), hyu (ひゅ), hyo (ひょ)
mya (みゃ), myu (みゅ), myo (みょ)
rya (りゃ), ryu (りゅ), ryo (りょ)

And there's also a set for katakana.
kyā (キャ), kyū (キュ), kyō (キョ)
sha (シャ), shu (シュ), sho (ショ)
cha (チャ), chu (チュ), cho (チョ)
nya (ニャ), nyo (ニョ), nyu (ニュ)
hya (ヒャ), hyo (ヒョ), hyu (ヒュ)
mya (ミャ), myo (ミョ), myu (ミョ)
rya (リャ), ryu (リュ), ryo (リョ)

But there's also other stuff, and that's what's giving me a headache.

Like, for katakana, there's っ,ゝ, and ゞ, which all have to do with pronunciation and how stuff sounds. There's even more for katakana, though. ー is the weird one. Without that, there's just ッ,ヾ, and ヽ.

However, there's still more kana, which are kinda similar to some of the basic kana, but… not.

For hiragana, there's

ga (が), gi (ぎ), gu (ぐ), ge (げ), go (ご), and the weirder gya (ぎゃ), gyu (ぎゅ), gyo (ぎょ)
zai (ざ), zi… though it's more like "ji" (じ), zu (ず), ze (ぜ), zo (ぞ), with ja (じャ), ju (じゅ), jo (じょ)
da (だ), di (ぢ), du/dzu/zu (づ), de (で), do (ど), dya (ぢゃ), dyu (ぢゅ), dyo (ぢょ)
ba (ば), bi (び), bu (ぶ), be (べ), bo (ぼ), bya (びゃ), byu (びゅ), byo (びょ)
pa (ぱ), pi (ぴ), pu (ぷ), pe (ぺ), po (ぽ), pya (ぴゃ), pyu (ぴゅ), pyo (ぴょ)

For katakana...

gA (ガ), gi (ギ), gu (グ), ge (ゲ), go (ゴ), and the weirder gya (ギャ), gyu (ギュ), gyo (ギョ)
za (ザ), zi… though it's more like "ji" (ジ), zu (ツ), ze (ゼ), zo (ゾ), with ja (じゃ), ju (ジュ), jo (ジョ)
da (ダ), something like "ji," "dji," or "jyi" (チ), zu (ツ), de (テ), do (ド), ja (チャ), ju (チュ), jo (チョ)
ba (パ), bi (ピ), bu (プ), be (ペ), bo (ポ), bya (ピャ), byu (ピュ), byo (ピョ)
pa (パ), pi (ピ), pu (プ), pe (ペ), po (ポ), pya (ピャ), pyu (ピュ), pyo (ピョ),

Seriously, the last two rows are basically identical. Only, instead of the thing-y like the closing quotations ("), there's the degree sign (°).

And my hands hurt. Both of them.

And my writing looks like scribbles at this point.

…

My back's kinda stiff, too. I didn't actually know that three-year olds could feel stiff.
Even my *eyes* hurt.

...

And I currently sound a bit like a dying elephant.

...

I roll back into a sitting position, sighing.

At least, by this point, I get to take a break… and try to explain things to Shinko-san, who keeps going on and on about how "cute" I am, Tenma-san, who clearly doesn't want to be here, and Minazuki-san… who's clearly just humoring the little "client."

… I want to just flop back again and take a nap.

There's a reason Itachi's my favorite. And it's not that he's the youngest and shortest, and thus, the least intimidating and most approachable.

---

I slump behind Itachi, feet dragging on the ground, as we head to the Uchiha compound.

I'm so tired at this point that I don't even care about being polite— Itachi's carrying all the groceries we'd gotten the day before. Hey, if I'm going to be taking advantage of Mikoto-sama's hospitality, I might as well pay her back a bit. Plus, there's no point in letting the groceries go to waste.

I yawn, quickly covering my mouth with a hand.

I didn't take a nap. It's still about a *koku* until sunset… so about four in the afternoon?

I scramble to catch up with Itachi. I feel bad that I'm making him carry everything, but…

Like I've said, I am *tired*.

---

That night, Mikoto-obasama makes *nikujaga*, dish of meat, potatoes and onion stewed in sweetened soy sauce, sometimes other vegetables. It's a bit like beef stew. It's mostly potatoes, and it's usually boiled until most of the liquid has been reduced. The meat's usually either thinly sliced beef, minced/ground beef, or pork.

Mikoto-sama uses thinly-sliced beef, and also adds *hakusai*, something a bit like Chinese cabbage *Before*, and carrots.

It's delicious, and I actually stay mostly awake throughout the entirety of dinner.

There's even some apples and strawberries for dessert!

They're what help me get through the headache of Itachi explaining units of measurement.

The standard basics are *shaku* (尺) for length, *tsubo* (坪) for area, *shō* (升) for volume, and *kan* (貫) for what I think is mass. A *shaku*'s about a foot and a *shō* is about half a gallon.

But for length, there's also *sun* (寸), which are about one-tenth of a *shaku*, *ken* (間), which are about six *shaku*, *ri* (里), which are 12,960 *shaku*, and more.

Luckily, there are a lot of measurements that are logical… like, metric-system logical.
Like, for area, a *shaku* (勺), which is different from the length *shaku* (尺), is 1/100 of a *tsubo*. There’s also the *go* (合) for volume, which is the usual way of measuring sake and is 1/10 of a *shō*, and the *koku* (石), which is pretty important because it’s considered to be approximately the amount of rice necessary to feed a civilian for an entire year, which is useful when calculating food rations in wartime. And there’s yet another *shaku* for volume, which is 1/100 of a *shō*, but uses the same kanji as the *shaku* for area, which is pretty confusing.

It's also my official introduction to *kanji*, since Itachi moves on from that to creating a worksheet of basic kanji… with pronunciations and spelling in *hiragana*, which is arguably a good way to familiarize me with those kana, but also serves to make everything blur in front of my eyes. It's arguably worse than learning physics.

Because some things are relatively easy. I knew the numbers for one through ten from Before, as well as some of the other really basic kanji that have the same structure and meaning as they do in Chinese, and just have a different pronunciation… but…

甘 means "sweet." 甘 means the number 20. It's the single-character equivalent of writing 二十. The primary meaning of 両 is "well," as in, a hole for drawing water from deep in the ground. 両 means "donburi," that bowl of rice with various toppings. And some things aren't the same, which is really annoying! I knew the *simplified* Chinese characters… but… evidently, some things haven't been simplified yet.

Like "bird." I learned it as 鳥, but in Japanese it's 鳥. Worse, 鳥 designates a crow or a raven, and they look *almost identical*. And there's also 馬, which means *horse* of all things. That used to be 马!

The next morning, I wake up to a pudgy finger poking my cheek and a three-year-old's face that's way too close to me. Yeah, Sasuke's cute as a toddler, but… personal space, please?

And once again, I blush bright red. Because I was so tired that I’d slept through half of breakfast and I *drooled*. On the table. I quickly wipe it off with a napkin, but… I really wish I knew how to sink into the ground right now and disappear.

Still, the *okayu*— which is a bit like… congee, or the rice porridge I was used to and loved Before, but less broken-down— is really good with the green onions and grilled hamachi, also known as *buri*, which Itachi shows me is written as 鰤.

And I have discovered that Itachi is a very dedicated teacher who has decided to *carry around a small notebook and pens with him so that he can show me the kanji for everything throughout the day*. Me? I'm very intimidated. And there's something kinda scary about that tiny smile he has on right now.

I'm even more intimidated. Because in the time I was sleeping, Itachi had managed to obtain a list of prices of the couple who run Uchiha Senbei, and we're going to visit my parents as soon as I have time to make a get-well card.

And… that *smile*. I internally whimper when the realization finally strikes me— that's the same smile Mikoto-sama used. The same smile she had worn when… *inviting* me to dinner, and that she had used when Fugaku-sama had tried to protest.

I simply paste on a smile (hopefully hiding how terrified I am) and nod rapidly, accepting the card and envelope that Itachi pulls out of seemingly nowhere and scrambling back to the room to grab a pen and some of the colorful crayons that Itachi keeps in his room so Sasuke doesn't lose them.
What seems like an hour later, my head is spinning, and I think Otou-san actually likes Itachi now.

And, at this point, Itachi deserves at least double the pay of the rest of his genin team.

Long story short, Kobayashi Teas will have a new contract with Uchiha Senbei as soon as it's officialized. And everyone's really happy. My parents are happy to get fresh senbei at a lower price than slightly stale senbei. Uchiha Senbei also really happy to expand their business, because it location inside the Uchiha compound heavily restricts their customer base. The agreement's a win-win scenario.

A little while later, I'm pouring over one of my larger notebooks at one of the tables downstairs. I've got the worksheets scattered around me, and I'm trying to write down everything that happened that day. Then, I'll move on to… write about something, anything else. Maybe name different animals, or types of weather, or even write more about what I remember.

It's slow going, and each hand can only really write a few lines before tiring, but I just try for another word, another line, just a little bit more before switching hands.

It's also almost embarrassingly messy. There's smeared pencil over the paper and my hands… and even my forearms, and I've accidentally creased the paper several times, but… I'm improving.

Meanwhile, Itachi's preparing dango and the rest of his team gets to work sorting out the shelves and familiarizing themselves with everything. Whenever my hands need a longer break, or I've gotten a bit too frustrated with my inability to remember specific kana, I head over to make sure they're working smoothly.

I'm pretty nervous, but… it should be fine. With any luck, we'll open about half a koku after lunch, and close about half a koku before sunset. Less than four hours. We'll be fine.

For lunch, Team 2 leaves again to… go eat, I'd assume, and Itachi once again brings out a bento, this time full of just onigiri, and he takes some of he restocked the kitchen earlier, when he'd gone to buy ingredients for dango, to make miso soup and fried lotus root, which is nice and crunchy. And dango. Lots of dango.

We normally serve a wide variety of dango, but it wasn't until I saw how confused the rest of Team 2 was that I realized that maybe not everyone's used to more than just botchan and maybe mitarashi or anko dango.

Dango is generically just a sweet made from mochiko, rice flour, that's a bit similar to mochi. The many different varieties of dango are usually named after the various seasonings served on or with it. Anko dango is commonly served with anko, sweetened red bean (azuki) paste. Chadango is green-tea flavored dango. Botchan dango, also known as hanami dango or sanshoku dango has three colors, but is only served in the springtime. Kuri dango is dango coated in chestnut paste. Goma dango is served with a salty-sweet sauce made from sugar and ground black sesame seeds. Kibi dango is made with millet flour. Kinako dango is made with kinako, toasted soy flour, or just covered in kinako. Mitarashi dango is lightly-grilled dango covered with a sweet soy sauce glaze. Kurumi dango is dango covered in a sweet walnut paste. Yomogi dango is dango made with yomogi, a type of herb. Zunda dango is dango covered in zunda, sweet ground green soybean (edamame).

Today, we've got the normal dango with the difference sauces/toppings.
I think I've eaten too much dango, though—my jaw's tired from chewing and I'm a bit too full. Still… fresh dango is just so good, and Itachi makes them different from Okaa-san and Otou-san!

Still, I can't wait till the shop opens!

At almost two and a half *koku* after noon, probably about a bit before five in the afternoon, I am ready to keel over and start crying.

I'd completely forgotten that doing this would mean forgoing my nap.

At first, things went perfectly fine. Shinko-san and Izumo-san washed dishes and served tea and cleaned tables and kept everything tidy. Minazuki-san manned the register. And Itachi and I took orders, prepared tea, prepared the plates of *dango* or *senbei* or whatever else was ordered, and served the customers.

That was fine.

We survived the well-meaning grandmothers and grandfathers and frequent customers, and even Yamanaka-sama, who'd popped in to say hello, and the very stern, very intimidating gazes of Hyūga… I forgot-or-never-knew-the-person's-name-and-was-too-scared-of-him-to-find-out. There was a bit of an awkward moment when Itachi had been the one to greet him, but we survived. Luckily, Hyūga Hizashi-san was nicer, even though apologies are always awkward, and the very nice person known as Hyūga Hitomi, who I'm *certain* I've seen before but don't remember well, also came to… check in on me. I think. I also think she'd visited my parents yesterday, but I was so taken aback by a *smiling, cheerful* Hyūga that I'm afraid I kinda blanked out on a lot of the conversation.

We survived all of that. And then, around one-and-a-half *koku* past noon… I meet the species of human being known as fangirls for the first time.

Or at least, for the first time in this world, and for the first time while in the presence of the target of their fangirling.

And they are terrifying and slightly disturbing and I am amazed that Itachi did not take me up on my offer to let him hide in my room upstairs. Itachi deserves a *very* big tip for this mission. The shop was crowded to the point of bursting.

Normally, it's roomy, peaceful, but with a decent flow of customers and a nice atmosphere.

Now? It feels a bit like how I imagine a Black Friday sale in person would feel like.

I don't know how his fans found him. I don't want to know how much free time his fans have or that they have decided to spend on gawking at Itachi. But the fact is, they have someone flocked here.

And I… kinda capitalized on that fact.

It wasn't like I could shoo them away, after all…and all it took were some comments over how rude it was to hang around inside a store without buying anything, as well as an aside to a nice grandmother who wanted to know why the *dango* and *senbei* tasted a bit different that Itachi was making the *dango*… and the tables, as well as the area outside, were packed.

Still… when that bustle hadn't faded after what seemed like an *hour*, I was more than ready to push them out the door and shut them out. When it turns out that we ran out of ingredients for the dango, I practically jumped for joy.
Only, I didn't, because I was too tired, but my mood definitely did.

And now, we're finally done.

I smile and wave at the remaining patrons who leave the shop.

When the last person walks out the door, I grab a stool, flip the sign on the back of the front door to "CLOSED," and heave a sigh of relief.

We're done. We've survived.

That night, Mikoto-obasama makes *oden*, a one-pot dish of various savory goodies simmered in a soy sauce and *dashi* kelp broth. Common ingredients include boiled eggs, *chikuwa* fish cake, squid balls, thick cuts of *daikon* radish, octopus, and *konnyaku* yam.

I'd actually needed to be shaken awake where I'd nodded off on the table, but it was worth it for the *oden*.

That didn't stop me from immediately going back to sleep after dinner, though.

The next morning, Sasuke accidentally smashes one of Mikoto-sama's flower vases. His socks had slipped on the polished wooden floor when he'd sprinted full speed around a corner.

Breakfast is grilled *hamachi*, along with rice and miso soup and *nattō*, but no one actually speaks over the elephant in the room of Mikoto-obasama's broken vase.

Itachi and I quickly leave the house, but Itachi hesitates on the way to the hospital.

"Makoto?" he asks. "Do you mind if I go to replace the vase Sasuke broke?"

I shake my head. It's not like Okaa-san and Otou-san won't be at the hospital if we take a detour.

Itachi turns to head a bit further from the center of Konoha, to the more civilian districts. He stops at a small shop. There's some really pretty ceramic pieces in the window, with a tea set and even some vases, displayed with branches of flowering plum blossoms.

Next door, there's a place with glass… and there's also a woodworking shop nearby. And a store with what seem like either decorative wall-scrolls and panels or calligraphy supplies… or possibly both, which we passed on the way here. And a store with what seem like second-hand *kimono*.

I push my way through the still-open door to the pottery shop. Too self-conscious to approach the front, I decide to look around instead. It's interesting in here. Contrary to what the window shows, there's more than just pottery. There's also metalworks. Part of me registers Itachi talking to a… Nonomura-san, but I'm more interested in a table with brightly colored… hair pins? *Kanzashi*.

They're stacked in an open box. Most of them look similar. There are a lot of designs that I'm pretty sure are for winter and spring, based on what I've seen the *maiko* wearing. There's greens and a lot of soft pinks and purples, all rendered in folded silk triangles.

Wait, no. Not all of them. The light gleams off something metallic, closer to the bottom of the box, and… oh, wow.

It's a hair-pin, but… it's *metal*. And not like of those fans or the ones meant to make noise. No, it's like the ones with silk flowers… just not made of silk. There's a bundle of… what seem to be white
chrysanthemums and red maple, the ones with seven-pointed leaves, and there are small, yellow leaves interspersed to provide accents of color to the red and white that also trail down in lightly clanking chains, though there's also two trails of the maple leaves.

It's beautiful.

I've never seen anything like it, but… wow.

"Makoto?" I turn, clutching at the kanzashi. "Do you want the hairpin?"

I bite my lip, looking again at the hairpin, but I shake my head. It's pretty, but… "It's… it's fine. I didn't bring any money."

"Are you sure?" Itachi asks. "I can get it for you. You can just pay me back later."

I pause for a minute too long.

"I'll go ask," Itachi calls over his shoulder as he walks to the front.

I stay behind, examining the pin. Yes, it's pretty, but… it probably wouldn't look good on me. Plus, I've already got issues with being mistaken for a girl. While that's not a problem in its own right… it's the small things that bug me.

Like being shooed away from the fallen tree trunks with the bugs. Or the disapproving looks when I'd just throw on a shirt and shorts and end up with grass stains and on my knees, or laugh too loud, or shout in exhilaration. Or the horrified looks when I'd hold a butterfly or a bee in my hand and rush to show it to my parents. Or having a random parent tsk about my parents and their poor child-rearing skills just within earshot. Or when I'd annoy Shino and he'd push me down a hill, which he's done more than once and ends with me returning the favor as soon as I've clambered back up… but the "well-meaning" person immediately shoots him a dirty look and rushes to help me up. Or when someone would accidentally shove me aside and then their parent would make them apologize to me because it's not nice to hit a girl or… or something.

It's not even that big of a deal, it's just… annoying, especially when I want to try and be more social.

It seems like everyone just cares too much when they think I'm a girl. I'm not made of glass, I'd prefer if they didn't treat me that way. I'm pretty sure they don't mean anything by it, but… still. And people tend to be more… unknowingly condescending in an effort to be "nice."

Sure, it'll probably be useful if I want to… infiltrate something when I'm a shinobi, but… it's kinda suffocating. Add that to how the fangirls has acted yesterday, and… I don't really want to be thought of that way. I don't want to be associated with… them. Not now.

I'm still staring at the pin when Itachi returns. "A significant portion of the hairpin is made of gold, and it's actually the first piece made by the Nonomura-san's daughter. He doesn't have a price set on it, yet, so he has to ask her, but—"

I sigh. "It's probably too expensive." And I'm already thankful for everything Otou-san and Okaa-san do for me, and it wouldn't be nice… especially since… you know…

I shake my head, trying to clear it. "Besides… it's a bit too…" I pause. "I'm not a girl. And my hair's not long enough for it, even if…" I slump. "…I shouldn't waste money on a trinket. I'd just… break it, or lose it in a couple of months, anyways." And it wouldn't be nice to Okaa-san or Otou-san.

That's true. I've got this second chance, I shouldn't waste it on frivolities. Not yet. There'll be time for
that later, but… not yet.

I set the kanzashi down in the box again, carefully concealing it under the other hairpins, and try to smile. "It's not really… practical, you know? It's pretty, but that's… that's not enough."

"Makoto?" Itachi asks.

"Let's just go, 'kay?" I grin weakly. "Besides, I'm sure Okaa-san has pretty things, too, that she'll probably let me look at. C'mon! I want to tell Okaa-san and Otou-san about what happened yesterday."

Probably an hour later, we exit the hospital, laughing. Or at least, I do. Itachi's got two points of bright red on his face.

He's also smiling, though, so it can't have been that bad. Yeah, Okaa-san can get embarrassing with the praise, but Itachi definitely deserves every single word she said.

...though maybe the comment about him leaving the shinobi corps to work for Kobayashi Teas full-time was a bit too much, considering how… canon, and how he'd sort of frozen up.

Still, I don't think it's healthy to keep all of that bottled up. I doubt Itachi has anyone he can just vent on. And I'm probably not good enough to be that person, but…

I bump Itachi lightly with my head.

"Makoto? Did you need something?"

"Itachi? Do… do you not want to be a shinobi?"

Itachi pauses. "...being a shinobi is expected of the Uchiha heir."

I blink. I mean… "Oh… wait… oh, yeah… you're the heir." I twitch. I'd… somehow forgotten that. I then blanche, clapping a hand over my mouth as I almost double over.

"Makoto? Are you alright?" Itachi asks.

"...I just imagined you as Fugaku-sama. As in, his face, but on top of your body… and with your hairstyle…" I shudder. "No. That just looked so wrong." I blanche again. "Not that there's anything wrong with Fugaku-sama or anything, it's just that… you're my friend. He's not. He's… nice… sometimes… but… nooffensebutyourfather'sabitscary," I blurt out, immediately clapping a hand over my mouth.

Itachi coughs.

I move on from that. "But I asked about you," I murmur. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it now, but…" I bite my cheek. "I want to know," I mumble. "You don't have to if you don't want to, but…"

Itachi sighs imperceptibly. "We're almost at the shop. Do you have a table in your room? I can show you some more kanji that might be helpful"

I blink at the change in topic, then grin, nodding. "Un!"

Itachi explains as he writes a new list of characters in the notebook.
"If you do not mind, I would prefer if you did not tell Otou-sama or Haha-ue." He pauses. "In fact, I would prefer if... if you did not tell anyone."

I look up, nodding slowly. "It's a big deal, huh? Okay. No one. I promise." I grin. "And that includes Okaa-san and Otou-san, too, if you're wondering."

Itachi smiles, before sobering up. "I was born right before the Third Shinobi War." He sighs. "When I was your age... I witnessed first-hand many of the war's casualties."

He sets down the pencil. "There was one day I remember the best. There was a battle, during the nighttime. I had watched from a cliff, out of sight. It was... horrific. In the morning, I went down to try... to try and see if anyone lived. There was one shinobi, who called for water." He closes his eyes. "I gave him water. But... he was an Iwa-nin."

"Oh," I murmur.

"He saw my weapons pack, I would assume." Itachi shrugs, opening his eyes, but not looking beyond his hands, fisted in his lap. He takes a deep breath. "Then, he tried to kill me."

I blink. Oh.

"And then Otou-sama killed him," Itachi concludes, shifting his weight until he's sitting criss-crossed as opposed to sitting in seiza, on his legs. He sighs again. "I don't want war. I would prefer to avoid violence. I would prefer not to have to ever kill anyone. My favorite word is heiwa, 平和, peace." He writes it down on the notebook, before fisting his hand around the pencil. "But... I cannot do that. My clan, my village... they expect me to serve as a shinobi." He puts the pencil back down. "And so, I dream of the next best thing. I train in the hopes of becoming a shinobi so strong that... perhaps, one day, I can bring an end to war and conflict."

Itachi sighs. "I am strong. I graduated after barely a year in the Academy, and at the top of the graduating class. None of the missions we receive challenge me. If given the opportunity, I believe I would qualify for chūnin." He pauses. "Sensei won't recommend me for the Chūnin Exams. Father... Otou-sama is... a bit upset with that. But..." He shrugs again.

I sigh, puffing out my cheeks, then stand up... only to glomp onto Itachi. I rest my chin on his shoulder, giving him what I consider to be a long-needed hug. "Fugaku-sama's silly. And so's the village and your clan if that's what they actually think." I stand up, going to flop onto my pillow, still looking at Itachi. "I'll be a shinobi, too. And I'll help you." I grin. "I personally think that when getting along with people, it's best to speak softly and carry a big stick! Not literally, but... be nice, and be really to protect yourself, but... be nice first."

I rest my chin on my hands. "I think you could make a very nice Hokage, Itachi."

Itachi blinks, opening his mouth, but I cut him off. "If you want to make the entire Elemental Nations listen to you, you need to make them see you first. You need enough power to make them take you seriously." I stare at him. "So, try for Hokage. Keep doing what you're doing, but also make friends. Make friends with other people, other shinobi." I laugh. "Maybe if you have time, you should come play with me and Shino! Maybe even bring Sasuke-chan."

I stare at Itachi. "But I think it's important that you get to know people. And... make an actual plan to bring about peace and end wars. I don't know enough, but... that's a big dream."

I roll off the pillow until I'm lying on my back and Itachi seems to be upside down. I smile. "If you'll teach me, then I'll try to help you." My smile widens into a grin. "I like your dream, Itachi."
Itachi stares, and my grin shrinks slightly. Did I do something weird?

"You… you really think that?" he murmurs. "You don't believe it to be weird or odd?"

I roll back to my front, propping myself up on my elbows. I glare. "Your dream is perfectly fine, and not weird at all." I scrunch my nose, glaring at the wall. "I'll get Shino to put the itchy bugs into the beds of anyone who says that."

Itachi smiles, an actual smile, and my glare softens.

"Thank you, Makoto."

---

...I should not have said that. It seems my encouragement has also served to encourage Itachi's… efforts towards tutoring me. That's honestly the only explanation I can think of for why, about a koku later, as Team 2 opens the shop, I'm perched on a chair at the kitchen table upstairs, reading Itachi's history textbook, while Itachi prepares plates of dango and sauces and toppings next to me that he'll carry downstairs soon.

I don't know when he had time to make a glossary of all the kanji in the first few chapters of the book, and I'm not sure I want to know, but there in my notebook are the words and their pronunciation in hiragana. If I don't know what some mean, I just ask Itachi. He somehow manages to make time for me in the middle of a whirlwind of pots, plates, and bowls.

I'm still in charge of making the tea, but Itachi's very good at guilt-tripping me into studying.

There's also a suspicious pile of books next to me that look disturbingly like more history textbooks… or just history books… and I think they're from the library. I like history, and history is useful… but while learning to read?

Well… oh, no.

I accidentally flipped to the back of the notebooks… those look like exercise notes. That looks like an exercise log. I sneak a glance at Itachi, even as I surreptitiously flip back to the page of kanji and kanji pronunciations. Maybe if I pretend it's not there…

Motivated geniuses are terrifying.

---

And no, pretending it wasn't there didn't help. As soon as we closed the shop, Itachi made me run all the way to the Uchiha compound… and then back to the shop because he'd "accidentally" forgotten to bring my notebook and pajamas.

I'd packed them in the bag myself. The only way he could have "forgotten" to bring them is if he "accidentally" took them out.

And the distance doesn't sound like much, but usually takes a bit under half a koku to walk. Even then, it doesn't seem very long… until you have a very motivated "friend"… who you essentially promised to become a superb shinobi… and is very willing to hold you to that promise decide you need to sprint it.

I'm three. My legs are short and stubby, and I am not used to this much exercise.

...at this point, I'm going to have to crawl up all the hospital stairs tomorrow. Or get someone to carry me. That would also work.
Except that no, that wasn't it, and now I'm "learning" about splits and other basic stretches.

I hate that stretch where you have your legs extended straight in front of you and you have to grab your feet? That one always caused pains in my back and the sides of my legs that most certainly weren't my hamstrings… and not the good pain either.

Butterfly position is still a bit painful… and my splits really suck. My arms aren't strong enough to hold a backbend, and this body isn't used to being turned upside down and so my face turns bright red after barely ten seconds.

Possibly the worst stretch is the one for my shoulders. You know how some people can grab their hands behind their back and bring them over their head without bending their elbows and their shoulder do that weird thing? Apparently, it can be taught, though it's best to do it when young. So, now my shoulders are also in pain from a bunch of stretching, though it's not nearly as bad as my legs.

Still, my three-year-old body, complete with all the natural softness of childhood and the inherent flexibility, definitely influences a lot. The run earlier also helped. Without it… well… let's just say ouch.

My older mentality probably also does quite a bit towards letting me endure the pain… without screaming, at least.

First the issues I had with writing, now this? What next?

...no. Not puberty. Nope. May my unpleasantly sharp mind suffer the fury of… a thousand kanji-induced headaches…

...I'll just focus on stretching for now.

I practically collapse at the table, jelly-limbed, when Mikoto-obasama calls us over. Today's meal is interesting— monkfish nabe (hotpot). Also known as anko nabe. There's also a very interesting dish known as ankimo, or monkfish liver. Mikoto-obasama steamed it, I think, and it looks really good with the chopped scallions, grated daikon, and ponzu, a kinda citrusy sauce.

Other than that, a lot of the ingredients are similar to the oden from the night before. And it's probably just as good. I liked the ankimo best, though. It's really rich and creamy, but also light and delicate. Given how it's also the liver, I guess I'd compare it to foie gras… or probably uni, sea urchin. They're the most buttery-but-not things I can think of off the top of my head, but they're all unique.

The next day, after a light breakfast… Itachi makes me run. Again. My legs are pretty sore from yesterday, but… does that matter? Nope! Of course, they're not unbearably sore… they just hurt.

But the most annoying part are the incentives. First, it's Itachi "forgetting" something at home… and then it's that he "left" something with Shinko-chan (who was shopping in the marketplace and took forever to find), and then he "needs" me to deliver a message to Mikoto-obasama. I'm pretty sure the "message" was just a blank piece of paper.

But then he realizes that he needed an answer (okay, so maybe it wasn't blank), and sends me for it. Another piece of paper. I'm starting to think the first one was just a message to give me a piece of paper.
And then… I get to stretch. Again. Yay. For practically half a *koku*. Double yay.

At this point, I'm almost sitting in perfect side split, and it's only the pain that's making me hold myself up at all. There's no dry pain, or the the ouch of tearing anything. Nope. My muscles are complete jelly. Painful jelly, but… jelly.

My middle split still sucks, though. There's really no fixing that.

---

Oh. The messages were actually messages.

We opened up the shop early… well, *they* opened up the shop early. I was still playing a waiting game of seeing which would surrender first, my legs or my arms. So after about a *koku* of that, it was time for lunch.

Except, Itachi had a surprise for me. And the surprise was just like all of Itachi's surprised these past few days— sweet, but also really, *really*… not.

Recipes. Nice, right? And some empty *bento* boxes and handkerchiefs that are Mikoto-obasama's.

But there's the catch— the recipes are in *kanji* and *hiragana*, with some *katakana* to boot.

And Itachi's not letting me do anything until I read everything out loud.

---

About a quarter-*koku* later, we're done, *finally* done, and I'm sneaking two handkerchief-wrapped *bento* into the hospital. Whenever anyone passes by, I hide behind Itachi's legs.

A few minutes later, I'm ducking through the door. Mission: Yummy Lunch, part 2, is a success!

We made the food, we delivered it, and now… we need to get Okaa-san and Otou-san to eat it, and *hopefully* like it.

"It's not *really* morning, but… *ohayō!*" I grin. "Ne, ne, Kaa-chan, Tou-chan, Itachi helped me make an *obento* for you!"

Okaa-san smiles. "That's very nice of you Makoto, Itachi-kun."

I pass her a box, then hand the other to Otou-san. "Try it, try it!" I grin, bouncing slightly on my toes.


Itachi bobs his head in a semi-bow. "Hai."

"Oh, that's so cute, Makoto!" Okaa-san gasps from her bed, lid in her hands. I beam. Itachi had to help me, but I added little smiley faces in sesame seeds on the *onigiri* and used some of the pretty toothpicks Okaa-san likes on the fruit.

"Ah, I think I need help with the lid," Otou-san sighs, and I bounce over to help. His right arm's in a brace, so… yeah. Still…

"That's why I had Itachi help wrap the *onigiri* in *nori*," I grin, remembering the trouble we'd gone to in an effort to get the seaweed to stick. "Hopefully it's still a bit crunchy. But this way, it's less messy and it's easy to eat with your left hand!" I laugh. "And sorry the *tamagoyaki'*s a bit dry and… burnt." I lean in closer. "Itachi helped with the *tako*-shaped sausage. We found a big sausage, so it actually
has eight legs! And a head! Just like an actual octopus!” I exaggerate my sigh. "We couldn't actually find a real octopus, or even the squid you like, so…” I shrug. "The sausage-tako will have to do."

I turn on my heel, flouncing away, before turning back to face them, clasping my hands. "Ne, ne… do you like it?"

Okaa-san laughs. "It's very good, Makoto. Thank you so much, Itachi-kun. The mikan and ringo and ichigo are very good!"

I grin. The small citrus fruits had been my job to peel! I'd accidentally pressed too hard on some, but… I like to think I did a good job. Though... "Itachi's really good at peeling apples! I convinced him to save part of it for the ringo no usagi, though! I always liked it when you cut my apple pieces like bunnies, so… I thought…” I shuffle my feet. "But Itachi's so cool. He peels the apple in that spiral like you try to do, Otou-san!” Though really, the strawberries were so good. I'd snuck away more than a few.

Itachi coughs. "The fruits were in season.” He murmurs. "And… I practiced. Kitchen knives are… easier to use than kunai.”

Otoc-san laughs, a full chuckle that's surprisingly big and deep for his frame, and I hide a grin. He's been practicing that since forever, and he fails more often than he succeeds. "If I'd tried doing that with one of those, I'd probably have cut my finger off by now.”

I almost snort. "That'd… that'd be bad," I force out, trying not to let my laughter show.

...it shows. My face is probably all weird, and I'm pretty sure I'm shaking ever-so-slightly.

Otoc-san laughs again, and Okaa-san joins him, a light peal of laughter that still somehow sounds polite, and I finally join in, with my laughter consisting mostly of high-pitched squeaks of gasped breath and coughs between soundless shaking. It's embarrassing, but… I look at Itachi's barely-there smile, and it makes me feel happy.

...and then there's the sound of someone clearing his throat, and I jump.

Standing in the open doorway… is a very intimidating medic-nin with a clipboard. He's got this grey-and-white hair… and these really thick, arched brows that should make him look silly or permanently surprised, but together with his deadpan expression… and the half-moon glasses that do not make him look like Albus Dumbledore at all… just make him look… a bit… okay, a lot… angry.

He pushes up his square glasses, clearing his throat again… and looks at the open bento very pointedly. I almost jump. "Uhm," I squeak, wide-eyed. "I'm… sorry?"

Moments later, Itachi and I are kindly escorted out the front door, bento re-wrapped and in our arms, and are told, in no uncertain terms, that bringing food into the Hospital is, while rarely prevented, especially by… silly, sentimental nurses?... is strongly discouraged.

I'm too intimidated to do more than gulp and nod frantically, body still frozen and eyes still wide in terror. Itachi seems normal, but he's just suspiciously stiff next to me.

"I… should probably apologize," Itachi murmurs when we finally start to de-solidify. "I had not expected… well, Hakusai Fukuto-sama isn't normally… he is the Head Iryō-nin of the Konohagakure Central Hospital.”
Oh. Those seem like some pretty weightly titles. I nod, soundlessly, before looking down at the bento.

"Well, I think Okaa-san and Otou-san liked the bento?" My voice goes up suspiciously, even though *that was not intended to be a question.* I take a deep breathe, and then… "I think we *might* be a bit late."

Itachi looks at the sun, and his eyes widen ever-so-slightly. "Ah. You might be right."

We look at each other.

"I think we should hurry?" I squeak out again.

Itachi nods slowly. "That would… probably be best."

As we run back to Kobayashi Tea, I try my best not to laugh at the sheer absurdity of what just happened, I'd swear that Itachi smiled.

---

That night, as I'm about to go to sleep, I remember something.

I turn over, looking at where Itachi's sitting at a table, looking over something.

"Ne… Itachi?"

He turns around. "Makoto? Did you need something?"

I shake my head. "No, it's just…" I hesitate. "Your… your mission's almost over… right?"

Itachi thinks for a moment, then nods slowly. "...hai. It has been… today is the sixth day, I believe. Your parents should be released from the hospital tomorrow, even if they won't be fully healed for a while."

I curl a bit further into the pillow. "...Itachi?"

"Hai?"

"Are… are we friends?"

Itachi doesn't respond immediately, and I wince at my question. That might have been… a bit too forward.

"It's… it's okay… if that's a bit… too…” I trail off. "It's okay if you don't *want* to be… but… well…"

"Yes." Itachi's reply is quiet, but firm. "I believe… I would like for us to be friends."

My face widens into a smile, and I bury my face in the pillow to try and hide the ear-to-ear grin.

After a few moments, I feel like I need to answer Itachi's unasked question. "You're my second friend." I pause, thinking. "Well *actually,* if we go by when we first met… I think you're my first friend." I blink. Wait… really? I think back again. "Yeah… I think that's right."

I let out a huff of almost-laughter. "That's so *weird.*" I look over at Itachi. "Just a week ago, Shino… ah, Aburame Shino invited me over for his birthday, and I thought that was *such a big deal.* Just three weeks before that, I'd panicked over inviting him over for *my* birthday…" I bury my head back
into the pillow to muffle my squeal of laughter. "Ah, that seems so long ago!"

I roll onto my back. "And then my parents… got into the accident… and now…” I look back over. "In almost a week, I've been in the Police Building for nearly getting someone arrested… accidentally… and then stayed over with the Uchiha Clan head… and his family… in the Uchiha Compound…” I stare sightlessly at the ceiling, not really seeing it, but… lost in my memories. Lost in amazement. I didn't realize it… but yeah. "I've eaten at the same table as the Uchiha clan head. I've learned to read. I've learned hiragana and katakana and kanji and almost have some of my splits down, and… and… and I've made a new friend."

I roll onto my stomach, looking at Itachi. "And… thank you, Itachi. If it had just been the other people in Team 2… or really anyone else… I'm pretty certain that this…” I flap my hand at the room. "...would never have happened."

I rest my chin on my hands. "So thank you. For everything. For treating me seriously and not… just like a three-year old. For taking extra time to humor me and teach me. For making the worksheets. For talking to me. For being so nice."

I look down. "You didn't have to do any of what you did. For that matter… your family didn't have to be so nice either." I frown. "I'll have to thank them, somehow…” I look at Itachi. "What tea do you like? What tea does Fugaku-sama like? What does Mikoto-sa… -obasama like?” I bury my head in the blanket. "And I've had the Uchiha clan matriarch tell me to call her Mikoto-obasan!"

I groan into the blanket, once again making a sound reminiscent of what I'd imagine a dying elephant's final trumpets to sound like. I'm in so much pain right now. Oh… gods…

I'm torn from my mental anguish by a… a bark? No… a snort? A baby elephant sneezing? No… that's…

I look over at the only other person in the ro…

…

...Itachi's… laughing.

…

Itachi's laughing. He's genuinely laughing now, chuckles of hold-yourself-up-so-you-don't-fall laughter, and…

My face splits in a grin.

Before I can help it, I'm joining in with my squeaky, hiccup-y, fragmented laughter until my sides hurt and I'm probably crying and I'm just trying to breathe, by the sounds just make me laugh more and I try to look over at Itachi but the sight of him half-collapsed with silent laughter is so funny that I just start laughing again, and…

Maybe half an hour, a quarter koku later, our giggles finally subside.

I groan theatrically, between fading hiccups of laughter. "Ow. My sides hurt. They hurt so… so much.”

Itachi, who's focused on breathing from where he's rolled into his back on the floor, nods.
"I… believe… I may have… bruised my elbow," he gasps, and it's almost enough to make me start laughing again. But then he manages to pull himself together long enough to extinguish the light and collapse onto the other side of the bed and winces and I murmur a soft apology because my feet can get cold and he's warm, so…

And then he decides that it's the perfect time to ask, "I personally believe the important matter here is that… it was your birthday… about two weeks ago?"

Itachi practically needs to suffocate me with his pillow before I stop laughing and answer the question.

The next day, I wake up before Itachi, which… is surprising for me because I thought I'd sleep in more, but… also not really. Because we'd spent a lot of time talking about… random things. Like birthdays (Itachi's is on rokugatsu no kokonoka, or… 6/9, so… June 9), favorite foods (cabbage with onigiri with kombu, which I'd known), least favorite foods (steak, which I had not known), favorite colors (green, like the color of new grass and leaves in springtime), and so on.

And… it's immediately awkward because I'd gone to sleep wrapped around a pillow (the easiest substitute for the large teddy bear I'd had Before that I'd slept with every night and was arguably my most important non-essential item) but… well…

Let's just say the pillow has been replaced.

Though, Itachi's all bones and muscle, which is really uncomfortable, but…

Ah. The windows open. And it's January.

And Itachi's warm.

I wriggle until my arms aren't trapped and turn, grabbing a pillow. A little more wriggling, pulling up the duvet cover up a bit so that it's evenly distributed, and… I curl up again, nuzzled against the source of the warmth.

It's cold and I'm still a bit fuzzy from sleep and really just want to go back to sleep and Itachi's warm and I've done this before with Okaa-san and it's nice having a larger heater under the blanket next to you, especially when it gets cold. It gets uncomfortable in August, but like… everything's uncomfortable in August when it's hot and humid and sticky, and it's not August right now, so… I move my slightly-cold nose so that it's out of the cold and pull the blanket up just a little bit more, so it covers most of my head but there's enough of a gap for air, and… I promptly go back to sleep.

Or at least, I would have, except my cold nose, along with my earlier wiggling, was apparently the incentive for Itachi to wake up. "O-ohayō, Sasuke," he yawns, shifting… and pulling the blankets with him as he rolls over, which is NOT okay.

I promptly tug at the blankets, only for Itachi to turn over, and… "and I'm not Sasuke, but it's cold and you're taking all the blankets!"

Itachi huffs in amusement, before yawning again. "Ah… I think we stayed up too late, Makoto," he murmurs, rubbing at his face, before standing up and heading over to close the window. "I apologize for forgetting to close the window."

He turns around… and smiles. I stare at him grumpily from where I promptly took to opportunity the vacate the now-empty warm spot, and cocooned myself in the blankets. "No," I grumble, hissing and recoiling when he comes back over and tries to pull me out.
Itachi chuckles, before… oh, *where did he get that spray bottle? Get it away!*

...and now, I am cold, grumpy, still sleepy, but unfortunately awake. And Itachi knows it, still brandishing that spray bottle which I know recognize as the one he keeps for the little bonsai pine on the corner of his desk.

"I *really* don't like you right now," I mutter.

Itachi shrugs, a ghost of a smile still on his face.

"It's morning. Time to get up. We should clean up your house before your parents return. I doubt you've aired out their room even once."

I groan. Yeah, that's a good point, but…

"And I have for you another three pages of *kanji*, along with their pronunciations." He holds up my notebook and the history text.

I stare at them grumpily.

..."Breakfast is ready!" Mikoto-obasama calls from down the hall.

...I get of out of the blanket-and-pillow-cocoon.

---

When we reach Kobayashi Tea, Itachi helps strip my parents' bed for all the sheets, covers, and cases, which he then pushes into the laundry machine, and carries the rugs downstairs, where Shinko-san and Tenma-San are assigned to beat them of any dust. They're also in charge of sweeping, mopping, and polishing the floor… washing the windows… and cleaning basically everything else. They've already swept. All of the inventory, from the tea to the cups, is currently on the floor as the team tackles the shelves. Next, they'll replace the tea, wash down all of the teapots and cups and plates and bowls, polish the silverware, and the wash/wipe down down the tables and chairs. Finally, they'll mop and polish the floor.

Meanwhile, Itachi opens the windows and wipes down the tops of the cabinets and all the curtains for dust, and sweeps any debris off the floor, tossing the contents of the dustpan into the garbage, before helping me move everything off of the shelves.

He quickly but meticulously cleans each shelf and flat surface, before metaphorically attacking the contents of the shelves as the next victims of his cleaning furor.

Seriously. There is cleaning… and then there is *cleaning*. I don't think I've ever seen anyone clean as meticulously as Itachi… and the rest of Team 2, after a bit of convincing from him. Like, this is above and beyond, and I am impressed. And a bit intimidated but hey, what else is new?

I'm not exempt, either— I'm tasked with returning the now-clean objects to where they came from. And that in itself is *exhausting*. Seriously, I don't know how Itachi and the rest of his team do it.

I get a small break after Itachi dumps the wet sheets into the dryer, while he goes to refill the shelves with groceries, a half-*koku* of time that I spend half-asleep lying on my now-dust-free rug.

When he returns, it's putting away the groceries and wiping down the now-empty surfaces and
polishing the sink and sweeping the floor again and taking all of the sheets out of the dryer and putting them back over the mattress and pillow-cases and everything.

Afterwards, I collapse on Okaa-san and Otou-san's newly-made bed.

I just want to sleep.

I hear Itachi walk over to the kitchen, and then return, but I'm too tired to look. I just hope it's not more cleaning we need to do...

"Makoto?" Itachi asks, nudging my shoulder.

"Hai?" I mumble, pushing myself into a sitting position.

Itachi smiles, takes a step back, brings his hands from behind his back, and opens his hands… to reveal a small wooden box. "Happy belated birthday, Makoto."

Blinking, I look down. With a nod from Itachi, I take off the lid. My eyes widen.

"I-Itachi!" I squeak. "You… you..." I pause. "How much did it cost?" I demand, looking over, before curling up a bit and looking down. "Ah, I should… pay you back."

Itachi takes the lid, puts it back on the box, and presses it gently into my hands. "We are friends. It would be very impolite of me to miss such an important event in my friend's life. And it is a gift. It would be rude to ask for money in return." He smiles. "And it would be even more rude to refuse a gift."

I stare, deadpanned, remembering a conversation earlier in the week. Itachi had been just as insistent about attaching to a suffix to my name.

Still... "You really didn't have to. You know that, right?" I look at him. "I'm currently worried that I guilt-tripped you into this or something…" He raises an eyebrow, and I duck my head. "But… thanks. Really," I mutter, before leaning into him in a kinda-hug. "Thank you, Itachi. I… it means a lot."

Itachi hugs me back for a moment, then gently pushes me back to gesture to the box. "If it helps, the daughter of the shop-owner gave me a message, to pass on to the future owner of this hairpin."

I frown. "A message?"

"She told me to tell you, 'Wear the hairpin, and don't lose it. I would rather see it scratched from wear than collecting dust in a drawer. If it will make your friend feel better, I'll even make a permanent offer— if you break it, you can bring it back in for me to fix, for just the price of the materials. Okay?"

My eyes widen, and Itachi smiles.

"Apparently, it's a rather unconventional design for kanzashi. Most people prefer those made of silk. Apart from that, it was her first creation, so it's rather clumsily-made in certain areas." He pauses. "No one had actually asked about purchasing it, not since it was put in the box almost eight years ago."

I almost choke on air. "What? But… it's so pretty! No one? In eight years?"

Itachi shakes his head, before he reaches for something else. "Oh, and I almost forgot. I asked Haha-
ue for some advice, since you mentioned that your hair isn't quite long enough yet."

From his pocket, he takes out… a folded ribbon? But… it's weird, and it's more like lace than
anything.

"I also bought a ribbon you can hook the *kanzashi* onto. If you would like me to…" Itachi gestures,
and I nod hesitantly, turning.

He carefully ties it like a headband, adding a bow, and spins me back around, carefully securing the
*kanzashi* on the other side, then taking half a step back, and…

"I look ridiculous, don't I?" I deadpan. That carefully-straight face that isn't quite emotionless can
only mean one thing.

"That looks very nice, Makoto," Itachi coughs.

I look at him for a little while longer, before shrugging. "Looking like a fool because of a friend is an
age-old, time-honored tradition." I grin. "Besides, it's a gift! And a symbol of our new friendship! So
that means that I'll treasure it, even if I can't actually wear it properly for a while." My grin widens
into something sinister. "*And* it means that I'll have to do something even more awesome for your
birthday!"

Itachi presses his eyes closed. "Based upon my experiences with that tone… I feel as if I should I
should exercise caution once *rokugatsu* arrives." The sixth month. June. His birthday. I laugh, a
malicious chuckle that doesn't come out quite as maliciously as I'd hoped it would. "Bwahaha!" I
giggle through a toothy grin. "Beware!"

A little while later, Team 2 and I are in the waiting room of the Hospital, waiting as Okaa-san and
Otou-san are discharged. Otou-san's in a wheelchair, and his arm's still in a cast, but Okaa-san just
has crutches and what seems like a brace around her wrist.

Shinko-san helps wheel Otou-san, even as Izumo-san falls behind, while Minazuki-san talks with
Okaa-san and I bounce happily alongside Itachi.

I don't have a hairband on, or a hairpin, but there's a ribbon tied in a bow around my wrist, and I'm
carrying a small backpack, with only a notebook, some pencils… and a small wooden box.

---

It is for your sake

That I walk the fields in spring,

Gathering green herbs,

While my garment's hanging sleeves

Are speckled with falling snow.

— Emperor Koko

君がため

春の野に出でて
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So, uh... I'm sorry?

*bows almost 90, extending chapter as payment.*

I'm really sorry for my month-and-a-half-long hiatus. So, here's about 20,000 words as an apology. 20,000 brand new words, a new plot, and a lot of character development.

I hope you like it!

I hope Itachi's mostly in-character. I wanted to reflect that he's troubled, but he's still young, so it makes very little sense for him to be silent and just 'hn.' That'll come later. He's calm and composed, but he doesn't have an iron mask just yet. Plus, Makoto's a client, and a kid, and a cute kid, and an intelligent cute kid who's about Sasuke's age who currently has both parents stuck in the hospital after a pretty serious accident, and Itachi's excited to have a friend.

About the poem— Makoto didn't quite "gather green herbs," but he definitely had to be outside, and got a bit messy, and it was definitely, entirely because of/for Itachi.

But yeah... a lot better than what I had before. Completely different, and better. I hope, at least.

And, as a side note— if there is anyone who knows Japanese and is willing to help me, please just comment or email me at ShadowAccio6181@gmail.com. I'm currently relying a lot on Google, and... while I try to cross-reference, it's not
perfect.

Note to readers: This world has a lot of worldbuilding. We've just started, so hopefully you like that!

On a separate note, I'm actually trying to learn to write with my non-dominant hand (in my case, my left hand)! ...It's… a process. It's been nearly a week, and my handwriting… has improved. It's shaky and hideous, but it's not that bad on a vertical whiteboard, and I'm optimistic. (^_^)

I might have mentioned this before, but if you have any ideas for OCs, this universe needs people! (Name, physical description, occupation... hobbies, friends, etc. I'm putting a template below. I might change them before I insert them into the story, but I'll credit my inspiration.

Name: (MUST BE JAPANESE)

Physical description: (Nothing too extreme, please, or I'll have to change it)

Occupation: Civilian/Chūnin

Loyalty: Konohagakure/Land of Fire/Land of Water/Kirigakure/Kumogakure (hinthintwinkwink)

Other information:

And reviews are greatly appreciated! Even if it's just "hi!" (Note: If I don't update, comments actually sometimes help. At least, it's an effective way to guilt-trip me into trying to find more time to write. *hinthint*)

-ShadowAccio6181

Question time: How much do you like the worldbuilding? Like, on a scale from 0 being "I absolutely hate it, it's a waste of time, and you're stupid" to a 10 of "That's so cool! I never thought of that! I'd definitely like more world-building!"

Oh, and if you see something seriously wrong with my characterization, PLEASE let me know! I'm starting to introduce more canon characters, and I'd prefer to fix problems now, rather than… come back to it ten chapters later and realize I need to rewrite eleven chapters worth of bad characterization.
Of Flower-Viewing and Friends

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto meets Shisui, learns a bit about the custom of flower-viewing, and gets to see Itachi again!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

In the peaceful light

Of the ever-shining sun

In the days of spring,

Why do the cherry blossoms

Scatter like restless thoughts?

---

It's been almost two months since the last day of the D-ranked mission, and... I haven't seen Itachi since. I've spent more than a few days at the Uchiha Compound, with Mikoto-obasama. I brought her some gifts, like teas and *higashi* and *wagashi* as thanks.

The teas were some of our more expensive, *gyokuro* and *shincha*. The first is an exotic variety of *sencha* that produces a particularly pretty jade tint which is cultivated in the shade, and takes about 2-3 weeks to be ready for harvesting. Normally, it sells for about 25 ryō per *momme* (匁), which is... maybe a bit less than two tablespoons? About four-minus-a-quarter grams... I think. I gave Mikoto-obasama six *momme*, probably enough for twelve *gō*. That's... pretty good, I think. One *gō* seems to be about five fluid ounces. *Shincha*, meanwhile, is first flush tea, which means that it's tea that was picked earliest in the season, and is sweeter than later flushes. We usually start selling it in late April, but a shipment came early. I gave Mikoto-obasama the same, about six *momme*, for that.

I'd actually went back to the shop. Itachi spent 500 ryō on that hairpin. Yeah, it's not *quite* that bad, but... this way, I can pay him back. And also thank Mikoto-obasama for essentially taking me in that week. I'd packaged each serving separately, and I'd divided each type of tea into two equal portions. One, I insisted, was to go to Itachi. In that, I'd also included a thank-you card, in which I'd written a slightly shaky, but colorful letter with crayons, and then decorated. I'd also included several pressed plum blossoms.

Mikoto-obasama's stopped by multiple times, and I've even introduced her to Okaa-san and Otousan, but... I've only seen Itachi maybe... four times, and each time, he was in a rush.

Mikoto-obasama says he's very busy, and his team is taking a lot of C-ranks, and that she's very proud of him, but...

I'm a bit worried.
Mikoto-obasama says that she'll try to make sure he's free at least one day during the time when the cherry-blossoms bloom, though, and… I really hope she'll be able to do that. About a week ago, I first saw the *sakura* buds forming. Yesterday, I saw one bloom. It's almost time for *hanami*. So, hopefully… we'll be able to talk together, at least for a bit, soon.

I roll off my new raised bed (which I *finally* got and I love it so, *so much*), run from my room, and stumble as quietly as I can down the stairs.

I carefully shuffle over to the front of the shop, making sure that I don't disturb anyone who might be in one of the tea rooms, and walk under the cloth parting— I'm too short to need to duck.

I look around, scanning the shop. It's busy, but not *that* busy. Tou-chan's at the counter, so I walk over, dodging people's legs.

I tug on his grey haori. "Ne, Tou-san?"

He startles and looks down. "Makoto-kun? What are you doing here?"

"Is Kaa-san busy?" I ask. I've been trying to push for more freedom, but Okaa-san still insists that I don't go anywhere alone. I want to stop by the Compound later, but right now, I'm mainly feeling a bit stir-crazy. I've been keeping up on my stretches diligently, even if I don't progress as quickly when I can't run, but… I really should exercise a bit more.

"Hm… your Okaa-san should be free in about ten minutes. She's currently in one of the *washitsu*." He pauses. "She's been meaning to go get some things from the stalls. Why don't you get your jacket and prepare to head out?"

"Hai!" I nod, bow to the customers waiting to check out their purchases, and scramble back upstairs to my room.

Double-checking to make sure that the strap of my messenger-style shoulder bag that I got recently is fastened, I pull on my shoes.

"Makoto-kun! There you are!"

At the shout, I jump slightly, almost tripping on the strap of my bag and wrench my head up. "Okaa-san? You're done?"

"Yes. So, your Tou-chan told me that you want to go outside again?"

I tilt my head, before nodding slowly. "Hai."

Kaa-san claps her hands excitedly. "Perfect! Makoto-kun, I've been talking with some of my friends about how to get you to socialize more. I'm really happy that you're getting out more, but… you don't have that many friends. When Shino-kun's not at the playground, you just run around on your own. I know it's not your fault… but I feel kind of responsible, so I've decided that I want you to make lots of friends! There's several other parks and playgrounds I thought we could visit. What do you say, Makoto-kun?"

I bite my cheek. Huh. Well… I guess it's better than staying inside… and more walking can't be bad. "Okay, Okaa-san…" If you say so…

I mean, how bad can it be?
I tug on Okaa-san's sleeve, hand still shaking a bit. "Is there a… smaller… place we can go to next time, Okaa-san? That was… really scary."

I'm not kidding. It was terrifying.

After a short walk, Okaa-san had dropped me off at the edge of a playground and encourage me to go play. After realizing that no, she would not let me just run around the outside and then do some of the exercises I've remembered and managed to work up the motivation to do— bunny hops, frog jumps, and starfish jumps. Oh, and suicides. I hate suicide runs, but… they're effective.

The first involve sitting on your toes in a kneeling position and… well, hopping. Small hops, not too far off the ground. Frog jumps are like a bigger, more painful version— you squat in that same position, with hands on the ground and where the knees aren't together, and you jump, straightening your legs and moving forward, then land in the same position. It really hurts the hamstrings, but it also hurts my shoulders. And there's also starfish jumps, which are like frog jumps, but where you squat in the bunny-hop positions with heels closer to the ground and with arms wrapped around the knees… and then jump out, making a "x" with the arms and legs.

And there are suicide runs, which are pretty (in)famous, where you mark out a length of… well, I use grass. You start at one end, run an eighth of the way down, go back to the start, run a quarter of the way down, go back to the start, run three-eights the way down, go back to the start, run half-way down, go back to the start, and keep going, increasing by eighths, until you reach the other end. Then, you either turn and just do what you did before, or start decreasing the lengths you run. (1, 7/8, 3/4, 5/8, 1/2, etc.)

I've started doing bunny-hop suicides, but with quarter-increments and stopping after I return from the full length. The other ones… I just jump three times, then take a break. They hurt too much to do many more of them nicely.

I've never been more thankful for being desensitized towards mud… or the Aburame clan, since they're the reason why most bugs in or around Konohagakure are smart enough to avoid concentrations of people.

But… Okaa-san wouldn't let me do those. I tried to inch towards the treeline, but a look from Okaa-san stopped me. From a lack of anything to do, I went to play in the sandbox. The sand was incredibly fine, not grainy or anything like the sandboxes I was used to. Using the water in my water bottle in my bag, I'd managed to wet a pile of sand, which I then compacted. Using a fallen twig and a bucket that no one seemed to be using, as well as my hands, I then proceeded to start building a sand castle, humming a bit of the soundtrack from *The Little Mermaid* under my breath… and then Aladdin, when I realized one of the stacks looked a bit like one of the turban-like roofs.

I had forgotten how curious little kids are. I had also forgotten the almost-tunnel-vision-like state I sometimes enter while… well, doing art. That may not be the best term, but it happens when I draw, paint, or even "attempt" sculpting. I say, "attempt," because my sculpting ability, though above average, was nowhere close to my capabilities at two-dimensional art.

So, I was adding some finishing touches on my kinda-castle, which included a maze in the garden that reminded me more of *Beauty and the Beast* than anything else, because who on earth needs continuity, when I heard, "Wow! That's so cool!"

I turned around… and blanched.
I was positively swarmed by this mass of humanity. It seemed like everyone on the playground was around me, some standing on benches to get a better view, as they jostled to see what I was making.

The most awkward thing? It wasn't just the kids… some had brought their parents, too. I could see Okaa-san having a blast in the crowd, of course, but me?

No.

It was all too overwhelming. Everyone was so big.

"That's so cool!"

"Can you teach me to make that?"

"Oh! Me too, me too!"

"Same here!"

"You're so cute!"

"How old are you?"

The questions and exclamations just swirled round and round.

Finally, I managed to find my voice. "H-hi? I am… Kobayashi Makoto. Umm… it's nice to meet you all?" I bob forward in a stunted, awkward bow. "I'm glad you liked my sand castle. … I worked hard on it!" That last statement was definitely true. It had taken seemingly forever.

I shuffled my feet in the almost stifling silence that followed. I remember wondering, did I do anything wrong? I… I didn't think so, but…

"KYAAA! YOU'RE SO CUTE!"

As if in unison, an unholy chorus split the silence as all of the females in the crowd, and maybe some of the boys, I honestly don't remember, squealed in unison.

I did the only thing I could. I fled behind Kaa-san's skirt.

…

My response wasn't the most dignified, I admit, but I dare any introvert to do much better. I'm not that introverted, but my default reaction in a crowd I'm not prepared for, in a situation I'm not prepared for… is to run and curl into a ball.

Okaa-san laughed and patted my head. "My, my, Makoto-chan, are you making friends? That's good, I was so worried…"

As one, the crowd exclaimed their confusion.

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's so cute, how does she not have friends?"

And at that last one, I flushed a bright red that… prompted more squeals. I just pressed harder into
Kaa-san's skirt. I remember entertaining the thought that maybe if I couldn't see them, they wouldn't see me.

...Sadly, my non-existent genjutsu skills apparently weren't enough to render me invisible.

Kaa-san gave me a gentle push out from behind her. "Makoto-chan is rather shy, I'm afraid... but I'm sure it was very nice meeting you all." She prods me gently in the arm, and I bob forward in another bow— "It was very nice meeting you. I hope to see you again." — before promptly high-tailing it over to the trees and scampering up one, a hobby I tried not to indulge around adults who usually panicked. I'd picked it up hanging around with Shino and going bug-hunting. There are many insects that prefer to stick to trees.

The crowd finally began to clear, and I sighed as adults came to talk with Okaa-san, turning over to lie back on the branch, hooking my foot around it and flapping out my arm for balance, listening half-heartedly to the chatter below.

"Oh, Kimiko-san, was that your daughter? I haven't seen her since she was a baby!"

"Oh, Makoto-kun is my son, but I will agree that he is absolutely adorable…"

"...How old is your son, Kobayashi-san?"

"Oh, he turned three a few months ago."

"Only three?! He is very intelligent for his age. And so polite, too…"

"Oh, thank you!" Okaa-san smiled, before… "Makoto-kun, why don't you introduce yourself to these nice people?"

I'd sighed, slipping off the tree branch and sliding down the trunk to the ground, before walking out and bowing again. "Hello. My name is Kobayashi Makoto. It's... very nice to meet you all... it was just a bit scary earlier." I smiled nervously.

When silence was all that greeted me, I remember having the most foreboding feeling of familiarity.

And sure enough, another chorus of squeals greeted me.

"Ano... um... Kaa-san? I'm getting a little hungry... could we please go back home?" I whispered.

Unfortunately, my whispering skills weren't that good... and ohnowhendidtheygetback.

"What, no! You can't go!"

"Yeah, you still have to teach me how to build an awesome sand castle like that, remember?"

Wait, what? When did I agree to that?

"Oh, at least promise that you'll come back again tomorrow or something!"

"Uh huh!"

I winced slightly, because, no, I was not planning on returning, but... looking at their faces, I really couldn't let them down that harshly.
"I'm sorry, but... I have other things to do. I'm not sure if I would be able to. I'll try to come back though," I smiled. "I'm happy you liked my sandcastle."

To my relief, my statement worked the way I had intended, and a chorus of denials, and well-wishes and good-byes later, I had managed to exist the park after the crowd parted.

And that brings me back to the present.

"Oh, definitely! But regardless, I'm happy that my Makoto-kun is so popular! I can't wait to see how that will play out when you get older!"

I slump minutely. "Um..." I try changing the subject. "What are we going to have for lunch?"

Luckily, Okaa-san runs with it.

"Hmmm... I was thinking about kake soba! What about you?"

Soba are thin noodles made from buckwheat. Kake soba are when they're served in a hot broth. To be honest, I like most noodle dishes, so I grin. "That sounds really good!"

"But first, why don't you take a bath? You should have time for one before the soba's ready."

"Hai, Kaa-san."

"Makoto-kun, what do you think about having a hanami party?"

"...Hanami?" I parrot, blinking. That... was the sakura-viewing thing, right? I remember a bit from last year... and even the years before. I love springtime because it's so cool seeing the seasons. All of Southern California's seasons consisted of some mix between hot and dry, in varying degrees. Here... there's rain and flowers and green grass and... it's nice, okay?

Just as I'd spent what seemed like hours just staring out the window at the snow, I'd gazed at downpours of rain, at thunderstorms, at the trees rustling on windy days... and at the light-pink petals that would get everywhere, even if I didn't see the trees themselves that first year.

Every year, we try to have a picnic, even though I usually try to bundle myself in a fluffy blanket and just chow down on sweets or nap in the soft sunlight that manages to filter through the petals.

"Sakura-viewing! Many of my friends are going, and you might even make some new friends!" Kaa-san claps her hands, giggling slightly. Her face sinks a little. "Of course, if you don't want to go..."

I mentally wince. Whatever higher powers exist, please don't let the playground fiasco repeat itself. Of course, there is the option of not going, but... one look at Kaa-san's face and my shoulders slump. "You know I like going. Are we doing something different this year?"

Kaa-san perks right up. "I was thinking, now that you're a bit older, we can explore more of the places in Konohagakure with sakura trees."

I bite back a sigh, and grin instead. "As long as there's sweets, I'll go!"

Kaa-san laughs. "You really are my musuko, huh? You definitely inherited my sweet tooth."

I beam.
Perhaps I should explain more about hanami. *Hanami*, written in kanji as 花見 and translating directly to "flower viewing," is the traditional custom of enjoying the transient beauty of flowers. Normally, this practically exclusively refers to viewing cherry blossoms, or *sakura*. In Konoha, these bloom from around the end of March or early April. They only bloom for a week or so, so when they bloom, you drop everything and go.

This custom started in ancient times, since before the Warring States era. *Hanami* mostly consists of having an outdoor party beneath the sakura during daytime or at night. For kids, the daytime parties are more popular. *Hanami* at night is called *yozakura*, 夜桜 or "night sakura." In many places, people put up paper lanterns for *yozakura*.

*Sakura* originally was used to divine that year's harvest as well as announce the rice-planting season, according to Okaa-san. Nowadays, it's mainly just an excuse to get out and have fun. People believe in *kami* inside the trees and make offerings. Afterwards, adults eat and drink *sake*.

According to Kaa-san, her family loves holding flower-viewing parties with sake and feasts underneath the blossoming boughs of sakura trees in their home. They'd write poems praising the delicate flowers, which are seen as a metaphor for life itself. They are luminous and beautiful, yet fleeting and ephemeral.

*Sakura* are so popular that there are even proverbs and ghost stories about it. The teasing proverb *dumplings rather than flowers*, 花より団子 or *hana yori dango*, hints at the real priorities for most cherry blossom viewers. Nowadays, most of the non-traditional generation (coughcoughpracticallyeveryonecoughcough) are more interested in the food and drinks accompanying a hanami party than actually viewing the flowers themselves. Personally? I want to see the flowers! …though I also want food.

I'm especially excited for the *sakura mochi*, which I'm never had before— I'd gotten too full from the *botchan* dango, and… well, at that point, I'd felt nauseous at the notion of any more food..

Still, before I get too excited about the event, we need to finish preparations… from what I can tell, Kaa-san plans to dress me in a kimono… and we also need to prepare the food for the picnic. Maybe this time, I can actually convince Kaa-san and Tou-san to let me help cook.

The buds on the cherry trees are opening! And not one at a time, like the last week, but… they're all open. Kaa-san and Tou-san plan to close the shop tomorrow, so that we all can go as a family. But first… Kaa-san wanted to talk with me about clothes, so…

I walk over to the room that she and Otou-san share, and I knock on the door.

"Okaa-san? You said… something about what I'd be wearing?"

A slightly muffled response comes from behind the door. "Right! Come on in, Makoto-kun!"

"Hai," I respond, reaching upward. I grab the door handle and I pull, letting the door swing inward. "I'm here."

"Makoto-kun! Perfect, I was just getting it out."

Okaa-san's sitting on the floor, in front of… a suitcase? "Getting what out, Okaa-san?"

"Your kimono, of course!"

"...my what?"
"Okaa-san?" I murmur. "These… they're really soft."

"Hai, hai! They're a silk and cotton blend, Makoto-kun!"

I blanch. Now, I'm terrified of getting it dirty. "Is… is it easy to wash?"

"Oh, don't worry about that! Just worry about having fun."

"But… isn't that sort of expensive?"

"Oh, don't worry, Makoto-kun. Trust me. Okaa-san just wants you to have fun."

"…Hai!" I pause. "Um… can I… go to the bathroom? And can you lift me up? I really want to see how this looks."

"Oh, you're so cute, Makoto-kun! Of course! You look adorable."

Huh. I do look adorable.

Okaa-san helped me balance on the rim of the bathtub so that I could see myself fully in the mirror. I twist and turn, trying to see myself from all around.

It's… I like it.

Okaa-san interrupts me as she quickly rushes outside with a gasp. I'm left wobbling on the rather slippery rim of the bathtub. Had I been an actual three-year-old… luckily for Okaa-san and Otousan, I'm not. I manage to shuffle over to the wall, and using it as a support, I climb down.

Okaa-san rushes back in, babbling. "I can't believe I forgot- I also got you a netsuke! It's in the shape of a sakura flower… isn't it pretty? And this is an inrō."

At my confusion, she explains. "The kimono doesn't have pockets, so you need these if you don't want to have to hold things. See?" She kneels down next to me. "You just tuck the netsuke and the string under and over your obi… then it hangs nicely!"

She sits back on her heels, smiling. "Do you like it?"

I look down, lifting the box. It's… kinda heavy. The inrō is really pretty… it's this shiny black, with a gold decoration of… cherry trees? There are… two seams… but…

Okaa-san gently explains. "The inrō is lacquered, which is what makes it so shiny, and… if you pull at it here… aha!" The inrō separates into two parts, then with another part, into three. Each one is filled with sweets. I gasp.

"Do you like them? I know how much you like sweets, so… the bottom layer has amanatto. I know they don't really look that nice, but they're really sweet! It's just… they're beans that were boiled in sugar water, dried and then topped with more sugar, so… beans don't really look nice, but… I think you might like them? Then, the next layer… those are konpeito. Aren't they colorful? They look a lot nicer, huh? Then… be careful with this, they're a bit fragile… these are higashi. They're a bit like mochi with how pretty they are, but they're more solid and last longer. We normally sell them in boxes in the store, because of that. We normally eat wagashi before they're more than a day or so old, but these? They last for a long time. They're made with sugar and soybean flour."

The amanatto doesn't look really appetizing, and I think most other kids my age would turn their noses up at it, but… I pop one into my mouth, chewing slowly. Huh. It's a bit harder than I'd
expected, since I'd been expecting something like anko, red bean paste, and it's also a little sweeter than I expected. I'd been expecting something like unsweetened oshiruko, red bean soup, but... it's really good.

The konpeito on the other hand... I pop one into my mouth. I actually expected something sour, for some reason... it's a very simple flavor, and I think I like it even more as a result. It's pretty much just sugar. The little bumps feel a little funny on my tongue at first, but... I like it. I try biting down on it hesitantly, since it's a pretty hard candy. After a little bit of shifting around, I manage to crunch off successively larger pieces, until I'm chewing the sugar. I'll definitely have to brush my teeth carefully today, and I think I prefer sucking on it better, but... they're also really good.

Okaa-san has pretty good taste when it comes to sweets.

And the last... I remember trying higashi before. They were delicious, but those weren't as pretty as the ones we sold. Those were the ones that had crumbled slightly, or were a bit deformed. These... I hesitate. They look so pretty that I almost don't want to eat them. They're not as realistic as wagashi, but... they're so tiny.

I lift one, a uniformly light pink flower reminiscent of sakura, and place it into my mouth, smiling.

Mmm... It practically melts in my mouth. The taste... it's rich, but not too sweet, and...

I stare at the opened box on my lap, frowning. I really want to eat more... but there are only about another four pieces.

...

But... I really want to eat another one.

But at the same time... I chew my lip. I want to save it... but then again... surely another one wouldn't hurt?

A voice whispers in the back of my head. 'But then, after that... you'll want another one... and then another one... and the-'

'Okay, now shut up!' I think back.

I stare at the box again, hand still raised. To eat... or not to eat.

That is the question.

Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the sli-

Okay. No. No. I'm quoting Shakespeare. Hamlet. HAMLET. That's... like the epitome of melodrama. I stare at the box again, whimpering slightly. But... surely these deserves such melodrama? With their beauty and exquisite taste...

I bite my lip.

A bright flash and the sound of giggling interrupts my internal debate. I look up to see Okaa-san... and is that an... old-fashioned camera she's holding?

I stare at her mournfully, feeling betrayed. That laughter... born of such schadenfreude... why must she feel so compelled to derive happiness from my suffering?

"Ah, gomen, Makoto-kun," Okaa-san giggles. "But your face... I actually hadn't intended to use this
until we had settled down by the sakura trees. These are pretty expensive, and rather fragile, but they take pictures! Isn't that cool? It's a pretty new thing, but if we wait just a little bit..." she pulls out a picture and shakes it gently as she scoots over to a darker corner of the room. "Ah! It's starting to show! Come over, Makoto-kun!"

Out of curiosity, I gently stack the containers of sweets, making sure I hear the click, before grabbing it with two hands and shuffling over. I plop myself down on the floor next to Okaa-san, looking curiously over her shoulder.

So... it's kind of like a Polaroid camera? Just... really, really old-fashioned? Okay... probably not that old-fashioned... no, actually. For someone like me... that is old. Lik-

Okay, moving on.

Oh, hey... look! The picture finished developing... Okay. Now, I actually understand. I look adorable. But that reminds me...

Arrgh! I want to eat another higashi again!

I pout at the box in my arms, before an idea strikes me. I turn around.

"Okaa-san?"

"Hai?"

"Are we only celebrating hanami today?"

"Yes?" Okaa-san frowns. "Do you not want to go, Makoto?"

I shake my head. "It's not that... but Mikoto-sama said that she'd try to make sure Itachi finally got some free time for hanami, and I was hoping to..."

"Oh, of course!" Okaa-san smiles. "Why don't I walk you over, and you can ask her?"

I wince. "Ah... I'm sure your busy!" I rush out.
"Takeyourtimewiththeshopit'sprettybusysoyoudon'thavetoworryaboutme!" I shout, scrambling down the stairs, grabbing the first things that can fit over my split-toed tabi socks— geta.

Geta are the raised, wooden platform-ish sandals. Zori are the straw, flip-flop-like thingys... and they're definitely easier to walk in, but... I actually prefer the feeling of the geta, even if it's a bit wobbly. I got them a bit earlier, actually... some time during the winter, I think. When it was still snowing. Okaa-san wanted to take me to a park, but there was snow all over the ground, so she got me these really thick tabi socks and geta with these small teeth on the bottom.

I definitely wouldn't recommend this for others, but me? I liked it. As a result, Okaa-san and Otousan bought me another set, without teeth, for playing around in and other occasions. I sometimes wear them around the house for fun, which may seem weird, but... I think it's fun, okay?

And they're not too high off the ground, less than five centimeters (less than two inches), so... they're not that difficult to walk in. Just a bit different.

I slip my feet into them, wiggling my toes as I use the wall to push myself into carefully onto the two wooden feet of the geta.

After a few, wobbling steps as I get used to the clacking sound and different balance, I clip-clop
"Makoto-kun! You look so cute in that kimono!" Mikoto-obasama coos, and I flush. Beside her, Sasuke nods, surprisingly shy compared to his normal personality. "Can you turn around?"

Face still faintly red, I nod, turning slowly in place. It is a pretty kimono, with whitish-pink sakura flowers over a pale whitish-blue background that contrasts well with my hair. The problem…

"I think my skin's too pale… I look a bit creepy," I murmur. The slightly more vibrant pink around the edges help, but..

"Your skin is beautiful, Makoto-kun, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise," Mikoto-obasama tsks, straightening out a fold. "I'm sorry to tell you that Itachi's currently on a long-term C-rank, but he left about a week ago, so he should be back in a few days, before the sakura trees stop blooming." She smiles, patting my head. "I'll come let you know when he comes back, okay? I'm happy that he has another friend now."

I slump slightly, but nod. "Thanks." I smile weakly.

As I scamper into the back of the store, a handkerchief-wrapped package of fresh senbei from Uchiha Senbei, I see a cloth-covered basket on a short cabinet, the one we usually use for our shoes. Running over, I lift the cloth over the basket. Let's see… plates, various lacquered boxes, and several thermoses of tea. Yup! All packed. And there's my inrō!

I take off my geta and quietly shuffle down the hallway leading to the front. Door to really big tea room, door to other really big tea room, corridor with more doors to the smaller tea rooms… the storage pantry-thing to my right… I run under the noren, the cloth divider that serves to separate the official tea shop from the hallway. The slits in it allow adults to pass under more easily… but I'm short enough that my head is still a bit below the bottom of the cloth. The counter/table-thingy's right in front, partially as a deterrent for anyone who might be curious to peek through.

The shop is surprisingly empty, except for this old couple, who I smile and wave at before tugging on Otou-san's sleeve. "It's almost time for hanami, right?"

Otou-san chuckles and pats me on the head. "Hai, hai! Almost. Just let me finish up here, Makoto-kun, okay?"

The old man chuckles from where he's moved in front of the counter. "So, Kobayashi-chan, you're heading out to see the sakura, too?"

"Hai," I grin, climbing onto a stool that Tou-san keeps tucked under the counter. "Are you going, too?"

"Hai," the old man laughs, chuckling.

The old woman next to him smiles. "It's wonderful to see youngsters appreciating the finer things in life… you have a very sweet musuko, Kobayashi-san."

Otou-san chuckles, scratching his ear. "Thanks, Yoshida-san. Kimiko and I are very proud of him."

"Well, we wish you luck in finding a good spot… the best viewing locations are quite busy, aren't they?" The old man sighs.
Otou-san shrugs. "Well, for us, it's also hana yori dango, so…"

"Dango rather than flowers?" The old woman cackles. "I think that's the priority for most of us. Mata raishū… see you next week."


"Bye!" I call after them.

As the door swings shut, letting the bell tinkle gently, Otou-san reaches to hang his apron on the wall behind him.

"Makoto-kun, do you think you can get the sign?"

"Hai!" Bouncing slightly, I shuffle over the door, grabbing a chair as I climb up, and flip the sign so that it shows the store's closed.

Next to me, Otou-san locks the door, before picking me up and setting me on the floor as he returns the chair to its table.

"Let's go!"

It's very peaceful. It's nice, quiet, mostly-serene… and irritatingly boring. Annoyingly enough, my mind's too awake for me to fall asleep.

"Ano, Okaa-san?" I ask, gently tugging on her sleeve.

"Hai, Makoto-kun?" She looks over, smiling.

"Can… can I go play?" I shuffle my feet. "I want to go explore… my legs are getting a bit tired."

"Oh, of course!" She pauses. "Actually… if you're getting a bit tired of just sitting around, why don't you try to catch the sakura petals?"

I blink, confused. "Catch the sakura petals? Why?"

Okaa-san smiles. "You know, they say that if you catch three flower petals falling from a sakura tree, your wish will come true."

I tilt my head to one side, thinking. Actually… why not? Just walking around might get boring for a bit… and it would be pretty cool to try and catch the pretty, super soft petals before they fall on the ground. Besides, there were so many… and making wishes was always fun, if only as a way to self-reflect.

I nod decisively, jumping to my feet… and windmilling my arms a bit as I almost overbalance on my geta.

"Oh, be careful, Makoto!" Okaa-san says, alarmed.

I nod, submitting to her fussing as she smoothes out my kimono, and smile when she hands me my inrō.

"See you later!" I shout over my shoulder as I click-clack over to a denser section of sakura trees.

Okay, let's see… catch the falling petals. I chew my lip, thinking. Just grabbing wildly at them won't
work. The displaced air from my hands would scatter the feather-light petals. Maybe… if I wait for them to come to me…

Cup my hands… don't move them too much. I click-clack slowly over to a tree, eyes glued to the sky. Find a petal… that one will do. Okay… slowly does it… try to get it to fall into your hands without moving them too much…

A petal flutters onto my hand, and I beam. Now to grab i-

Nooo!

The displaced air from when I tried to slam a hand over the petal caused it to fall off my hand, and it fluttered to the floor while I tried to grab desperately at it.

Okay… try again. Maybe this time, just cup your hands after catching one…

After several more failed attempts, I finally start refining my method. It took several bouts of slow breathing to keep myself calm, but I've currently got two petals in my inrō, above the konpeito. Of course, I made sure they were clean, but I didn't worry too much- I've already tried fresh sakuramochi, and I was rather fond of the taste. Plus, tea made from sakura also tasted good, so I was pretty nonchalant about mixing the petals with food.

But I really wanted to catch a third petal now… I fix my eyes on a particularly bright petal floating down.

Okay… try to position myself to catch it… I inch forward, slowly, carefully judging the distance. A sudden gust of wind blows it a little higher and changed its trajectory, and I quickly scoot backwAAAAA…

Ah?

I tripped over… over something, but luckily, I didn't fall… someone caught me.

Those same hands help push me back upright. "Daijōbu desu ka?" A soft voice asks. Are you okay?

I pat myself down… I think so. "Uh… I think I'm fine. Thank you,…"

I turn around, trying to identify my mysterious savior.

"…Hyūga-san?" I tilt my head, studying the person in front of me. White-eyes, taller than me… He seems familiar, but… "I'm Kobayashi Makoto," I say, bowing quickly. "What's your name?"

"Ah… I'm Hyūga Neji. It's nice to meet you." He ducks his head in a quick bow.

"Thanks? It's a pleasure to meet you, as well. Thank you so much for catching me…" I laugh lightly, rubbing at my neck. "I was pretty lucky you were there."

"Oh, you're welcome. I was there… uh, I was watching you. You're.. wearing geta. And a kimono. I didn't… most other children…” He trails off awkwardly.

"Oh, yeah. I'm a bit weird, huh?" I grin at him. "I like your kimono, too!"

He flushes slightly. "Ah… thanks. But for me… it's traditional in the Hyūga clan. Do you belong to a clan, or…"

"My parents run Kobayashi Teas." I tilt my head. "Are you… do you know a Hyūga Hizashi, by
any chance?"

"He is my father," he responds, frowning slightly.

I beam. So this is Neji. "Hey, if you're free, do you want to come with me? I have some sweets… and my parents set out a picnic. We're here for hanami, and they brought all sorts of teas… and wagashi. I also have a lot of sweets."

Remembering the bounty hanging from my obi, I quickly grab the inrō and fumble with it, trying to remove the lid. "Aha!" I brandish the top layer at Neji-san, displaying the higashi inside. "Do you want some higashi? They're really good!"

Neji-san blinks, wide-eyed, slowly picking up a slightly-dented sakura. "Ah… thank you. I do like higashi… what tea do you have?"

I throw my head back, laughing. "Do we have? I think it might be easier to list which ones we don't have! Let's see… rose, sakura, oolong, matcha, sencha… jasmine… matcha and roasted rice…"

"Woah… you do have a lot of tea," he whispers, amazed. I nod vigorously.

"So… do you want to come? As thanks for catching me." I desperately want him to say yes. He's Interesting. And yes, that deserves a capital I. He's Interesting the same way that Shino and Itachi were. Eyes that are just a little too clear, speech patterns that are just a bit too well-developed, and a mind that can actually think. It's not very common… and sometimes, other people are also Interesting. But now? I want him to be my friend.

After a pause, he asks, "...Can I ask permission from Otou-san?"

I nod consideringly, rocking on my heels. "Hm...May I go with you?"


I beam, radiating sunbeams and sparkles.

"Don't worry! It's okay! Okaa-san and Otou-san don't know about what happened when they were sick, and I'm pretty sure no one's told them!" I urgently pacify a surprisingly pale Hyūga Hizashi. "Actually… why don't you also come?" I suggest. "No, really, I'm sure!"

Hyūga Hizashi-san just opens and closes his mouth wordlessly, before finally managing to get some noise out. "I-i-if you are certain, then I suppose…"

"Wonderful! Let's go!" I grab his hand, towing him along behind me, careful not to trip over my kimono or geta. Neji-san, bless him, decides to grab his father's other hand.

I'm currently busy trying not to laugh. The entire visit, from beginning to end, seemed to be out of a comedy. Neji and I had arrived at the rather intimidating Hyūga compound, with Neji there first. I was several meters behind him, panting and carefully trying not to slide or trip over my geta. Let me say this, that compound is really scary. It's located rather out-of-the-way, with the entrance a bit far away the main street. There's a small wall, but it seems to be more of a fence around a garden. In the middle, looming above me, was the two-story-or-so main house, with trees peeking out over the fence next to it. Especially given my current height… or lack thereof… it's really scary. And I'm not sure if you know this… but when I'm nervous, I start babbling at some point or another.

I'd just stood there, panting, while Neji exchanged some words with the equally-intimidating, blank-
faced Hyūga who opened the door when he knocked. To be fair, he probably would have been less intimidating had I not been less than a meter tall, but… he was pretty scary to me.

"Uh, hi? What's your name? I'm Kobayashi Makoto… this is my first time here, and… have you been to see the sakura flowers, yet? They're rather pretty, aren't they?" My voice practically went up an octave.

"My name is Hyūga Hoheto, Kobayashi-kun. And yes, I have. They are pretty, aren't they?"

When he began to talk, I had practically let out a sigh of relief. Oh, thank goodness. The ice had cracked, and it was a lot less nerve-wracking than talking to a blank-faced Hyūga.

"Uh huh! Uh… do you want some konpeito?" Food was always safe. People generally liked food… right?

"Thank you, Kobayashi-kun, but I'm afraid I must decline."

I blinked, thinking. "So… you don't like sweets? Or maybe just konpei… Oh! Is it because you're a shinobi, so you always have to watch out for getting poisoned or something?"

Hyūga-san blinked slowly, before his blank mask broke and he started chuckling. "Ah, not exactly. Yes, that is a valid concern for shinobi on mission, but we normally feel safe enough to relax while in Konoha. Well… at least I am. Most chūnin don't have to worry about being targeted, after all. Are you interested in being a shinobi, Kobayashi-kun?"

I tugged on a stray strand of hair. "Um… I'm not sure. It sounds like it would be cool… but I don't know enough… yet. Can you tell me a little?" I stared up at him. "Is being a shinobi fun? Isn't it dangerous?"

He broke my gaze and blinked, thinking. "You make a lot of friends, which is nice… and when you get placed on a genin team, they often start to feel like your second family." He smiles. "It's a lot of work, but once you reach chūnin, things get easier."

I humed, kicking at the stone on the floor slightly with my geta. But before I could reply, Neji-san had arrived with his father in tow, and Hyūga Hoheto had smiled and waved, closing the door with a "Take care, Kobayashi-kun."

And that leads us to where we are now— dragging a pale-face Hyūga Hizashi for a picnic with my parents.

"I'm back," I shout, waving my free hand, as Okaa-san and Otou-san, sitting side by side on the picnic blanket, come into view. "I made a friend! And I also brought his father here, too!"

They turn, shocked for a moment, before moving to rearrange some of the dishes.

I plop down, patting the area of the blanket next to me, and Neji-san slowly sinks into seiza, with his legs tucked neatly under him.

I reach over for some extra teacups, giving one to Neji-san as I point out the different types of tea, absentmindedly grabbing my own teacup from earlier and wiping it out with a clean napkin, before dumping in a small spoonful of matcha powder, then adding in some hot water and whisking it to a foamy froth with the bamboo whisk, and then doing the same for Neji as I show him where the wagashi and higashi are.

It's not really a tea ceremony, given how rushed everything is, but… the tea still tastes good, and I'm
not really in the mood to stand on ceremony at the moment.

I grin, chattering with Neji about the food as I watch Hyūga-san's state of borderline panic recede and calm under the soothing aroma of matcha and the taste of delicious wagashi that Okaa-san and Otou-san pushed onto his plate.

I laugh, smiling under the peaceful fall of sakura petals, admiring their soft, whitish-pink color contrasting with the blue of the sky and the bright green of grass, outlined by the dark brown of the branches. It's sad how they fall so soon, but...

I perk up. Tomorrow I'll see Itachi again!

A couple of days passed since Neji-kun and I became friends. We meet up in the park with the sakura to play… well, not play. Usually it's just to sit and talk about whatever's going on. He even gave me permission to attach the less-formal suffix of -kun to his name! So he's Neji-kun, not Neji-san anymore.

...Yeah, I know, that doesn't sound like much, but it's a bit of a bigger deal here, okay?

It's quite fascinating. He's still shy, but he's also a veritable gold-mine of interesting shinobi information. I introduced him to Shino the day after, when I'd gone to get him from his compound. Neji's busy, and doesn't have much free time, but he's interesting and I want to be friends with him so I am going to be friends with him.

I'd dragged Neji to the Aburame Compound, where I knocked on the front door, and anxiously shifted from foot to foot until someone answered, and we waiting until Shino came out. I introduced them, and we went to play! Of course, Shino came together with an older Aburame, one who it turned out was about to graduate the Academy, but he does that a lot.

Sometimes the Aburame are grown-up and old. Other times, like that one time last year, they're really young. That one was nice. He was covered head-to-toe, which was a bit weird, and he didn't want me touching him (like, at all), but he showed us lots of types of poisonous plants and flowers and bugs, many that we shouldn't touch or bother, and he was super nice. I mean, yeah, he was shy, but… he was still nice. His name was… Toro? Tori? No, wait… Torune… I think. But anyway, yesterday's Aburame was Muta, and he was also very nice. He'd shown us some of the butterflies in the wilder grass and flowers further away from the road, towards the back of the sakura grove.

There were all sorts of butterflies, like the windmill, which has yellowish-brown wings that are around 9–10 centimetres across with long tails and a chain of red spots at the edges. They weren't that common yet, since it was around late May, but… there were quite a few, fluttering about in the sunlight. I particularly liked the coloration of the glassy bluebottle, which had wings in this really pretty whitish-green color that were outlined with thick black bands. The shape, which were pointier than some of the other butterflies, was also quite pretty.

Our friendship was… weird. It was based off of a comfortable silence, food, and nature. Quite pleasant, to be honest… just not one that most other people would have. That's not to say we just laid around and did nothing. We had several races, whether to a location or up a tree, and we enjoyed laughing together. Well… I erupted in a fit of giggles, Neji-kun chuckled quietly, and Shino-kun would usually turn his head away, shoulders shaking slightly, until he regained his composure. We feasted on matcha with roasted rice and rice crackers or mochi, or edible flowers, or fresh honeycomb, one of my new favorite treats, until we were all sticky. And mochi. And dango. Lots of dango.
Seriously. Fresh honeycomb is awesome. I'm not sure about normal honeycomb, but Aburame honeycomb is heavenly. Yeah, I'll admit, it was a bit weird at first, but I'm so glad I tried it. It's.. it's like honey, but completely different. For one, the texture is a bit chewier, which makes it really nice, and the wax also gives the honey a pleasant body. Plus, you can just use your hands to eat it… even if it makes a bit of a mess.

Part of the reason we're even allowed to have it at all is because the bees had a surplus after the winter, and… you know, spring means flowers… means pollen… means more honey, which means for food for the bees!

I… I'll miss these days, later. Because let's face it, nothing that peaceful or good lasts forever. It's like that warm glowy feeling you feel inside you when you sleep in and wake up to soft sunlight and birds chirping. The bed is warm, you're comfortable, and you just want that one moment to last forever… but then the alarm rings, and you realize that you need to hurry up because you have a test that you were planning on studying for that morning!

Except, I'm pretty sure in this case, that "test" is known as shinobi life, and getting an A means having a lot of fun, while Bs and Cs lead to relatively uneventful, somewhat boring lives with high mortality rates during war, and anything less is really boring, helpless, and fatal.

And I've already essentially promised Itachi that I'd get As, so now I actually have a reason to do well… other than personal motivation and pride.

When I just lay down on a blanket on the grass and stare up at the sky instead of running around or playing children's games, every time there's complete serenity and silence… I start feeling the tick-tock of the hands of a clock.

It's like I'm an flickering fire or something. There's rocks and earth and firewood… and without someone to light the match, I'll might have just lay there forever, contentedly dozing in the sunlight, but… Itachi provided that catalyst. So now… it's just a matter of time.

Ookay. When I start saying mushy, sentimental, melodramatically poetic things, that usually means I've spent way too much time in my head. I shake my head and slap my cheeks a little.

Too much sun and rest for you.

...It's not until I look around that I remember why I'd been napping in the first place.

Oh. Right. I'd gotten stuck in a tree. Because I was tired. Because I'd tried to challenge myself by climbing a really tall tree. Because I hadn't looked down sooner. Because Neji-kun and Shino are busy, and there are almost no sakura left on the branch. Because I don't want to be with the kids at the playground or the parents or Okaa-san and her friends. And… I haven't seen Itachi, yet, and the window of time for hanami is almost over.

I sign and slump forward, hugging a knee to my chest. How long has it been?

I tilt my head up, squinting at the sun that peeks through the thin foliage of the tree. Hadn't it been on the other side before I went to sleep? I pretty sure I was napping in sunlight, not shade…

Oh, that means I've missed lunch. As if on cue, my stomach growls. I sign, reached for my bag of food and other goodies that Okaa-san packed for me. I think I have senbei, rice crackers, in there somewhere…

Not too long afterwards, I'm back to swinging my feet below the tree branch while bunching on the senbei. At this point, I'm bored enough that I'm willing to risk a fall. The problem? I'm currently
more than five meters above the ground.

…

Honestly, I think I'm more like seven meters off the ground, but… it's probably because I'm so tiny these days. Plus, my distance judgement's always been a bit wonky.

But for anyone who doesn't know, that's like three people, stacked on top of each other, and… I'm probably not going to survive a fall like that.

A hint of movement in the trees draws my attention, and I immediately perk up. A person! Maybe I can finally get down!

It's a guy with short, unkempt, dark-colored hair, a relatively broad nose, and… is that eyeliner? I mean, I think he's a guy… but maybe she's just a tomboyish girl?

I'm leaning towards boy, though, based on the style of shinobi clothing…

He's wearing the standard Konoha shinobi outfit, but without the flak jacket. Maybe it's just my height… but I don't think he's more than 12.

I cup my hands around my mouth and shout desperately, at the top of my lungs, "HELLO! UP HERE!"

The shinobi startles and looks around wildly for a moment, before spotting me. He does a double take. "... Hello."

His voice barely carries over the distance. A slightly awkward moment passes. Now that I've got someone's attention, I'm actually not sure what to do… scream for them to help me? I avert my eyes and seize upon a topic of conversation. "Would you like some matcha?! I also have mochi and dango!"

The shinobi blinks. "Thank you very much…" He tilts his head up. "You are aware that you are in a tree, correct?"

I look around. Just as I thought, nothing has changed I'm still in the exact same tree, on the exact same branch… that I've been on since mid-morning. It's… kind of hard to miss. "Yes, I know!"

"And…" His eyes shift, probably estimating my height from this distance. "Uh… how old are you again?"

"I'm three. Well, three and a half," I grumble loudly.

"Sorry? I can't… really hear you?"

"I'M THREE YEARS OLD!" I scream.

"You… you do realize that you are in a tree, right?" Huh, that's weird. His voice is starting to squeak slightly. I mentally wince. Definitely a guy, then. He must be going through puberty. What was the question again? Oh, right.

I resist the urge to bang my head against something. I'm not quite ready to fall out of a tree yet. "WHY DO YOU THINK I CALLED TO YOU?!"

His chakra seems… mildly exasperated. Or just confused. Or possibly horrified. I can't quite tell, especially at this distance, and without concentrating… and I don't want to. I'm still fuzzy-headed
and half-groggy from my nap, and it's a nice sensation that makes me want to be lazy.

"How long have you been up in that tree?" he calls, enunciating every word. Seriously, dude. I'm not stupid. I'm three… actually, most three-year-olds are rather stupid. Sorry, eyeliner-shinobi.

"I DON'T KNOW," I call, "WHAT TIME IS IT NOW?"

The shinobi pauses, turning to look at his shadow. "Around… eight koku, I think!" he shouts.

I blink. I shouldn't be this surprised… I'd pretty much just already concluded that it's early afternoon. However, getting an actual number? The shop opens at eight, I normally get up around six, and I normally leave the house by seven-thirty, but I was exploring a bit until I came to this tree, so… "Maybe… three koku?!" I call down.

"...?" The shinobi's eyebrows slowly creep up as his head slowly tilts to one side, and he blinks. Slowly. Several times. I reassess the numbers again… oh wow. I've been up in a tree for over six hours? I scratch my head again, running the numbers. …yeah… that's actually… pretty accurate.

"I GOT TIRED AND FELL ASLEEP!" I shout defensively.

The shinobi flails his arms, and I can practically feel his encroaching panic. "ARE YOU STUCK IN THE TREE?!" he yells.

… I deadpan. "WELL, I CERTAINLY THINK SO, CONSIDERING THE FACT THAT I HAVE NO CLUE REGARDING HOW TO GET DOWN, SHORT OF FALLING AND MAYBE DYING!" I take a deep breath. "AND YEAH, I'M DESPERATE, BUT NOT THAT DESPERATE!"

Yeah. A three-year-old, falling seven meters and not ending up in the hospital? Maybe one of those prodigious shinobi-babies… but I'm still doubtful.

To my surprise, the messy-haired, eyeliner shinobi just laughs, ignoring the fact that I just pretty much nonverbally called him an idiot. "Sheesh, you're like a smaller, louder Itachi, and with actual emotions."

Wait, what? I perk up. "YOU KNOW ITACHI?!"

"Yeah…? Wait, how do you know him? And did he let you refer to him as that?"

"LONG STORY!" I shout. "IT INVOLVES POLICE AND FANGIRLS!" The shinobi lets out a bark of laughter, and I unwillingly smile, coughing. Ow. My throat hearts. "I'll tell you over tea, if you want!"

"Are you sure you don't want to get down first?"

I glance around, groaning. "... I'm not in the mood to repack everything right now. Too much stuff… too much time… I'm still half-asleep… and I'm lazy. Especially now that it's not quite that urgent to get down.

"...sorry? I don't think I heard?" Shinobi-san calls.

I blink, but realize that he probably doesn't have a good view of my tree branch from where he's standing. I sigh. "COME ON UP. I'LL SHOW YOU!"

"How on earth did you get everything up here?!" the messy-haired shinobi exclaims, gawking
unabashedly at my little nest of... stuff.

I point to my bag, raising an eyebrow. I can actually raise an eyebrow again, which I'm ridiculously proud of. Unfortunately, it's only my right eyebrow, but there's still time for improvement... Shino-kun, annoyingly enough, can raise both of his eyebrows individually. He takes a remarkable amount of pleasure from demonstrating that, for someone who does his best to pretend not to have emotions.

"I mean... yeah, sure. I saw that! But... how did you fit everything in there?!" he whines piteously, hands on his head, looking as if his entire world has been shattered.

I look over at my bag. Huh. That's... actually a really good question. It's a really small bag... I look around. And it somehow contained a blanket, several containers of food, a jacket, three cups, and a thermos of tea. "I'm actually not sure. Okaa-san did it."

The shinobi just stares. "..."

"..." I stare back, blinking.

"..."

More silence. The shinobi seems to be on the verge of questioning everything he has ever known, when I decide to throw him a lifeline. Poor shinobi... things are so much easier when you don't think about them in detail. Suspension of disbelief is a wonderful, wonderful thing. "I'm Kobayashi Makoto. Who are you?"

"Ahh..." The shinobi flushes bright red. "I probably should have introduced myself earlier... I'm Uchiha Shisui," he declares, beaming. "I'm Itachi-kun's... cousin? And his friend." He thinks, scratching his head. "...let's just go with relative." He looks at me again. "So, how do you know his royal prodigious-ness?"

I resist the urge to giggle at the nickname. "Itachi babysat me for a... D-ranked mission, I think. It lasted almost a week, so I'm not that sure whether it was one mission or several, but..." I shrug. "Yeah." There are more details, but I'm not in the mood to elaborate right now.

I push a cup of tea into his hands. "Here. Drink."

"Huh? Oh, thanks!" He holds the cup loosely in his hand, staring at me. "A D-ranked babysitting mission? You're... three..." He trails off into awkward silence again, staring at me. "You know, kid, it's disturbingly easy to think of you as just a really small chūnin or something."

I growl. "My name isn't kid. It's Kobayashi Makoto. Just... call me Makoto or something," I grumble, flapping a hand. "Plus, I'm not even a shinobi, yet. A chūnin?" I gesture to what I'm wearing sarcastically. "Does this look like the clothing of a shinobi?" Considering that I'm wearing a loose T-shirt with a cute squirrel printed on the front with leggings and normal sandals... yeah, nope.

Uchiha Shisui-san flushes again. "You could have been off duty or something! Or... or maybe a genin, okay? S-" I remember something he said earlier that peaked my curiosity.

"You said that I remind you of Itachi. Why is that?" Uchiha-san freezes, mouth still open in the middle of his sentence, but without saying anything. He pauses, looking at me, as he scratches the back of his head.

"Well, it's going to sound weird, but... you both have old eyes. Like, I'm-already-an-old-geezer old. I'm not really sure if you even understand that, since you're only three and all, though..."
My face darkens, and I frown. "Please don't patronize me. I'm three, not an idiot."

Uchiha-san backpedals frantically. "Okay, okay! Sorry, kid!"

"And my name isn't kid," I snarl.

"Okay, okay! Just… don't cry."

My face smooths into a blank mask. I was angry, not… oh. Does my angry face look that much like I'm about to cry? I grit my teeth, counting to ten. It doesn't work, but in that time, I manage to remember that I also have a cup of tea. The scent of matcha with roasted rice helps me calm down more than the counting. I sit it slowly, glaring daggers at the annoying shinobi.

"Okay, okay. But… yeah. Which clan do you come from? Hatake? I know they have a tendency towards white hair."

"I'm a civilian. My name is Kobayashi Makoto." And I'm pretty sure Hatake Kakashi is the last one…

"Well, I know they're down to only one member, but you could be, like, the kid of a member who just isn't a shinobi or something." I stare at him blankly. Okay, I can see his reasoning, but… nope. Just… nope.

"Or maybe one of the other clans! Yamanaka tend to have blue-green eyes and pale hair, maybe…"

I continue to stare at him, before enunciating carefully, "My parents are civilians."

"There are civilian Yamanaka!" Uchiha-san retorts.

I breathe in sharply through my nose, trying to see if I can finally get the fact of the matter through his skull and into his brain. "I will put it plainly. I highly doubt I'm related to any shinobi, at all. End of discussion." I exhale, taking another sip of my tea.

"Oh, well…" He frowns slightly, looking at his feet. "Have you thought about becoming a shinobi?"

I tilt my head. "A little. Why?" Seriously, this is the… what, fourth person to ask me so far? I'm three, for heaven's sake.

"I think you'd be a good one," he decides with an air of finality that might have ended an argument with someone his age.

"But I'm not from a clan and I don't have any shinobi relatives, either," I protest, wanting to hear his reasoning. Yeah, my answer was already a 'maybe, probably, I'm currently just waiting and seeing when the decision deadline is and what exactly I need to do,' but… all of these shinobi… why me? And, to be fair, a twelve-or-so-year-old is probably more likely to answer my questions than a clan head, the Hokage, or a surprisingly nice Hyūga.

Uchiha-san rubs his neck, looking at me. "Well… you're pretty smart for someone your age, and you're not as clumsy as most either. Kids like you… they tend to make good shinobi." He smiles, humorlessly. He seems… sadder than before for some reason, but his emotions quickly return to what they were before. "And… shinobi are cool, right!?"

I stare at him. Shinobi… some are cool. "ANBU-san's cool. Shino's cool. Aburame-sama's cool. The Sandaime's very nice, but not cool. He's smart… and old… but cool?" I shrug. "I don't know. Anko-
san's not cool. Hizashi-san's *super* not-cool. The green shinobi's just weird. Same with the grey-haired-but-not-old shinobi. Mi...nazuki-san? I think that's his name. He's not cool at all. The others on Team 2. And Fugaku-sama's just kinda quiet and acts a bit too much like a rock." I pause. "Mikoto-obasama's *super* cool, though. And... I do think there's another shinobi who's *super* cool."

It's comically sad how Uchiha Shisui-san perks up at that.

"Uchiha Itachi is awesome, *super* nice, and the coolest person I know."

Poor Uchiha-san... he's practically crying right now. "What... what about me?"

I look at him, blank-faced. "When I first saw you, I thought you might have been a girl... but a really tomboyish, messy one. Then, you somehow thought that I didn't know I was stuck in a tree. I don't like when people question my intelligence."

Uchiha-san mopes on his tree branch. "So..."

"So you're possibly the... fourth or fifth coolest shinobi I've met so far," I decide.

He straightens back up, eyes shining. "I'm... cool?"

I shrug. "You didn't accidentally destroy the tea shop, and you're not *too* weird. Plus, I think the eyeliner is kind of cool."

He beams.

I ignore him and continue. "So, Uchiha-san... Is being a shinobi tough? Is the Academy fun? Are the people nice?"

He pouts. "Call me Shisui! Really! Uchiha-san..." He shudders. "Well, there's over a hundred other Uchihas, so... *please* don't."

I shrug. "I just ignore them."

He pauses. "As for whether being a shinobi is tough... Well... some *might* judge you, if you do decide to go down the shinobi path because you're a civilian, but it shouldn't be more than they would judge you for being a kunoichi. Besides, the Yondaime didn't come from a shinobi family, either. And he became the *hokage*."

I stare at him blankly. You've... got to be kidding me... right? "I'm not a girl... you do know that, right?"

He stares at me for a moment, before flushing. "Sorry! Sorry... so it should still be good!"

"You've just dropped even lower on my list of 'cool' shinobi," I decide. "But, I suppose. I still want to know more about shinobi, first. I've asked Itachi some questions, so I'm not a complete stranger, but..."

"Well... why don't I show you around the more... shinobi parts of Konoha?" I whip around, staring at him. He just looks away. "There are places where civilians aren't really allowed to go that are *really* cool, and... I think you might like that."

I just need to make sure about something... "You're not a pedophile, right?"

Shisui-san chokes on his tea. "What..." he coughs, "Why do you even have to *ask* that?"
"Well, based on your previous sentence… I just wanted to make sure. And just in case you are, I would like you to know that I have a rape whistle and am not afraid to use it." I pause. "I'd prefer not to, considering what happened the last time, but…"

"The last time?!" He flails wildly. "Wha… I need to bring you to the hospital or something! Did you tell your parents? They must be…"

I hold up a hand, sighing. "It was a misunderstanding. I had thought it was a normal whistle, and I needed a way to cut through that racket since I couldn't shout loudly enough. Basically… that's part of the reason I don't really think anyone in the Military Police is 'cool,' and the reason I don't like the green shinobi, the silver-haired shinobi with the mask, Hyūga Hizashi-san, and Anko Mitarashi-san that much. And it's how I met Fugaku-sama and Itachi."

"…What happened?" he asks, bewildered.

"Help me pack up, and I'll tell you while we head to whatever 'cool' place you mentioned," I sigh, using air quotations to try and show some of my disbelief. Of course, he either doesn't catch it, or deliberately ignores me. I quickly pick up my cup and drain the test of the tea.

"Oh, and one more question. Can I adopt you as my friend?"

I spew the tea right back out, coughing. "Huh? I… I'm sorry? Can you repeat that?" I swipe at my mouth with the back of my hand.

Shisui-san stares at me determinedly. "You're tiny, and cute-looking, and you remind me of Itachi! I've kinda adopted him, too, as a friend. If you join in, I'll have a small kohai, and also an even smaller kohai! And I'm not sure if you know, but Itachi really needs more friends. I'll also teach you some of my awesome ninjutsu, too! I just need to convince you to wear eyeliner, and then we'll all be able to take over the elemental nations with our powers of awesomeness!"

What happened? His personality just did a complete one-eighty, and I'm left scrambling in an effort to catch up! I'm… a bit overwhelmed.

"Woah, woah, woah. Back up. Well, I guess I am fine with you… 'adopting me' as your friend… but maybe everything can wait until a little later? First, I need to decide whether I'll become a shinobi at all. The… uh… awesome ninjutsu and eyeliner can wait… until later. Yeah. A lot later."

He pouts. Pouts!

"Aww… you're just like Itachi-kun when you ruin my fun. Well, have you ever been to the Aviary? The hawks and everything are really cool-looking. Of course, I personally prefer crows, but the people there said that crows were unlucky. Can you believe that? I mean, sure, crows have developed a pretty bad reputation as scavengers, and some people think that they're symbols of death or something, but we're shinobi. I mean, death is practically part of our life, for crying out loud… shit!"

Uh oh, I should have said that, either! I probably shouldn't have mentioned that to you since you're a kid, and a civilian to boot, so… what… uh… bunnies! Hey, I really want to show you some of these little bunnies I've found. There are babies, and I found them alone, so I took them to the Inuzuka vets, and they said that they were only two weeks old! Itachi-kun refused to see them, saying that he had to practice with his kunai, but you'll come, right? They're so tiny, they practically fit in your hand! Well, probably not yours, since you're so tiny and all… hey, can I call you Mako-chan? Or maybe Usagi-chan? You're really cute and your hair's kinda fluffy-looking, too, and you remind me of one of the smaller rabbits, so it would be perfect!
Oh, wait, I've got an even better idea, I'll call that bunny Makoto-chan, too! But then I really should name another bunny Itachi-kun. No, Itachi-chan sound cuter! But which one… there are two black ones, can you believe it? Wait, we can just call one Shisui-chan… but then, it would be hilarious if I called it Fugaku-chan! I would love to see the look on his face, and then I could say things like 'Fugaku pooped all over the lawn,' which would be awesome, but… oh! I almost forgot to tell you! Uchiha Fugaku-sama is the head of the Uchiha clan, and he always looks like he's got this meter-long stick up his a… butt. His butt. Well, to be honest, a lot of Uchiha look that way, but hopefully not me, though, right?! You've seen Uchiha. Can you imagine what I would look like if…"

I just smile and nod, with clenched teeth and white knuckles as I cling onto his back, my bag over my shoulder, while he jumps down from our position on the tree. I might regret this, I think… but I get a good feeling from Shisui-san. I think we'll be good friends…

"Wait!" A section from his babbling suddenly strikes me. "I'm underage! You're underage! Besides, going to a shinobi bar is not the best idea. I think!"

Never mind. I almost certainly will regret this!

"After all, I'm your impressionable kohai and everything! Why don't we first go see the Aviary you mentioned. And can we go inside? I mean, I've seen it before, but I didn't learn that much about how it works. I was too busy looking at the library, so I'm really curious…"

I stumble next to Shisui-san, as he practically skips next to me. The streets and houses are painted a beautiful, glowing orange by the setting sun, and I'm exhausted. I'm even too tired to worry about formalities.

It's… it's been a long d... not day. It's been a long afternoon. First, we stopped by the aviary, but Shisui-san was dumped outside after barely ten minutes, when he tried to pet a hawk through the bars of a cage. I can't blame him, it was a rather handsome hawk, but… you don't pet them. I couldn't open the door, since they had to lock it to keep him out and I wasn't strong enough to break the lock, so I had to ask one of the nice chūnin to let me out. I got a sweet and a pat on the head, as well as a pitying look, as I walked outside and did my best to drag Shisui-san somewhere else.

Then, we went to see the cute bunnies, which were nicer, but Shisui-san almost broke a jar when he knocked it, and I barely managed to catch it in time. I got a lollipop and another pat on the head, as well as a "thank-you," before we were both kicked out.

Finally, Shisui-san decides that it's getting late and that keeping me from my parents would probably be a very bad idea. Unfortunately, his idea of a good idea is to drop me on the roof of the tea store. …

Luckily, there's a beam leading down to the balcony-thingy outside my room, and I might have fallen further than I intended and probably bruised a knee and hip… it's not anything like. Tumbling out a tree.

From there, it's simply a matter to pull open the sliding door that leads into my room and busy myself with a notebook and some pencils, doodling flowers and trees. It's not too hard to pretend like I've been here all along when Okaa-san calls me over for dinner and Otou-san asks me what I've done that day.

Nearly a koku later, I stare out the window, head propped up with a pillow under my chin.
I think… I might have slept too much in the morning. The sky's faintly red around the horizon to my left, and the sky to my right glows navy or ultramarine blue. There are still some lights on, but the stars are starting to come out.

It's getting a bit late, and I did feel tired earlier, but now that I'm lying down, I'm not no longer sleepy.

Today… it feels as if it were simply a dream. Everything was so weird that… it feels so surreal.

I stare out the window until my eyes burn and my eyelids start slipping and… I yawn.

Okay. I'm tired again.

I wriggle deeper into my nest of blankets and pillows. I don't really have a teddy bear that's comfortable (and big enough) to cuddle with, so I currently just wrap myself around an extra pillow. It's a nice solution.

I let my head flop down, still faintly seeing the beautiful glowy-blue sky. Maybe I can find Shisui-san tomorrow. I can probably ask Mikoto-obasama if I can't. And maybe Itachi will be done with his mission. And I can talk with him about the stuff in the textbooks and show him how my left and right splits are pretty much down and how my middle splits are almost there and I can balance on my hands for maybe five seconds before falling over and I can already see my feet while in a backbend and I can actually touch my feet to my head now.

I've been writing short letters to Itachi, to practice writing. They're messy and not always the nicest and I tend to ramble, so they're more notes on what I want to tell him, but… some of the recent letters actually look nice enough. My handwriting's actually improving!

...I still can't write more than a page without needing to switch hands, though.

I shift to find a more comfortable position as I hear a slight thunk above me. I blink blearily. Rain?

Thunk.

I yawn, shifting again. That'll be pretty to see tomorrow, even if I'll have to deal with mud.

Thunk. Thunk.

I frown at the ceiling. Why is the rain so loud?

Thunk.

I nestle deeper into my blankets, drawing them up around my ears.

Thwump.

I blink. That… didn't sound like r—

What is that? I frown, pushing myself up and rubbing my eyes. I debate flopping down again, but I end up swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and shuffling over, sliding the door open a crack.

I don't think it's anything dangerous, but…

…

Yeah, that's not anything dangerous.
"Shisui-san, what are you doing on my balcony?" I demand, opening the door all the way.

Shisui-san hops in, beaming. "Itachi's back!"

I blink, suddenly very much awake. "Itachi? He's back? Now?"

Shisui-san nods furiously, before smiling a mischievous smile that means nothing good. "And that means that it's the perfect time for a sleepover!" he announces happily.

I stare at him, wide-eyed. "Do you know what time it is?"

Shisui-san shrugs. "Does it matter?"

I hesitate one moment longer, before giving in and nodding vigorously. "Let me just grab a pack of clothes, some other stuff, and tell my parents," I decide.

Shisui-san winces. "Do we have to?"

I frown at him. "Yes."

"B-b-b-but… civilians are scary! And weird! They have all these strange ideas about stuff, and…" Shisui-san babbles, before noticing that I'm not paying attention to him anymore, instead walking out the door to find Okaa-san. "Makoto!"

"Don't care," I grumble. "I'll be back in a moment."

So… in the past half-koku or so, I've learned several things.

Shūnshin is fun and scary and really, really fast.

Shisui-san's default way of carrying people is over his shoulder.

Mikoto-obasama is scary and cool and Fugaku-sama's definitely scared of her, even if he pretends he isn't.

And Itachi hasn't had a haircut for a while.

He normally has his hair in this kinda-spiky sorta-bowl cut, but it's now grow out to the point where it'd be over his nose, so he parts his hair in the middle. He looks a lot like Mikoto-obasama that way… and how he'll look in the future, but I try not to think about that.

Oh, and apparently I'm no longer allowed to call Shisui-san… well, "Shisui-san."

But the oddest thing? Apparently I'm now a creature of folklore.

…

No, seriously. I'm too pale and it's late winter/early spring, so Okaa-san likes dressing me in paler colors, like blue, green, pink, and so on, so…

What's the logical conclusion?

...I'm a ghost.

Or, rather, a type of zashiki warashi, which is this… yōkai? Ayakashi? Mononoke? Yūrei? ...it's complicated. The closest English equivalent would probably be… "spirit," or maybe "fey." Basically,
something otherworldly.

But it's really easy to turn red when you learn that you've been thought of as a very beautiful spirit-thingy whose skin and clothing glows with pure, radiant white light, and with features more beautiful than normal mortals, who brings richness and prosperity and promotes happiness and well-being.

Yeah, there are bad yōkai, but zashiki warashi are definitely not. I'm pretty flattered, and I'll probably be more flattered after my face cools down, but... I'm now, apparently, a good-luck-bringing-ghost-thingy that haunts the Uchiha main house, with an emphasis on Itachi.

Hooray.

But seriously, who comes up with this stuff? I'm now this magical thing that appears only at sunset or specific times during the day and brings good luck and happiness. All because of the fact that I'm way too pale, currently dress in paler colors, and tend to avoid people because I'm awkward like that.

Oh, and apparently showing up in the pale kimono only perpetuated that rumor, because zashiki warashi tend to dress traditionally.

...

Itachi actually laughed at that with that sort of muffled laughter that makes his shoulders shake and keeps an actual smile on his face.

...I think he's secretly a mean person who takes delight in seeing me in awkward situations.

...

And shinobi are horrible, horrible gossips and no one will ever convince me otherwise because how else would this have happened.

...

Oh, and another piece of important news— Itachi is leaving on a mission soon, but because there was... something that went wrong with the C-rank, he has a week to train and do local D-ranks and... stuff. He won't tell me what went wrong, but no one got seriously hurt, so I won't pry.

He can't take a longer break, though, either. According to his sensei, there's a super-important mission soon, towards the end of gogatsu, or May, and his team is being considered. It's not really hard, and it's more of a reward, but it's a really big deal, even if he won't tell me exactly what the mission is. Still, until then, we have time to play!

And I know what I want to do first— I want Itachi to meet Shino and Neji-kun!

The next day is probably one of best days this month.

It started with a welcome sorta-familiarity— breakfast with Itachi and Sasuke and Mikoto-obasama and Fugaku-sama. A surprise came right after that, though, when Mikoto-obasama lent me an old kimono that's a pale pink and an equally pink headband, both with embroidered sakura petals. It was hers when she was younger, and I was (and still am) absolutely terrified of getting even a grass-stain on it.

But... it was time for hanami, Itachi was here, and I wanted him to meet Shino and Neji-kun, so I ignored my urge to sit politely in seiza in a clean, tatami-covered floor for that entire day, and went
to find them.

And so, after telling Itachi to meet me at Kobayashi Tea in about a koku, I ran to the Aburame compound to find Shino and tell him to head to the sakura grove, and then to the Hyūga compound to give a "guard" a message meant for Neji-kun, not tripping by the sole grace of not having brought geta the night before and thus, not having been able to put any on.

I scrambled home to grab some dango and tea and other sweets, as well as Itachi, before I dragged him over to the sakura grove, where the trees aren't really covered in flowers, but... there were enough left.

Halfway there, Shisui decided to invite himself to the party, and so I introduced Itachi and Shisui to Shino and Neji-kun.

...and I completely forgot about the tensions between the Hyūga and Uchiha, but luckily, Itachi and Shisui are (relatively) mature individuals, and Neji-kun's still young, so the only issue is a spot of awkwardness that lasted maybe a couple of minutes.

Ocha, tea, and dango and sweets are a great ice-breaker, though, and soon Neji had convinced me to also address him without any honorifics, after I noticed him pouting that he was the only one I attached an honorific to.

Now, though, it's almost midday, and Shino and Neji have returned home for lunch. Shisui's volunteered to treat us to lunch, though. There's this ramen place that he's heard a lot about recently, apparently, and... well, why not?

I grin as I practically skip alongside my friends, regaling Itachi with tales of how silly Shisui was yesterday.

I know this won't last. Itachi's busy. So is Shisui. Even Neji and Shino are going to get busier when they start learning their clan techniques.

But, for now... I'm with my friends, and it's sunny and nice and the sakura's pretty and it seems like nothing can go wrong.

I'm happy.

I wish... I wish happy, tranquil moments like this could last forever.

---

In the peaceful light
Of the ever-shining sun
In the days of spring,
Why do the cherry blossoms
Scatter like restless thoughts?
— Ki no Tomonori

久方の
光のどけき
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Okay, this chapter is done! For everyone who's read this as it was before, you'll notice that I didn't rewrite as much. When compared to the last chapter, at least. Unfortunately, my next chapter is… a bit more troublesome.

NEW QUESTION: About how long would you like for each chapter to be? Options include 5-8,000 words, 8-10,000 words, 10-12,000 words, 20,000 words… Also, how do you like the poems? And thanks to everyone who reviewed!

Next time: It's almost Itachi's birthday! Kobayashi Tea gets a new employee! And someone dies, but it's canon, so…

Now, for a test of who knows Naruto best.

The first person who guesses the new employee or the person's death gets one request! This can be a spoiler for the future, an early sneak-peak into a future chapter…

Also… something has already changed from canon. Something... arguably important. The deadline is when I upload Chapter 8. The person who guesses correctly first gets two requests.

Good luck!
Chapter Summary

In which Makoto comes to terms with mortality, comforts Itachi, and hires a new employee for the tea shop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the summer night

The evening still seems present,

But the dawn is here.

To what region of the clouds

Has the wandering moon returned?

It's been almost two months since Itachi's break. I've seen him a few times since then, but... his birthday is in a barely three weeks, and I kinda wanted to... actually do something special for it. He bought me the hairpin after all, so I feel rather obligated to return the favor.

It's not that special... but I asked Okaa-san and Otou-san a little while back about things that brought good luck, and I'd explained that I wanted to get something like that for Itachi. After a bit of discussion— and showing them the kanzashi, which was surprisingly awkward— I decided to get him three things— an omamori, a daruma, and an ema.

They're all sorts of good-luck charms, but... they're also a bit different. An omamori is this small silk... envelope? Talisman? I'd say keychain-attachment, simply because that's what I think of, but it's really just this small, envelope-like charm with a prayer inside (that you're never supposed to see, because opening an omamori is super bad luck), and a small string to hand the omamori from. According to Otou-san, seeing wear and tear on an omamori is actually a good thing, as it shows that it took the burden for you, and did its job of protecting you. They're not supposed to last more than a year, and then you're supposed to return them to the shrine or temple you bought it from, and the priests, or the miko, the shrine maidens (think the people with the white and red outfits... like that one girl from that one anime... I think it was Inuyasha?) will dispose of it in a sacred fire with others.

A daruma is this... hollow papier-mache doll, essentially. They're circular, and mostly red, but have a white face, with a mustache and beard and these super big eyebrows and enormous round eyes... that don't have pupils. You're supposed to fill in one pupil when you set a goal and fill the other when the goal is achieved. They also have a weight at the bottom and right themselves if you push them over. They are associated with the phrase "nanakorobi yaoki", meaning "seven times down, eight times up" and are considered symbols of perseverance.

As with any charm, there's a special way to get rid of them— they should be burned in this special ceremony or something in January... sorry, ichigatsu.
And *ema* are these small wooden boards that you write a wish or prayer on and hang up at a shrine. Simple.

The last two aren't really *good-luck charms*, I guess, but… I decided to get them anyways. I already got Otou-san to teach me a bit of *origami* though, because next year, if Itachi likes these, I plan to make him a *senbazuru*. It's a string of one thousand paper cranes. If you complete one in one year, you're supposed to get a wish.

Technically, Okaa-san bought the *omamori* and *ema*. Apparently, I have family who works at a shrine on her side of the family. It seems super random, but apparently her family (now *my* family) does a lot in terms of… religion.

Seriously. I got this entire crash course on the culture of the Elemental Nations, and while it's really interesting… well, I actually have no complaints, other than "why now?" It was really interesting.

My family's super cool. Okaa-san refused to get into details, but we're apparently descended from this "priestly clan" so we have this familial obligation to send a family member every now and then to work at a shrine, specifically dedicated to this god of thunder. Because the clan came from the mountains a bit further north, closer to Kumo… or something.

Okaa-san wouldn't elaborate on our family, but she did explain that the five main Elemental nations, as well as some of the smaller ones, worship certain kami. The Land of Fire has a ton of shrines for Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun. The Land of Lightning worships Raijin, a god of thunder, lightning, and storms. Wind worships Fūjin, the god of (you guessed it) wind. As for Water… Okaa-san actually doesn't know, but she's pretty sure it's a kami related to the sea, and probably either Ryūjin or Susanoo. Earth is… also a bit weird, but there are worships Sarutahiko Ōkami, the leader of the earthly kami (and there's apparently a lot of them, but they're not all that major). He's different from the rest. There's this story explains that how, the time of creation, light, pure elements branched off to become heaven (*ame*), while heavy, turbid elements branched off to become earth (*tuchi*). He belongs to the *kuni-tsu-kami*, the gods of the earth, while the others belongs to the *ama-tsu-kami*, the gods of… I think it translates to "heaven". I think the *amatsukami* normally are better-known, but he's apparently one of the seven "Great Kami," so he's still pretty important.

But while that's pretty important and good to know, what I care about most is that my relative(s)— I don't know if there's only one or more— sent over two *omamori* and two *ema*, and Otou-san had someone send a really nice *daruma* alongside the delivery of tea for May.

And then I also wrote a card (even though it's really long and honestly more of a letter), complete with a bunch of cut-paper decorations that Otou-san helped me with because personal touches are *important* when you have the time and want to show friends that you care.

But he's not *here* and he left for that super-important mission to escort some important guy from the capitol at least two *weeks* ago. Sure, it might take another week, but… at the same time, two weeks have been enough. Yeah, it was a really, *really* important person so they had, like, a dozen stops along the way, but… two weeks is a very long time.

And Okaa-san left for some important family business two days ago, which means that the meals are… kind of suckier, mainly because Otou-san is managing the shop all on his own and doesn't have time to cook. He's really busy. And while neither he or Okaa-san like the idea of me going over to the Uchiha for dinner, mainly because of them worrying about it being impolite or the idea that they might want something in return or that something will happen to me on the way there (which, mind you, are perfectly rational concerns and similar to those expressed when I told them of Itachi's present for me), they usually don't voice their concerns, so I simply don't bring the subject up. It's a bit like willful ignorance, or not poking a sleeping bear— provided nothing occurs that brings our
attention to the subject, we can agree to avoid the subject.

So, we simply ignore the fact that I'm not home everyday before sunset, and we ignore the fact that I return about a koku later with a warm bento and a few leaves. Maybe not all families do this, but it's familiar to how things worked Before— usually, until (and sometimes despite the fact that) someone explicitly says not to do something, it's implicitly allowed.

It's Itachi's birthday tomorrow. Itachi's mission should definitely be over by now, but I haven't seen him yet. And Okaa-san was only supposed to be gone for a few days, but we got a message saying that something happened, and that she'd be gone for a lot longer, and I haven't seen Okaa-san in three weeks, and I'm getting super-scared. Otou-san's even busier than normal, and a montsuki kimono and a montsuki haori in my size were delivered, though they were soon put into storage. Those are only worn for really formal things, like... weddings, or sometimes really important tea ceremonies or other traditional demonstrations, or... or funerals.

Otou-san's not smiling. He's always worried now, and he seems so tired and... I'm scared. I don't think this is for anything happy.

And... I'm really worried about Itachi. I'm probably just paranoid and these two things probably don't have anything to do with one another... but for some reason, I can't seem to shake that nagging feeling from my head. And to course, there's always the possibility there are two, independently problematic things happening. Tragedies aren't isolated to one person at a time, after all.

I'm tired, though. Mikoto-obasama looks sad when I ask her about him, and I think there's something else going on, so I didn't pry, but... he's alive. He's physically fine, as far as she knows. That's good. And something went wrong on his mission, but she won't tell me any details, or even if he's back yet. That's not good.

I've been eating over with Shino recently. I still play with Shino and Neji practically daily, and that's nice... for the most part. The butterflies are nice. The bees are fuzzy and their legs tickle, but the drone of their wings helps drown things out sometimes, and I can sleep.

I like the Aburame gardens. The pollen's almost thick enough to choke on, and it's not always that pleasant when I start sneezing and my nose gets a bit stuffy, but when things get too much, I can climb up a tree and let the breeze and rustling leaves and sunshine lull me to sleep. As long as I don't fall down, get injured, or bother the few insects that call the tree home, Aburame-sama's fine with me up there. I don't mind the insects to much either, since Aburame-sama's been having Shino check me over to make sure nothing latched on to my hair or clothing. It's still rather nerve-wracking to find a moth or a few bees or even that one time when there was a massive spider in my hood, but I've mostly overcome my aversions by now.

I still don't always like it when they crawl on me, though— I'm ticklish. And I'm always terrified of accidentally squishing someone. Something.

I'm sitting on a stool behind the counter in Uchiha Senbei, one of the few places in the Uchiha Compound where I can be without attracting unwanted attention, when Shisui finds me. I don't really like coming in through the front, so I currently climb the wall, and then climb up a tree on the way out— one of few perks of being so far away from the center of Konoha.

It's awkward walking through the compound, and I've already spent a few-too-many times in tears because the jerks at the front wouldn't let me through. I entirely understand and approve of their caution (I mean, I lived in a gated community Before, so it's not like it's weird), but at the same
time…

And my hair and clothes stand out. Like, a lot.

Shisui knows I usually come here, since Teyaki-san and Uruchi-san know me pretty well from how often I come to pick up an order of senbei, and they’re nice enough to let me stay and hide when Mikoto-obasama can’t.

I'm staring at the dust motes dancing in the stream of sunshine when two hands latch under my arms and hoist me up over a shoulder like a bag of rice.

"Thanks for keeping this safe, Teyaki-ojisan, Uruchi-obasan!" Shisui calls over his shoulder as he opens the door with a tinkle an—

I spit hair out of my mouth, shaking my head and roughly smoothing my hair down, glaring at Shisui. _Shunshin_ is fun… unless you’re upside down and backwards, and your hair isn’t tied down.

I blink. "Ne, Shisui? Why’d you bring me back to Makoto-obasama's house? And why the backyard, for that matter?"

Shisui grins humorlessly. "Because Itachi's back, but he's brooding and he won't talk to anyone and even Mikoto-obasan and Jii-chan, my grampa, are worried. And so's Fugaku-jisan, even if he won't admit it. He’s been frowning more than usual."

My stomach drops. "Wha… what happened? Something happened on the mission, didn’t it?" I bite my lip. "Okaa-san's been gone for three weeks... she said something about family business… did something happen about three weeks ago?" I frown. "No… wait… Mikoto-obasama only started acting weird about two weeks ago…"

Shisui rubs his face, exhaling sharply. "I don't know why your Kaa-san would be involved, but the thing… it was a bit over two-and-a-half weeks ago. We didn't get the details until a bit after that, though. Let’s just say…"

"Shisui, I told you, I'm fine."

My head spins around. Itachi?

Itachi shuffles out from around the corner of the house, and…

Oh.

Yeah, I can see why people would be concerned. His skin is pasty, his hair's a mess (and it seems like he hasn’t washed it for the past two weeks), and it's grown out tot the point where he parts it in the middle, and those lines on his face that aren't under-eye bags seem deeper than before. I'd had those _Before_, and I can already see a bit of them on my face now, but I'm hoping I'll grow out of them. They're most noticeable when I smile(d), so I'd thought they were like dimples for the longest time, but… Itachi's aren't the same, though they're similar. They're… deeper. It doesn't make sense, especially for his age, but…

"Itachi?" I ask, voice wavering slightly.

He freezes, eyes locking with mine— and oh, his eyes look a bit bloodshot and that can't be good— and he immediately turns and heads back.

Of course, like the inconsiderate friend I am, I run after him. "ITACHI!"
I find him in his room, on his bed, with his blanket over his head. I take off my shoes, wincing at how I'd worn them up to his door, and leave them just outside, stepping in.

"Itachi?" I ask softly.

He doesn't respond.

I step over to the bed, pull up a corner of the duvet-burrow, and crawl inside until I find Itachi in a ball, arms around his knees and still facing away from me.

Hesitantly, I give him a hug.

_Before, _some of my friends hadn't really like hugs, but… I think…

Itachi shudders, pulling me closer, and… oh, no, he's crying what do I do.

I gingerly pat his back.

A few moments later, he extricates himself, curling back into a ball.

"Sorry… about that," he mumbles. "I shouldn—"

"You don't have to apologize," I frown. "We're friends."

Itachi winces, and I immediately start worrying again. "Itachi, what happened?"

"I… It's nothing. I'm just…"

"It's not nothing," I hiss. "You're my friend, so anything that makes you sad or happy or _anything _is _something_. And I might be overstepping boundaries here, and I'm probably not respecting your wishes to let things lies, but…" I sigh. "You're my _friend_, Itachi."

Itachi still doesn't look at me, but he leans over in a semblance of a hug.

"I failed my last mission."

"The big one?" I ask.

He nods.

"Something went wrong, I heard?"

He nods again.

"I don't think you'd be this upset at just failing a mission, if you'll excuse the presumption," I state dryly.

He shakes his head. "You're right. It's… it's not just that."

I wait, prompting him to elaborate.

"I… I activated my Sharingan," he murmurs. "I _should_ be happy."

"There's more than that, though, isn't there?" I ask, stomach dropping. Had I been a normal three-year-old, I would have been confused. Had I been a well-educated three-year-old, I might have been awe-struck. However, being me… I'm well aware of what a Sharingan is. And I'm well aware that
Itachi nods, shoulders slumping, and he bows his head. "Thanks to my skill, Team 2 was given the ceremonial honour of being the Fire Daimyō's guard during his annual trip to Konoha. During the trip… the convoy was attacked by someone in a mask."

My stomach practically dropped below the ground.

Itachi's eyes are wet with tears.

"He killed everyone else in… barely any time at all. Luckily, Shinko and Minazuki-sensei weren't there. They were scouting. Tenma... I tried to warn him, but… he attacked, and… and the man was somehow intangible. He was strong. Too strong. He killed Tenma." He swallows heavily. "The funeral was a week ago."

I squeeze tighter.

"I don't know… I lived, while Tenma didn't," Itachi whispers. "I… I wonder if I'm the reason he died. I think… the reason he attacked first... I had helped him out, during a mission a little while before that. Tenma-san… he's very proud. He promised to repay the favor, even though I would been just fine with a 'thank-you.' I can't help but wonder… did Tenma-san sacrifice himself in order to repay the favor he felt he owed me?"

I hesitate, before slowly wrapping my arms around him. Itachi swallows harshly.

"But… the Fire Daimyo couldn't possibly have been killed, right? I mean…"

Itachi shakes his head. "I think we were lucky… but I honestly don't know."

I nod slowly, before deciding to breach the slightly-sensitive question.

"So… Team 2 was disbanded?" I ask hesitantly. "But… Shinko-san…"

Itachi answers softly, "She's physically fine, but… she no longer wants to be a shinobi."

"Oh." Oh, indeed. I hug him tighter. "If you want my advice… I think you should go visit your team?"

He turns his head away, but I press on.

"You should. I don't think Shinko-san blames you for Izumo-san's death, if that's what you're worried about… and I don't think you could have done anything. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I can't help but be thankful that you're still alive. And Tenma…"

I bit my lip, thinking, remembering everything I knew about Izumo-san and trying to form it into a cohesive whole. Think, Makoto.

"I don't… I didn't know him very well, but… he was proud. I think… he would tell you to stop being a wimp. He would say that his decision was his own, and that at least now, you owe him something… and isn't he awesome, for being the reason you got the Sharingan? He'd probably tell you to not waste what he gave you, to remember him, and to just be thankful that someone as amazing as him deigned to die for someone like you."

Itachi smiles through his tears. "That… that sounds like him."

His face drops.
I hesitate. "Did… does he have family?"

Itachi nods. "A mother, a father, two sisters, and a brother. They live in the poorer districts. His father's sick. Tenma… he's the eldest. He tried to do his best. Part of the reason he might have felt so deeply indebted… I helped him… acquire… some things he needed for his father's medicine."

"Then, maybe check in on them? Every now and then. Maybe twice or three times a month at first, but less later on."

Itachi nods hesitantly.

"I don't think he would've liked charity, but… just show that you care. Say hi to them in the streets if you see them, and so on."

Itachi smiles. "I think he would like that."

I grin. "Yeah, and I think that he would tell you to do something amazing, so that he won't be ashamed in the afterlife that he was part of that team. If Shinko-san is no longer a shinobi, and Izumo-san isn't here anymore… that means that you should carry on for them, right? Not, like, pressure, but… build off of what they helped to teach you, and recognize them when you become awesome. I think… I think that would be the best way to honor his sacrifice."

Itachi nods. "That makes sense." He looks over, smiling. "Thank you. I'd debated simply not using my Sharingan, but…" he looks away. "I don't think I like having it. It grants an eidetic memory, but it means I remember every detail of that day. But… I daresay that would make him more upset."

Itachi chuckles slightly, swiping at his eyes.

I elbow him. "And if that's true, and you simply can't forget, then just make new memories! Make better memories." I smile softly. "It's not smart to wallow in sad, scary memories. Be happy! Remember things that make you happy! You'll have to use your Sharingan while fighting, but… for every bad memory, remember a good memory. Okay?"

I look back at Itachi…

"Oh. Is that the Sharingan?" I ask, looking at the slowly-spinning red irises with the black markings. I lean in closer. "They're… they're spinning. That's so cool!" I bounce on the bed, smiling widely. "They're so pretty!"

Wait. I frown. "Doesn't it take a lot of chakra to keep it on?"

Itachi nods, letting his eyes fade back to black. "Yes. I will need to train." He smiles. "How do you know?"

I grin sheepishly, shrugging. "Neji's very proud of his Byakugan." Which is, thankfully, true.

"Ah," Itachi nods, before standing up. "I should clean up. I've...rather neglected some things recently." He frowns, tugging at his hair. "I should cut my hair."

My eyes widen. "No! It looks nice! If you want, I've got an extra hair-tie?"

Itachi hesitates.

"Please keep it long?" I ask. "And… maybe let me play with it?" I beg. "Neji doesn't let me try some of the more complicated things."
Itachi sighs, and I mentally cheer. "I'll go check on Tenma's family a little later. I should bring something. But… if you have time, I wanted to go visit the Memorial Stone, and then find Shinko?"

I shrug, hopping off the bed and going over the door, where I slip my feet into my shoes. When I turn back, Itachi turns his back to me and kneels down. "Hop on. It's a bit of a walk to the Memorial Stone."

"Are you sure I'm not too heavy?" I ask.

Itachi smiles. "You're lighter and easier to carry than Sasuke, and I carry him around regularly."

I beam, carefully hooking my legs over his arms as I keep my hands on his shoulders. When you're giving someone a piggyback ride, nothing is worse than the feeling when they're practically choking you.

"The Memorial Stone… that's the place where shinobi get their name carved, right?" Itachi nods.

"Why don't we stop by Yamanaka Flowers, first?" I ask. "We should probably get something…"

Itachi hums in agreement as he heads out. "I know the way."

Stopping outside Yamanaka Flowers, Itachi lets me slide off his back, and I open the door, walking in as it tinkles. The shop… is crowded, but not too badly. I slip inside, wriggling my way to the front desk. Sure enough, I see Yamanaka Inoichi-sama behind the counter. I duck around the counter, waving.

"Konnichiwa, Yamanaka-sama!" I giggle.

"Oh, Makoto-kun! Long time no see," he laughs, patting me on my head, "What are you doing here… and without your mother?"

I shift from foot to foot, deciding to get everything over quickly. "I have a friend on a genin team whose teammate died recently. I was hoping to get a flower to put on his grave?"

Yamanaka-sama blinks. "...You have a friend on a genin team?"

I twist my hands nervously, but luckily Itachi manages to find me just then. "Oh… hello, Yamanaka-sama. I apologize if Makoto is bothering you…"

"Oh, no worries. I know Makoto-kun quite well," Yamanaka Inoichi-sama replies, with a smile that doesn't quite meet his eyes.

I hurriedly try to diffuse the tension. "Itachi-kun and his team babysat me once, during March… I knew the genin who died."

"Oh." Yamanaka-sama's expression clears. "Very well then… let's see, what about a white chrysanthemum?"

I tilt my head. "Why a white chrysanthemum?"

Yamanaka-sama waves off my question. "Oh, it actually means truth in hanakotoba, the language of flowers, bu—"

"Like my name!" I gasp, before shrinking back. "Oops, wait, sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

Yamanaka-sama smiles. "Don't worry about it. But… well… I suppose it depends on which kanji
you use." He grabs a pad of paper, writing down two kanji—真 and 誠. I point to the first. "Yes. That does mean truth." He points to the violets in a flowerpot behind him. "If it had been the other kanji, sumire would probably be better flower, since it refers to 'honesty' and 'sincerity,' though some also use it to say 'please love me' or 'a small love' or 'a small bliss.'" He taps his pen against the table. "However, the reason why I suggested shiragiku is because… well, they're common flowers for funerals." He hands the flower over. "Here, it's complementary."

Oh. That's… a bit depressing. So my name is associated with a flower for funerals.

I accept it with a soft, "Thanks, Yamanaka-sama."

"Haven't I told you not to call me that before?" he asks.

I laugh. "Sorry Inoichi-ojisan. I'll try to remember."

I grab Itachi's hand, and as soon as we're out of the shop, I hop back onto Itachi's back.

---

We left the flower off at the Memorial Stone where Izumo Tenma-san's name is carved. He was so determined to be an amazing shinobi… he would probably have been proud to have his name carved on the Memorial Stone, together with all the past shinobi of Konoha who died in service to the village.

After several moments of remembrance, where Itachi thanked him for his sacrifice and promised to remember him, Itachi seemed as if some weight had lifted from his shoulders.

I spent the time tracing the names on the Memorial Stone, looking for any I recognized. It was a surprisingly emotional experience… so many people, reduced to just names on stone. And at the same time… they died for Konoha. So that the village could be safe, so that the civilians were protected.

My fingers lingered on several names, in particular, which I recognized. Uzumaki Kushina. Namikaze Minato. And another one… Uchiha Obito.

I sit and stare as Itachi sits beside me, looking at Izumo Tenma-san's name. This world… it seems so much more real with these names. These were actual people who died. And if I became a shinobi… there was a very real possibility that my name would end up here, too.

I shook myself out of the melancholic mood when Itachi stood up, and I scrambled so that I walking next to him, before hopping on his back again to get to Shinko-san's house.

We're standing in front of the door, now.

Itachi breathes in, and out, and rings the doorbell.

There's a pattering of feet, with a called out "I'm coming!" before the door swings open… to reveal Inari Shinko.

"Konnichiwa, Shinko-san," I greet her.

"Oh! You're the cute kid!" she exclaims, before turning to Itachi. Her face changes, and her shoulders slump. "Why… why don't you two come on it?"

She moves out of the way as Itachi steps in, removing his shoes, and I do the same. We follow her over to her kitchen table as she asks if we want anything. Both Itachi and I politely decline, and a
silence hangs for a moment, before Shinko-san breaks it.

"I guess you're here to ask me why I quit being a shinobi?" Shinko-san asks, head down.

When Itachi shrinks in on himself a little, I decide to step in. "Actually, Itachi wanted to make sure you were okay, after…" I trail off, awkwardly, but everyone knows what I was going to say.

Shinko-san sighs softly. "Well… to be honest… not really. Since I can't be a shinobi… part of the reason I joined, apart from it being cool, was because it pays rather well. Currently… I’m looking for another job, but there aren't many that hire twelve-year-olds." She looks at Itachi hesitantly. "If… if you could just keep your eyes out… anything would do. We did quite a few D-ranks, so I'm rather confident I can do most jobs, but…" she grimaces. "Well, many jobs stay within the family, but Otou-san works for the civilian side of the Konoha administration, and…" she sighs. "There's a reason there aren't many civilians in that."

I almost wonder why she didn't mention a mother… but when I realize that, I decide not to ask. Still… something nags at me. A job… suitable for a twelve-year-old… drop-out genin…

I clap my hands excitedly. "Shinko-san! I might be able to do something about that!" I declare, bouncing on my seat as my mind races.

She just looks at me, tiredly. "Thanks, Makoto-chan, but… I don't think you can hel-

I interrupt her, pressing on. "How well can you work at a cash register or waitress?"

She stutters. "Uh… I suppose? F-for what?"

"If you remember, my parents own a tea shop. We need a helper, but the helper needs to be able to help fill in by manning the desk or serving tea and cleaning up… and we have a lot of customers who are shinobi. Sometimes… people can't really deal with that, but… can you do that?" I ask, eyes fixated on hers. "Okaa-san and Otou-san are really busy. Plus, it's almost time for Tanabata, and it'd be nice to have someone who could take charge of a stall. We really do need a helper, and if I can make sure it's someone I like…

She nods, hesitantly, and I resist the urge to cheer. "Wonderful! I'll introduce you to my parents… well, Okaa-san's currently not at home, but that should be fine. And we'll probably have to run you through several tests, but… if you promise to work hard, I think this might work… Let's go!"

Itachi, already having reached the logical conclusion on his own, gives me my shoes and, after putting on his own, lets me jump onto his back. Shinko-san trails behind me, still stuttering. "B-b-but… I need to change my clothes! Brush my hair! If it's an interview…"

I give her a cursory once-over. "Eh… don't worry. Those clothes are fine. Plus, you'll get an apron… and if you take over some of the tea ceremonies, you'll need a kimono. I think Okaa-san has some you can borrow, when that time comes, but for now, and we can probably provide an under-kimono… this is more than fine for now. Brush, though… I think you'll need something a little more professional-looking than pigtails."

"H-hai," she stutters, bowing quickly before running upstairs. There's a moment of silence before she rushes down again.

"Awesome! Now let's hurry… it's almost the afternoon tea rush… our busiest hours are in the afternoon, in the two or three hours before the sun sets, but after lunchtime. We're also busy before lunch, but not as much. We'll need to hurry."
"Follow me, Shinko-san," Itachi says calmly, before he jumps onto the roofs, with Shinko-san following and me resisting the urge the cling onto his neck as he runs alongside a wall, and jumps over to another roof, because aaaaahhhhhhhHHHHHHHH!

It's almost an hour later when Itachi leaves to return home, and to my knowledge, Shinko-san's still here. Just like I had thought, Otou-san was perfectly fine with giving her a trial period of the rest of the week, being quite thankful for an extra set of hands, and decided to start her try-out as soon as he finished showing her the basic ropes of the shop.

I hope she's doing okay. After Itachi left, I didn't stay for much longer.

This has been a really long day, and I just want to sleep… and contemplated the white chrysanthemum, the shiragiku.

What I learned today… that's interesting.

My name, 'Makoto,' means truth… and so does the white chrysanthemum. However, apart from just being associated with truth, 'makoto,' the white chrysanthemum, shiragiku, is also associated with death, because of how it's a popular flower at funerals.

Isn't that… rather ironic for me? I am planning on becoming a shinobi after all… so being a white flower that means 'truth' and is associated with death… that would be really ironic, huh? Shinobi are ninja. Ninja… they aren't usually considered to be nice people. They lie, steal, and kill.

I sigh. Maybe… maybe this is just coincidence… or maybe it's fate.

I groan, burying my face in my pillow. Enough scary conspiracy theories about Fate and numbers and symbols. Shinko-san's also working tomorrow. Plus, Itachi's coming over again tomorrow, so I'll need to prepare his birthday present… and according to him, he's bringing Shisui, too.

I've got a bad feeling… shinobi and chaos tend to go together like… like wagashi or higashi and matcha. Basically, they go with each other way too well.

I should get some rest… I think I'll need it.

In the summer night

The evening still seems present,

But the dawn is here.

To what region of the clouds

Has the wandering moon come home?

— Kiyohara no Fukayabu

夏の夜は

まだ宵ながら

明けぬるを
雲のいづくに
月やどるらむ
— 清原深養父

Natsu no yo wa
Mada yoi nagara
Akenuru o
Kumo no izuko ni
Tsuki yadoruran
— Kiyohara no Fukayabu

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yes! I am off my... way-too-long hiatus, and I am posting chapters again!

Shinko's new job is actually canon. I hadn't actually planned ahead for this, but it was an amazing coincidence. According to Narutopedia, "Exposed to the realisation of the horrors of the shinobi way of life, Shinko decided to quit and find civilian work, which was safer. When Itachi became a chūnin, he... visited the tea shop where she worked at and she waited on [him]... she quit her shinobi job because not only was Tenma killed, but because Itachi was so much more skilled than her and even younger than her, making it seem redundant to be a shinobi when Itachi was one."

Also, just as another disclaimer... I am not fluent in Japanese. I hope to remedy that as soon as I have the opportunity. What I do have right now is access to Google and the inclination to research things as exhaustively as I am able to. I currently try to limit my Japanese to nouns and phrases that can stand on their own, or explain the meaning in-text. If you know Japanese and I got something wrong, please let me know and I will try and fix it as soon as possible.

I would like to thank everyone who's commented so far. I appreciate this support, and I hope you continue to read and support this story!

Until next week! \(^{^_-^}/

- ShadowAccio6181
Of Tanabata and Unfortunate Events

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto prepares for a festival and accidentally gets on the bad side of someone he really didn't want any attention from...

Or, in which Danzo gets mistaken for a pedophile.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

わくらばにあまの河なみよるながらあくるそらにはまかせずもがな

It is rare that

The River of Heaven

Washes them together – it is night, and yet

The sky grows light.

I would that it not.

July is almost here, and that's… that's really cool. There are two interesting things about July… first, it's Neji's birthday. It's on July 3rd. Then… well, it's on July 7.

Tanabata.

First of all, it's name literally means "evening of the seventh," even if it's also known as the Star Festival. It originates from an old story, "The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl."

Orihime, 織姫, the Weaving Princess, was the daughter of the Tentei, 天帝, the Sky King, or the universe itself, and she, wove beautiful clothes by the bank of the Amanogawa, or 天の川, the "heavenly river." We known it as the Milky Way… and not the candy bar. The celestial Milky War.

Her father loved the cloth that she wove, and so she worked very hard every day to weave it. However, Orihime was sad. Because of her hard work, she could never meet and fall in love with anyone. Concerned about his daughter, Tentei arranged for her to meet Hikoboshi, 彦星, the cow Cowman/Cowherd Star, or literally, "Boy Star." Some versions of the story also call him Kengyuu, 牽牛, though. He lived and worked on the other side of the Amanogawa.

When the two met, they fell instantly in love with each other and married shortly thereafter.

Sweet, huh? And so they lived happily ever after… not.

You see, the problem is that, once married, Orihime no longer wove cloth for Tentei, and Hikoboshi allowed his cows to stray all over Heaven, which, as you might have imagined, caused a bit of a mess. In anger, Tentei separated the two lovers across the Amanogawa and forbade them to meet.
However, Orihime became despondent at the loss of her husband. She begged her father to let them meet again. Tentei was so moved by his daughter's tears that he allowed the two to meet on the 7th day of the 7th month, under the condition that she worked hard and finished her weaving. As you might have guessed, that was pretty good motivation, and everything went smoothly. They both arrived, on each bank of the Amanogawa.

The first time they tried to meet, however, they found that they could not cross the river. There was no bridge.

So, yeah, they're a bit sad. Luckily, the princess managed to fix this… in a really Cinderella-esque manner.

Orihime cried so much that a flock of magpies came and promised to make a bridge with their wings so that she could cross the river. She crossed the river, was happy with her lover… and later returned home. However, they were content, because they could meet each other every year. The other residents of the heavens were also happy. The cows didn't wander willy-nilly, and the Orihime's father got his silk woven.

There's… only one problem, which makes things a little sadder. It is said that if it rains on Tanabata, the magpies cannot come. As thus, if it rains, the two lovers must wait until another year to meet.

That's a rather bittersweet story, huh?

So yeah, Tanabata is based on that, and takes place when Orihime and Hikoboshi meet, and Orihime crosses the Amanogawa.

The day and the story is… pretty much the main link between the two.

These days, people generally celebrate this day by writing wishes, sometimes in the form of poetry, on tanzaku, which are basically small pieces of paper, before hanging them on bamboo, sometimes with other decorations. These trees or bamboo are usually set up in a variety of public locations in the days leading up to Tanabata, and according to Okaa-san and Otou-san, they're thinking about putting one up. These public locations normally include important buildings and stores. Passers-by write a wish on colored paper strips, the tanzaku, and then hang them on the tree or bamboo, which gradually becomes quite covered in tanzaku. Of course, sometimes there are other decorations, as well.

After the festival, usually around midnight or sometime the next day, the bamboo and decorations are usually set afloat on a river and/or burned.

In Konoha, we also hold a summer festival, which has pop-up outdoor food stalls, games for children, and traditional performances or parades.

So, yeah, it's a pretty popular festival.

Actually, another interesting thing is that there's also a traditional song for Tanabata. It's really really pretty… it's almost like a lullaby, and the melody is pretty simple. I really like singing it.

*Sasa no ha sara-sara*

*Nokiba ni yureru*

The bamboo leaves rustle,

Swinging by the eaves.
Ohoshi-sama kira-kira

Kingin sunago

The stars twinkle

On the gold and silver grains of sand.

Goshiki no tanzaku

watashi ga kaita

The five-colour paper strips

I have already written.

Ohoshi-sama kirakira

sora kara miteru

The stars twinkle,

they watch us from heaven.

…

Pretty, huh? The picture it paints is so pretty!

According to Okaa-san and Otou-san, there are also other decorations they’re debating putting up. For one, there are origami paper cranes, 折り鶴, or orizuru, as well as other paper things like… paper purses (巾着, or kinchaku), which are a type of decoration decoration that symbolizes one's hope for good business, paper nets (投網, or toami), which are paper decorations that pray for good luck in fishing, paper… trash bags (くずかご, or kuzukago), which are a bit weird, but symbolize cleanliness, and paper streamers, 吹き流し, or fukinagashi… which just basically look pretty.

The problem is that they take a bit of time to make.

So Tanabata's really cool! I, personally, am excited for the festival. I'd learned about some of the festival foods and everything, like… takoyaki, which are balls of wheat-flour-based batter that is typically mixed with a filling of minced or diced octopus, tempura scraps, pickled ginger, and green onion, and is cooked in a special molded pan. I've never had it before, because Okaa-san and Otou-san don't have that special molded pan, so… I'm excited.

There's also yakitori, which is basically grilled chicken on a stick, and isn't really special, but… it's good. It's pretty good.

There should also be yakisoba, fried soba (buckwheat noodles); okonomiyaki, savory pancakes that were traditionally cooked to use up leftovers in the refrigerator, but are often made with pork, seafood and cheese; ikayaki, grilled squid on a stick, chocolate-dipped bananas on sticks… corn cobs on sticks…

You know, there is a lot of food on sticks. That's probably because it's so convenient

There's also:

- Karumeyaki (which, from what I can tell, is grilled caramel and sounds pretty good);
- *Karaage*, which is fried chicken… again on a stick
- *Mini kasutera* (which I've actually tried, though in full size, and… they're a bit like sponge cake)
- Baked potatoes with butter (which I'm *really* looking forward to)
- *Kakigori* (shaved ice with syrup and something I'm *not* looking forward to)
- *Shiroyaki* (grilled sea bream on a stick… something I *am* looking forward to)
- *Taiyaki* (fish-shaped pastries with a hot filling. I've had *anko*, sweetened red bean paste, but not some of the other variants, like custard, chocolate, or cheese)
- Crepes (with a sweet filling and served in paper cones)
- *Dango* (which I like)
- *Ringo ame* (candied apples… and something I'm a bit *meh* about)
- *Hotake-yaki* (scallops grilled in their shell, usually with butter)
- *Ichigo-ame* (candied strawberry… on a stick. Candied *strawberries*. Who… who *does* that? Chocolate or honey is more than enough)
- *Mikan-ame* (which, according to Tou-san, is *really* hard to find. If you don't know, *mikan* are a type of small, easy-to-peel orange.)
- *Ume-ame* (candied plums… *sour* plums. I'm really *not* excited to try this.)

...  
Aaaand… I think that's it?  
There's a *lot* of festival foods… I didn't really have that much fun learning some of the *kanji*, but…

*cue jazz hands.*

Yay. My vocabulary increased. Yay.

But… Neji’s birthday comes first. The planning session for that took place a few weeks ago.

It was a nice, clear, weekend, and the sun shined down through the leaves of the trees, forming dappled patterns on the grassy hill. Very peaceful… until you saw the *mess* of papers, crayons, pencils, and a helpful piece of flat, solid wood that serves as a desk and place to write on, as well as the four frazzled-looking people around it.

Yes. I said *four*. Apart from me, there was Shino-kun, Neji-kun, and Hyūga Hizashi-san. Yes, Neji managed to bring his father.

I almost felt a little bad for Neji-kun. Shino-kun and I may or may not have decided that we needed to plan a rather… over-the-top celebration. Normal people might have tried to arrange a surprise party or something… we did the exact opposite. We created a list of his favorite sweets, foods, places, toys he liked… and asked what he wanted. We also requested that he bring his father the next week. Neji-kun requested some time to think about it, and we gave him a deadline of next week, so we'd have enough time to scheme properly.
We'd already decided on a lavender-matcha tea blend, since Neji had been fascinated by the flowers and quite liked it when I brought a thermos of lavender tea the next week, and I'd requested that Shino-kun see if he could get his hands on lavender honey.

So, the present was settled. The problem was... absolutely none of us knows what goes on in a birthday party. Even me. Because there aren't any climbing walls or trampoline places or amusement parks or Pump-It-Ups with birthday programs... nor are there large quantities of human beings who familiar with Neji. Because no, Hizashi-san, the Hyūga and older adults don't count. And everything we can think about seems too... underwhelming.

It's only after I ask if any of them are going to the Tanabata festival that we actually get somewhere.

I'm not entirely sure if this is a good way to celebrate a birthday... but it seems like it will be fun, so... I honestly don't care.

We're going to decorate the shop, and then Hyūga Hizashi-san will take us all around the festival. We'll have a budget of about 6,000 ryo in total, which is about one of the lower costs for a D-rank mission. It's more than three kids would normally have, and would probably normally be around the cost for an entire birthday party, but... two sets of puppy-dog-eyes are pretty convincing. And yes, I said two sets. Shino can't do puppy-dog eyes. I've trained him to pull off a rather cute pout, so far.

One of the things I've pushed the hardest for, though, is a game that's sometimes played during during Tanabata.

You see, there's a dish that used to be associated strongly with Tanabata, which is a type of noodles called *shomen*. Now, noodle dishes are pretty popular during summer in general, but... there's a game known as *Nagashi Shomen*, which I'm pretty interested in. The name literally means "washing-away somen," which might tell you a little about how it's played.

To play *Nagashi Somen*, you need to rig up a chute of some kind, traditionally a wide stick of bamboo that has been cut in half lengthwise, and set it at an angle by putting one end of it on something. You can do this by stacking chairs or bricks, by placing one end in a window of your house and the other end in the yard below, or... just figure something out. The steeper it is, the harder the game is.

The bottom of the chute should have a clean bucket or large pot underneath it. We're also adding a mesh strainer... and the reason should be pretty clear once you learn the instructions of the game.

A stream of clean, drinking water runs down the chute, which we'll probably do by punching a hole in a large bucket or something.

Now, you're ready.

Participants line up on either side of the chute with chopsticks in one hand and a bowl of dipping sauce in the other. Once everyone is ready, you put cooked somen noodles at the top of the chute, and then everyone tries to grab the somen with their chopsticks as it passes them.

It's hard, because the noodles are carried along quickly by the stream of water and the angle of the chute, as well as the fact that you have to do it with chopsticks.

And, of course, you eat the noodles after you grab them.

Also on a good note, the present that Shino and I had planned on giving Neji is going along wonderfully. Shino's already convinced his father to help, and he says that he should have the jar of honey made from bees pollinating lavender flowers by next week. Then, I'll strengthen the lavender...
scent, and flavour, by taking a small jar and heating it in a double-boiler by placing it in a pot of boiling water with fresh lavender flowers inside a mesh bag, dipped in the honey. It should also serve to pasteurize the honey, as long as I keep it hot enough at around 65°C or 145°F for at least thirty minutes.

The normal lavender honey will be in honeycomb form, and we'll decorate the jar containing the rest of the honey! I've also asked Otou-san to find us a one of those honey dippers, in either wood or glass, so… our gift is going along wonderfully. I really hope Neji will like it.

Okaa-san actually returned a few weeks ago. It was rather… anticlimactic. One day, she wasn't here, but the next, she was.

Okay-san seems different from how she was before… maybe more tired, or something. She won't tell me what happened, or why she had to stay away for so long. Ironically, the fact that she won't tell me is a big reason I'm still worried.

Still…

The presents are nice, I guess. Okaa-san bought me several new obi, a few netsuke in seasonal designs, two pairs of new geta, and a few sets of "normal" clothing— shirts, pants… all in my preferred soft pastels, but… really nice, with embroidery around the hems and neckline and subtle patterns.

I like those. I'm… Okaa-san said she got it in the capital, Keishi. So I'm fairly sure she was there… and maybe I'm crazy or something, but considering what Itachi's mission was… maybe I'm just a bit… worried.

Okaa-san really likes Shinko-chan, which is nice. Itachi's been stopping by a lot more regularly, which is nice! He got a new genin team from the Academy graduates in June, but they're not ready for C-ranks yet, so they're just doing D-ranks, which means that Itachi can stop by practically every day.

I also get to spend more time with Shisui!

...and now, if I ever find a rollercoaster again, I shall be immune to fear. Shisui and that shunshin are more terrifying than any rollercoaster… especially when he throws me into the air to try and catch me.

That prompted Itachi to spend an entire afternoon teaching me how to fall properly.

Shisui also dragged me to meet his grandfather, who apologized for his "idiot of a grandson," explaining that he "has a good heart, even if he's rather lacking in common sense." I think I like his grandfather, and not just because embarrassing Shisui with a description of he got kicked out of the aviary and veterinary offices was a really effective bonding moment.

Uchiha-san ended my first visit by extending me an open invitation, and a promise that he'd prepare some warabimochi and genmaicha as long as I let him know of my arrival in advance, and that he'd be happy to share stories about the early days of Konoha. He's pretty old, for a shinobi, and he was actually one of the first genin after Konoha was founded, which I think is super cool.

I've taken him up on his offer multiple times. He's like one of those cool grampas you hear about. He actually jokes that if I keep being this common of a visitor, he might need to officially adopt me. According to him, Shisui was never this cute, and both he and his older brother had been too busy
running around and making a mess to play with their old Ojii-san. Apparently, he'd also long bemoaned being one of the only people who like warabimochi dipped in kinako, which is sweet toasted soybean flour and something I really like. He actually let out these theatrical sobs when he told me that one of his friends actually hated warabimochi.

That was also something that was a surprise… I didn't know Shisui had an older brother. He died when he was around seven years old, though, so Shisui doesn't really talk about him, especially after he also lost his mother in the Kyūbi attack nearly four years ago.

That's… sad.

It's several days later when Okaa-san takes me shopping for Tanabata, because apparently, she'd bought kimono during her time away, but they were delivered to a shop nearby and she hadn't found a chance to stop by yet.

We actually head to a place on the same street as where I'd first found the kanzashi with the pretty chrysanthemums and autumn leaves.

She'd gotten me a new yukata, a light cotton summer kimono. Okaa-san had decided on a dark, indigo-ish yukata with dark, slightly watery patterns in subtle shades of blue, grey, and purple. Technically, given the fact that I'm a boy, I should probably have worn a solid color, but I'm young enough that I can get away with a subtle pattern. I probably wouldn't be able to pull it off had I been, say, around eight years old, but… for now, it's nice.

Afterwards, because it's a nice day, Okaa-san decides to take me to go window-shopping.

It's… really cool. There are so many shops, and some of the smaller, out-of-the-way shops have really cool products. I don't find anything quite as odd and amazing as that hairpin, but… the craftsmanship's breathtaking to look at.

In one of them, I see this beautifully-crafted toy dog-thingy. Okaa-san explains that it's an inu-hariko, which is a bit like a good-luck talisman, and symbolizes protection for children. I'm too occupied admiring the fine details on it, but I catch some things. It's made in a way similar to papier-mache, where it's crafted of shoufu-nori paste (I have no idea what that is) and kiri wood sawdust (a type of tree, I'm guessing?) and covered with gofun, which I did manage to hear explained, and is basically crushed oyster shell. Then, it's carefully painted in vibrant colors.

It's tiny, but… it's so cool.

Unfortunately, Okaa-san didn't bring her purse, since we were just picking up deliveries. Okaa-san does promise to get it for me some other time, though, even though I try to wave it off. I spend a few more moments gazing admiringly like it, before allowing Okaa-san to pull me away. One thing nice and a bit awkward about being three again— people want to get you unnecessary stuff. Honestly, it's like Christmas-time all over again in terms of "ah… thank you, but… uh…"

It wasn't like I didn't ask for stuff… it's just that I felt getting, say… air fresheners in holiday scents or a set of books I didn't need, ask for, or arguably want wasn't the best use of money, especially when I'd rather get a different set of books, or splurge on some unnecessarily expensive mechanical pencils that I'd probably lose, or art supplies I probably wouldn't get the chance to use that much.

You know, there's the nice unnecessary stuff… and then there's the awkward unnecessary stuff. At least I actually have room, now, with all those empty shelves… so I guess I can afford to have random trinkets taking up space.
We stop by the sweet shop, and Okaa-san pushes some ryo into my hand, telling me to get something while I wait as she discusses orders of tea-accompaniment sweets for Tanabata with the owners.

I look carefully at the colorful, carefully-wrapped displays, but one in particular catches my eye. It's in a pretty package with a flower… I think… a peony?... on the front, and more interestingly, an inu hariko. I nod decisively, grabbing it, before moving to the front. I reach up, sliding the box across the counter.

"Um… excuse me? Can I get the candy?" I ask, quietly.

"Oh! Of course… aren't you adorable? You have good taste! My niece also loves bontan ame."

I blink, puzzled, slightly overwhelmed by the cashier's cheerfulness. "Ah… is that the name? I just saw the inu hariko on the front…"

The cashier giggles. "Uh huh! Trust me, it's really good." She finishes counting out the change and slides it across the table, along with the candy, which she put inside a bag.

"Dōmo arigatō," I chirp in thanks, smiling.

"You're welcome!" the lady beams. "Have a nice day!"

I nod and wave, turning around as I exit the shop, sitting down on a bench outside the store. I carefully peel open the packaging of the candy, as I pull out the tray. They're in little rectangles… wrapped in something that's clear and plastic-like. I pick one up, frowning, turning it over. Is it… there's no label on it, and I think I've seen something similar before. I carefully hold a side of it to my mouth, biting down gently. The outside… seems to… melt slightly. Ah. I was right. It's wrapped in rice paper.

I look at it, eyebrows raised. I'm already curious. Rice paper… I haven't had that in a while. I return the square to my mouth, popping the entire thing in my mouth as I chew slowly. It's soft, chewy… and slightly lemon-orange flavored. I… I really like it. It's pretty good.

After I've eaten the entire piece, I grab another one, humming in satisfaction. Citrusy sweets… I haven't found any in awhile.

I smile, swinging my legs, basking in the summer sun as I watch the people passing by, and listen to their chatter. It's… it's nice, I think, shifting occasionally when the sun reflects into my eyes.

When Okaa-san comes back outside, she grabs my hand, smiling.

"Let's go, Makoto-kun! I was actually thinking… do you want me to drop you off at the park?"

I think, carefully, before nodding slowly. As long as I can stay away from the masses… I'll probably just hog the swings or something… that should be fine. I pause when an oddity sounds in my mind.

"Drop me off?" I ask, peering curiously up at Okaa-san.

Okaa-san nods. "Yes. I need to go buy some of the decorations we need, and I also need to head over to the carpenters. It will take me some time, about two hours, but I'll be nearby. Just across the street. Still, it's not really a place for children, with all of the dangerous tools, and I don't want you to be bored."
I nod. "Okay."

Okaa-san walks me over to the front of the shop, showing me where it is if I need to find her, before she walks me over to the park. I wave to her, before running in an effort to grab a free spot on the swings.

The swings are nice, I think, as I push myself higher and higher, clutching onto the supports as I free-fall for a moment at the top of my swing. The swings aren't like the swings in California, which are kind of soft and rubbery, pressing uncomfortably into your hips until you get used to them. They're more like the swings in Europe… the ones with the hard seats.

I shake myself out of my thoughts when I sit up, suddenly realizing a bit of a biological necessity. I look around, finding a small building with the restroom sign on it, before running over. Let's see… the boy's restroom. I pull open the door, quickly rushing over to a stall. Peeing while standing up is awkward, and I do my best not to think too deeply about anything, quickly wiping up and flushing, before unlocking the door and heading over to the sinks. I'm just happy that these are a lot nicer than some of the public restrooms Before… and more kid-friendly, as well. I drag out a stool with my foot, before stepping onto it. I pump some soap onto my hands, and turn the faucet, scrubbing carefully, counting to 60.

I'm grabbing a paper towel for my hands and to turn off the faucet when the door opens and I turn… only to inch closer to the wall, eyes wide, too worried about what's in front of to care about the probably-germy wall at my back.

Because… I'm not judgemental… but why's this person wearing?

That's got to be the most hideous…

...why does he know my name? What? No, no… nononono you stay there. Ew. I backed up into the wall. Why does he know my name why is he looking at medoeshewantmetorespondwhyishetalkingtomedoiknowhimdonthaveitohaveit… oh, gosh, I recognize that and no, I'm not shy you're just creepy and WHY IS HE HOLDING THE INU-HARIKO FROM EARLIER AND BONTAN AME I THOUGHT THE CREEPY GUY WITH SWEETS WAS A MYTH BECAUSE SURELY NO ONE WOULD BE THAT STU—

I suddenly feel a hard object under my jacket from where I brought my arms in. The whistle! I grab it, blowing as hard as I can while pushing myself backwards, almost falling out of the restroom, just catching myself with my hands as I sprint wildly for the carpentry shop.

Bursting in, I look around wildly, before throwing myself at Okaa-san with a shout of "KAA-SAN!" and burying my head in her leg. I breathe shakily as my heart rate calms down again.

Okaa-san carefully puts a hand on my shoulder, pulling me up to face her. I dash away the wetness from my eyes, not even sure why it's there, as I see Okaa-san tense. "Mako-chan? What's wrong."

I open my mouth, only for my voice to crack slightly. With a start, I realize that I'm trembling slightly, and my chest hurts and there's an uncomfortable burning feeling in my throat… oh, this is why I need to warm up when running. Seriously, stress-induced asthma (unfortunately, exercise-induced asthma) is pain in the brain sometimes. I take a slow breath, leaning on Okaa-san in an effort to ease the strain a bit. Yeah, I know you're supposed to stand… but guess what? This just works better for me. Still, when I start talking again, I stutter. "T-there was a man… this really, really weird… creepy… person… in the… the bathroom..." I recall, shuddering slightly and rolling my shoulders. Ew. Who knows what was on that wall? I chew my lip thinking, only to jump when Okaa-san shouts.
"What!"

I flinch slightly at the volume, curling in a bit further and shaking my head to try and clear the light-headedness. "Yeah. He looked… really old. And his smile… just… just…" I shudder. Yellow, crooked teeth… the guy was old and probably didn't pay that much attention to flossing.

"Anyways, he said that he'd been… looking for me… or something." I was quite frankly, too busy being uncomfortable— when you're in the bathroom, starting any conversation is just weird, especially if the other person just got in because hello? You're in the bathroom. I'm pretty sure you're there to do something other than… talk… "Did he follow me in there just to talk with me?" I murmur, face scrunching in disgust. Weirdo, definitely. If you want to start a conversation, don't do it in the loo. "He mentioned… he asked me to would go with him… or something," I scoff in almost laughter. Seriously? That's like… "And something about a home, and 'special training' or… something." I practically start laughing at the memory, now that the immediate weirdawkwarduncomfortable feeling is gone. Yeah, perfectly normal to be accosted with an interrogation in the potty. "I think he mentioned… new friends? And… he tried to give me candy, and that inu hariko from earlier, and…" At this point I'm laughing hysterically, and I think I'm actually crying with the absurdity of everything. I think I know this guy. From the anime… I don't remember his name, unfortunately. But… did he lure all of his people over that way? With creepy interrogations and puppy toys and candy?

I double over and practically wrap my arms around my stomach with now-soundless laughter. I'm actually crying. My sides hurt, but… I remember how he was supposed to look, and… those glass… rhinestones… pink and orange…

Two hands stabilize me and pull me closer. I manage to stop laughing, those little hiccups still escape and I have to cough a few times to calm down enough to…


Her reaction… it's not… it's a bit out of character. She's putting on a shaky smile, but… she's tense. Really tense. Like… tense-to-the-point-of-slightly-trembling.

"You know what?" Okaa-san smiles sharply. "I think I can wrap this up now. Let's see if I can find drop you off with… let's see… I think that Inoichi-san will be minding the flower shop… he should be able to help. If I do, stick with them, okay? I need to find your Otou-chan… and some of Okaa-san's friends."

I just nod, trying to make sense of the situation. It's still funny, but… I'm currently more filled with overwhelming curiosity and sheer bewilderment than humor and hysteries.

Okaa-san carries me while I cling to her neck. We rush into Yamanaka Flowers, and Okaa-san tells Yamanaka-sama… sorry, Inoichi-ojisan, about early. It's a really rushed summary, though. Just… hi, please take care of Makoto, there was a creepy guy earlier and I need to sort some things out with my husband.

That's the basics of it, since she's speaking a bit faster than normal, and I think I might have missed something.

Yamanaka-san calmly adjusts to the situation quickly enough, though, and shoos us into a back room.

"Yes. That is why I brought Makoto to you, Inoichi-san. But there is something I need to tell Makoto about. Is…" she hesitates. "Is the room secure?"
I stare at her. *What?* Is the room secure? Why would she need a room to be secure?

"... If you want to talk about something sensitive, we can move to one of the upstairs rooms. I will need to be inside, though, so..."

"That's fine, you should probably know this, too," Okaa-san decides hurriedly. "As long as you promise to keep it a secret, of course."

I am *so* confused right now.

"Of course, Kimiko-san, though I hope you understand if I might need to let... for example, the Hokage, know?" Yamanaka-sama asks.

I almost frown at them. Hello? Very confused little kid here?

"Oh, he knows." She turns to me. "Makoto. That man earlier... you did the right thing, you understand?"

I tilt my head. Huh? "Like... the running away?"

"And blowing the whistle, and with telling me immediately," Okaa-san nods, before continuing. "You should stay away from people like that, okay? Anyone who you don't feel comfortable around, who offers you candy, who tells you to go with them..."

I frown. "Huh?"

"That man was very dangerous, Makoto-kun," Okaa-san sighs. "You should be careful. Konohagakure is safe, but... even shinobi can only do so much."

I mean, yeah, I understand completely. He's dangerous, he's killed... or maybe rather, *will* kill a lot of people and cause suffering and lots and lots of pain, but... I thought that was secret? Like I'm pretty sure he got away with everything for the longest time for... for some reason. And he's arguably the Umbridge of this world in that everyone hates him. Gah, what's his name? And he's seriously screwed up, even for a world in which child soldiers exists and are actually encouraged and psychologically messed up people are standard. And that he wanted to recruit me for... something... in which I'm need to do... I forgot what, but I distinctly remember it being very not good.

Still, I think no one was supposed to know about that, so...

"And you know that... there are good people in this world, and there are bad people, right?" Okaa-san asks, crouching down. I nod. I mean, *duh.* "And you know that if an adult or anyone asks for help, to not help them? Because adults should ask adults for help, and if they *really* need help, you... should probably get another adult?" I nod, if a bit slower. Because... wait a second... this seems familiar... "And you know what you're private parts are, right?"

I practically choke on my tongue, reeling backward. Is... she's trying to give me bad-touch, stranger-danger talk. Because... I laugh out loud, covering my face in my hands and backing up, shaking my head. Because... oh, this is *hilarious*. My shoulders shake with silent laugh. Of *course* they don't know. Of *course* their first thought was not, 'hey, this guy's trying to recruit Makoto for a super-secret group of questionable legal status,' it was, 'hey, this guy's a pedo.'

I bump into a wall and slowly slide down, trying to calm myself down by not looking at Okaa-san's serious face, because if *I* do, I'll start laughing again.

Two arms wrap around me, and I start laughing even harder, even as I try to muffle it. I take a few
deep, shuddering breaths, but then… "If anyone, and I mean anyone, even if it's someone we know, tries to touch you there without permission…" Okaa-san begins, and I start laughing again.

It's only when I hear shushing sounds and someone patting my hair that I start to realize that… oh. Maybe they don't think I'm laughing. Right. Because laughter's not normal… and they probably think I'm crying… and…

Okay, that started it off again. I really need to stop laughing. My sides hurt.

After a few moments to compose myself, I start struggling to get out of Okaa-san's hug.

"R-Really, I'm f-f-f-fine," I choke out. "Really. It's just… I…"

I take a deep breath, fighting to keep it steady and not laugh again.

"I'm fine."

Okaa-san looks at me, wiping tears of mirth from my eyes, and I see her questioning it, but deciding nonetheless to move on. Thank you.

You know of my family, right?"

I blink, taken aback by her sudden change in topic — what's this thing that the Hokage knows about?— before nodding. "Hai, Okaa-san."

"Then you should probably also understand that your name, on various legal documents, isn't actually Makoto." Wait, what?

She traces a name on the table.

蓮輝

"On my family's tapestry, you are Hasuki, the bright lotus that emerges from the muddy waters. As for why…" she trails off, before taking a breath. "As my son, my musuko, you are very important to the Land of Fire. I am the oldest daughter of my father, and my name does hold considerable sway. As the second youngest in a family of boys, my brothers are… quite protective. And rather powerful. By default, that regard also extends to you."

"I… I don't get it." I frown. "So… am I Makoto? Or Hasuki? And… I thought that that flower was ren or renge?"

"It can also be hasu. Just as the kanji for your name could also be pronounced as shin. Makoto is more like your… your nickname. It is still your name, but in the sense that your name is much like… the lotus of truth of the wisteria plain in the little forest. The grammar doesn't quite work, but something like… kobayashi no fujwara no makoto no hasu." Okaa-san sighs, smiling slightly. "Your father and I decided to give you Makoto as a name in an effort to keep you safer, to give you a semblance of normalcy. It's a beautiful name, but common enough to not attract undue attention."

That's a lot of effort… "Is there someone who really hates your family or something?"

Okaa-san smiles ruefully, shoulders slumping minutely. "I wish. At least then we'd know the enemy. But no. The threat… could come from anywhere. My father has four children. My eldest brother, Hiroshi, was rendered sterile from an unfortunate accident with his horse. Kichirō, the second eldest, still has no children as of yet. Hiroshi and Kichirō may not have any children… ever. My younger sister, who is now just sixteen, will be wed for political advantage in two years' time… my family is
currently drawing up the contract to Kaminari no Kuni, the Land of Lightning. Any of her children will not count towards the line of succession. I am only lucky that your father's name is powerful enough to pacify my parents."

She pauses, seemingly lost in thought.

I ask, hesitantly, "Does your father have any siblings that could take over?"

"No, Hasu-chan. Most were assassinated during the last war in an effort to weaken the entire Land of Fire. And even had they survived, it would not have mattered. Hiroshi is currently the heir. His children would have been next in line, then Kichirō, then Kichirō's children, and then my children."

"But… what about Otou-san's family? Aren't they… traders? Merchants?"

"It matters not. He is of the Land of Fire. He loves us, and we are of Fire, so he is of Fire as well."

"Oh." I blink. That's… cool, I guess.

Okaa-san hugs me tightly. "And so, you may have to take up the family mantel. You would be the last of my line, the last of the Fujiwara clan. I am sorry about this, but do not worry. There still is a chance you don't have to. After all, I have recently received news that Kichirō is trying to court someone! Isn't that cute?"

Yamanaka-sama interrupts, startling me. I'd been so focused on Okaa-san that I'd almost forgotten he was there… and I have to bit my lips to stop the giggles— which, while entirely inappropriate for the situation, is entirely merited based on the expression on his face. "Fujiwara? The Fujiwara? As in, the Fujiwara family that is allowed the sit on the floor with the Daimyō, part of the dōjō kuge? The one which almost always has at least one member hold a position in the kugyō and… served as sesshō and kampaku?"

Okaa-san smiles. "Yes. You understand my reaction now, right?"

Yamanaka-sama nods, face still a mask of shock. "Though at this rate… I think you may even be underreacting. That… that… that…" He waves us to continue as he turns away and tries to process the bombshell that Okaa-san dropped. The bombshell I'm not sure I understand.

"What's the kugyō, Okaa-san?" I ask, tugging on her sleeve. "And se…"

"It is the collective term for the most powerful men attached to the courts of the various Daimyo of the Elemental Regions. The kugyō is mainly divided into two groups: the Ko, which includes the Chancellor of the Realm, the Minister of the Left, and the Minister of the Right; and the Kei, comprising the Major Counsellor, the Middle Counsellor, the Court Councillor, and members of the court of the third rank or higher," Okaa-san explains.

I blink… wow. "That's… a lot of people."

"Not as much as you might think, Kou-chan," Okaa-san says, smiling faintly. "And keep in mind, most countries have a ruler, though only the five great countries have Daimyo and Kage. Still, this means that they need to deal with four other 'greater countries,' not counting the different interests within the court, along with the smaller countries allied with Konoha, and… It's a surprisingly long list, once you think about it."

"Oh." I… that's complicated. I should probably learn it later, but… I want a color-coded drawn diagram and enough time to memorize it. Is that too much to ask?
Okaa-san smiles. Her tone lightens, and it sounds almost like teasing. "Don't worry, there is still time, and you may not yet have to worry about managing two important families. I guess we should be thankful that you are so handsome- you'll probably have to take one wife for each family," she laughs.

I blanch at the thought. That would mean… would mean…


My face must have been comical, because she bursts into giggles.

However, Okaa-san becomes serious again. "But regardless, there are many who would use you in an effort to gain power with the Fire Daimyo. That is why I am taking this event so seriously."

I nod faintly, unknowingly mirroring Yamanaka-sama. "Yeah. I think that makes sense, Okaa-san. So… basically, you came to Konoha 'cause you thought it was safe, and 'cause you and Tou-chan are super important and everything… but now you're worried?"


Wait. "So, when you were gone on family business… and Itachi had that mission when his team…"

I trail off. Because…

"How about we sort this out first?" Okaa-san suggests.

I rub my face.

Oh, I am not looking forward to this.

The next hour or so is a flurry of activity.

Yamanaka-sama goes to the Military Police, and he returns, with a blank-faced Uchiha I don't quite know. It's awkward in the room, and I try to hide behind Okaa-san when possible. Thankfully, she explains the story first, but then the chūnin asks me a list of questions. I answer them to the best of my ability. Tan skin, shaggy black or dark brown hair… a ridiculous pointed straw hat… with a weird chin with a detail I forgot because his teeth were too gross… a brownish-greyish yukata, a really, weirdly long, thick, and baggy black haori, what I'm pretty sure were geta, and… oh, can't forget the absolutely hideous sunglasses.

"Like… really big, rectangular… kind of? These sunglasses were the really reflective kind, and they had these really thin metal frames… he also had bandages around his forehead. And he had this walking stick that he kept on tapping. It echoed, in the bathroom," I murmur, trying to nestle into Okaa-san's side. Because… stop looking at me! It's awkward. And I think Okaa-san's both making too big of a deal and not big enough of a deal, and… gah!

Pretty soon, Okaa-san and I, together with Inoichi-jisan, are walking over to the Hokage's building and waiting in the lobby and… I'm tired. And still in a bit of a daze. Nothing really seems real. Did everything really just happen, or what I having a weird hallucinogenic dream/nightmare?

Pretty soon, the door opens, and… oh god. "It's you!" I blurt, pointing, before immediately shrinking behind Okaa-san with a hand bunched in her skirt.

Oops.
A collective silence drops over the room, as everyone within earshot turns to look at us.

Apparently… I… might be a bit loud… and the Hokage building has amazingly good acoustics that *echo*. Because the hustle and bustle that I've been hearing… suddenly… stops.

And of course, being the awkward me, I feel the need to fill the silence. "Why on *earth* did you follow me into the bathroom? That's *weird*. For that matter… who wants candy in a bathroom? And *floss your teeth! They're gross,*" I exclaim… only to immediately regret it.

For the second time this month, I want the earth to just open up and swallow me whole.

The clicking sound of shoes reverberates through the room as the door opens further. "Danzō… would you care to explain why this child and parent mistook you for a pedophile earlier today?" Hokage-sama asks dryly.

I feel like I should be blushing.

But right now, I just… start laughing again, silent hiccuping laughs.

I turn and press my face into Okaa-san's skirt, trying desperately not to make a noise. Because this *really isn't the time*. But Okaa-san pries me out, and a stifled gasp of air sounds, and… yeah I'm laughing so hard I'm crying and everyone's going to get the wrong idea and oh *why* can't the ground just swallow me up?

A *whooshing* sound later, there's a nice ANBU member picking me up and… ooh! Fluffy silver hair! Yes, I remember this ANBU. I like this ANBU. I let him pick me up, before burying my face into his shoulder instead as I refuse to look at anyone else and try to get myself under control. 'Nothing to see here, folks! Just… look the other way! Just an awkward three-year-old who can't seem to stop laughing, making a *really* awkward exit!' I think hysterically.

…

Oh, who am I kidding.

Hokage-sama sighs again. "Inoichi-san, Kimiko-san… Danzō… let's… let's have a *talk.*"

His voice sounds so world-weary and just tired of *everything*… I rather feel bad for creating more trouble, but… I'm too busy trying *not* to laugh more right now. Laughter's one of my default coping mechanisms, but now? I'm too busy trying not to exist. I want a black hole to just open up right next to me and swallow me… or Itachi. Yes, Itachi and Shisui sound nice. I can talk to them about… about Tanabata and… and food and noodles and food stands and whether Uchiha Senbei's going to open a stand and *other normal stuff* that's NOT related to today's mess.

I tug lightly on the ANBU's hair and shift slightly, just enough so that I can ask, in a voice still shaky with laughter, "Ne, ANBU-san, do you know where Itachi and Shisui are? Can we find them?"

Maybe they can, at least, get a laugh out of this… maybe. Just… please let it be the end of… of *this*. At least Tanabata's in a matter of days. Hopefully, everyone will forget this. Yes… Tanabata.

I can't wait.

No, really. I *can't wait*.

---

*Wakuraba ni*
Ama no gawa nami
Yoru nagara
Akuru sora ni wa
Makasezu mo gana
— Nyogo Kishi Joō

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I hope you like the new chapter! And the character we love to hate- Danzō. Give the guy a round of applause. Because seriously, the only other character who single-handedly screwed up that much of the world's history is probably Black Zetsu.

That song is actually an existing song, and you can find it (along with many other wonderful songs, some of with I may or may not reference later) under the title "Japanese Folk Song #49: The Star Festival (たなばたさま / Tanabatasama)" on YouTube. I tried adding a link, but... it just wasn't cooperating. Sorry!
Of Obon and Lanterns

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto learns a bit more about the shinobi tendency to die early... and attends a festival (this time, together with his friends).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

Even in the ancient days
When the gods held sway,
I have never heard
That water gleamed with autumn red
As it does in the Naka stream.

---

I'm dying. I feel like I'm slowly melting into this puddle of sugary... stuff.

August is... a bit of nightmare, here in Hi no Kuni, the Land of Fire. It's hot, humid, and sticky, and I hate being hot, humid, or sweaty!

As a result, I've been very good at keeping up with my new-found aversion to being around strangers. I haven't really been in public, period, for that matter. I'm rather decidedly indoors between nine in the morning and sunset. Shino and Neji understand and agree— it's just that hot and humid.

Plus, it's a bit awkward now that Okaa-san and Otou-san insist on having an adult there at all times, after... the bathroom incident. Like, nothing ruins a puppy-pile mood like remembering there's an adult standing awkwardly to one side.

I spend most of my time now with Itachi and Shisui. Or, if one of them is on a mission, Itachi or Shisui. They're capable shinobi who are around my age... or at least, not past puberty, so they're acceptable to Okaa-san and Otou-san. Yay.

As it turns out... it had been the Daimyo's son who'd died during the disastrous mission in gogatsu, the fifth month— May. I managed to get that much out of Okaa-san. Luckily, no one blames Itachi. Or Shinko-chan, for that matter.

Okaa-san let me explain a bit to Itachi and Shisui about why I'm no longer allowed to go outside whenever I want to. I thought it would be more of a bombshell, and Shisui resembled a jellyfish for a few moments, but Itachi just sat there and sipped at his sweetened iced tea.

It took a lot of persuasion from me for Okaa-san and Otou-san to add sweetened, lemony iced tea (basically, the closest I could get to an Arnold Palmer) to the menu, but it's been very popular with the sudden heat wave.
I don't think I like the heat wave. Most days, I feel like a grumpy, sticky puddle, almost as if someone spilled sugary lemonade in the sun and let it dry.

It's hot and I can't go outside, and I'm fundamentally… a bit bored? I've spent quite a lot of time in the library (which is air-conditioned, thank the bureaucracy), but… for the most part, air conditioning isn't a thing. Like, the houses and structures are constructed for ventilation and air flow, so they're built for the summer (which actually explains why things can get so bitterly cold in winter and why small heaters and stoves and kotatsu are so popular), but… circulating warm air is still warm air. It's like turning a fan on— it doesn't get rid of the warmth. To be fair, that makes sense. Heat and humidity can ruin houses and interior structures more than snow and wind. Fractures? Simple. Mold? Er… well…

And plus, it's not good for you to step from a warm environment directly into a cold one.

But for me, it just means spending an entire day indoors, preferably with kakigōri. I especially like the shirokuma type especially. It's basically flavored shaved ice, but it's not anything like those horrendous, food-coloring-infused snow cones from Before.

First of all, the ice shavings are thinner and smaller. Secondly, what's poured over is stuff like… sweetened condensed milk, and maybe some matcha or other green tea… or anko, adzuki bean paste. I especially like it when it's served with ice cream inside… oh, or when it's thinly shaved frozen milk. And the kōrikoppu glass cups the ice is served in are ridiculously pretty.

But… drawing and reading and learning are fun and all, but… what's more fun is re-learning how to braid hair. Well… I'm not sure it counts technically as fun, simply due to how annoying it is to re-learn something you once took for granted, but it's nice spending time with Itachi and Shisui.

In this life… it's pretty, and soft, and such a cool color. Even Itachi and Shisui agreed, and I remember Itachi had fun learning how to braid it. That had been a fun day. I'd been really good at braiding hair in my previous life. True, it was easier to do on other people, but… well, I said I took good care of my hair? My hair was… always a bit thin on the top, ever since I was a young child. To put less strain on it, I normally tossed it in a single braid, although before the… abrupt transition, I'd been experimenting with French braids. My hair was really slippery in my past life… and ponytails just didn't stay up.

I'd really enjoyed braiding my friends' hair as well, especially after they started growing their hair out. I could braid practically anyone's hair… even when that 'anyone' was the little brother of one of my friends, who's hair was just long enough to french-braid… maybe about three inches, or almost eight centimeters long.

I've practiced on my hair a bit, but it's still not much more than shoulder-length. Admittedly, neither is Itachi's, but… it's easier on another person. My fingers had been stiff at first, but after a bit over half-an-hour, I'd managed to regain enough dexterity to be satisfied with my results.

Normal braids are sometimes hard, but French braids look good even on people with short hair.

I know Shisui ended up with a very nice crown-style braid, even if my fingers and arms hurt and it might have been a bit lopsided. I tried my best.

Itachi's really good with braiding hair though, and so's Shisui, but to a lesser degree. He'd asked me to teach him, and Shisui refused to be left out. They learned amazingly quickly. Shisui explained that braiding was a bit tricky at first, but that wire-manipulation, as well shuriken-jutsu, shuriken techniques, and hand-seals, meant that they had to be pretty good with their fingers.
So... apparently shinobi would make amazing hair stylists. I don't think anyone would (or should) trust them to cut hair, though, necessarily. There's no such thing as unwarranted paranoia when dealing with shinobi. Too many sharp objects, too close to people's necks...

It'd be disturbingly easy to kill someone that way.

But anyways, I'd spent a few days teaching them how to braid. I'd actually exhausted my repertoire of braids. And learned that Sharingan make learning anything that involves rote memorization really easy.

I'm happy that Itachi's recording nice memories, though, no matter how funny it is to see him staring intently at my fingers with red eyes. He's now up to two tomoe in each eye!

But seriously, Itachi had somehow managed to pull off an eight-stranded braid on my hair. Yes, Shisui helped, but... eight strands. Especially when you consider how I had to instruct him without a visual demonstration... that is impressive. I'd only demonstrated the four-strand braid, but he'd picked up on the idea behind it really quickly.

He actually offered to help me put up my hair for the next festival.

And yes, there's actually another festival coming up.

It's called Obon, or just Bon, and it's a custom to honor the spirit of one's ancestors. It's a really big festival in Konoha, probably because of the high mortality rate amongst shinobi. It is believed that each year during obon, the ancestors' spirits return to this world in order to visit their relatives. It's a really old tradition, and it's been celebrated for more than 500 years and traditionally includes a dance, known as Bon-Odori, but I'll get into that later.

Originally, Obon was celebrated around the 15th day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar, which is called Fumizuki, (文月) or the "Month of Books." However, nowadays, Obon is celebrated in August, which is called Hazuki (葉月), or the "Month of Leaves."

Here, it begins around the 13th and ends on the 16th.

According to Otou-san, some villages in the Land of Fire or the surrounding countries celebrate Obon in the more traditional month of July, usually mid-month, which is called Shichigatsu Bon, but September is closer to the actual date on the lunar calendar. Our festival should probably be called Hachigatsu Bon, and Kyū Bon is when people actually celebrate it by the lunar calendar, and as thus, the dates vary every year.

For this festival, unlike Tanabata, there's actually a set series of expected actions that pretty much everyone does. People clean their houses and place a variety of food offerings, such as vegetables and fruits, for the spirits of their ancestors in front of a butsudan, a type of altar, and/or at temples. Chochin lanterns and arrangements of flowers are usually placed by the butsudan as another offering. Many times, people return to ancestral family places, and visit and clean their ancestors' graves. Traditionally, lanterns are hung in front of houses to guide the ancestors' spirit, and people perform dances like bon odori.

On the first day of Obon, people normally light chochin lanterns, which are the traditional paper lanterns, are lit inside houses, and they bring the lanterns to their family's grave sites to call their ancestors' spirits back home. This process is called mukae-bon. In some regions, fires called mukae-bi are lit at the entrances of houses to help guide the spirits to enter.

On the last day, families assist in returning their ancestors' spirits back to the grave, by hanging the
chōchin lanterns, painted with the family crest, to guide the spirits to their eternal resting place. This process is called okuri-bon. In some regions, fires called okuri-bi are lit at entrances of houses to send directly to the ancestors' spirits. Interesting fact: "okuri" translates semi-directly to "sending off," and there's actually a type of yōkai, or kind of… I'm not really sure what it translates to in English… maybe "spirit"?

It's basically a creature of folklore.

And my point is, there's something called an okuri-inu or okuri-ōkami, which translates to "sending off dog" or "sending off wolf," and… okay, humor me for a little, because these are so cool. Not many people know all of them, but Shisui's ojii-san is a goldmine of interesting stories.

And I'd also learned a bit in my past life, because they're so interesting!

The okuri inu is a nocturnal, dog- or wolf-like yōkai which haunts mountain passes, forested roads, and similar locations. They resemble ordinary dogs and wolves in all but their ferocity; for they're are much more dangerous than their mortal counterparts.

The okuri inu follows lone travelers late on the road at night. It stalks them, keeping a safe distance, but following footstep for footstep, as long as they keep walking. If the traveler should trip or stumble, the okuri inu will pounce on them and rip them to shreds. The "sending-off" part of its name comes from the fact that this yokai follows closely behind travelers, trailing behind them as if it were a friend sending them off on their way.

The okuri inu is somewhat of a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, if one should trip and fall, it will pounce with supernatural speed and gobble him or her up. On the other hand, they are so ferocious that while they are following someone, no other dangerous yōkai or wild animals will come close. As long as one keeps his footing, he is safe… but that's not always easy when you're traveling in the dark over root-infested, rocky mountain footpaths.

The okuri inu has a special relationship with another yōkai, the yosuzume. This eerie bird's nocturnal song is often a warning that an okuri inu is following you. If one hears the yosuzume's "chi, chi, chi" song, it is a sign to take extra care to watch one's footing so that the okuri inu doesn't have dinner that night.

In the unfortunate case that one should stumble on the road, there is one chance for survival: if you fake it so it looks like you did it on purpose, the okuri inu will be tricked into thinking you were just taking a short rest, and it won't pursue. You do this by saying, "Dokkoisho!" ("Heave-ho!") or, "Shindoi wa!" ("This is exhausting!")— that is, according to Shisui… and I'm just hoping he didn't try to trick me— and quickly fixing yourself into a sitting position. Sigh, sit for a bit, then continue on your way. The okuri inu will wait patiently for you.

So, basically, I love this story because of something I've learned before- If you forget something, just act confident and make something up until you're out of trouble. It applies for a lot of things. Like, if you have no idea how to do a math problem, just start doing random things until something works out.

Maybe it says something about me that it even works, but… that's how I figured out two problems on my math final one time.

Oh, wait, one last thing about the okuri inu— If you should make it out of the mountains safely, you should turn around and call out, "Thanks for seeing me off!" Afterwards, that okuri inu will never follow you again. Further, when you get home, you should wash your feet and leave out a dish of something for the okuri inu to show your gratitude for it watching over you.
So, it's that cute?

Of course, Shisui had just insisted on elaborating on the story. I'm not sure if he was kidding or not, but his ojii-san didn't contradict him, so I think it was the truth. According to him, there is a similar yōkai known as the okuri itachi, the sending-off weasel. This is a weasel that works in roughly the same way as the okuri inu, only that if you take off one of your shoes and throw it at it, the weasel will eat the shoe and run away, leaving you in peace.

Shisui joked that we should try throwing shoes at Itachi to see if it also works. I decided to try that in advance by throwing my shoe at him, instead.

Hey, it got him to shut up, and I'm too small to do anything else… I'm barely tall enough to punch him in the stomach.

Unfortunately, I didn't get my shoe back until much later, but Shisui let me piggy-back ride him as an apology for making such a bad joke.

So, back to the subject of Obon. Okuri-bi… okuri-bon… what haven't I mentioned yet… aha!

During Obon, the smell of senko incense fills Japanese houses and cemeteries, which is rather pretty… but also makes me cough.

Now, for what was actually my favorite part— the floating lanterns. They're known as toro nagashi, and they are a beautiful part of the traditions during Obon. Inside each toro nagashi is a candle, that will eventually burn out, and the lantern will then float down a river that runs to the ocean. By using the toro nagashi, we symbolically send off our ancestors' spirits into the sky by way of the lanterns.

That was, to be honest, the biggest part of what we did. Okaa-san and Otou-san don't have anyone in the graveyard, but I took Shinko-chan to the Memorial Stone and I also convinced her to bring enough supplies to make do over there. It seems a bit spur-of-the-moment, but I'd actually put a lot of thought into it.

She was a bit hesitant, but ended up helping on some of the parts I couldn't reach. I'd also brought forty-four daffodil bulbs from Yamanaka flowers, as well as as several bouquets of the flowers themselves, since they only bloom in early spring, normally.

I find it rather ironic that daffodils are so appropriate. They mean "respect" in Hanakotoba, the language of flowers, and they're a pretty yellow color, with orangey trumpets in the center. They're bright, and vivid, and happy-looking, which… which I think is nicer. It's more like… like we're celebrating the life the shinobi lived for the village. My eyes had lingered on one name, in particular… oh, this is definitely ironic. The petals of the flower are a bright yellow, just like the Yondaime Hokage's hair was supposed to be.

Before, I remember I once loved daffodils. Every early spring, the way I knew that spring was here would be when the daffodils bloomed in the park. They always bloomed first, and even when the days were bitingly cold and my nose had been stung a bright red by the wind, the presence of daffodils meant that spring was just around the corner.

And… I actually still remember something. There was a poem, by William Wordsworth.

I loved that poem. I'd used it for every poetry-related homework assignment from grade school on. I'd memorized it, and re-memorized… and kept on memorizing it, because why fix something that isn't broken?

The poem…
I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

I stared at the Memorial Stone and the daffodils.
The daffodils actually remind me of who I was before Before. Soft, delicate… and so bright, but also so silly. Now… I'm changing again, aren't I? I just hope… I just hope it's for the better.

I won't forget who I used to be, though. I have to keep that in mind. I am who I am today because of who I was Before.
When I was done with my cleaning-up, the entire place looked so much nicer. The dark stone of the kunai-shaped memorial positively gleamed, reflecting the colors of the setting sun and the yellow of the daffodils.

I'd just nodded, picked up my things again, cleaning up, and headed home.

Bon odori is one of the now-common time I've wished I could just sink into the earth. Shisui's the worst, Itachi is incorrigible, and Neji and Shino are traitors who left me to die alone in an agonizing way.

Metaphorically die, that is. Die of embarrassment.

I hide behind my hair, because Itachi helped me put my hair in a very nice… it's like a mix of a French braid and a crown braid, but it goes in spiraling circles, so it looks like a rose? I've seen it on Google before. Or Youtube. But, Youtube is part of Google, so…

Moving on. What matters is that I can't shake my hair down over my face and hide behind it. Unfortunately. Because I'm embarrassed to the point where I would normally do that.

You see, another tradition observed is a folk dance called bon odori. The styles of dance vary from area to area but usually, taiko drums keep the rhythms. Bon odori is typically held at parks, gardens, shrines, or temples, wearing yukata (summer kimono) where dancers perform around a yagura stage. Originally a folk dance to welcome the spirits of the dead, the style of celebration varies in many aspects from region to region. Each region has a local dance, as well as different music. The music can be songs specifically pertinent to the spiritual message of Obon, or local min'yō folk songs.

The way in which the dance is performed is also different in each region, though the typical Bon dance involves people lining up in a circle around a high wooden scaffold made especially for the festival called a yagura. The yagura is usually also the bandstand for the musicians and singers of the Obon music. Some dances proceed clockwise, and some dances proceed counter-clockwise around the yagura. Some dances reverse during the dance, though most do not. At times, people face the yagura and move towards and away from it. Still some dances simply proceed in a straight line through the streets of the town.

The dance of a region can depict the area's history and specialization. For example, the movements of one dance… somewhere (that I didn't understand or ask in time for Otou-san to explain) show the movements of miners, i.e. digging, cart pushing, lantern hanging, etc. Also, somewhere else (which I also don't know), the local dances mimic the work of fishermen, including motions like hauling in the nets. All dancers perform the same dance sequence in unison.

There are other ways in which a regional Bon dance can vary. Some dances involve the use of different kinds of fans, others involve the use of small towels called tenugui which may have colorful designs. Some require the use of small wooden clappers, or "kachi-kachi" during the dance. One dance (from another place I didn't catch) is performed with a straw hat that has been decorated with flowers.

The music that is played during the Bon dance is not limited to Obon music and min'yō; some modern enka hits and kids' tunes written to the beat of the "ondo" are also used to dance to during Obon season.

Yeah… that's cool. But… the reason I currently wish I were tall enough to punch Shisui in the face… is that he forcibly dragged me into the… dancing area.
You see, *bon odori* dances are really slow, and people normally dance along. Shisui's ojii-san went into the group, and Shisui shoved me, so I had no choice but to go, especially after Uchiha-san grabbed my hand and helped me up… then didn't let go and dragged me closer to the *kagura*.

The saddest part? The people aren't… really good at dancing. Think… everyone in your school, spontaneously trying to learn a dance. Even if it's easy… it probably won't look that good.

Still… the hardest part… I have to forcibly bite my lip to not laugh when another person stumbles awkwardly, careful to keep my movements as close to those of the dancers on the stage. I shoot a glare out of the corner of my eye, at Shisui, Neji, and Shino, who are sitting on the roof of a nearby building… and *don't you dare click the shutter of that camera!*

I take a deep breath, looking away, as I try to avoid looking at my personal blackmailer and the two traitors. I can't leave… I'd hurt Uchiha-san's feelings. Wait. I look again, squinting. Yup… only three people. Where is…

A hand taps me on my shoulder and I flinch, breaking the movement of the dance as I spin around.

Oh. There he is. Itachi's right behind me, dancing along, too… and that's just unfair. I resume the movements of the dance as I pout pitifully at Itachi. He… he… okay, it's not fair for him to make the movements look so smooth, and graceful, and… not awkward. He's not even looking at the movements on the stage!

He smiles slightly, eyes flashing red, and… oh, that's so not fair. I glare at him.

I, not being one of those blessed individuals who have ocularly-based eidetic memories, finally manage to figure his trick out several minutes later, after categorizing a set of motions. They're repeating a set series of motions, just altering the speed according to the rhythm of the song. I'm not thanking Itachi, though.

I firmly fix my eyes on the dancers on the *yagura*, storing and categorizing the motions. I took dance lessons for *nine years* in my previous life… I absolutely refuse to be shown up so drastically at such a simple dance.

After a series of frustrations and failed attempts, where I'm a little too fast… or too slow… or have the wrong hand… or the wrong foot… or forgot something… or simply do the wrong action at the right time, I start getting the hang of it. It's hard, though. My body doesn't respond correctly, and it's slow and clumsy. Worse, it's a bit hard to see some things like the placement of the feet, but… I mostly figure it out eventually. Finally… it's been almost twenty *minutes*. Still, it's not good enough… not up to my satisfaction, at least. I focus then on trying to feel the intent behind the motions… what it symbolizes… polishing the movements until they're about as graceful as a three-and-a-half-year-old can perform. It takes a frustratingly long time, but… by the time Shisui's ojii-san decides to leave, I've got the steps memorized nicely.

Ha, Shisui. I win.

Soon, it's the last day of Obon. I'm not sure how, but the festival is still going strong. I'm exhausted, but that might be because today, I'm actually wearing my *yukata*, the indigo one I'd also worn at Tanabata.

Despite how light it is… I'm still feeling remarkably overheated.

Today, Shisui's invited me to spend the day with him, while Okaa-san, Otou-san, and Shinko-chan man (or woman… no. That's not grammatically correct, is it?) the shop.
I walk over slowly, ducking into patches of shade whenever I can, shielding my face from the harsh glare of the sun. Still, with how muggy it is… even the shade doesn’t offer much relief. I dodge around various throngs of people moving along, humming a random tune.

I follow the wall around the Uchiha compound until… aha! I find the stack of stones and the tree stump, and together with the cracks in the wall, carefully climb over into the compound.

Obon is often a joyous occasion… in many civilian areas. It actually reminds me of the Day of the Dead celebrations—El Día de los Muertos. It’s supposed to be a surprisingly happy time.

Unfortunately, that’s not really the case in Konoha. Sure, there are festivals, and everyone laughs and dances when we gather together… but most of the shinobi prefer to spend most of their time thinking. They’re quieter… not as happy. I think that’s because unlike in civilian communities… shinobi kill people. There’s war, and pain, and death, and Obon… it’s harder to be cheerful when you’ve lost so many people, I guess, and when you’ve also killed many other people.

It’s still more of an abstract concept to me, the idea of what shinobi do, but… it’s not hard to see the shinobi, sometimes. Obon is… interesting. I’ve seen some shinobi who look terrified, almost… which I’m guessing is because the dead come back on Obon, so some might be scared that ghosts of their enemies will come for revenge or something. Either way… it’s interesting.

I arrive at the door of Shisui’s house, and I knock, before removing my shoes and putting them on a shelf. "Hello?" I call.

"Ah, Makoto-kun," a voice calls cheerfully from further inside. "Come. I'm inside the kitchen."

"Ohayō, Shisui's ojii-san," I greet, shuffling over, taking a seat at the table. "Is Shisui in?"

"Mmm… he's currently buying some food, since we're not the best at cooking," Shisui's ojii-san chuckles, sitting down and sliding a cup of tea over. "How are you doing, Makoto-kun? Have you been having fun?"

I hum, noncommittally. "Obon… I like the food," I shrug, giggling when Shisui's ojii-san nods in agreement. "I… I do have a question though," I murmur, biting my lip. "Shinobi… they're… really quiet sometimes, during Obon. Is that because of…"

Shisui's ojii-san sighs. "What do you think, Makoto-kun?"

"Well…" I chew my lip, thinking. "I think that's because shinobi have a closer relationship… with death. With their comrades. They lose people who are precious to them, especially during war, right? And… they also kill people, other shinobi, in return. There's war, and pain, and death, and Obon… it's harder to be cheerful when you've lost so many people, I guess? And… I think they just want to think about… about everything." A silence hangs in the air. "Is… is that right, Uchiha-san?"

Shisui's ojii-san sighs with a rueful smile, running a hand over his face. "You're like Shisui-kun, you know, Makoto-kun. And like Itachi-kun. You're all too perceptive of some things for your own good." He turns to me, huffing a slow chuckle. "Yes. And don't call me Uchiha-san… just call me Kagami-san or Jii-chan, as that annoying grandson of mine does."

I blink, mouthing the words. "K-Kagami-san? Ojii-san?" I mean, he is old, but… no. Kagami… I think I've heard that before…

"Didn't I tell you my name, yet?" Kagami-san blinks, puzzled. When I shake my head, he just sighs. "I'm getting too old… maybe that silly grandson of mine had a point, when he said I was getting senile…"
We sit for a moment in silence, sipping tea. Kagami-jiisan sighs. "Your words were quite accurate and to the point. I've lived through three shinobi wars, you know. I fought in the first two... then, I retired. Somehow, despite everything I've been through, every near-death experience... nothing scared me as much as living through the Third Shinobi World War as a retired shinobi. I helped with village security, of course, but... I was never sent out. Instead, I stayed and took care of Shisui-kun while my daughter and son-in-law and grandson were sent to the front lines."

He seems to age a decade, just sitting there and reminiscing.

"I lost my grandson in that war, you know? I'd lost my wife a little after the Second Shinobi War. The Third Shinobi War took my grandson, and my son-in-law." His eyes seem to glisten with unshed tears. "They both died honorable deaths... even my grandson. He had cut off one of the most important supply routes for Iwagakure. Still... the destruction of that bridge cost his life. And then, during the Kyūbi Attack, the Nine-Tail's attack nearly four years ago... I lost my daughter. She hadn't been with the rest of the clan because she had been visiting the Memorial Stone and leaving flowers at the graveyard for... for Obito-kun, and his father." A tear traces down his cheek. "She visited every weekend..."

I blink. Did I hear that right? Because... "Obito-kun?" I ask.


The blood drains from my face. Obito. Uchiha Obito. Isn't that... the goggles and the orange swirly-mask guy? I thought... I thought that... wasn't that the name of the person... who had unleashed the Kyūbi?

Then... he'd unwittingly killed his mother. I stare blankly at the table, eyes unseeing. Oh... oh... I shake my head sharply, dislodging that thought. I'll think about it later. Still...

I slip out of my seat, walking around the table, and I lean against Kagami-jiisan in mimicry of a hug. He smells like woodsmoke and incense and... something sharper, like... like that ointment that my grandfather liked to use Before. It's pretty common, but... for some reason... my eyes moisten, only to shoot open when an arm wraps around me and I hear sniffling. I shift slightly, clambering onto the chair as I hug Kagami-jiisan back, patting his shoulder awkwardly. I have no idea what to say to make him feel better... so I'll just be quiet.

Not too long, later, Kagami-jiisan carefully deposits me on the chair as he shuffles over to grab a tissue. Blowing his nose noisily, he chuckles. "Thank you, Makoto-kun. I... I haven't spoken about them in... in awhile." His face shapes into a small smile. "Thank you."

Staring at him, I make a decision. "Are their names on the Memorial Stone?" I ask.

Kagami-jiisan stares at me, displaying a bit of shock at the non sequitur, but nods.

I hop off the chair, grabbing his hand. "Let's go to the Memorial Stone, then," I decide. "I want to show you something... and ask what you think."

He seems bemused, but agrees. I rush to grab my shoes, before grabbing his hand again and scrambling out the door. I wince at the sun, but soldier on through it, leading Kagami-san over to the Memorial Stone. When we get there, I'm panting and uncomfortably warm, while Kagami-jiisan is annoyingly composed. But, that doesn't last long when he sees the flowers. I grin at him, shifting from foot to foot. "So, what do you think? Daffodils mean 'respect' in hanakotoba, so... I figured..." I trail off awkwardly, waving a hand at the stone.
He stares for a long time, before his face splits in a wide grin. I'm alarmed when I see tears, but his chuckles are clearly of laughter.

"Makoto-kun," he chuckles. "You… don't you ever grow up, okay?"

I blink, bemused. "Huh?"

"Don't change," he coughs out between fits of laughter. "Ah…" He wipes his eyes, still smiling. "I needed that. Thank you, Makoto… the flowers are very nice."

"I also got some planters and added some daffodil bulbs, so there'll be more in the spring," I chirp, excited. "And since they have *bulbs*, that means that they'll just keep on blooming, every spring!"

Kagami-jiisan stares at the moment fondly. "Makoto-kun… do you mind if I stay here for a little longer? You can return to the house… Shisui should have returned by now."

I accept the dismissal and turn to leave, but I turn back when I reach the edge of the field. "Don't take too long, Kagami-jiisan! Old people need to take care of their health!"

He pauses for a moment, before bursting into laughter so loud that I can hear it even from where I am. I wave, then run off, giggling.

I like Kagami-jiisan.

I'm eating dango with Shisui and Itachi, all of us arranged on the Yondaime's head. Okay, I understand, why are we all there? The answer— his head has the most shade, and it's the easiest to get to. Shisui had helped to ferry me over, and it's surprisingly comfortable. The height means that there's a constant light breeze, and the shade makes everything rather pleasant.

It's around mid-afternoon when Shisui brings up the ending of Obon— *tōrō nagashi*, the floating lanterns.

"Uhm… I really want to see them, but I'm not sure where to get one," I mumble. "Okaa-san and Otou-san didn't really *lose* anyone recently, and… even though… you know, *that* happened, it's still not…" I shrug. "I just don't know. I *want* to, but…"

"Why don't you come with us?" Itachi asks suddenly.

I blink, questioningly, and Shisui answers. "Hmm… it's pretty much isolated to the clans, but… that's more because nobody else tries to join than anything. I think… why not?" Unfortunately, Shisui only makes me more confused. Luckily, Itachi explains.

"During Obon, the clans and various other shinobi normally gather at the head of the river, from about where it enters Konohagakure. I am not quite sure when the tradition started, but it… developed into an unverbalized agreement, to show up. It takes place near the border of the Nara compound, where a river widens as it passes. There is a wide gravel beach there, which makes it ideal."

Shisui chips in. "We'll take you with us!"

I nod, hesitantly. "I'll have to check with Okaa-san and Otou-san, but… I'm *pretty* sure it will be okay," I decide. "Shisui, can you take me over to the shop? Please?"

He nods and crouches down as I clamber onto his back, giggling. "Let's go!"
It's a beautiful, solemn affair. The sun set, but the sky practically seems to glow blue in the twilight. Kagami-jiisan and Shisui brought three lanterns— one for each of Shisui's parents, and one for his brother. Shisui has his father's, and Kagami-jiisan carries the lantern with his daughter's name. I carry the one with Obito's name written on it.

We don't speak. No one does. I recognize familiar faces, though. Neji and Hizashi-san carry one lantern, which I assume is for Neji's mother, who died due to complications from childbirth. I think I see Shino, together with a group of other Aburame, but it's too dark for me to be sure.

Itachi carries a lantern as he walks a little apart with his mother and father. I can't see Sasuke-chan anywhere.

When he sees me, he smiles and turns the lantern, showing me the name.

I-zu-mo-ten… ah. Izumo Tenma.

We reach the edge of the water, now identifiable only by the reflection of our lanterns now that even twilight has faded.

After gently setting the lanterns in the water and giving them a slight push, we watch them a little, and then Kagami-jiisan tugs my hand gently, reminding me to make way for the people behind me.

I stand up a little too quickly, and I step on the hem of my yukata, tripping backwards. I'm caught by hand that steadies me gently. When I look up… it's to a pale-skinned face with markings around the eyes, framed by long black hair.

Oh.

I know that face. Maybe it's a bit of the surrealistic setting, with the magical beauty of the lanterns and their reflection on the dark water as they bob down the river, but… I'm not really unnerved. I just smile, with a brief bobbed bow, as I step aside.

He's carrying two lanterns, and his eyes are too shiny, though to I can't tell if they're red or not in the darkness, and he's hunched over a bit. He seems… he seems so sad. I can't help but wonder which names he carries.

I twist around as Shisui reaches back to grab my hand and pulls me along behind him, watching as he gently places the two lanterns in the water, bowing his head for short moment, before he stands up, letting them bob away. Then, someone shifts and the line of sight is broken.

I turn so I'm facing Shisui as he drags me away from the main crowd and helps me clamber over grasses and slightly-slippery rocks. My yukata might be a bit dirty after this, but… the view of the river is amazing. Shisui helps me onto a large flat rock before clambering up after me, and we sit in silence, watching the parade of lanterns, some larger, some rounder, some with different designs… but all glowing and bobbing, as they meander down the river. It instills in me this… this sense of peace. It's like the sense of *mono no aware* people get from watching the sakura fall… it's the the awareness of the impermanence, of the transience of things, and the feeling of both a gentle sadness or wistfulness at their passing as well as a longer, deeper gentle sadness about this state being the reality of life.

I almost wonder… if I become a shinobi, will that be me one day, with my name on a lantern that bobs down a river? Or will I become just another one of the grieving people, who just hold such sadness and regret inside?
But it's mostly peaceful… almost like this scene is just partially removed from the world, just enough so that it seems timeless and… magical, in a sense. I actually almost nod off, leaning against Shisui's shoulder. I actually do drift off when Shisui hoists me onto his back and walks back, slowly, with the rest of the crowd. It's almost like the stream of time resumed, but… a little of that surreal, peaceful feeling still lingers, lulling me into sleep.

The floating lanterns… they were truly beautiful.

---

Even in the ancient days

When the gods held sway,

I have never heard

That water gleamed with autumn red

As it does in the Tatsuta River.

— Ariwara no Narihira Ason

---

千早ぶる

神代もきかず

龍田川

からくれないに

水くくるとは

— 在原業平朝臣

---

Chihayaburu

Kami yo mo kikazu

Tatsuta-gawa

Kara kurenai ni

Mizu kukuru to wa

— Ariwara no Narihira Ason

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: ...so, that was kinda sad at the end?

This was a bit more of a filler chapter, but it's important because friendships don't develop out of the blue, and I wanted Makoto on better terms with Kagami, and it
builds up a bit more of the world, so... I'll be starting on some actual plot with the next chapter! To be honest, my first story-arc has been crammed into two chapters, just because the flow wouldn't work otherwise... so, brace yourselves for a 20,000-word monster of a chapter!

(^_^;) ...sorry?

Anyways, I hope you all like the story so far! Please let me know what you think of it!

-ShadowAccio6181
Of Friendships and Day Trips

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto attends a birthday party, gets into a small accident, moves in temporarily with Neji, goes on a day trip with some friends, and attends yet another festival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the autumn fields
When the heedless wind blows by
Over the pure-white dew,
How the myriad unstrung gems
Are scattered everywhere around

So… it didn't actually start out as an international incident?

That's the… pretty much only good part.

It started out with an invitation to a birthday party, about one week into September, delivered by Yamanaka Inoichi-sama. That was the first horseman of the upcoming apocalypse. Apart from that, though, which we'll get back to later… that's… sort-of important. You see, it's apparently Yamanaka Ino-san's birthday on the 22nd of September.

So, yay, that's… good? I guess? I don't think it was because Ino-san asked about me, however, since it was probably more an attempt by Yamanaka Inoichi-sama at making more friends for her. But, then again, that's just my guess.

What's a bit more important is what Okaa-san tells me after that.

You see… apparently, Okaa-san and Otou-san need to leave for the capital on the tenth of September, to iron out a treaty. That leads to the important thing— delegation from Kumogakure is arriving this year to renegotiate the finer details of a treaty. Apparently, the overall terms of the treaty had been mostly hammered out by last winter, but… there were complications since then, composing of the death of the Raikage (something about… bad clams? I honestly don't know), a mix of heavy, abnormally early snowfall, lower temperatures, icy roads, and a truly horrific flooding/landslide problem that delayed them until recently.

And apparently, my aunt is marrying a noble from the Land of Lightning?

It's confusing. She's Okaa-san's younger sister, and she's marrying… I think it was the second or third son of this really important family or something? I… court politics are confusing, okay? Just… cut me some slack.
Apparently, part of this delegation will arrive at Konoha, on the 15th, while the other part will be going to Keishi, the capital of the Land of Fire. Upon leaving, the delegation at the court will start moving first, before rendezvousing with the delegation in Konohagakure in time for the Tsukimi celebration, before they leave together for the capital of Kaminari no Kuni, the capital of the Land of Lightning. Then, I'm pretty sure the shinobi will go back to their hidden village.

Oh, and that reminds me… Ino-san will be celebrating her birthday over two weeks early, apparently, so on the eighth… which is in less than a week. That probably would panic me more… apart from the fact that I don't know Ino-san very well, and Okaa-san's already planned to go out later to pick out a present.

It's quite nice when you don't have to worry about doing anything… I'll probably just make a card with a drawing of a birthday cake and 'Happy Birthday, Ino' written on it.

Currently, the only I'm worried about is who will take care of me for the… about 17 days Okaa-san and Otou-san won't be here. You see, they're planning on spending Tsukimi with Okaa-san's family.

When Otou-san told me about everything, he had explained that I could choose.

"Makoto-kun, your Okaa-san and I will be going to visit the capitol, and her family. We should be gone for a little more than two weeks, and we've decided to ask you if you want to go with us or not. It's not for fun, unfortunately, so if you want to come, you have to promise to be a good boy and behave. That means being quiet, not complaining if you're uncomfortable… we'll try to make sure you're comfortable, but we won't be with you all the time. We'll be very busy, and we'll probably have some of the servants there take care of you."

He had rubbed his nose, hesitating.

"We're not sure you'll be very happy there, since you have to use very good manners. Like, sitting in seiza, eating with small bites, only speaking when spoken to… Your Okaa-san and I haven't been concentrating on that because we want you to be happy, and your manners are already very good, but…"

He had sighed. "It's up to you. And we're equally fine with you staying. In fact, you might be happier, but…" Otou-san inhales deeply and sighs again. "It's up to you, musuko."

I had, of course, asked in return whether I would have to meet Okaa-san's family eventually, and… the answer was a definite yes.

Otou-san: "Well, yes. We were actually planning on going there for 'fun' next spring, when the wisteria blooms."

And so, I think my decision was rather clear, then. Because there was no way that I was voluntarily subjecting myself to an etiquette boot-camp… and I'm pretty sure that I would make at least one social faux-pas. And it would be really bad if I made a bad impression this early on.

And of course… "If I stay in Konoha, can I choose which shinobi take care of me? Because if so, I choose Shisui and Itachi." Because… there was very little chance of me taking the risk of a normal genin team. All respect to Shinko-chan and the former team 2, but… the only person who'd known what to do with a kid was Itachi… and maybe the jōnin.

Otou-san chuckled slightly. "Your mother actually thought you would say that, so she's has been asking around. Don't worry, we still have time. Meanwhile, enjoy the party tomorrow, okay? Maybe you'll make some friends.
I'd just sighed internally, pasting a smile on my face. Forced socialization… maybe beneficial, but not really enjoyable, even if it's something I've gotten annoyingly used to. "Hai."

So, first, I ought to explain exactly what this 'Tsukimi' thing is. It's basically like *hanami*, except on a more specific date (the evening of the 24th, this year) and about the moon instead of *sakura* flowers.

Or do you want the long version?

*Tsukimi*, or *Otsukimi*, if you want to be really polite or respectful by adding the honorific 'O,' literally means "moon-viewing," also known as *Jugoya*, refers to Japanese festivals honoring the autumn moon, what I think is a version of the Mid-Autumn Festival from our world… especially since the mooncakes somehow also made it over. They're… a *Chinese* tradition. I'm not sure how they made it here, but… I'm not going to complain. Have you ever had one? I recommend the bakery known as 85°. They're… really good, even if I don't really like the one with the paste made from this dried fruit-thingy.

The celebration of the full moon typically takes place on the 15th day of the eighth month of the traditional Japanese calendar; the waxing moon is celebrated on the 13th day of the ninth month. These days normally fall in September and October of the modern solar calendar.

Tsukimi traditions include displaying decorations made from Japanese pampas grass (*susuki*) and eating rice dumplings called *Tsukimi dango* in order to celebrate the beauty of the moon. Seasonal produce are also displayed as offerings to the moon. Sweet potatoes are offered to the full moon, while beans or chestnuts are offered to the waxing moon the following month. The alternate names of the celebrations, *Imomeigetsu* (literally "potato harvest moon") and *Mamemeigetsu* ("bean harvest moon") or *Kurimeigetsu* ("chestnut harvest moon") are derived from these offerings.

So, yeah… this celebration is a little like *hanami*, except, it's a bit of a private thing, done with family and friends, only even more subdued. Of course, that's normally. Shinobi villages aren't normal. According to Shisui, most adults just use it as an excuse to get drunk on *sake*. He probably wasn't supposed to tell me that, but… you know, that actually makes more sense.

The only thing I can really say about the birthday party… is that I honestly should have expected this mess, since… well, let's just say that the *last* birthday party was a pretty good precursor.

Let me rewind. It was a pleasant day, albeit slightly cooler than usual, and I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt under a sweater, together with long pants and boots. Okaa-san walked with me to Yamanaka Flowers, where we met Yamanaka Inoichi-sama, who walked with us over to the Yamanaka compound. That's when the first bombshell dropped. You see, during our walk, Yamanaka-sama confessed to us that Ino-san's birthday party… had a last-minute addition. It would also serve as *Shikamaru-san's* birthday.

Yamanaka-sama had explained that the Nara were ridiculously lazy to the point where they hadn't even organized a proper birthday party, so he had, at the last minute, altered the birthday party to include Shikamaru-kun. He also reassured us that we didn't have to worry about not getting a gift or a card, since the Nara clan apparently considered gifts to be "troublesome," especially when considering the need for thank-you cards.

I actually sympathize with that last part. In my past life… well, thank-you cards were mandatory, and I much preferred the European way of opening the gifts at the end of the party so that everyone could see. Then, a verbal thank-you sufficed, and socially-awkward children (like me) got inspiration about what to get for other classmates' birthdays, especially those classmates said children did not heavily
interact with. It was also nicer when you were a close friend because you could see the reactions of your friend, and because you could actually explain some things (like hand-drawn details on the card and the reason you chose that specific wrapping paper).

Good news- my emotional semi-detachment and general nonchalance regarding the entire thing means that I do not cry about having forgotten a present for Shikamaru-san the way I did for Itachi.

Because… that's something I would definitely do. Luckily… to me, he's mainly just the son of a friend of a friend of my parents. That's… enough closeness for me to feel bad about not getting him a present (because I'm a nice person… I hope?), but not enough closeness for me to continue feeling bad after I'm told that it's not a big deal.

It's only a little later when I started worrying a little… and that was because Yamanaka-sama told us that the Akimichi clan would also be coming, and that they had baked the cake.

Three rather important shinobi clans… yeah. For someone who's already worried about the information she… he knows, such an occurrence… makes said someone wonder which higher deity wanted to make their life interesting.

But… well, the first part of the party was perfectly fine… and perfectly boring. I'd stuck close to Okaa-san and just contented myself with looking around, before she'd taken me over to introduce me to Shikamaru-san and his mother, who Okaa-san immediately started talking to. I'd introduced myself and wished a happy birthday to Shikamaru-san, who'd just mumbled a rather insincere "thanks for coming" in return, while turning away to shuffle away, shoulder hunched. I'd followed him, waving it off with a "Don't worry! I'm glad to be here…" and a conspiratorial, "To be fair, I mainly came for the cake… and because Yamanaka-sama is good friends with Okaa-san, who decided that I needed more friends."

It was the right decision, since Shikamaru-san let out a huff of laughter, and replied, "Troublesome…"

I'd nodded, humming. "Mmhmm… well, it was nice meeting you, Nara-san." After that, I had turned to go, but Shikamaru-san had tapped me on the shoulder.

"Troublesome… just call me Shikamaru."

I'd smiled, nodding. "Okay then, Shikamaru-sa-"

At his grumble, I decided to revise my statement. "Shikamaru-kun."

That was when his mother, who had come back when I wasn't looking, interrupted me. "Aw, what a well-behaved child… see, Shikamaru? Why can't you also use good manners, too? Just… stop slouching and stop mumbling! You're not going to be able to make friends if you're so grumpy all the time! Honestly!"

Of course, that was about when I started panicking, because… I don't like causing unnecessary conflict, and his mother scared me. I'd stumbled backwards, trying to diffuse the situation. "Uhm… really, it's fine, Nara-sama! Shikamaru-san… kun was perfectly nice! Really! And…"

My apology rant was cut off when I tripped over a slightly slippery patch of grass and fell.

Apparently, falling is a very good cue for shinobi to arrive. Because this time, I was also caught by someone… albeit a bigger someone than Neji.

"Ah! I'm so sorry for bumping into you, Nara-sama! I'll… just…" I fumbled around for an escape.
"I'll just... go now. Thanks for having me at the party!"

I'd quickly run off in a random direction, hoping to find Okaa-san... only to run headfirst into Yamanaka Inoichi-sama, and fall backwards. Seriously. This... okay, maybe this is why people don't run in crowded areas, but... you know, at least it's someone I know! And someone nice, who wouldn't take offense at my bumping into them.

"Ah, Makoto-kun! Your Okaa-san was just looking for you," Yamanaka-sama exclaimed, reaching out a hand to help me up. I'd thanked him, also apologizing for running into him... and that was when Nara-sama arrived, together with the other Nara-sama (the male one), and Shikamaru-kun. "Ah! Makoto-kun, I'm think you've seen them before, but this is Nara Shikaku-san, a friend of mine, Yoshino-san, his wife, and Shikamaru-kun, the other birthday boy."

"We've met," Nara Shikaku-sama mumbled, hands in his pockets, before crouching down. "Sorry if I scared you," he sighed, before turning to his wife. "There. Happy?"

I shrinked back, ducking behind Yamanaka-sama's leg as a chill ran down my spine. Nara Yoshino-sama was apparently not happy. "Shikaku! That's not a proper apology! I was hoping Shikamaru had made a new friend, too!" Wait, new friend? Who? Me? "Instead, your ugly mug scared her off!" Wait, HER? No! I'm a boy! Otherwise, I'd get even more identity confused! I'd rather firmly decided, early on, that this was a new start, a sequel to my previous life, if you may. And one of the identifying differences between who I was and who I am is that I'm currently a boy... otherwise, I'd get even more confused about certain things than I currently am.

I am now Makoto. Makoto is a boy. That isn't necessarily bad, if I want to be a shinobi, because periods sucked. Yes, it's weird, having a different appendage, but not really much weirder than being a child and ridiculously short. Makoto cannot be who I used to be, because I need to be better than I used to be. Constant self-improvement is important, and this is an opportunity to not have another mid-life crisis in my early teens, or, you know, the worse alternative— die during my early teens. Makoto is a chance for me to be more focused and independent, as well as more self-driven. Makoto will not be who I used to be. I will not be the person I used to be disappointed by, whose intellect and innate talent made it easy to start things, but also shy away from challenges. Makoto will be nice, and friendly, and polite, and use good manners. Makoto will, essentially, be Me, version 2.0.

Confusion is bad. I am not who I used to be. I will keep that identity and build on it, and improve myself.

I was brought out of my thoughts by a face that's a bit too close to mine... with a squeak, I stumbled backwards.

"Ah, gomen, Makoto-kun," Nara Yoshino-sama apologized. "Sorry... I didn't mean to mistake you for a girl. And I apologize on behalf of my husband... he sometimes forgets that his scars can be scary."

Wait, what? "Scary? Scars?" I craned my head up, looking. Oh. Right. "Oh... I wasn't really scared of that," I mumbled, shuffling out from behind Yamanaka-sama, carefully bowing 45°. "Sumimasen, Nara-sama. I didn't mean... uh... I mean... I'm sorry. I'm just... a bit shy around strangers."

A hand landed on my head, ruffling, and I made a strangled sound, before straightening up and patting my hair down. Hey. My hair is light in this world, and it gets staticky really easily, especially in fall.

Yamanaka-san chuckled. "Aw... isn't Mako-kun cute? Don't worry, Shikaku... according to Kimiko-san, he accidentally headbutted Aburame Shibi once." I whined, burying my head in my
hands. Unfortunately, Yamanaka-sama continued. "And his first interaction with Danzō, well… you know that rumor about Danzō being called a pedophile that's been circulating around Konoha?"

Oh, kami. Don't remind me. I whined again, burying my face in Yamanaka-sama's leg.

"It's only funny now that it's over but… that was because of Mako-kun!"

Please, Yamanaka-sama, with all due respect… shut up. Please.

Luckily, a small hand grabbed mine.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru sighed, glancing at the adults out of the corner of his eye. "Hurry up. I want to get away before Kaa-san starts trying to introduce me to other people."

I bit my lip, looking back. "Will… will that be okay with them?" I asked.

"Tch. I do it all the time," he grumbled.

Well, then… "Please," I beg.

"Troublesome," he sighed, dragging me by the sleeve. After dodging several adult-sized bodies, we reach the line of tables, with food. "Get under," Shikamaru-kun mumbled, crouching down and lifting the cloth.

"Um… okay," I decided hesitantly, carefully getting down on all fours, crawling underneath. Shikamaru followed me. Once underneath, my eyes adjusted… to see another kid.

"Ah… Shikamaru-kun?" I whispered, tugging on his sleeve.

"I thought I'd find you here," Shikamaru grumbled. "Makoto, wasn't it? This is Akimichi Chōji. Chōji… this is one of the guests for Ino's birthday party."

"Ino?" the boy wondered, munching on something… ah. Chips.

"Yeah," I replied quietly. "Yamanaka-sama is a friend of Okaa-san's, and… well, he invited me," I shrug. "I'm Kobayashi Makoto. Please call me Makoto. It's nice to meet you…"

"Chōji. Just call me Chōji," he mumbled between crunches of chips.

"Chōji… -kun?" I try.

"That's good," he decides.

The silence that followed was a bit awkward, broken periodically by the crunching of chips, but not uncomfortable.

"Um, thanks for helping me, Shikamaru-kun, and it was nice meeting you, Chōji-kun," I decided. "I think I should go look for my Okaa-san… and do either of you two know where Ino-san is? I need to go wish her a happy birthday."

"Hm… I think she's looking for flowers with some of her friends," Chōji-kun offered.

"Thanks. I'll go look there. I'll… see you later, then, Shikamaru-kun, Chōji-kun?" I asked.

Shikamaru just grunted, but Chōji-kun nodded. "Hopefully. We're bringing the cake out in about half-an-hour… and it's chocolate, with buttercream frosting."
Oh. "That sounds really good… I definitely can't miss that!" I grinned. "See you later," I waved, crawling carefully out from under the table and brushing off my clothes.

Flowers… I headed in the direction that Chōji-kun indicated.

That was… the start of the end. You see, apparently, it's not that normal for young boys to agree to help a young girl make flower crowns. I honestly can't figure out why, but… to be fair, I couldn't figure out a lot of the reason behind some societal standards Before, anyways.

Still… apparently flower crowns are a concept relegated to solely girls.

You know, at this point, I think it might be easier to think of myself as a girl… but pretty soon, I need to use the restroom… and it's a bit hard to ignore anatomical evidence.

I know that's not all that necessarily defines someone, and that there is something called gender dysphoria (even if I'm not certain on what that is) but… it's just simpler on me, okay? I was an artist in my past life, and I also loved science… as well as literature. I basically loved school in general.

As a result… well… I'll put it this way. I am currently male. I have lots of hobbies and interests that people may consider feminine, but I am male.

If anyone is made uncomfortable by that… first off, why are you deliberately butting into my business? My approach to life is… you do what you want, I do what I want… unless we hurt each other, in which case, we need to figure out how not to do that. Basically, unless you impact someone else in a dramatically negative manner, you have a right to do whatever you want, especially in private. In society… well… I wrote an entire essay about that, once. I'm not eager to do that again.

There's some flaws, but… for the most part, it works. I've never understood why some people are so against things that just "make them feel uncomfortable."

A lot of things make a lot of people feel uncomfortable.

Take me, for example… most fashion trends made me uncomfortable, listening to some music lyrics made me uncomfortable… even watching people chew with their mouths open (which is… just… please don't do that) makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to see how the first stage of digestion works. Please, don't make me. Also… talking with your mouth open. Please. Just… no. Holding knives the wrong way. Forks, I can understand. Knives… please, no. Improper etiquette at the dining table… for example, if you go to a restaurant with bread plates, you use the plate to your left. Use utensils from the outside in. The napkin goes on your lap, not in your collar (unless you are an infant), elbows stay off the table, don't slurp your soup, don't bite into the bread (tear off bite-sized pieces, butter them, then place the entirety in your mouth), and… there's probably more I'm missing, but that's a start.

Yes, I was a lucky kid in my past life.

Oh, wait. Several more things that make me uncomfortable… dipping nigiri sushi in the soy sauce rice-side first, cutting nigiri sushi, dipping ginger in the soy sauce… and people who pour soy sauce on white rice, which is way too common. It's fine, it's fine, I won't criticize your life decisions… eat it how you like… yeah, it might taste better that way… but… to me, it's as if someone poured in cereal after milk.

I won't rant to you, but…

Yeah.
Basically, if people got to make rules banning everything they felt uncomfortable about, society wouldn't work. Coexisting with people is general involves not voicing a lot of discomfort, all while trying to make yourself as inoffensive as possible (depends on how nice you are).

Because you can't control other people's actions.

Back to the reason why picking flowers and making flower crowns probably wasn't the best thing to do.

No, correction. It was fun, Ino is amazing at making daisy crowns, and I don't regret anything.

I'm just regretting my… inappropriate over-response to what happened afterwards. Much afterwards. I was still wearing Ino's flower crown in my hair when I lined up for cake, received a slice, and walked over to a tree to sit down and eat it. I don't feel any embarrassment. It was a really nice crown, and according to Ino-san, I looked awesome in it.

An older kid, who I didn't know, accidentally got gum in my hair. At least, I think it's accidental.

As a result, I got a bit annoyed, (because let's face it, that's gross. There's all sorts of germs and… that's just gross), and lashed back with a, "Eww…" (that was my initial reaction) "Excuse me! Please watch where you're going! You got gum in my hair."

Okay, my tone wasn't the nicest, but… his response… well, he let out this over-dramatic huff, rolling his eyes, "Look kid, stop being such a brat. It's just hair. Just… cut it off or something!"

"I… I beg your pardon? Cut off my hair?" My voice squeaked a little. "Excuse me?" I was… to put it frankly, very angry. I love my hair. This… this cretin just comes over, gets gum in it (tangling my hair around the flower crown, too) and… he think that I should cut off my hair?!

"I… I beg your pardon? Cut off my hair?" My voice squeaked a little. "Excuse me?" I was… to put it frankly, very angry. I love my hair. This… this cretin just comes over, gets gum in it (tangling my hair around the flower crown, too) and… he think that I should cut off my hair?!

"Stop it!" I shouted, ducking when he tries to grab at my hair. "You made enough of a mess already…" At this point, I'm positively crying. Again, I put the blame on my biology. I'm a kid. Admittedly, that's not an excuse, but… I'm an kid. I curled up in a little ball, my back to the boy. "Just… go away. Please."

Here's where I'll get a little defensive. Had the boy just left, everything would have been fine. He didn't even have to apologize. Instead… he reached out again, this time with a hissed, "Aren't you supposed to be a boy? Man up, and stop acting like a girl already."

Unfortunately… he grabbed my hair and tugged. There was a yanking sensation and… I just remember staring, his hand still in my hair, as chunks of my hair (matted with gum) fell to the ground.

I… snapped. I just remember thinking some mix of letgoletgoletgoletgoletGO!

I chomped down hard on his hand, trying to turn around—ow, ow, OW, that hurts, stop pulling my hair— elbowed him in the groin (accidentally), and successfully hit him in the stomach.

...That was the second horseman of the "apocalypse" that would be coming really soon.

When I realized that there were adults walking in this direction, staring… and when the boy reached out again, angry, with a "You little…"... well, I was scared. I ran. Away. Into the forest… while sobbing quietly.
Not my proudest moment, but… I hate losing face.

Losing face is… a fundamentally Asian concept. I'd adopted a bastardized version, since… well, I haven't ever actually lived in China, or anywhere in the wide area of places that count as "asia," so things are a bit different.

But I'd understood a little of it.

One way to describe Face is that it is the prevention of embarrassment at all costs. But that is insufficient as Asian cultures emphasize a concern with loss of Face for the individual personally, and for others as well. For example, a child would never disagree with their parents in public, a colleague would never criticize another in public, nor would a subordinate point out an error made by a superior.

There are many aspects of Face.

One can lose Face, gain Face, and lose Face for others… which is what I hate the most. Because while it didn't mean much for me, born in America, raised in Europe, and fundamentally American after living there almost a decade… it meant a lot to my former parents. And… it was one of the aspects we quarreled over the most. Mom had often said… well, it's a term that loosely translates to, "have you no shame?" but… it's not the same.

I'll mainly explain its importance in Chinese culture (my mom was from Northeastern China), but… I'm pretty sure it applies to more than that. The concept of Face is based on a kind of relationship between a wide range of other people, including schoolmates, co-workers, and extended family, as well as social, professional, and friendship networks. By explaining Face as shame, embarrassment, or loss of honor, it twists the concept to matter more on an individual and personal scale… which it really shouldn't.

It was described a little in the movie, Mulan, where she didn't want to bring dishonor on her family name… this is kind of like that, but more important.

And… I just threw a temper tantrum. In public. In front of… I don't know how many shinobi. I just cry harder at the thought and… the humiliation.

And my hair… maybe it's not that big a deal, but… I like my hair. I really treasure my hair. Even in my past life… I'd taken ridiculously good care of my hair. In this life… it's pretty, and soft, and such a cool color. Even Itachi and Shisui agreed, and I remember Itachi had fun learning how to braid it. That had been a fun day. I'd been really good at braiding hair in my previous life. True, it was easier to do on other people, but… well, I said I took good care of my hair? My hair was… always a bit thin on the top, ever since I was a young child. To put less strain on it, I normally tossed it in a single braid, although before the… abrupt transition, I'd been experimenting with French braids. My hair was really slippery in my past life… and ponytails just didn't stay up.

I'd really enjoyed braiding my friends' hair as well, especially after they started growing their hair out. I could braid practically anyone's hair… even when that 'anyone' was the little brother of one of my friends, who's hair was just long enough to french-braid… about three centimeters long.

Yeah… I liked making things with my hands.

So, one day, I'd asked Itachi if I could braid his hair, and he'd agreed. Seriously… he is the nicest person on the face of this planet.
But, back to the braiding. I'd happily filled his hair, and later Shisui's, with a series of small braids. My fingers had been stiff at first, but after a bit over half-an-hour, I'd managed to regain enough dexterity to be satisfied with my results.

It's annoying. I'd been a pretty good pianist in my last life… having stiff fingers is just annoying. But soon, I'd been decently satisfied with my results, and decided to try to braid my own hair. That was… about when Itachi had asked me to teach him how to do the same.

Note to aspiring braiders— practice on people with long hair. It's easier, especially to start.

I hadn't been sure what to expect, since my former younger brothers had also tried to learn at one point, onto to fail miserably due to the lack of finger dexterity, but… Itachi (and later, Shisui) turned out to be really good at braiding. When I asked, they explained that it was a bit tricky at first, but that wire-manipulation in conjunction with shuriken-jutsu, shuriken techniques, meant that they had to be pretty good with their fingers. Also, hand-seals weren't easy if you didn't have some manual dexterity.

And so, I'd spent the rest of that day teaching two shinobi how to braid. I'd actually exhausted my repertoire of braids… Itachi had even managed to pull off an eight-stranded braid (with a bit of assistance in the form of Shisui and holding some strands still while he braided), which is really impressive. Considering how I had to instruct him without a visual demonstration… that is impressive. I'd only demonstrated the four-strand braid, but he'd picked up on the idea behind it quickly. I was also amazed, since my hair, only reaching half-way down my back, isn't actually long enough to easily put in some of the more complicated braids.

But… I don't actually have anything else to babble about right now. So… back to where we were.

I had actually run deep enough into the forest that I got lost. And… the sun was setting. I'm not sure if you know this, but forests are scary when the sun goes down. It was already pretty dark, and I… was scared. Really scared. I hadn't actually been outside past sundown before… and that realization added to my emotional mess. I'd gotten myself in a bad situation, and it was all my fault.

Time for another monologue. I… don't have typical responses to stress. For me, everything just accumulates and accumulates and accumulates until something happens to make the entire bag break.

By this point… I was a bit hysterical. I remember thinking something along the lines of 'stupid, stupid me. Now you're also going to get everyone worried, and you're an idiot yourself for not being able to control your temper… you haven't changed at all from your past life. Now everyone's going to hate you! And you're going to have to apologize and everything, but I don't want to and what on earth is going to happen with your hair? The gum's still in there… get it out get it out!'

I was… I probably like a mess, crying and hiccuping. I remember thinking that I should try and get down… I should get back, but… Okaa-san and Otou-san must be so disappointed… I felt so ashamed when I tried to I picture their faces. And… I didn't want to apologize to the mean boy, either. I remember knowing that I should, but that I didn't want to. I should also get down, but I didn't want to… I couldn't. I was scared.

I wanted my teddy bear. I wanted the teddy bear I used to have, the one that I'd cry to sometimes. I just… wanted something to hug onto.

It was getting cold, it was getting dark, and… I was getting more and more scared as my imagination ran away with itself.

I'm not how much time I spent huddled into a ball, crying. It could have been ten minutes or an hour.
But by the time someone found me, my tantrum had become just tears and hiccuping cries… together with chattering teeth. I was freezing. My fingers were numb, and I was shivering all over.

When Itachi and Shisui found me, I practically threw myself in their direction, crying. Luckily, they managed to catch me. "I'm sorry!" I remember just babbling this string of… apologies and… I don't really remember what. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry… I was so scared…"

I remember one of them exclaiming about how cold I was, and wrapping me in an over-large jacket. I was too busy trying to burrow into my new source of warmth to really care. Group hugs are nice.

I remember trying to force articulate words through chattering teeth. "W-w-w-w-what are you d-d-d-doing… h-here? How'd you kn-kn-n-n-now I w-w-w-was l-l-l-lost?"

"Err… well… you're pretty fast, for a kid!" Shisui exclaimed.

I headbutted him in the chest.

Thankfully, Itachi explained in more detail. "At first, I believe the adults were occupied with trying to calm the… other person involved in the… incident." I twitched, and he quickly moved on. "They seem to have believed that you were simply hiding behind a tree or something, and would return soon. It was only after some time had passed and you had not returned that they… that they grew worried and tried to look for you. Eventually, your mother contacted the Military Police, and… Shisui and I were fortunate enough to be in the vicinity."

Shisui had scoffed. "Translated from Itachi-speak, that means that the people panicked, your mother had the sense to actually get someone who's normally in charge of these things, and we saw them arrive. We recognized your mother and followed the entire gaggle in. When we heard the story, Itachi talked his father into letting us try to find you first, since you'd probably respond better to familiar faces. And that reminds me… that was an impressive punch!" he exclaimed.

I'd groaned, burying my head in the jacket.

"Huh?" Shisui asked.

I'd lifted my head, mumbling. "I said, that was an accident. But…" I had fished around for how to express my thoughts… "That's the only thing he mentioned?"

"Uh… yeah?" Shisui had stared at me, bewildered.

I giggled slightly, hiccuping. After the scare was over… I was no longer crying, but I was nowhere near emotional equilibrium. And hence, laughing. "A-ask him ab-bout the bite o-on his h-hand." I freeze up, realising I probably shouldn't have mentioned that… my mood dropped.

I looked away, wrapping my arms around my knees. "He… he had gotten gum in my hair. I got… a bit upset. He said to just cut my hair… I told him no, then tried to go find Okaa-san. I like my hair… I didn't want to cut it. I was crying a bit by then, I think. The boy… well, I think he tried to fix the situation. He… he cut the gum out, I think… but… I… I kind of snapped. He cut my hair. He was still pulling on my hair, and it hurt, and I didn't want him to cut more of it! So I kind of… twisted around and bit his hand to make him let go."

"Atta boy," Shisui said, ruffling my hair. I just curled further into a ball. That… what I did wasn't good. I shouldn't have reacted like that. It was a bit of an overreaction… maybe I should go apologize? But after what happened… I don't want to. I don't want to go back. I don't want to have to face that boy again. I don't want all of the adults at the party to look at me… I don't want to see Okaa-san disappointed or embarrassed about me.
"You know, Makoto, you probably shouldn't have done that," Itachi mentioned.

My hands balled up, and my eyes tingled. "I know."

"You should apologize. Your hair will grow back."

"I want it to grow out now!" I yelled back, before freezing. I curl father into my ball and started crying again. Dammit, Makoto! You even lashed out at your friend. It's just… I know that, Itachi! Just… leave me alone! "Please, just… just go. I know that, but I don't WANT to! I don't want to go back!" I shout.

Shisui tried to interject. "Hey, Itachi, maybe…"

However, Itachi's amazingly persistent when he wants to be. "Violence is not the answer, Makoto," Itachi continued. "You should apologize."

I dig my fingernails into my palms. Please, just… "Just leave me alone, Itachi!"

"I know you're sad, Makoto. But you need to calm down…" I shout back, before pressing my head into my knees, trying desperately to stem the tears.

... The silence that followed made me feel even worse.

"...Don't worry, Makoto. If you want, Shisui and I will go back with you. Would that be okay?"

Itachi? You didn't leave… and… "I embarrassed Okaa-san. All of the other adults… even the other kids… they'll…"

"It's fine, Makoto. I promise." But how can you know for sure? "Apologize. It will be fine, I'm sure of it. You're only a child… I'm sure they'll understand. And your mother…"

"The birthday party was supposed to be a fun time. I also probably embarrassed Yamanaka-sama… he was the one who invited Okaa-san and I. I messed up the birthday party…" I mumbled, tears rolling down my cheeks.

Itachi pulled me into a hug, and I stiffened, surprised. "The fact that you understand that should be enough. Don't worry. You're still young. They'll forgive you. Just learn from the experience, okay?"

I buried my face into his shirt.

"That reminds me. The boy who dropped gum in your hair and cut it… I believe he also wanted to apologize," Itachi mentioned.

I looked up, bewildered. "What? B-but… I was the one in the wrong. I shouldn't have… have overreacted to an accident," I sighed, looking back down.

"You both made mistakes," Itachi continued, calmly. "But you can't just ignore this incident, Makoto. I assure you, apologizing is your best course of action. If you want to, also apologize to Yamanaka-sama and your mother. But you can't just run away from your problems, Makoto." He hesitated for a moment, before pushing on. "I am rather certain that if you avoid apologizing, this incident will haunt you for a long time, and you would end up constantly wondering whether you did the right thing."
Sadly… that was definitely true. "How… how did you know…"

"You're a kind person, Makoto, and smart as well. You would definitely regret your actions, and you would have a hard time deluding yourself. You just…" Itachi hesitated, probably wondering what to say.

Luckily, Shisui helped him out. "Don't be scared. You know it's the right thing to do… you're not stupid, Makoto. You're just scared." He chuckled slightly. "Don't worry, it's not the first birthday you've ruined. If anything, I'm pretty sure this is one of the things people laugh about with their friends when they grow up…" he sobered up quickly, though. "Makoto… Itachi's right. This isn't really about everyone else. It's about you."

They were… unfortunately right. But… "Can you go with me?" I asked hesitantly, twisting my hand.

Itachi patted me on the head. "Of course. Now… shall we go?"

...my face crumpled as I thought of something. "Wait… is the party still going on? Or… did everyone leave?"

Shisui chuckled awkwardly. "Ah… if it helps, everyone's still there!"

No. That doesn't help. "Don't tell me… don't tell me that… because of what happened…"

Itachi very carefully did not meet my eyes.

I sighed. "Is… is it too late to consider just running away from this problem?"

"Absolutely," Itachi states, boosting me onto Shisui's back. "Don't worry. I'm fairly certain they are just concerned and waiting to hear that you are safe."

"Itachi… that… that really doesn't help things," I moaned, letting my head thump on Shisui's shoulder as he started walking.

"Hey, on the bright side, this is the first birthday party you've ruined!" Shisui exclaimed. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities in the future!"

Thumping someone on the head and listening to their exaggerated cries of pain had never felt more cathartic.

When I went back to the party, everything… well… Itachi was right. I apologized to the older kid for overreacting and using… excessive violence, he apologized to me for getting gum in my hair and overreacting… we also apologized to Yamanaka-sama and Ino-chan for disturbing the party, and everything ended up totally fine. Case closed, moving on.

...Or not. Because… well… the kid's name was Yamanaka Fū and yes, I agree, that name is a bit ridiculous. Mainly because it's... rather girly. Honestly, I think he just had inadequacy issues that he reflected onto me. I mean, his name, 楓, means maple. Plus, he has this really orange hair (which might have been part of the reason for his name). So, I ended up feeling a bit sorry for him. Plus, he's not that old, either. He's just really tall for a six-year-old. Or maybe he just seems really tall to me. Considering I'm a bit of a midget… yeah, being intimidating is pretty easy. Still, because he's a Yamanaka, Yamanaka-sama felt honored-bound to offer some help, even though I tried my best to assure him that it was fine.
Looking back on it, I probably should have just agreed to the help, because later, according to Okaa-san, I agreed to a playdate with Ino. Ino-san. Whoops. Ino-chan.

I… still don’t know how that happened.

But, Yamanaka-sama recommended this place, who's apparently well-liked by some of the shinobi clans, and told Okaa-san to just put the appointment on the Yamanaka clan tab. Because, apparently, people are very nice here in Konoha, and the places of better repute actually trust customers. That's very nice, very nice, very refreshing… and in my opinion, an admirable and very brave choice to make.

There was just a… tiny problem. Sort of. Or rather, it would have been a problem for anyone else. You see, when we arrived, the Hyūga clan already had an appointment. On a related note, Neji is an amazing person, and I don't deserve him as a friend. Similarly, Hyūga Hizashi-san is also very nice, and so is Hyūga Hiashi-sama, even if he (along with everyone else in his clan) is really scary, and being in the same room with ten-or-so blank-faced Hyūga clan members is not an experience I want to repeat.

Also, I turned out to be very fortunate, in that the damage caused by the gum was easily mitigated… by my getting bangs. Bangs. I had those, once Before. I think… it was when I was around five years old, but I'd spent the next decade-or-so growing them out. After this haircut, I might end up doing the same thing, but… I look surprisingly nice with bangs. It's not a bad look. Of course, I might regret it in a couple weeks, or months, but… I don't dislike it, currently.

I had already had such an emotional upheaval not too long ago… at the time, I was just kind of… emotionless. But a good emotionless. It's that kind of peaceful tranquility where nothing really bothers you.

I can affirm that fact, because Okaa-san's announcement when I went to show her my new hairstyle would have completely shocked me in any other circumstance. Instead, I'd just smiled and nodded and thanked Hyūga-sama for agreeing to take me in for the next two weeks or so.

Because… that's not normal, is it? I'm not sure what's normal and what's not, but… agreeing to take in the friend of someone you know… do adults do that? Or rather, is that a normal thing for clan heads to do? Or is that just a normal thing for clan heads with large resources and both a business and emotional investment to do? Does that sentence even make sense? I think I'm tired…

Sleep is good. Sleep is nice. Sleep is good for my brain.

Sleep is good for my thinking process.

I should go to sleep.

Yes, I should go to sleep. Maybe then I can think more clearly.

Sleep. Yes, sleep is good.

---

So… that sleepover invitation was the third horseman of the apocalypse. However, I didn't know that, and so a little bit of sleep was enough to render me emotionally content and a bit more mentally sound and ready to come to terms with the world.

…

…Oh, who am I kidding? That's more of a wishful thought than anything. I think I've been so
desensitized to just… the craziness of Konoha shinobi that I am now incapable of emotions like surprise.

Just… suspend your disbelief, don't question things, and just keep your head down and move on. Smile and nod. Smile and nod.

Somehow, by the time I'd come down for breakfast, Okaa-san had already packed everything. Everything. I'm… not sure how she had the energy, inclination, or ability to do everything in the dark without waking me up, but… right. Smile and nod and don't question seemingly-magical powers.

My next thought was amazement at how quickly my parents were prepared to get rid of me, but those fears were, thankfully, soon assuaged. Apparently, Okaa-san and Otou-san wanted to make sure I was comfortable and sort out the details of what I would do during the remaining two days before they had to leave. I'm still not sure whether to be thankful that there's a reason… or really, really worried that Okaa-san and Otou-san had a pre-prepared excuse regarding why they were so well-prepared to get rid of me.

Regardless of my paranoia, the fact was that I was to be moving in that day. And it's not like I could do anything about that, so… I ate breakfast, grabbed a bag with some paper and pencils, and got ready to go.

The Hyūga compound is terrifying. There's no other word for it. It's like this somber mausoleum in shades of brown and white and grey and black… and it's scary, okay? It's like everyone's a ghost. They're so polite, they don't make noise, and everything's so neat. And clean.

It's admirable, and beautiful in its own right, but… it's scary. I'm highly intimidated. I'm worried that I'll accidentally offend someone or break something or get fingerprint smudges on another thing or leave a brightly colored sock in the middle of a hallway by accident.

My socks tend to end up in a lot of places. That's always been the case… and for some reason, I don't think the Hyūga would enjoy that tendency of mine.

I shuffle along awkwardly behind Hyūga Hizashi-san as he leads me down a maze of halls. They all look the same, and I already anticipate that I will be getting myself lost at least once. I try to remember which corridors we take. Straight down, past two hallways… past another door then turn right, then left… no, wait, go past a door and the vase with the magnolias, then turn left, then take a right and… I've already lost my train of thought. I'm not expecting it when Hizashi-san comes to an abrupt halt in front of a nondescript door. It doesn't look that different from the twenty-or-so doors we've passed, but Hizashi-san knocks gently on the wood.

"Neji, Makoto-kun's here," Hizashi-san says, opening the door softly.

Neji? I get to have a sleepover with Neji! I duck under Hizashi-san's arm, wriggling past the door. "Neji! I didn't know I was staying with you!" I exclaim, delighted.

I barely catch a glimpse of the room before there are two hand on my shoulders, spinning me around. "Chichiue!" Neji whines. Whines. "I'm not done cleaning up, yet! You can't show Makoto my bedroom now."

I resist the urge to giggle. "Neji, I won't mind if there's a bit of a mess. That's normal." I wriggle free and spin around again… and I barely hold myself back from laughter. Neji's face is faintly flushed, and he's glaring at his feet. The room looks like a hurricane hit it. I don't think Neji's naturally messy,
so… ah.

He was probably trying to reorganize everything.

"Here, I'll help," I decide cheerfully.

"N-no, Makoto, really," Neji stutters. "You don't… you don't have to do that. Really."

"Don't worry! It'll be fun!" I exclaim. "Let's go!"

An hour and a pillow fight later, we're sprawled, panting, over the futon.

"See?" I gasp, trying to catch my breath. "Fun."

Neji just groans pitifully. "Why did you have to trip me?"

"Because it was the only way to bury you in pillows and tickle you," I respond promptly, stretching out. Ow. My sides hurt from laughing this much. "You didn't have to tickle me that much, though," I pout.

"I didn't know you were that ticklish," Neji protested. "You didn't say anything."

"I was too busy laughing to say anything," I groan, staring at the ceiling. All of a sudden, a thought strikes me. "Hey, Neji? Do you think Shino's ticklish?"

"...

"...because I don't know about you, but I really want to figure out what his laugh sounds like," I decide. "I know you snort a bit when you laugh."

"And your laugh sounds like a mix between a strangled goose, a dying chicken, and a cat who just had its tail stepped on," Neji responds. I grab a pillow, smushing it down over my face. "Oh, be quiet," I plead from beneath the pillow. Why is it that out of all the things that have changed since my previous life, my ridiculous laughter is still the same?

After a few minutes, I pull myself onto my hands and knees, and then shakily onto my feet. I stumble over to the corner I'd thrown my bag. Enough procrastinating. I need to get this done. "Uh, Neji? Can you help me with something?"

"Sure? What do you need help with?" Neji pulls himself up and comes over.

"What do you normally do in a day?" I ask.

"...Like… what do you mean?"

"What time is breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? Do you train? When?"

"Ah. Well… Chichi-ue normally wakes me around half a koku after sunrise. Breakfast is until two bells. Lunch is just around midday. Normally, you can just stop by and grab something. For dinner, though… we all eat together. It starts at about sunset, and we normally finish after a koku or so. Chichi-ue says it's good practice, but… we just have to sit there and be quiet for the most part. The elders don't like it when we fidget, either."

That… sounds a bit like torture. However… it also sounds like something I really ought to learn. But, nevermind that. "We normally play in the afternoon, so I think we can still do that, but… what
do you normally do in the morning?"

Neji frowns, thinking. "I normally train with Chichi-ue in the morning. I can ask if you can join in, but…"

"What do you learn?" I ask.

"Chichi-ue's teaching me some of the basic forms of Jūken," Neji replies.

I wince. "Don't you need the Byakugan for that?"

"Uh… oh. Yes. I think so." Neji looks a bit sheepish, though it's hard to tell.

"Don't worry," I decide. "I'll think of something to do."

"Are you sure?" Neji asks.

"Uh huh," I chirp, rocking back on my heels. "I'll be fine. Don't worry!"

Soon, I head back to get the rest of my stuff. Otō-san helps me carry the bags to the entrance of the Hyūga compound, where I'm told that someone will bring them to where I'll be staying. That's… nice of them? I'm a bit disconcerted by how it doesn't really feel like a home, and seems more like a really fancy hotel. Is this normal? Is everyone like this? I don't know.

What I do know is that it's really, really convenient. There's a reason Otō-san had to help me. The bag includes my set of formal kimono, with the yukata, haori, pants, etcetera, as well as five changes of clothes, a heavy winter jacket, four different scarves, three unique hats, two sets of gloves (one thin, one in case it snows early), one thin cotton yukata, and two sets of pajamas, on top of shoes, socks, and my toiletries. It's not too much, considering how everything's kid-sized, but that's no small amount, either.

After my clothes are out of the way, I run back to pack a smaller bag, with everything I think I'll need. That includes, amongst other things—an entire pack of paper; all of my pencils, pens and colored pencils; every single one of my books (Okaa-san later manages to convince me to leave half of them behind); three different packs of tea; an entire bento's worth of sweets; my inrō from hanami, complete with more sweets; and… my library card.

It's taken almost nine months, but maybe, just maybe… if my luck holds out… maybe I can actually take Gekkō-san up on his offer? Well, first off, let's hope he's still there. But if he is… well, I really like it when Itachi and Shisui and Kagami tell me stories about their missions. I'm pretty sure I can convince Gekkō-san to do the same!

The next day, Otō-san and Okaa-san leave. It's surprisingly anticlimactic. Okaa-san leaves me with a small allowance. Well, to be honest, it's not really that small. She left me with the equivalent of a decent C-rank mission—about 50,000 ryo. That's quite a lot of money. I'm not sure if this is normal, but for some reason, I feel that most people don't entrust such large sums of money to three-year-old children. Well, the fact of the matter is… I'm starting to become used to everything. Is insanity contagious? Or am I just developing a resistance to it? Either way, I'm not sure if it's good or bad, but… meh.

It doesn't feel like they're gone. I know they'll be back.

But for some reason, I feel like I should be sad. Kids cry when their parents go away, don't they?
But… I just stand, hand-in-hand with Hizashi-san, waving as Okaa-san runs to where a group of people, including various shinobi and Otō-san, mingle and talk. 'Good luck,' I think.

On the third day that Okaa-san's gone, I am practically ready to scream. Except, I can't. And all because of the Hyūga. Honestly, I'm not sure I ever want to come back. You see… being able to stay with Neji is awesome. Hizashi-san is nice. The other Hyūga are also (mostly) nice. Hoheto-san talks with me sometimes. I also met Tokuma-chan! He's really pretty, and actually looks a bit like a girl. I like him, though. He's nice.

Tokuma-san is about twelve years old, and he recently became a genin, so he got assigned to be my "babysitter." These duties basically just involve showing me around and making sure that I don't break anything, make a mess, start crying… basically, that I don't annoy any other Hyūga. Though, that might be a bit harsh of them. To them, I'm just a normal kid. Just a normal kid, who isn't expected to be self-sufficient. I think Tokuma-san's pretty happy that I am, though. As am I. It would be awkward if I needed help after… ahem… going poo. Yeah. Thanks… but no thanks.

Thankfully, Tokuma-san is really permissive. I don't think it's responsible to let a three-year-old run free in Konohagakure on his own, but when I am that three-year old? I'm practically ready to commit homicide to get some space and independence. Though, considering that I'm currently in the Elemental Nations… that may very well end up being the case.

Regardless of what I would do to get some freedom, the fact of the matter is that I have it. Or at least, I have enough of it to head to the library or to Kagami-san's house on my own, and whenever I want to. Within reason, of course. For example, if I'm late for dinner… I'm not sure I want to know what would happen.

I head to the library every day after breakfast. For some reason, the Hyūga always get a bit odd when I bring up going to the Uchiha compound, so while I'd rather go wait and see if Itachi or Shisui are there... I can't leave the compound for that purpose only. It doesn't stop me, but... I need to be discreet. Luckily, they're not my only option. Hopefully. I'm pretty sure that Gekkō-san said he'd only be here on weekends... or was it weekdays? The problem is, I'm not entirely sure, so I basically hold a stake-out every morning, from about a koku after sunrise until noon. I can't just take advantage of Kagami-jiisan.

It takes about eight days before my diligence pays off. Eight days. I'm not sure if time works differently here or something (which, to be honest, might be entirely true), but I'm pretty sure that's more than a week! Okay, got that out of my system. After almost an entire gestation period, it's perfectly fine for schedules to change, especially when you have no contact with the other person. I definitely consider myself lucky that I managed to find him at all— Shisui's told me stories of missions that last almost a month, and… eight days aren't nearly as long as that.

So, I spent those eight days combing the library for reading material. When I get bored, I try to sketch the library. I arrange books, and try to draw them. I draw random geometric patterns. I try (and fail) to draw people. For some reason, they always end up looking about ten years older. Unless I'm drawing old people. I'm really good at drawing old people. I think it's their wrinkles. On other people, I always make the creases or shadows in the face too drastic, and… well, they end up looking a couple of decades older.

On my fifth day, I actually found something interesting. I'd become more interested in researching famous shinobi of the past, specifically. There were some outdated bingo books in the library, which not only doubled as a study guide… but also as a very nice source of faces to practice drawing. Before, I'd been amazing at still life, but not much else. Animals were… decent. I'd hoped to conquer figure drawing next. Now, I've got so much more time, and… well, I'm drawing faces.
I've gotten a bit better. Now, only some of them look a few decades older, and others just look like the person's aunt. Or uncle. Or cousin. Or second-cousin-once-removed. My point is, I'm getting better. I think. Practice makes perfect, after all. On days when I start to go a little stir-crazy, or get a bit too frustrated, like… the second day. Or the fourth day. Or the sixth and seventh days. Or just the time right before lunch when I've been staring at tiny characters for way too long and they practically start swimming in front of my eyes.

I go to find Kagami-jiisan. He's always there. He's also the easiest way for me to learn if Shisui or Itachi are on missions. Plus, even if they are, he has the best stories. Soon, I think I might be able to convince him to teach me to throw kunai, the multipurpose knives that shinobi seem to use for everything from aerial warfare to cooking (Kagami-jiisan told me a very interesting story about his old teammate, Akimichi Torifu, and a camping trip they went on to northern Fire Country during the winter… let's just say I now have some very funny mental images of Danzō, an angry Akimichi, and Kagami-jiisan's discovery that kunai make very good cooking utensils if you blunt an edge.)

I've already gotten to hold some, and on day four, he actually gave me a kunai! I now have this really cute belt-holster with three pockets, two small ones an a bigger one in front, with a kunai. Kagami-jiisan showed me how to store the kunai safely without cutting myself, how to take it out quickly, and how to hold it. It's blunted, which is probably one of the only reasons I haven't cut myself yet, but it's real. Like, it's a genuine kunai that could probably kill someone if I sharpened it well enough.

Kagami-jiisan told me that he'd show me how to sharpen one effectively after I manage to get used to it, and after I can use one well enough to warrant sharpening. ...I feel like I shouldn't be this excited, but… it's shiny, and heavy, and cold, and even just holding it sends this thrill through me. It's like that jittery feeling when you're about to board a rollercoaster, or when you're in debate and you found this awesome statistic. Or when you've taken a test, and you know you did well, and you're excited for the next unit. I don't really know how to describe it, but there's one thing I know for sure—

Kagami-jiisan is awesome.

And the pouch he gave me— that he gave me. Like, a gift. Truth be told, it's a bit stained and worn down to the point where the leather's soft to the touch, so I know it's old, but the cloth lining is clean and new, and the history seems to increase its value, not decrease it. Basically, it's awesome. And now it's mine. Currently, I just keep small bundles of paper, pencils, pens, and erasers in it, and I hook my inrō onto it, and then I just feel so giddy. I don't even know why. But it's definitely convenient, like that one time I tried to climb a rock in the park. My normal bag would have just gotten in my way.

Even Neji found it a bit cool, even though according to him, 'Hyūga don't use kunai.' I think it's stupid, but by now, I've learned enough about Hyūga etiquette to not say it out loud. Soon, even the two-hour-long dinners where I force myself to sit in seiza with my feet tucked under me until my legs are numb with pins and needles don't seem so bad.

Though, honestly, I wouldn't have survived without Neji. And Hizashi-san. Neji hisses corrections to me, when I'm slouching or put my elbows on the table by accident, which is annoying sometimes, but usually better in the long run. I'm thankful, truth be told, though… never mind. It's a good thing Neji's a cute kid, and that I can tell how much he likes teaching… or rather, telling other people what to do. I think he's a bit fed up with everyone else telling him what to do.

Because… well… things can be a bit tense. Sometimes. Or rather, most of the time. Hyūga Hiashi-sama sometimes comes by and asks me questions about things like how my day was like, or whether I've visited this part of the Hyūga compound. I think he's trying to make me feel welcome, and I
definitely appreciate the gesture… it's just that Neji-san clams up, and doesn't relax until, like, an hour later.

He gets a bit colder, and harsher, and… I like Neji. I'm not sure I like that side of him as much. It makes me feel… I don't know. I just get a bit less happy? And there's this squirming feeling in my gut and I just want to give Neji a hug. I just want to drag him off to the park, and squish him in a group hug with Shino and mess up his hair until he chases me, and we're all happy. It's like… there's this light that just gets muffled, and I don't like that.

I don't even think I would have found out about this side of him if I didn't pretty much live with him, to be honest. It's small, but… I'm not sure what it is that's bothering Neji. I just know that I try to be there. He doesn't like hugs when he's like that, and he starts to feel grumpy when I try to be extra-cheerful, in an effort to see if emotions are contagious. It's like… he gets happier… until he realizes that he's feeling happier, and then… just… shuts down.

But… enough about depressing topics such as questioning your friend's mental health! Let's move onto happier things! Like… Gekkō-san!

The eighth day had been pretty much… well, average. It hadn't been any different from any of the other seven days at least. The difference? The very person I'd been looking for stomps into the library, scowling, as he makes a beeline over to a particular bookshelf.

"Gekkō-san!" I call, quickly setting down my book and rushing over. "Gekkō-san!"

There's no response. I wait until he's picked up a book and is flipping through it, still scowling, before I tug on his shirt. "Hayate-sempai!"

Gekkō-san freezes for a moment, before twisting and looking down. "Uh… do I know you? Are you lost?"

...Well, that's a bit disappointing. But then again… "You don't remember me, Hayate-sempai? I'm Kobayashi Makoto? You thought I was a girl? You showed me how to draw a henohenomoheji? At the beginning of the year? You kept on calling me 'chibi-chan' even though I'm not actually that short for my age?"

A wave of comprehension crosses his face, and he smiles, tiredly. "Ah. Now I remember. I must have forgotten… you're so short, chibi-chan, you don't even stand out in my memory."

I pout, grumpily. "'M not that short." But then I perk up. "But… congratulations on making chūnin, Hayate-sempai!"

Sure enough, he's wearing the typical chūnin vest, even though it's a bit baggy on him.

He chuckles a bit. "Yeah. Thanks, chibi-chan. So… why are you here today?"

"I've been looking for you." I decide to plow on. "Okaa-san and Otō-san are going to the capitol, so I'm staying with a friend, but it's boring. And most of my other friends are busy. So… I remembered you helped me… before… and… well…" I shift awkwardly, but I figure that I should just take the plunge. "Could you please tell me what you learn in the Academy? And maybe what I should do to prepare?"

I really want an outside opinion. Shisui thinks the entire thing's a joke, and Itachi only really stayed for one year.
Eyes shut, I don't really see Gekkō-san's face shift, but I can feel it. I'm not expecting what he says next, though.

"Sure. I'm just curious, though… who are your friends? I didn't think little kids were that busy."

Oh. Well… I don't suppose there's any point in hiding it. "But my friends aren't little kids. Neji's a bit older, so he's learning Jūken, and Shino's parents are teaching him… stuff. I'm not sure what, but he's from the Aburame clan. And Shisui's a jōnin, and Itachi's a chūnin, so they're super busy. Kagami-jisan's usually there, but I don't want to have to bother him too much. I think he also has stuff to do." I explain, not looking at Gekkō-san. "I… Neji and Shino both are learning so much… and I'm not. I was hoping… can you teach me a bit of taijutsu? Or something? Maybe just the basics? Or what exercises I should do? I want to learn…" I pout. "I just don't know where to start."

A hand lands on my head, ruffling my hair. I look up, through a curtain of messed-up hair. Seriously, why does everyone want to ruffle my hair? Okaa-san and Tō-san and Shisui and…

"Well, as a sempai, I'm supposed to teach my kōhai, right?"

I blink for a moment, before my face splits in a grin. "Thank you so much, Hayate-sempai! I promise I won't let you down!"

---

So, first of all, Gekkō Hayate is pretty bad at taijutsu. Or at least, teaching taijutsu. The good news is that it doesn't really matter. He started teaching me the day we met. It was pretty awkward at first, but he showed me the training ground that he normally uses. It got a bit less fun when the first instruction was to run ten laps.

It wasn't a big field, admittedly, and the total probably only amounted to a mile… but that's a lot for a little kid.

So, the good news… I was wearing clothes that were actually decently suited to exercise. That wasn't a coincidence, though. Decently loose, long-sleeved, relatively thin clothes had pretty much become my default wardrobe, along with a longer, yukata-style jacket with a sash and buttons that honestly more closely resembled a tunic and the shinobi-style sandals that are surprisingly comfortable and also the most popular type of footwear in Konohagakure.

The interesting thing is that despite the open toes, I haven't yet injured myself there, despite my hobby of climbing trees. They're actually not bad. They offer pretty good support, and despite my constant running around, the aeration means that there isn't any of that typical smelly-foot odor. Of course, that might be because small children don't really get that, but… you know what? Moving on.

Laps. Running laps. The good thing is that Hayate-sempai basically just showed me how he normally warmed up. He's really bad at explaining things, though. Thankfully for me, I'm not a typical three-year-old. And thankfully, Itachi had already taught me pretty well. Of course… then I had to run ten laps. Hayate-sempai actually ran the first lap with me, and according to him, my form was remarkably good. Yeah, no duh. His one advice was to restrain myself from sprinting at first.

So, I gritted my teeth and ran. Pretty soon, my form had worsened, my legs were numb, breathing hurt, and for some reason, I was still running. Normally, I'm not that… determined. To exercise. But… Hayate-sempai was watching. And if there's anything I hate to do, it's disappoint other people. I'm used to disappointing myself. But… others? Even as my side started cramping, I just slowed down a bit. I was still running. Three more laps. Two more laps. One… more… lap…

As soon as I reached Hayate, I slowed down drastically, but careful to keep moving. If I stopped"
right then… I knew I would cramp up. I'd walked about another three meters before my vision greyed, and I slowly let myself curl onto the ground, coughing as I tried to catch my breath, and as I tried not to throw up. I pushed myself upright, into a sitting position with my legs out in front of my and my hands on my knees as I focused on trying to regain my breath. It hurt still, breathing. Deep breaths hurt, but… I forced myself to hold my breath, ignoring my racing pulse as I tried to slow it down, still coughing occasionally.

A hand on my back helps, and by the time I'd uncurled to lie flat on my back, Hayate-sempai was looking at me worriedly.

"Chibi-chan? Do you have a history of asthma or something?"

As it turns out, I'm pretty sure I still have mild asthma. Seriously. That thing plagued me from childhood, to my teenage years, and followed me even to my new life. Seriously? That's one dedicated disease.

The good news is, it shouldn't hinder me too much. I tell Hayate-san a bit based on what I was like in my previous life. I have bad endurance. I normally recover after a bit of rest. And so on. According to Hayate-san, I should make sure to warm up well before exercise and not push myself too far, too soon. Basically, I should be aware of my body. It's nothing I hadn't realized before.

After this, though, he decided to demonstrate a few exercises while he let me sit out, though he let me participate for stretches. Some of the exercises are familiar, such as sit-ups and push-ups and leg-lifts, while others are only vaguely familiar, such as a few involving either a tree stump or a rock. Itachi hadn't shown me these. The stretches are the easiest part of everything. I've been very diligent about practicing those, and it shows.

The rest... well... it helps that there's someone there to encourage me?

Soon, though, Hayate-sempai needs to leave, but I think I have everything down. My muscles definitely can't take much more. "Um… Hayate-sempai? When would be the next time I can see you?" I ask.

He rubs his face, sighing. "Well… I have a mission starting tomorrow. I'm guarding a caravan the Land of Hot Water, Yu no Kuni. I should be gone for… I don't know how long. I usually use this training ground, though, so if you stick around, you'll probably find me." He grins.

I nod solemnly. "Okay! Good luck on your mission, Hayate-sempai! I'll wait until I can stand, then I should probably go take a shower."

That's no joke. I probably look like I got stuck in a brief sprinkle of rain. My clothes are sticky, my hair is completely damp, and there are random damp spots on my shirt and sleeves where I mopped my forehead.

Hayate-sempai takes another look at me and nods. "Yeah. So… bye, chibi. See ya later," he calls, walking away with a wave. "Stay safe!"

After a couple minutes sprawled on my back, undoubtedly getting my clothes even more wet and covered in bits of grass and dirt, I manage to pull myself to my feet. I grimace at the state of my… being.

To put it frankly, I'm a mess.
...yeah. I don't think the Hyūga will be very pleased with the state of me. I'd probably track dirt and grass and wet spots in. And even after I change my shoes at the door... I'd have to be very careful not to brush up against anything.

So, what do I do?

Wait... I'm not sure, but... maybe Kagami-jiisan will let me borrow his shower!

On my walk over to the Uchiha compound, I feel like there was this meter-wide bubble around me that everyone kept outside of. Considering that I look like a bedraggled mop... I can't blame them.

I trudge over to the Uchiha compound, before slipping through the gate with a sigh. Okay. Let's hope Kaga-

"Mako-chan!" a voice calls.

I look over, eyes landing on a waving, curly-haired figure trailed by a smaller, short-haired individual.

I grin, waving right back. "Itachi! Shisui! You're back from that mission about the gophers! And the one about some statue or something?"

Shisui stops short when he finally sees the... well... state I'm in. Itachi, right behind him, stiffens and rushes over.


"I'm fine! Don't worry!" I insist, trying to wiggle away. However, Itachi has a vice grip on me, and Shisui— that traitor— actually helps him make sure I can't escape. Itachi doesn't let me go until he's practically patted me down and quickly checked the scraped areas, namely, my face, hands, and arms.

"You need a shower, at least," Itachi decides bluntly.

I wince. "Uh, about that... Shisui, do you think Kagami-jiisan will let me borrow a shower? you know I'm currently staying with the Hyūga, and... well..."

Shisui nods, comprehension dawning. "Yeah. I can see why you don't want to do that. Totally. Yup. Just... there's just a bit of a problem...'cause... well..."

"I'll bring a change of clothes," Itachi decides. "I don't think you'd like most of Sasuke's clothes, but there should be some things in your size around my house."

I hadn't even thought of that. "Oh... right. Yeah, thanks." I wince at the thought of changing right back into messy clothes.

I step out of the bathroom with a small towel around my neck, tugging at my clothes.

Everything's just a tag too big. It's not uncomfortable, though. The pants are fine, which is nice. A bit baggy, but it stays up when I tighten it, and it's not too long. The shirt... well, the sleeves just hang over my hands a little, and that's really not a big deal.
The dark colors are nice, though I'm pretty sure I don't pull them off as well as Itachi... or Shisui, or any Uchiha for that matter. Under the bright lights, I look *really* pale, as if I'm a ghost or something. I rub my face, suddenly a bit tired.

I've managed to hang the wet towel up by climbing onto the toilet, though I keep a smaller one for around my neck. I've toweled my hair (mostly) dry, but that doesn't really mean much.

I give the dripping ends of my hair one more swipe with the towel before giving it up as a waste of effort.

After looking around one more time to make sure everything's clean and tidy, I head over to the door, tug it open, and slip outside... only to be greeted with the aroma of... I think... definitely fish, but... also something else.

Suddenly feeling very hungry, I decide it's in my best interest not to linger, and instead to hurry up and find out what the food is, and whether or not I get some.

I shuffle down hall as quickly as the slippery floors let me, sliding at times, before practically sprinting down the stairs, shoving my feet into slippers, and spinning myself around the banister over to the open door of the kitchen.

Shisui's the first one I see. He's carrying plates over to the table, where Kagami-jiisan's sitting. Behind him's Itachi, who's... standing on top of a stool in order to access the stove.

Kagami-jiisan waves at me. "Ah, Makoto. We thought you would be hungry, and since Itachi and Shisui feel the same, I decided that we might as well have lunch a bit early."

"Oh, thanks!" I smile, before tilting my head slightly. "Just one question... what's on the plates that Shisui's holding?"

Itachi walks over, holding two plates. "Okonomiyaki. Kagami-ojiisan had lots of leftovers in the refrigerator, so I decided it would be a waste not to use them. I also made salmon *teriyaki*, as well as some *ikura* sushi." He turns to Shisui. "Apparently, that fish I caught was female. And pregnant."

He sets down the plates. "There's a small river, just outside of Konohagakure. It was teeming with salmon when I passed by. They don't taste as good as salmon caught in the ocean, but when you add teriyaki sauce, it doesn't really matter. Shisui, Makoto, I was thinking that we should go on a fishing trip. Kagami-san, you're welcome to come, if you want."

Seemingly in unison, Shisui and I both blink, before responding.

Shisui's excited. "Awesome! Sure! Today?"

I'm a bit hesitant. "I normally play with Shino and Neji in the afternoon. And I need to be back at the Hyūga at six. Exactly." However... it seems *really* tempting to skip. I mean, company-wise, Shisui and Itachi and Kagami-jiisan, or some insanely strict, permanently-grumpy Hyūga elders? "I *want* to go, but..."

Itachi's nonplussed. "We can invite them, too. You're friends, I mean."

I frown, slouching slightly. Kagami-jiisan laughs, and ruffles my hair. "Makoto-chan, if you keep acting like that, you'll end up with wrinkles like my sensei. You already have white hair. If you get wrinkles, too, you'll look like a mini Tobirama-sensei when you grow up."

I look up, wondering. "Tobirama-... sensei? Like... the Nidaime? He was your *sensei*?"
He nods, before pausing. "Didn't I tell you?"

I shake my head. "No. You said you'd fought alongside him, but not… that. Actually, for that matter… who was on your team, again? You said you were once teamed up with the Sandaime, but…"

"Ah. The Escort Unit for the Nidaime. Yes. However, my genin team was Akimichi Torifu and Shimura Danzō."

Shisui blinks. "Wait… like that creepy old Councilman who was accused of being a pedophile like… a month ago?"

I drop my forehead onto the table. Nope. Not this conversation topic again. I still think it could have been dealt with in a less… public manner. Yes, he was creepy, yes, it was odd, and I'm probably going to stay as far away from him as possible for the future, but…

"Say, Makoto, didn't you have something to do with it?"

This is exactly why I hoped everyone would just forget about it. Please, anyone up there, please just let me become one with my chair.

…

… yeah, nope.

My chair and I are still distinctly separate beings, and I can practically feel everyone staring at me.

"He was following me around. He was creepy. He was just... really weird. I didn't hear him, and he kind of snuck up on me in the bathroom, and… well… Iblewmywhistleandranawaybecausemyvoicewasn'treallyworkingandOkaa-sannmadeareallybigdealaboutitpleasejustleavemealone?"

The reactions to my statement are diverse.

Kagami-jiisan practically sprays tea over his okonomiyaki. Shisui bursts out laughing. Itachi stiffens, before practically jumping over his chair to pat me down again.

I just sigh and slump a bit further, trying to bat away Itachi. Honestly, it was a month ago, so why…

"Danzō did that?" Kagami-jiisan asks after a series of coughs as he dabs as the table with a napkin. "Danzō Danzō?"

"If it's the really old, weird Danzō with only one working arm, only one working eye, and that weird thing on his chin… then yes. That Danzō," I mutter. "And honestly Itachi, I'm fine. It was a month ago."

Itachi takes a deep breath. "I believe the important thing is, do you feel fine, Makoto? Or, to be honest, I believe the subject we should be talking about it… oh, stop laughing, Shisui. It's not funny. If it were, say, Sasuke instead…" He runs a hand down his face. "Kagami-san… why is your teammate following young children into bathrooms?"

I take the opportunity to wiggle a little further away, but Itachi catches the movement and turns back. "And you will be telling me the full story. He… felt… weird. As in… that felt?"

I nod slightly, still staring at the table.
Itachi sighs again. 'Later,' he mouths, setting a hand on my head. I nod, before glancing at Shisui and Kagami-jiisan, who are both rather obviously not looking in my direction.

I sigh. Again. "So… Kagami-jiisan?"

He runs a hand along the table. "That is odd, even for Danzō," he says slowly. When Shisui tries to ask more, Kagami-jiisan doesn't respond.

After a drawn-out silence, Kagami-jiisan stands to head over to the kitchen counter, and grabs a bowl with rice crackers before coming back to set it on the table.

"So… Itachi, how was that mission with the moose? And… uh… how are you getting along with your team?" I ask, trying to change the subject. Itachi plays along.

"Well, Himuka-san was excited to go on a C-rank. Yōji… was quiet, but also seemed rather grateful for the change from our typical D-ranks."

"Does he ever actually talk?"

"Of course. However, when talking is not essential… I find that he prefers to communicate nonverbally."

"Hm. So, how did the C-rank go? Anything interesting? Bad client?"

"Well, I have a newfound respect for moose." Seeing my lack of comprehension, Itachi elaborates. "It is remarkably silent for such a large animal, and easily provoked. As well as quite dangerous once provoked."

"What happened?" I prod.

"...Himuka-san misjudged the distance and threw a kunai in an effort to wound the moose. It was unimaginably upset, and actually injured Yōji-san when it ran over, though we only discovered that later. I managed to… uh… decapitate it through a rather fortuitous accident. I had been trying to make the equivalent of a wire net, however, I did not have enough time to do much more than string a wire between two trees. When the moose charged, I jumped aside, pulled the wire taught… and it was at neck height. My weight, against the momentum of the moose, meant that it was a rather clean kill."

Huh. "Cool," I decide. "What did you do with the moose?"

"We ate well. I learned how to butcher a moose, since I volunteered. There was not much else to do when waiting for Yōji-san to heal a little. The village was quite thankful for the moose. Oh, and I actually received a packet of… moose jerky. I tried some on the way back. It's quite good." He pauses. "I'll bring it, if we decide to go fishing."

Bribery? Well… if so… moose jerky. I'm definitely interested. "Okay, Itachi, let's go the Aburame compound. You can check in on your teammate, and I can ask Aburame-sama if Shino and I can go fishing. Then, we'll head to ask Hizashi-san and Neji," I decide.

Shisui winces. "Um… Makoto, I'll go with you when you swing by the Hyūga compound, 'kay?"

I blink. "Why?"

"Er… um… well… the Hyūga don't really like us," Shisui says awkwardly, looking at the table. "So, uh… they might not let your friend come along just… just 'cause."
Okay. I won't pry.

"There should be some fishing gear in storage," Kagami-jiisan announces. "I don't think I will be able to go with you, but bring something back for me, okay?"

"Okay!" I chirp, bouncing in place. "C'mon Itachi! Let's go!"

I drag Itachi to the Aburame compound, then pause, as there was a problem I hadn't actually thought about. When I want to visit, I take this… hopscotch-esque path around the back, through the garden, and keep a careful eye out to make sure I don't squash anything in the garden by accident. I don't dare set foot on the grass, but luckily, the stones are usually safe places to step. Still… I'm not sure if the Aburame would want for me to show that to Itachi.

"Wait here," I decide. We'll take the safe option. I leave Itachi just outside the front door of one of the houses. "I'll find Shino and Aburame-sama, and I'll see if they know where Yōji-san is, okay?"

Itachi nods, moving to stand in the shade beside the door. I shift awkwardly for a moment before metaphorically smacking myself on the head. 'Just get your job done, Makoto,' I hiss to myself, before hopping inside.

'Shino… Shino… Shino…' I mutter. 'Let's see, he should be in his room right now… no, wait. Wrong timing. It's morning… but not early early morning… so…'

I quickly change paths so that I'm heading to one of the training rooms in the Aburame compound. The question… up or down?

I bite my cheek. Probably down. It's a warm day, and sunny, too, so Shino would probably have ended up overheated too soon outside, especially with that massive overcoat of his.

I pause at the doorway. Huh. It's a bit darker today. I hit the side of the doorway with my palm, then wait.

Sure enough, about three seconds later, I see Shino and Aburame-sama.

"Makoto-kun? What are you here for?" Aburame-sama asks.

I take a deep breath. "There's one… Aburame Yōji-san, who was injured on a C-rank mission by a moose recently? I'm friends with his teammate, Itachi, and he wanted to check in on Yōji-san. Plus, Itachi, Shisui, and Kagami-san are going to take me for a fishing trip, and I wanted to ask if Shino wanted to come. I'll be going to ask Hizashi-san and Neji right after."

I wait for Aburame-sama's answer.

After a moment, he responds. "I see no reason why Shino cannot come. Please let Uchiha Kagami-san and Uchiha Shisui-san know that I leave him in their capable hands. Where Uchiha Itachi-kun?"

"I left him at the front, right by the door. I wasn't sure if he was supposed to come in."

Aburame-sama nods. "I am afraid that Yoji-kun does not stay within the compound. However, I have it on good account that he is recovering well. I shall let him know that Uchiha-kun came to ask about him." He pauses, as if to add something, but changes subject. "Do you know what Shino should bring?"

"Hmm… comfy clothes, maybe a snack, and probably water? Kagami-jiisan's trying to dig up some
fishing rods, so I think that's covered."

He nods, and detours to grab a bag from a closet, before quickly taking a separate tunnel to the kitchen, where he grabs two water bottles, fills them, and puts them in the bag alongside the box of what seems like fruit that Shino grabbed from the refrigerator.

"Makoto-kun? Do you need anything?" he asks.

Uh… "I think I'm good… oh, wait. Can I please borrow a water bottle?" He grabs another one, fills it, and hands it over. "Thanks. Other than that… I think I'm good!" I grin. "So… let's go?"

Aburame-sama nods, turning to follow us as Shino and I scramble to the front door.

After greeting Itachi, informing him about Yōji-san, and conveying what seemed like a veiled threat — though it definitely could have had other undertones that I couldn't make out— Aburame-sama waved us off.

As we headed to the Uchiha compound to drop Itachi off for Shisui, I'm tried to make sure Itachi and Shino are comfortable each other, though considering that they're both quiet, rather shy, emotionally-awkward people… it will probably need some more work later. Still, I'm determined. They're both my friends, so they should at least be comfortable with each other.

Itachi gets replaced with Shisui at the compound, and I start making a new set of introductions. Luckily, Shisui is less… uh… reticent, so while Shino is still mostly silent, I'm not the only one talking anymore. Thank goodness for that. It's awkward being the only one talking in the middle of an awkward silence.

Shisui grows more silent as we get closer to the Hyūga compound, though, and falls behind a little. Shino and I go up to knock on the door, in our usual routine (albeit a bit earlier than normal). Oh, yay! Hyūga Hoheto-san is one of the people at the door!

"Hoheto-san!" I call. "Ohayō!" Good morning!

"Ah, Makoto-kun! Ohayō. You're a bit early, though?"

"Hai," I nod. "Shisui and Itachi and Kagami are going to be taking me and Shino to go fishing! I wanted to ask Hizashi-san if Neji can go, too."

Hoheto-san glances at Shisui, body language tense. "Ah… sure… Aburame-sama gave permission for Shino-kun?"

"Hai!" I nod.

"Well… I can get them for you, if you want," Hoheto-san decides.

I resist the urge to frown, but I understand. "Okay. Thanks, Hoheto-san!"

We wait.

A few minutes turns into many minutes, turns into nearly half-an-hour, but I will stubbornly wait until I get an answer.

Luckily, not too long after that, I hear quick footsteps, and a voice, "Makoto! Shino!"

"Neji!" I greet, Shino mumbling out a quieter greeting.
"Good morning, Makoto-kun," Hizashi greets as he comes through the door, a bit slower. "And Shino-kun. Oh, and Shisui-san. I apologize for the wait, but it took a while to get some supplies."

"Don't forget this!" A feminine voice calls, and another Hyūga glides into view.

"Ah, thank you Hitomi," Hizashi-san responds.

"You're very welcome, Hizashi," she responds, before glancing over. "And this is?" she asks, prodding gently.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you two, didn't I?" Hizashi asks, a bit sheepish. "Hitomi, this is Makoto, Neji's best friend. Makoto, this is Hitomi-sama. She's my sister-in-law." Seeing my puzzled look, he clarified. "Sister-in-law. As in, my brother's wife?"

"Ah." I nod, before stepping forward and bowing. "It's nice to meet you, Hitomi-sama. I'm Kobayashi Makoto!"

She bows right back, though not as low. "It's a pleasure… Kobayashi. Like… the tea shop?"

"Hai!" I nod. "My parents run it. Oh, and sorry. This is Shisui. Uh… Uchiha Shisui. He's a good friend."

"Hi!" Shisui waves, a bit awkwardly. "I think we've met, by not like… officially. Nice to meet you?"

"It's a pleasure." She turns to hug Hizashi and Neji. "Stay safe, and have fun on your trip!"

"Bye Hyūga-sama!" I chirp, bouncing on my toes. "Have a nice day! And come on, everyone. Itachi and Kagami-jiisan are probably waiting back at the Compound."

"Of course, Makoto-kun," Hizashi-san replies. "If you'll lead the way, Shisui-san?"

Shisui nods. "Of course."

About half an hour later, we set out from one of the side gates with backpacks. I skip ahead a bit, before running back and bouncing. It probably rained recently, because despite the dusty, sandy road, the air is clear and the trees and leaves and sky seem to be sharper and more colorful than normal. Even Neji's excited, and Shino seems to be smiling.

Still, soon the relentless sun— why couldn't it be a cloudy day?— and the monotonous task of walking dampen our spirits, and before long, my feet start to hurt. It's this sharp, kinda pinching feeling in the arch of the bottom of my feet, and I frown. I shake my feet out, stubbornly determined to plod on. Yeah, my feet hurt… and my legs… and my clothes are starting to stick… and my head's starting to hurt, but… oh, wait. No. I fish my water bottle out of my backpack, quickly gulping down about a quarter of the contents. I'm probably getting a bit dehydrated. I grumble when I see how far behind the group I am, and I quickly jog back, shaking my head. No, Makoto. Bad. Grumpy-Makoto is bad.

I shade my head as I slow down so that I'm walking between Itachi and Shisui.

...Well, I say walking. It's more like trudging, head down, as I silently pray for relief.

A hand taps me on my shoulder. It's Itachi.

"Do you want me to carry you for a while?" he asks softly.
I hesitate, biting my lip. *I want* to say yes, but… "Won't I be too heavy? I don't want to make you
tired, either."

He waves it off. "I can carry Sasuke, and I'm pretty sure you're lighter than him." Still…

I squeak as two hands grab me by the side and pulls me upward. Shisui arranges me until I'm sitting
on his shoulders, and moves his hands so that he's holding me by the feet.

"Well, I'm older and bigger than Itachi, so I think *I'll* be fine, don't you?" he asks.

I sigh happily and flop over so that my chin rests on the top of his head. "Itachi's too nice," I decide.
"We need to take care of him to make sure no one takes advantage of that."

Shisui laughs, and I grab on tighter as I feel my seating shake. "Ah… you're too funny Mako-chan,"
he chuckles. "I don't think that's something most other people would say about Itachi-kohai. But
don't worry." He pats my head.

After a few moments, I murmur back. "I feel awkward getting carried while Shino-kun and Neji-kun
are getting carried."

Shisui laughs again. "Oh, the Hyūga's carrying Aburame-chibi, I think. And the chibi-Hyūga's a year
older!"

I pout. "If you're sure…" I grumble. Still, I'm not polite enough to ask Shisui to set me down. I stare
around me, soaking in the sounds of birds chirping and rustles in the grass by the trees. It's so *pretty*
here. There's not really any pollution, and you can tell that by how clear the sky is at the horizon, by
the plants and animals that encroach on the narrow road, by the complete absence of litter… and by
the occasional piles of animal droppings.

Soon, Shisui sets me down, and behind us, Hizashi-san does the same with Shino.

"We're going to want to take to the trees for the rest of the trip," Shisui announces. "Hyūga-san, do
you want to take Neji-kun? Shino-kun, I can carry you. And Makoto…"

My shoulders slump, and I can *feel* his amusement. "I'm going with Itachi, aren't I?"

"Yup!" Shisui cackles, grinning.

I sigh and trudge over to Itachi, giving him my saddest, most pitiful look. "I'm sorry. But… please?"

Itachi just smiles faintly and turns around, crouching on the ground. "Hop on."

"Yeah. Thanks, Itachi," I murmur, keeping my hands on his shoulders. I've given my little brothers
piggy-back rides enough in my past life to know that getting choked by a pair of little arms is the
*worst* part of piggy-backs. And that it's most comfortable if the passenger *doesn't* squeeze, and just
relaxes, keeping the knees bent.

I rest my cheek against my hand as Itachi jumps up, and I resist the urge to scream or squeeze Itachi.
I just freeze into this stiff, awkwardly-positioned form. After the initial shock though… it's quite nice,
as long as I ignore the fact that we're *jumping* from one tree branch to another and that the ground's
probably more than a couple meters below, and I start to relax. To be honest, even if I *do* think about
that, it's still not too bad. I'm not that scared of heights, and I've already kinda desensitized myself
from the sensation of falling. Plus, Itachi's grip is firm, and I trust him enough that I'm confident he
won't drop me or fall himself.
And, besides... going this fast is awesome.

We arrive soon after we took to the trees, and I gaze admiringly at the place. It's so pretty. It's like... like something out of a fairytale.

Something splashes in the large pool of water in the middle of the stream, and I quickly wriggle out of Itachi's grip to go look.

Oh, woah! There's fish! They're not small, but not that big either, and the sunlight gleams off their silvery scales easily, thanks to the clear water.

"Salmon," Itachi explains, pointing. "The smaller ones... they might be sweet fish, ayu. Today, we'll only be fishing for salmon. But remember what the ayu look like. They like clean, running water, so if you can find them, it usually means that the water is safe to drink. They also taste the best when simply skewered on a stick by the fire. You don't need to do anything fancy, and they're common enough that they're what we normally eat on missions, when we're not by a town."

"Usually, the only other options are ration bars or food pills," Shisui chimes in. "And the first is disgusting, but you don't really feel full after the second one. They're useful and good for you—or at least, everyone says so—but it's a lot nicer to actually eat food." He pauses "Even if you can't have a fire, they're usually okay to eat raw, even. Most fish are."

"There is the risk of parasites and food poisoning, Shisui," Itachi interjects.

"So? Aren't the... what's it called again... ginger and shiso suppose to prevent that or something?"

"...I doubt that leaves and thinly sliced roots can somehow kill only parasites, Shisui," Itachi says flatly.

Shisui grumbles. "Yeah, yeah. I know it sounds weird. But Jii-chan practically swears by i—GAH!"

He practically shrieks when a hand clamps down on his shoulder, and he turns slowly to look at the owner of the hand, face going white.

"Hello, Makoto-chan, Itachi-kun," Kagami-jiisan says, smiling. "I'm sorry for the interruption, but I really do think I ought to teach my dearest grandson a lesson in how to respect his elders, right, Shishi-chan? In fact, when you come by tomorrow, Makoto-chan, remind me to get the baby pictures out for this ungrateful little hellion." He sighs dramatically, shaking his head. "You used to be so cute, Shishi-chan."

"Shishi-chan?" I whisper at Itachi. "Like... those things on the temple roofs?"

He nods, carefully restraining his laughter. "It is one of the only ways Kagami-san can blackmail Shisui, since he's practically incapable of feeling embarrassment," Itachi explains. "But he looks... quite frankly, terrible, in that one photo."

"That's an understatement," Shisui grumbles, returning. "I look like this sunburnt potato-sausage monstrosity. And yellow is so not my color."

"For some reason, I want to see that picture even more now," I grin. "But on another note... what do we do now?"

"Uh..." Shisui says intelligently.
"I'll go get Shino and Neji. You have a minute or so to figure things out."

When I find Shino by a fallen log and Neji with Hizashi-san, I lead them back to Shisui and Itachi. By then, Shisui's smiling awkwardly in a way that it doesn't reach his eyes… yup. He's blanking. And probably trying not to panic. That carefully mild, placid smile… yeah, he's definitely practiced that in front of a mirror. And honestly, if it weren't for how his gaze desperately darts to Itachi ever now and then, I probably would have just brushed off his rehearsed stillness.

As it is, Itachi's definitely enjoying himself, if that self-satisfied smile… nah, it's a smirk. There's too much vicious glee for that to be a smile. Anyways, if that's any indication.

"Today, we will be teaching you how to use kunai, as well as how shinobi normally gather and prepare food. We will demonstrate some simple traps for rabbits, birds, and fish. Apart from that, you will also learn about what plants you can and cannot eat around here, as well as a bit of how to actually prepare your food. Shisui will also teach you other methods of fishing, such as kunai and fishing poles." After explaining, Itachi looks around. "Any questions?"

I shake my head. "I think we're good. Shino? Neji?" When both nod, I look back. "I think we're good. Where can we start?"

We start by holding kunai, then throwing kunai at trees, while Itachi corrects us and Shisui's off getting… something. We all suck. There's really no sugar-coating it. We get better to the point where we can more-or-less consistently hit a rather large tree trunk from about four meters away, and that's apparently really good… but… it's not good enough in my opinion, if that makes sense.

Then, Itachi herds us over to Shisui, who leads us into the forest to find a willow tree with long, rather bendy branches. He helps us cut several handfuls of the branches, and some even smaller twigs, before bringing us back out.

Shisui explains and demonstrates how to make a fish trap, which basically involves making two baskets and tying one inside the other so that fish can swim in, but not out. He uses kunai, and some dull ninja wire, as well as everything we'd retrieved. Itachi then leads us over to the river, where he left a net and some larger, sturdier branches and thin string.

Itachi explains that the trap usually can catch fish even if it doesn't have bait inside, but it's better with bait. He brings out a case with what he says are chicken livers, and puts it at the far back of the cage, before trying a string to the top, wading into the water, and carefully positioning it so that the opening faces upstream.

Meanwhile, Shisui hooks pieces of what seem to be chopped-up raw squid and a rock to a string that he fed through a hole in the top of a branch. The rest of the string is looped around the branch. He then grabs two more similarly-prepared sticks, leads us over to the edge of the water and wedges them individual at intervals into the mud, propping them up with piles of pebbles. He then grabs more string, attaches hooks, baits them, and add weights. He then walks over to a tree overlooking the water, climbs up, and ties the branch to the tree, before unreeling the string until their bait is in the water.

As he works, he explains what he's doing, as well as the benefits and detriments of each method of fishing. For the most part, they take too long and don't catch much fish.

Then, Shisui and Itachi walk onto the river, like, on the water, tie wire to a few kunai, and…
oh, wow, that's fast.

And… now they're just showing off. The acrobatics also look cool, but they're really not that necessary. Seriously. In the span of about five minutes or so, they managed to catch sev— no, nine fish. And the last five were in the last minute or so, after Itachi finished lecturing on how to aim for the fish.

That's good, though, because now, we get food!

Or not. Neji, Shino, and I, the three kids, are trailing after Shisui while he explains a bit about safety and plants. Previously, we dropped the fish off with Kagami-jiisan and Hizashi-san, who'd demonstrated different ways to prepare a fish… namely, skewered and filleted. They'd also let us try filleted a fish each. It… had turned out… decently… I guess. They'd then gotten to work on the rest of the fish while Shisui dragged us off.

"So, there are plants you can eat, there are plants you shouldn't eat, and you cannot eat under any circumstances, because then you need to get to a med-nin or you will be in extreme pain and may or may not die. There are also plants you can touch, plants you shouldn't touch, and plants that, if you touch, you probably should get to a med-nin. The same goes for animals, though then, you shouldn't go near, scare, or get the animal angry at you. Like snakes. You don't need to touch or eat them, but they can still bite you. And there are skunks and hedgehogs and really scary birds that get really aggressive and angry at you when you get too close to their nests."

Shisui pauses. "The good news is, you probably won't die… usually. And most of the poisonous stuff is a bit bitter, and even they will take a while to kill you, and if you don't eat too much, they probably won't. Still… they can make life pretty miserable for you, even if you don't die. And they might kill you indirectly or something, like if you have really bad stomach problems on a mission and can't probably focus on a fight with an enemy shinobi. So, yeah. Even though you won't don't die immediately, it's best to stay away from poisonous stuff. And for that matter, don't get on the bad side of poison specialists. It's just a bad idea."

I grin. Time to annoy Shisui. Using my most annoying voice, I ask, "Why?"

"Uh… because they will poison you?"

"Why?"

"Because… they're upset at you?"

"Why?"

"Because of what you did to them?"

At this point, Neji's furiously trying not to laugh, while Shino's shoulders are shaking slightly.

Shino decides to step in and save Shisui. "Why is it bad if they poison you?"

"Oh. Well, then you feel really bad… and… well, just don't."

"Okay," I chirp, sharing a grin with Shino. Even though his eyes are covered by his sunglasses, I can practically feel him roll his eyes. Yeah… he was my first target. You know how kids often just keep asking "why" nonstop? And then, you're just like, "I give up. Why are birds is not even a question!"

You know? Yeah… at one point, I decided it was fun to follow Shino around for a day, asking that
non-stop. I quit when he got annoyed, but after I repeated that a few times, he got into the habit of explaining himself before I had time to ask "why?"

I decided to pretty much permanently stop after that, but... by now, explaining everything has become Shino's default. I still kinda feel sorry for that, and by the subtle grin on his face when I react, I think that's kind of why he still does that.

I actually did the same to Neji, too, but he just ignored me after the fifth time or so...

...

Gah!

I stiffen as a hand lands on my shoulder.

"Maybe we should cut this short. Two of my snares caught a rabbit, and, surprisingly, we already caught two fish with the traps." Itachi walks over to stand by Shisui, and turns to look at us. "I think, at this point, it would be safest for you to avoid eating plants unless a qualified shinobi has said that they're fine to eat. It takes a long time to learn to consistently identify edible versus poisonous plants." He pauses. "If you need food, it's usually best to eat fish. Or animals like rabbits. They're not poisonous. Which is why we will be teaching you how to skin and prepare a rabbit."

Shisui grumbles, but agrees. And so, we trudge back out of the forest.

---

Half-an-hour later, we're happily chowing down on fish and rabbit. The rabbit... is actually pretty good. The meat's pale in color, but not dry. The fish... well, it's fish. The teriyaki sauce is nice, which is good!

Hizashi-san also unpacks some stuff, so we have bottles of sweet tea and dango and anpan and daifuku... all sorts of sweets.

As for Shisui... huh. I tilt my head, squinting in an effort to see better. What's that?

I scoot over. "Ne, Shisui?" I ask, pointing. "What's that?"

He looks down. "Ah? Oh, the shiso. This one's aojiso. There's also a red type, but we usually eat the green plants only. You might have seen it with sashimi? It's also used to... I think it's used to pickle umeboshi or something... oh, and if you mix it with... I think it was creeping wood sorrel, you get some pretty cool fake blood." He leans in. "And Itachi doesn't believe me, but it could kill parasites in raw fish if you eat it at the same time, and can also prevent food poisoning."

I stare at him, questioningly. "Are you sure? That sounds..." I mean... it's plausible, but...

Shisui shrugs. "Well, it's not going to poison you or make you sick or anything, so..."

That's fair.

---

On the way back, the adults— and Shisui and Itachi— decide that it would be faster to take the trees, and we kids hop back on our respective forms of transportation. The sun's not that low, but the light is golden-orange, so they want to hurry. After asking Itachi again if he's sure I'm not too heavy, I happily climb right back up. Shisui's hair is too spiky. Itachi's hair is a lot nicer, even if it is longer. I carefully arrange myself so that I'm not pulling his hair, and then we take off.
I'm tired by the time we return to Konohagakure. We stop by the gates, and… it's kind of pretty. The Hokage faces are awash in orangey-red light, and it softens the jagged rocky edges. Lights are being hung all throughout the village, and it's really pretty.

I see some people with white flak jackets and darker skin, and Itachi explains that it's the delegation from Kumo. They'd arrived while we were gone. It's the nineteenth. Tsukimi's in… five days, I think.

"The festival will start as the sun sets on the twenty-fourth," Itachi murmurs.

I just blink drowsily, humming in agreement. "Mmm. Thanks for ca-carrying me," I yawn, setting my head down again. "Sorry. 'M tired… but I had fun today. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Itachi reponds. "I'll drop you off?"

"Thanks." I yawn, shaking my head to try and clear it. "Are you going to be here for the festival?"

"Hm… to be honest, I am not quite sure. My team is still relatively… new, but we have been improving steadily…"

...yeah, he's not going to be here. About two days later, Itachi leaves on an easy body-guarding C-rank, a mission that should just last about a week, at most. Still, that's enough to guarantee that he won't be here for tsukimi. And Shisui left the day right after our day trip for for a mission of his own.

I've promised to tell them all about the festivities when they get back.

The day of the festival, you can practically feel the excitement in the air.

Lights start turning on a bit before sunset, as if they're also too excited to wait. Soon, the streets glow yellow and orange and red, even as the shadows lengthen and get bluer.

Shino meets Neji and Hizashi-san and I just outside the Hyūga compound, our pockets jangling with ryō coins. I'm laughing at Neji's enthusiasm and trying not to stumble in my geta or trip over the hem of my kimono. It's not quite the right time to wear the kanzashi, but I wear the ribbon happily in a large bow around a high ponytail.

We run around for what seem like ages, and it's only when we're tired and my feet hurt and we're beyond full on sweets and snacks that we return. I'm carefully carrying a small bag. Hizashi-san had helped me scoop up pretty white goldfish with golden-yellow splotches during that one game of kingyo-sukui, and I want to find a place to put it. He lets me make use of a pretty ceramic white-and-blue bowl, and promises to take me shopping later for a better container later, and also to help me name the fish.

The adults are busy doing their own stuff, though, and Hitomi-sama leads me over to Hinata-san, asking us to play nicely. Neji's a bit stiffer and quieter with her in the room, but there's really not that many children here, and the adults who'd normally humor us are doing something that seems rather… not appropriate for children. Plus, it's Hitomi-sama. It wouldn't have been polite to refuse.

By then, we're tired, but… sleep is kept quite at bay by the sugar from earlier. We end up all piling into Hinata-san's room, which is comfortable to sprawl in with its pillows and carpet and stuffed animals and how fluffy and fuzzy and soft everything is.

Slowly, between talks of food and festivals and seasons and weather and other trivia that you learn
and then forget, we drift off to sleep.

I wake up with a headache and a dry mouth.

It's still dark, but it's quiet outside, and... I want water. I grumble, yawning and rubbing my face.

There's a slightly scary, slightly spooky atmosphere, but I wave it off as just the night and the dark and the quiet. I shuffle over to the door, pulling it open. There's a figure in whitish-grey in the hall.

I rub my eyes. "Nngn... 'Zashi-san? Do I need to go to... to my room?" I yawn. "Mm thirsty..."

But then the figure moves, and I jolt back, wide-eyed and more awake and who is this...

My foot catches on the edge of my kimono, and I fall backwards. Then there's a blur, and something hard latches around my stomach, and ow... a sharp pain on the back of my neck.

I blink, but... I'm tired. Eyes sleepy... head hurts... I slump over.

I go back to sleep.

In the autumn fields
When the heedless wind blows by
Over the pure-white dew,
How the myriad unstrung gems
Are scattered everywhere around
— Fun'ya no Asayasu

白露を
風のふきしく
秋の野は
つらぬきとめぬ
玉ぞちりける
— 文屋朝康

Shiratsuyu o
Kaze no fukishiku
Aki no no wa
Tsuranuki tomenu
Tama zo chiri keru
Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry that it's a bit... long.
It was originally split into multiple chapters, but the flow was just wrong, especially with that pseudo-filler in the middle, so… ta-da! I decided to just toss it all into one chapter. You're welcome! I hope it works. There are a lot of words, and I've tried to proofread everything, but...

Please let me know if there are any parts that seem weird?

And oooh, there's a bit of a cliff-hanger at the end! I'm being nice, so it's only going to be a cliffhanger for maybe a maximum of 24 hours, but... please comment?

-ShadowAccio6181
Of Accidents and Tragedy

Chapter Summary

In which... well... Makoto refuses to be a stereotypical damsel in distress... and the Hyūga Affair still happens, despite everything that changes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

____________________________

By the wind storm's blast

From the mountain slopes

Maples leaves are torn,

Which turn the river

Into a rich brocade.

____________________________

It's dark.

I wake up to a throbbing headache, a crick in my neck, and something digging into my side.

Wha… what happened? I reach up to try and rub my face, but my hand's stuck… and my legs are pins-and-needles numb.

I suddenly remember what happened. Mind you, the rhythmic thumping, pain, cramped conditions, and more pain provide a pretty good picture.

I feel around. Long hair… Neji! And… I think… Hinata? Probably.

I put a hand over Neji's mouth while I pinch and prod at him. Sorry Neji, but this is important, and I need you awake. Neji groans and shifts around, so I resort to covering his nose and mouth. He jerks awake with a grumbled, "Makoto?"

I feel a jolt as the person carrying us starts. Thinking quickly, I adopt a sleep-fuzzy tone and mumble, "Ta-ko-ya-ki… dango…" while letting out a couple of grumbles, shifting, and for all purposes, going back to sleep.

Okay, Makoto, think. What's the situation? ...I've been kidnapped. I don't know how long it's been. I'm pretty sure... I'm pretty sure this is a shinobi from Kumo. He (or she) is nervous. But exhausted. His or her nerves are practically shot. I don't hear birds yet, but I'm rather awake, so it's probably early in the morning.

What do I have? I have Neji, Hinata… anything still on me from the festival… the kunai! Thank the heavens for Kagami-jiisan. Okay. I think I have a plan. I just need to talk to Neji.

Taking a few calming breaths, because I'm dead if anything bad happens, I focus on coaxing out a
tendril of chakra and imbuing it with a sense of peace, this-is-completely-normal, and the noises I can hear from outside the bag. Genjutsu is supposed to affect the brain. I've read about. I don't know if this will work or not, but I don't know any hand seals. However, what I do know is that I managed to once make Shisui see sparkles and flowers, even if he made me promise him to wait before trying anything like that again. Sorry, Shisui, but… I think this warrants an exception.

I'm not sure if it worked, but… I let out a yawn and a louder grumble. Nothing.

Okay. Here goes… "Neji, we're being kidnapped," I hiss. "Don't panic. I need you to get a hold of Hinata. I have a kunai, and I'll try to cut open this bag enough to jump out. Then, we run. Do you understand?"

I feel the gravity of the situation dawn on Neji, and he nods furiously, rustling the bag. I grab my kunai, cursing at the fact that I'm still in festival wear, before taking a deep breath to try and calm my nerves. What do I need the jōnin to believe…

'I'm safe. I'm far away from Konoha. My village will be so proud of me. I'm tired. Surely, it's fine to have a slight rest… gah! Stupid tree branches! I need to focus. I need to get as far as I can before sunrise. Everything's fine. I have the brats. I'm perfectly safe. Everything's fine. Everything's going smoothly.'

I repeat the sequence of thoughts, praying that my half-formed hypothesis about genjutsu works, before slowly coaxing out another, larger tendril of chakra and sending it towards where I think the Kumo-nin's head is. If only I were facing that way… maybe a deep enough stab… no.

Can't think about that. Can't risk it. What if you miss and they don't die and…

No. Stick to the plan. You know the forests. There aren't forests in Kumo. Not Konoha forests, at least. I think.

Deep breath. Okay. Let's hope. I grab my kunai, taking advantage of a jolt to stick it slightly into the bag. Waiting… waiting… waiting… "Now!" I hiss, yanking the kunai downward as I curl into a ball, pushing through the cut and slamming the kunai into a branch-

A weight slams into me, jolting my arm, and I fall, landing on a leg, only for it to collapse… and the tendril of chakra connecting me to the Kumo-nin snaps.

I freeze. But then a high-pitched voice mumbles, "Hmm? Okaa-san? Chicui-ue?"

I mentally curse, before lunging towards Hinata and Neji, grabbing them, and dragging them around the tree trunk so that it's between the Kumo-nin and us. Unfortunately, Hinata just doesn't shut up, and she actually starts crying.

We're dead. We're dead. "Neji, hurry and get over to that tree. Make sure to be quick, and that the Kumo-nin can't see you. When the Kumo-nin heads for us, Jūken him. I'll try to get Hinata to be quiet. Understand? Good. Go!" I hiss, before steeling myself for a performance.

He needs us alive… I think. This is so undignified, I grumble, before letting out a few choked-off whimpers that are more hysterical laughter. I screw my face and pretend to cry. 'Think Makoto, think! It probably worked… maybe. At least until that connecting chakra faded. You'll have to get ready. Think. Think.'

I add to the theatrics, taking a deep, gasping breath, even as I furiously try to think up a plausible thought process. There are so many possibilities… okay, pick one and stick to it. In skating over thin ice our safety is in our speed, Ralph Waldo Emerson.
'There's two missing kids. Where are those two I grabbed? The Hyūga girl and that other one, the
one who woke up? Pathetic brats. Seriously, crying? Dammit, I need to hurry up and get going
again. And what on earth happened with the bag? Probably scraped against a tree too much or
Okay, try to calm them down. Hey, stop crying. Come over here. I have candy. Kids like that, don't
they? I think that white-haired one's calming down. Does she actually believe me? She's patting the
other one on the back. Maybe I can actually get them to come with my voluntari—'

The stream of chakra cuts off abruptly. I look over to see Neji standing over the downed shinobi.
"I… I Jūkened him in the groin, then jumped up and aimed for the head," Neji gasps, wide-eyed.
"I… I think… it worked? I don't know? Makoto, do you think…"

"Good job, Neji." I say, trying not to panic. We're who-knows-where, there's a possibly dead Kumo-
nin in front of us… wait. Possibly-dead. "Neji, can you repeat that, aiming for the head again, and
then the… um, heart?" Can't take chances. I'm scared. I want to go home. I want Itachi and Shisui
and Ojii-san and Okaa-san and Otou-san and… I take a shuddering breath, before limping forward.

I need supplies. My leg isn't working. I think something broke. Not a bone, maybe… but I heard a
popping noise. Legs aren't supposed to make popping noises. And now, I can't put much weight on
my left leg without it hurting and probably buckling under me and probably hurting even more.

The Kumo-nin, and yes, now it's definitely a Kumo-nin, given that headband, has some very
convenient supplies. I take as much as I can. From the weapons pouch to the vest and the extra
storage pouches, as well as the bandages on his legs, I take pretty much everything I can. Even the
headband and the now mostly-useless bag and that thing around his neck. I'm not sure why, but I'm
driven by adrenaline and panic. There's a half-formed plan that if we find anyone, I'll need something
to show them that we're not just lying or hysterical, but… I'm honestly not thinking clearly. Anything
I can carry, I grab.

Ignoring the sound of Hinata still crying, I turn to Neji. "Okay, do you know where Konoha is?"

Mutely, he shakes his head. I take a deep breath. Okay. Konoha. I'm important, Hinata's important,
Neji's important. Someone will come after us. Or we'll find someone. There are shinobi out on
missions, watching the border… we'll either find someone or someone will find us. It's a matter of
staying alive, safe, and in one piece until then.

"Neji, when you used your Byakugan, did you see any more Kumo-nin around?"

He shakes his head again. "No, but… I can't see very far, either."

So that doesn't mean much. Still… "Neji, help me dig as deep a hole as you can, probably next to
some bushes or something. Every couple minutes, turn on your Byakugan quickly and look around.
We need to hide the Kumo-nin, and then we need to make it seem like we weren't here."

That's to detract any Kumo-nin, hopefully. Because if there's nothing obvious, they might not know
we started heading back from here. Konoha would probably send an Inuzuka after us, or someone
else specializing in tracking, and I don't think there's anyone like that in Kumo, so…

Deep breath.

"Wait, Neji, first, do you think you can grab my kunai?" I ask. He nods, and climbs up to grab it,
before jumping down.

Neji and I drag the Kumo-nin over to a thicket of bushes by a tree. Well, I say Neji and I. It was
mostly Neji. We dig a small indentation, just enough to get a pile of dirt, before dragging him into the bushes and arranging the branches to hopefully discourage anyone from finding him too easily. I remove his shoes, since they're too easy to see. Luckily, like most Kumo-nin, this one's dark-skinned.

Also luckily, it's September, and there are plenty of fallen leaves around. I grab an armful, piling them over the Kumo-nin and trying to make everything seem as natural as possible. I try to remove the tracks showing where we dragged the Kumo-nin, before tossing more leaves over the entire thing. When we get back, Hinata's stopped crying loudly, but is now huddled in a ball, hiccuping.

"Neji? Can you carry Hinata?" I ask.

He thinks, then nods slowly. "I think so."

"Awesome." I turn to Hinata. "Hey, Hinata?"

She peeks up. "W-what?" she hiccups, swiping a sleeve over her face and sniffing.

I blank. "Uh… do you think you can stand up?"

She nods.

"Okay, Neji's going to give you a piggy-back ride, okay?" I grin. "We're playing a game!"

She frowns. "What type of game?"

I dramatically look away. "Well… you don't really have to play if you don't want to," I say slowly. "But Neji bet that he was stronger than me. I told him that, to prove it, he'd have to carry you while walking." I look at her piteously. "Please? And then, I need to show that I can walk even farther than he can. So… do you think you can help me."

Hinata blinks for a moment before nodding hesitantly. "Ano… hai."

"Wonderful!" I exclaim, clapping my hands together. "So, just come over here. I'll give you a boost." After a bit of shuffling around, we get Hinata situated. "Okay, now… just stay there, okay?"

Hinata nods.

"Neji, just walk… that way," I decide, pointing. It's pointless to head straight back. I think I knew which direction the Kumo-nin was heading. If I consider that northeast, and the fact that he couldn't have traveled enough to leave the Land of Fire… we should head west, first. Keishi, the capital, is either south or southwest. If there are people from Kumo or Kaminari no Kuni over there, I don't want to bump into them. So, west. Which, if I face the direction the Kumo-nin was heading, should be behind me and to the left. "Try not to step on any branches. I'll follow behind you." 'And clean up your tracks,' I add mentally, 'While trying to keep weight off my injured leg.'

It's sometime while we're walking that the… vision? Hallucination?— I'm not sure what it is— strikes first. It's just a feeling, and it's almost as if I just… fell asleep. You know, how when you're really tired, you just drift off, and then something causes you to suddenly wake up and feel really alert? A bit like that. It felt the same, at first. Someone in front of me at nighttime. I'm stumbling and there's this same feeling. Kind of a mix of shock, and 'okay, well, that happened, and i have no idea what I'm doing but this kinda feels right?'

It's broken when Hinata coughs, and the earlier image of the other person disappears. No. Neji's shorter than that. And they're not wearing white. Why did I think he was wearing white?
We trudge on until we find a small river. By then, the sky is already lightening up. That gives us a better idea of direction, and we adjust. Following the gravel bed upstream, we continue heading west until we reach a small pond, and the sun's on the horizon. To be honest, it's not really a pond. But… there are ducks nearby, and I see dark shapes under the water. There's a splash, and rippling scales, and… there's fish. Salmon, I think. But there are also smaller ones… ayu. Sweetfish. It's not that late in the year, apparently. But more importantly, that means…

"I think the water here should be safe to drink," I murmur. "But first, I want to try something…"

I cut a length of ninja wire with a kunai, before tying one end around the loop at the back, while fastening the other end to a stick, which I stick into my belt. I should be able to catch some fish. They should be safe to eat raw. And if I can find a pregnant female salmon, or sake, the ikura should be good to eat, too.

But… I mean, I could use a rock, especially after washing it and cleaning it, but…

The sunlight means that I can actually see some of the plants now. And, if I'm not mistaken… yes! I find a few stalks of shiso, or rather, aojiso, the green variety. It's the thing that's usually with sashimi, I think, but the most important thing is that it's clean and edible and good to serve as a leaf-plate-thingy, and… I think Shisui said that it could kill parasites in raw fish when eaten.

I'm not sure if I believe him or not, but it can't hurt.

By now, the sun's high enough that the clearing is brightly lit, and I have an aid to help in my efforts at fishing. I can't stand on the water, but there's a few rocks poking out of the water in the middle of the pond.

I take off my yukata and socks and shoes, shivering at the cold, before wading over with my kunai. I still can't put weight on one leg, and that proves unfortunate, because my right leg lands on something slippery. Since it bears the entirety of my weight, I fall with a loud splash.

Water goes up my nose. My eyes are screwed shut. I want to gasp for air, but my head's still underwater. My feet don't touch the gravel bottom. I… can't… breathe…

I slam into a rock, and I grab onto it. I pull myself upright against the current, coughing and spluttering, fingers probably scraped raw against the gravel, before using it as leverage to reach a larger rock nearby.

I climb onto it, shivering and drenched, but with the kunai still in my hand.

See the fish. Wait for it… I throw the kunai onto the fish that surfaced nearby. I also miss. Right. I almost forgot. Aim below the fish. I coil up the wire, grab the kunai, and wait again for another fish to get closer. This one's big. Aim carefully…

Splash! I quickly kneel down, winding up the wire, trying carefully not to cut myself. Quickly, quickly… I quickly pull my shirt off, take a deep breath, and jump at the fish. I grab the fish with the shirt, wrapping it up and preventing it from struggling. My hand touches the gravel. I push up, grab at a rock, and pull my head back above the water.

The store isn't far away. I toss my precious bundle, carefully watching it as it lands on the bank. Okay. Now, time to get me out of the water. I drop myself into the water, holding onto the rock for dear life. Okay. There's another rock there… and another one here… and I'll have to watch for my step on that one, because it looks really slipping…
Eventually, I manage to pull myself onto the shore. My fingers are freezing, I'm shivering, but we have food.

I carefully unwrap the fish. I think... yes, this fish is pregnant. We don't have salt or soy sauce or anything, but... it's edible and it'll have to do. I fashion a rough bowl-like shape out of my shirt, before pushing down on the belly of the fish. A stream of orange eggs pop out from the belly, and I quickly aim it at the cloth indentation.

I repeat the motions until there's no more eggs, before grabbing another kunai and cutting the salmon's head off, whispering an apology.

In the meantime, Neji shuffles over. "What's that?" he whispers.

"Ikura," I respond. "It's good to eat. I'll also clean the fish and try to catch some more, for lunch. We'll feel hungry soon, after everything we did. I want to try to have some food ready. Do you think you can clean another rock? Try to find something like this, that's flat, or that has a bit of a dip in the middle. If you need to, use a kunai to scrap stuff off."

He nods, and heads over to the riverbank, examining the rocks. Once I'm happy that he seems mostly fine, I look for Hinata. She's... asleep, against a tree. To be honest, that's probably for the best. This situation isn't one that's suitable for a normal three-year-old. Apparently, normal three-year-olds panic and cry and don't listen. Yeah... I can't really blame Hinata, but I much prefer her to be asleep.

I pick the rock up, and head back to the pond. I'll try to arrange some rocks and use the fish's organs for bait. Plus, I need the water to clean the fish. The kunai's as clean as I can get it. But really, this salmon isn't that big. It's that hump-backed type. It might do, but... I should really try to get another one. Or two. I got lucky with this one. I should... I should prepare. I think. Just in case. I don't know.

The head's already off, so... picking up the kunai, I carefully slit the belly, pulling out the organs and dumping them into the lake, before rinsing the fish. I extend the cut to the tail, before doing the same to the top, careful to keep to one side of the bones. The cuts aren't that clean, and I'm making a bit of a mess, but I manage. Then, I do the same long the other side of the spine, before cleaning the pieces up and trying to get rid of as many bones as I can. The point is to get something to eat, I remind myself. Neatness and making it look nice isn't important.

I rinse both sections, before cutting them up more and putting them on a "plate" of rinsed shiso, and covering them with more shiso. I also cover the ikura with wet shiso.

There's quite a bit of ikura, so... I should be okay with just one more fish, I guess.

I shift over to where I dumped the remnants of the fish. Time to brave the cold and the wet again.

Hours have passed. The sun went from gentle, to straight above, and the light went from soft to bright, to golden. And then orangey. And now, a reddish scarlet that contrasts with the almost blueish shadows. We've eaten our way through four fish. I have three more chopped up nearby. It turns out that spending an entire day trying to catch fish is very good practice for aiming kunai, and having so many targets means that I have a decent chance of hitting something. Hinata woke up a bit before midday, ate, and went back to sleep during the afternoon. Neji's silent.

I stare at the shadows. They get longer with every passing second. It's getting darker.

I wonder if Konoha knows we're missing. Logic dictates that they should have realized in the morning, but... if the Hyūga stayed up late drinking and attending the festivities... they should have
woken up before midday, right? They should have realized we weren't in Konoha by then. But, then again, they might have just assumed that we kids had gone out to play or something. But attendance at dinner is mandatory.

Right now, it's probably a bit before sunset. That's when dinner is. It for a koku, about two hours. If we don't show up at sunset, they'll get worried, but they probably will just think we lost track of time or something. However, by the end of dinner, they should be really panicked. The Kumo-nin ran with us until at least half a koku, an hour or so, before sunrise… I think. He probably left a little after midnight. If the distance he ran is equivalent to someone running for two koku, four hours, of running with the added weight of three kids on his back, anyone from Konoha should be able to do the same in less than two koku. Maybe less than one koku. I don't know.

A koku past sunset. About eight. Maybe it will take an hour for them to actually ready a group to search for us. It shouldn't take longer than two hours, I'd imagine. We're pretty important, after all. Eight + two + five. Fifteen. So… three o'clock. About a koku and a half past midnight. If no one's found us by tomorrow morning, we'll have to try to head home ourselves.

I shift over to where Neji's sitting, and tell him what I decided. He agrees.

I don't want to leave, though. My leg hurts. And it's scary. I prod Neji until he stands up, and I drag him over to where I've got the fish.

"Eat up," I tell him. "We shouldn't keep it out for too long. Plus, we'll need our energy if… if no one shows up tomorrow."

Neji nods and picks up some more fish with the shiso leaves. I do the same. The salmon doesn't really taste like much, and the texture gets a bit unpleasant after only having that, but the perilla leaves, the shiso, help with the taste. I normally don't like them, but… they're delicious right now. The ikura, salmon roe, don't taste like much either, but are a welcome change from the salmon. They're not naturally salty, apparently. If I'm being honest, that was a bit of a surprise.

But… it's food. And they're filling. I'm honestly not that hungry, but… I force myself to eat. I can't waste food. At least, the good thing with not eating many vegetables is that I don't have to try and… uh… well… go poo. Speaking of… excretion… that is one example of why I'm very thankful to be a boy in this life. Peeing is considerably easier, neater, and just cleaner, especially when there's no toilet. That's also the reason why I haven't offered Hinata much water to drink. Earlier, I also made sure to tell Neji to go well away from the pond before going number 1.

We don't need extra ammonia in the drinking water. There's already enough from the fish… and I'm going to very determinedly not think about that.

I lean back on the grass. I'm tired. The sun's touching the horizon now, and it's pretty dark. Surely it would be fine for just a short nap?

My mind drifts back to that weird vision/deja-vu thingy from earlier. I thought I was following someone… someone else. A bit taller, wearing white. Could it be from Before? Maybe it was from during my childhood, or from any of the other times I was out at night… maybe in Disneyland? But no, the only light was from the moon and stars… I think.

It was an uphill climb… or was it a downhill climb. We passed through forest? Or was it a rockier mountain? Maybe it was a night hike? I've been on those before. The person in front of me was leading me somewhere. We were trying to get somewhere. Maybe it was a night hike, like something from any of the school-sponsored retreats in middle and high school? But… no. Those weren't in the dark, I think. And I don't remember a moon for those. And we definitely had to have flashlights, for
safety, I remember. I don't remember a flashlight then… but it was a rather bright night. So maybe I
just don't remember flashlights? But there wasn't a path, I think. And I thought there was a feeling of
scratches on my feet, and the itch of grasses on bare skin. And I only remember that other person, no
one else. Any school trips had large groups of people.

Maybe… maybe I'd gotten lost on my way to the restroom or something? And there was a campfire
behind me, I think. No, wait. Not a campfire. Fire. Something was on fire… but I don't remember
panicking. Maybe it was candles?

I think I began heading towards the firelight. No, running. I… tripped? I don't remember. I had to tell
someone something… I think. And there was an odd feeling… desperation?

All of a sudden, a rustle of bushes snaps me out of my doze.

The sun's more than half-way down, now. How long was I out?

"There you are!" a voice calls.

I flinch, spinning around and pushing myself to my feet. My foot. A flicker of movement shows me
that Neji did the same thing. The sudden movement jARRs my bad leg and I almost want to cry, but…

A dog jumps into the clearing. It's massive, probably at least twice my height, with fluffy orange fur
that's probably at least a foot long.

Oh. Never mind. Two dogs. A small, fluffy white dog jumps off the orange one's back. I think…
that's a pomeranian. Huh.

"Good job, Mura, Mizu!" the voice exclaims.

A shinobi with a Konohagakure hitai-ate and a chūnin vest bounds in after the dogs. "Hi everyone!
Good job with the… um… situation. I'm Inuzuka Koga, and I'm part of the team sent to get you guys
back."

I examine him. He's pretty tall, with spiky brown hair in a low ponytail, tanned skin, and the typical
Inuzuka fang tattoos on his cheek. I think we can trust him. I guess I was right. However…

I rattle of a series of questions. "Who's also in the team? Why were you selected? What's currently
going on?"

The chūnin blinks. "Uh… the Hyūga clan head and his brother. I'm one of the best trackers in
Konoha, and the most well-rounded, since Murasakimaru here has a great nose and Mizuiromaru, the
angry little one, has some of the best ears in the village."

Said angry little one growls.

"And, ah, well, the Hyūga clan realized that you guys were missing by around lunchtime. After a bit
of asking around, it turned out that no one had seen any of you since yesterday. The Kumo
delegation left around mid-morning for the capital, and, well, people put two and two together.
There's a couple shinobi sent after that delegation, but I was sent in this direction."

Okay, seems fair. I nod. There's just one issue. "Okay. But then, where's Hiashi-sama and Hizashi-
san?"

"Hyūga?" the chūnin asks. I nod. "They told me to find you as quickly as possible."
My eyes narrow and I back up slightly. Something seems off… "They said you guys were the important thing, and that they’d track me with the Byakugan. Hey, Mura, Mizu. D’you know where the two Hyūga are?" He asks, crouching down a bit. After a few moments, the dogs bark. Koga-san straightens up. "Okay… they’re near the dead body. About… two miles or so that way," he points.

Okay. I think we can trust him. And I want a familiar face so badly. But… "Neji’s tired. Hinata’s asleep." I announce bluntly. "Someone needs to carry them."

The chūnin nods. "Yeah. I can carry one or Mura-chan can carry them both," he mentions.

"You carry Hinata. I'll go with Neji on… Murasaki-chan?" I ask, looking doubtfully at the fluffy behemoth. She barks.

"Oh, definitely," the chūnin laughs awkwardly. "I didn’t notice, but… you’re practically dripping wet, aren't you?"

I give him a deadpan stare. "Fish are food. Fish live in water. Clothes + water = ?"

"Fair enough," he laughs, before heading over to Hinata. Neji and I watch carefully as he maneuvers her into this… sling-like device, before strapping her to his back. It’s a bit like a baby backpack.

Meanwhile, Murasakimaru lies down on her belly, wagging her tail.

"Get on," Koga-san encourages. "Just hold onto her fur. Try not to yank on it… but don't worry, she doesn't bite."

Neji, who's moved closer, looks doubtfully at the dog. I sigh. "Neji, give me a moment."

I limp over to our supplies. I grab my shirt and dump it onto the rough fabric of the bag, before quickly typing my **yukata** around myself. Using that as a shield, I also quickly strip off the rest of my clothing, before wringing out as much water as I could, and then also dumping it onto the sack, quickly followed by everything else. I scuttle over to my shoes and socks, back still to everyone else, before grabbing them. I quickly grab my pants, use them to wipe my feet—it's not like they haven't been through worse at this point—before sliding the socks onto my feet, followed by my **geta**. I tie my **obi** around the **yukata**, wring out my hair one last time, and roll the bag, along with everything else, into a neat package.

"Okay. I'm ready now," I announce.

All the way back, I feel this odd sense of anxiety, almost as if… as if something bad's going to happen. But… what would that be? Maybe it's just because I'm feeling so cold and just… generally exhausted.

And the sun's definitely set by now. So why do I keep seeing fire? And… no, that doesn't make sense. But this almost… almost feels like deja vu. And there's this ghost of a feeling of… suffocation, but more of a sensation than anything, as if nothing makes sense and it's almost like the world is squeezing in on me and what is going on why would he do that— wait, what?

No, it's just paranoia and fear, probably from the dark, I tell myself. It's nothing.

I shake my head I wind my hands through Murasakimaru-san's soft fur, making sure Neji doesn't fall.

A while later, we finally stumble back to the clearing.
Hyūga Hizashi-san's there. I shake Neji awake, and he runs straight at his father, jumping into his arms. Hiashi-sama comes to collect Hinata.

I see that the Kumo-nin's been dragged out from where we tried to hide him, and I carefully avert my eyes. I sigh in relief, letting the bag drop on the ground. I'll give it them in a moment. Finally… it's time to go home.

However, a shout chases away my lethargy.

"YOU!"

I spin around.

"You… you Konoha scum! The ink on the treaty hasn't even dried yet, and you've already murdered the head ninja!"

Hizashi-san, Hiashi-sama, and Inuzuka Koga-san surround us. More Kumo-nin arrive… and then Konoha-nin. Tensions are high, and everyone's shouting at everyone else.

"The person over there kidnapped us!" I shout, but no one listens. My nose stings, my eyes moisten, and… to my shame, I start crying.

But then again, no one really paid attention to me. Or us. Three little kids, stuck in the middle of a mess they weren't ready for.

Are they blind? The shinobi's evidently been dead for quite some while. And why would his killers still be there? And what moron would bring three children with them if they wanted to kill someone?

But the problem? The situation isn't black and white. Either the rest of the Kumo delegation don't know that the head shinobi was going to kidnap us, or they're doing a very good job of feigning innocence. The only solid evidence we have is what I took off the shinobi, which is in a sack at my feet, relatively out-of-view, my injury, and the fact that there are three kids several miles from Konohagakure, and they're not conclusive of the head shinobi's guilt. By the same standard, the stories of three disoriented children is hard to believe, especially when they can't actually explain everything to everyone's satisfaction. Like my kinda-genjutsu that I try to talk around. And the fact that three kids managed to take down a war-hardened shinobi. And the biggest problem for us?

The rest of the concrete evidence… wasn't good.

Fact— The head ninja was unarmed. There was nothing showing that he was a ninja.

Fact— The head ninja died via a Jūken strike to the head.

Fact— There were only four people capable of doing that: Hizashi-san, Hiashi-sama, Hinata, and Neji.

Fact— The Raikage gave Konohagakure an ultimatum— they would either give him the head of the killer, or he would declare war.

Fact— Konoha was not ready for another drawn-out war.

Fact— Two weeks later, there is a closed-casket funeral for Hyūga Hizashi.
After the issue of the dead Kumo-nin, the treaty between Hi no Kuni, the Land of Fire, and Kaminari no Kuni, the Land of Lightning, is in critical danger.

It's been almost a week since… since what happened.

After the ANBU brought… us… back to Konohagakure… well… due to… various issues… I couldn't stay at the Hyūga compound. The… uh… circumstances of my… protection detail… would have probably… more-greatly disturbed me had… it not been under the existing circumstances.

I was taken care of by the team consisting of Mitarashi Anko, Nakahara Kunimatsu… Hyūga Hiderō… and… Sannin no Orochimaru. Ironically? I get along best with Orochimaru-sama. Oops.

Orochimaru-san. He told me not to call him Orochimaru-sama.

I spend a lot of time just… thinking. Trying to digest everything. Trying to understand. Try to figure things out. That's why I currently get along best with him— he doesn't speak.

He's perfectly fine with sitting at the table with a pot of tea, some food, and occasionally a book, while I sit on the other side and stare down at the table, or the food, or at my lap, or outside the window. Apart from the occasional whistle of the kettle, the slight sound of chewing, and the occasional rustle of pages, there's no noise. I like that. I also really like his chawanmushi, which is like this steamed savory egg custard, and he seemed appreciative of Otou-san's recipe for tea eggs… that's good, I guess? I'm not… really in the mood to do much of anything.

I go through the motions of routine out of a… a lack of anything else to do, I guess.

Shinko-chan came in to check on me, even though she has the week off, and I should be thankful, but… I feel so empty.

I'm not in the mood for studying. And I've got a splint on my leg. Apparently, I'd hurt my knee and my ankle. And while my ankle's no big deal… they had to do a bit more on my knee. No one would explain anything in detail, but… it'll heal. Eventually.

The first two days pass like that.

On the third day, I finally start feeling a little human. It doesn't stop that little voice that keeps whispering, though. '…if anything happens, it's your fault, you know. If you just didn't do anything… if you just shut up and sat down and waited for someone else, everything would be better. It's your fault…'

Yes, it's my fault. The problem is… what can I do? I can't go back in time to change things. I'm not sure what I should have done, other than not take everything, or make sure Hinata, Neji, and I couldn't get kidnapped in the first place. And… I don't know what to do now. Should I apologize? Are words enough? What should I do? For that matter, what's going on?

I don't know. I've been thinking about it for two days. I don't know how to initiate anything, or whether what I can do will stop that uncomfortable twisting feeling of guilt in my stomach.

I spent the first day in bed, sleeping. Or rather, trying to sleep. To not think. That didn't work.

On the second day, yesterday, I tried heading over to the Hyūga compound. Hyūga Hoheto-san was
at the door, and he was nice about it, but made it very clear that there was Important Business going on and that I was Not Allowed.

I'm not kidding. I could practically hear the capital letters when he talked.

That made my anxiety worse. I didn't eat much during lunch, though I sipped at the miso soup.

In the afternoon, I tried going to see if Itachi and Shisui were back. Orochimaru-san dropped me off at the gate to the compound, at my insistence. They weren't. Kagami-jiisan was there, though. He was nice, and that uncomfortable feeling of something twisting my stomach around stopped. briefly. He kept telling me how brave I was, and how I did such a good job of trying to stay safe. The problem came when he asked how I was feeling. I think my silence answered that better than anything I could have said. Kagami-jiisan just poured me some more tea and said that while I might be feeling guilty, that nothing was my fault. I couldn't have done anything. I couldn't have known what would happen.

When he told me that, the twisting feeling came back. I quickly excused myself, and ran back to the gate. Orochimaru-san was still waiting there. I grabbed his hand and let him lead me back to my house. Once I get back, I quickly thank him and tell him that I'm feeling tired, and that I'll probably head upstairs for a nap.

I don't nap.

Instead, I wrap myself around a pillow, cocoon myself in blankets, and wonder why I'm crying.

…

On the third day, in the morning, I ask for his help with all of the questions I've been pondering.

It probably isn't my smartest decision. However, I'll drive myself mad if I don't get some answers, and he's my best option. Shisui's still not back, and neither is Itachi. Kagami-jiichan will probably try to sugarcoat things or divert the subject or try to wave my concerns off.

Orochimaru-san is my best option.

"Orochimaru-san?"

"Hmm?"

"...Did you hear about what happened… on… well, then?" I shrug. I'm not sure how to describe it. Luckily, he seems to get the idea.

"Yes."

"I feel guilty. I don't know what to do about that. I was hoping… if you can tell me what I should have done. And… if possible, how to prepare for stuff like… like that."

There's an unnerving silence after my words. I wonder if I've made a mistake. But… at this point, I'm not even sure it matters.

"...Why." It's as much a question as it is a demand. I oblige.

"You're smart. You're a jōnin. You've probably been in situations like this. I can't do anything, right now. The Kumo shinobi were really, really angry. A lot of it was because of something I did. I want… I want to make sure I won't do something like that again. I need to see what else I could have
done, if there was a right was to do stuff." I give a sad smile. "Kind of like if a person is mean. You need to know what to do. Like, if they're a bully, or they didn't actually mean it and just kind of… lashed out. You need to know what to do if you feel angry, or if you feel sad. You can't punch them. See? You need to know what to do in… in certain… situations. Like when Otou-san told me to blow my whistle if I ever felt really scared and needed help. This is the same."

There's another long silence.

"May I review the situation?" he asks. Without waiting for an answer, he continues. "You and two others were kidnapped by a Kumo shinobi. Whatever he does to render you all unconscious, or whether he does anything at all… it doesn't matter. You wake up at some point during his escape. Using a kunai you have, you manage to free yourself, along with the two other children. During the process, you injure your leg. Then, something happens. The Kumo jōnin dies by a Jūken strike to the brain. You strip him and try to hide him, before running away." He pauses to let everything sink in. "Am I wrong?"

"...No. Not really," I answer softly.

"Now, I will start at the beginning. I will stop at certain points. You will tell me what you knew, and what you did as a result."

I nod. "Hai."

"You wake up in a rather cramped bag—"

"Wait." I wince. I probably could have chosen a better way than interrupt, but… "I actually woke up a bit earlier. I think it was when the stranger first got into our room. I think that's why he took me, too."

"...oh?"

I nod. "Yes. I don't remember much. I think I thought he was Hizashi-san or Kō-san or someone like that, who was trying to get us to our bedrooms. But then, something hit me, and I went back to sleep."

Orochimaru-san nods slowly. "You woke up, registered someone, assumed they were friendly, and were knocked out as a result. Am I right?"

I nod again. "Yes."

He pauses, tapping his fingers slowly on the table. "...You couldn't have done anything. You don't have enhanced senses, and it was dark. However, once you become a shinobi, you should learn how to either sense chakra, or just consider everyone who wakes you up as an enemy. Or, you could simply secure your sleeping area in a way that would alert you if any strangers come too close, while making sure to show your comrades how to disable your traps. Normally, this is why shinobi take turns keeping watch… which is when one member of a team stays awake to make sure no enemy shinobi come close."

I nod.

Orochimaru-san continues. "Moving on. Then, the enemy shinobi knocks you out. If you become a shinobi, simply work on your reflexes and know what do in combat scenarios. Learning how to augment your body with chakra and simply growing up will also help. Next… when you wake up inside the bag."
"I had a headache. There was this jolting feeling, so I knew we were moving. Plus, Neji's hair was in my face, and Hinata was probably the one elbowing me. So I knew we were all taken. Probably by a shinobi, too, since we were last in the Hyūga compound. I didn't know who or why. But I was still in my yukata. So, I woke Neji up, told him to grab Hinata and get ready to jump, and then slashed the bag with the kunai. I didn't expect to be in midair when that happened, though. Still, I'd managed to dig the kunai into a tree, which hurt my shoulder a bit, but not too much. Unfortunately, someone, I think Hinata, slammed into me, knocking me down. I landed on my leg. Hinata fell next to me and started crying. Then—"

Orochimaru-san cuts me off with a sharp wave of his hand. "That's enough for now. First, do you know what your biggest mistake was?"

I shrink in on myself. "I didn't realize we were tree-jumping."

"Precisely. That will be less worrisome when you become a genin, as will your landing. Genin are trained in how to fall and how to catch themselves, as well as how to land. There's also a technique known as tree-walking, where shinobi can, quite literally, walk up trees, but that's irrelevant. Again, you probably chose the optimal course of action for that instance. Had you known it was a Kumo-nin, you probably should have stabbed him or had your friend incapacitate him before attempting to escape, however… can you tell me why that could have been bad?"

"That's the reason I didn't stab him with my kunai, first, to be honest," I reply. "I wasn't sure of my aim, especially since we were all inside a bag. Plus, I don't know how hard it is to stab someone. And if I didn't hit something important, like an organ or something, he would know that I was awake, that I had a kunai, and that I was probably trying to escape."

"Indeed." He taps his fingers on the table. "Apart from that, you were extraordinarily lucky that your conversation with your friend did not alert the shinobi first, but do move on with a plan of action without waking at least one would probably have resulted in the death of those two, so it is understandable. Moving on. What did you do next?"

"So, I grabbed Hinata and Neji and dragged us all behind a tree. Hinata was still crying. I told Neji to quickly get a bit away, to hide behind a nearby tree, while I acted as bait to draw the shinobi. And… I just pretended to be a scared, harmless kid. The shinobi actually tried to talk to us, when he got closer, and that's when Neji attacked. He managed to knock the shinobi out, I think. Though, he might also have killed him then. I told Neji to make sure. That was when I realized he was a Kumo-nin, and that someone was probably really wrong. Shinobi work in teams. I was worried there were more Kumo-nin nearby. I asked Neji, since he has the Byakugan. Still, he told me that he can't see too far, so there probably weren't but that wasn't certain. But I knew that Konoha has the Inuzuka clan, and they could probably smell us, even if we hid from Kumo-nin. So, we hid the Kumo-nin. I wasn't sure how soon it would be until Konoha could find us, so I took as much stuff from the Kumo-nin as possible. Both because we might need it, and because if we found someone, we'd need proof or something, right? He didn't have that much, honestly, so it wasn't too heavy. We then hid the Kumo-nin and covered our tracks as best we could. We weren't sure where Konoha was, but I was pretty sure the Kumo-nin was running away from Konoha. Still, I don't think shinobi run in a straight line, so there was no guarantee. But using that, I decided to head west. Because there's there probably more Kumo-nin that could come from the capital, and I didn't want them to accidentally run into us. So… we left." I look down.

"...In hindsight, that was, essentially, the pivotal moment. Your logic made sense, and I cannot fault it." I look up, eyes wide. Wait, what?

"However..." he sighs. "If you truly want solutions to your problems... learn. Train. Practice. Read.
You could have made a better decision. Yes, you made a good decision with what you had and knew. It could have worked. It should have worked. Unfortunately… life is cruel and full of surprises."

He looks at me, opens his mouth… and closes it again, sighing. "You wanted me to tell you of how you could have changed circumstances so that… things wouldn't have turned out the way they did, correct?"


"In life, you will have many regrets. You could have done better. Technically. If you had more at hand, you would have had more possibilities." He sighs. "And yet… never mind. Based on our conversations, I believe that you are, at the very least, a moderately intelligent and sensible child. When you turn six, join the Academy. Try to graduate early, if you can. And keep up this attitude, child. There is always room for self-improvement, and I am glad that there is another person who recognizes that." He moves as if to get up, but pauses to look back. "How old are you, again?"

I stare at him. To answer or not to answer… telling the truth might be dangerous, but at the same time, telling a lie would also hold risk.

I grin. "My birthday's on the thirty-first of December!"

Orochimaru-san raises an eyebrow. "And mine is on October 27. I will be turning forty-two. You?"

I huff. Blast it. Evasion failed. But… that's interesting. And wow he's old. For this world, at least. Well… let's hope I land on my feet after this one. I will be proud. I will sit up straight. I will look my (possibly) impending doom in the eye."

"...Four!"

The fourth day started on a rather… interesting note.

The third day had concluded with Orochimaru-san basically staring at me for the rest of the afternoon and evening while I did my homework and tried to read through and take notes from my history books. I kept feeling oddly self-conscious. I mean, yeah, it's not really normal for someone to take up half of a rather large kitchen table, but… that's normal for me. I'm good at taking up space. Plus, with three history books and a dictionary besides, what else exactly are you supposed to do? Finding the right pages individually takes too long, and they're too heavy, besides.

I still think I like Orochimaru-san, though. When I started getting drowsy, he'd helped me upstairs and tucked me in, and also helped clean up.

This morning, during breakfast, I ask him a bit more about the sections I read and reviewed. It was about the Second Shinobi War, and the reasons it began and ended. It's pretty interesting, but it's really dry and it's sometimes a bit boring. Of course, the fact I have to look up a new word every line or so doesn't help. But when Orochimaru-san explains things and tells the story, it seems like he's picking apart all of the extra layers and flowery language in some of the books, and breaks everything down into simple parts.

He's so cool! And smart! And cool! He's not really nice, I think. Not in the traditional sense. But then, he's not warm enough to be kind, but there's also none of that ice and coldness associated with polite. So… I guess he's nice. But if he's nice… maybe Itachi and Shisui and Kagami are kind instead. So, people start as polite and become nice and then become kind. Usually. Kagami-jiisan just kinda started as kind. And Shisui was nice at first.
Gah! Putting people into words is hard.

But when my stomach started growling again, when I actually invited Orochimaru-san up to my room 'cause the sun started shining in and bouncing off the table, since my room has those translucent, silky curtains that block the worst of the glare that the kitchen doesn't… I get to the important thing.

"Orochimaru-san? I… you have a genin team. Anko-san's a chūnin, but the other two aren't, I think. So, you're still teaching them, right? Then… you've been so busy taking care of me… I know it's a mission, but can I watch you guys train? I'm… I'm curious what your team does."

He shifts, leading back against his chair, studying me closely.

"It's dangerous. You are right that I had plans that I now intend to put aside due to this mission. However, if you truly do not mind and promise to stay on your best behavior, to stay quiet and still and not get in anyone's way… I don't see why not. The training exercise I had actually planned is in a particularly dangerous training ground, and it is a survival-style exercise. It would not be safe for you to be on the ground. However, I have recently come across backpack-style carriers for children up to those four years of age. It shouldn't be outside the realms of possibility to fashion one."

I tilt my head. "I think there's an easier way," I think out loud. "Is there a store for those in Konoha?"

"Of course," Orochimaru-san responds. "They have been rising in popularity for shinobi parents, or even rather civilian parents who travel frequently."

My eyes shine, and I jump up, placing my hands on the table. "Can you show me?"

It's a wonderful investment. I have many shinobi friends, and I foresee that I can use this for a long time, still. I doubt it's too too expensive. And I'm small, so I can probably also use it for a while after I turn five, especially if it's well-made.

Maybe now, Shisui can actually bring me to all of the places and we can do all of the things that Kagami-jiisan normally says are "too dangerous." Like climbing up the face of the Hokage monument. Or walking to the top of one of those super tall trees in the forest. Or playing pranks on the ninja in the Hokage Building. Shisui really likes hanging upside down with funny faces just outside the window. It would be hard for him to hold me like that, but if there's a backpack…

My eyes probably gleam with an unholy light. For once since the… affair… I feel alive again. Oh… this is amazing. This backpack, if it works, will be worth every ryo I'll pay for it.

Half-an-hour later, I'm skipping out of the store, with Orochimaru-san trailing behind, an oddly blank expression on his face. That's his way of being surprised and kind of shocked in public, I'm pretty sure. He just kind of puts up a mask while he tries to mentally digest everything.

In this case, I think his shock was at the amount of money Okaa-san and Otou-san entrusted me with. And how well I haggled down the price of the child-backpack.

Hey, I've had practice. You'd be pretty surprised at how much people are willing to indulge cute kids if said cute kid talks to them. And Shisui's taught me a lot of both socially-acceptable and not-really-socially-acceptable things when I go to play with him. What, it's not like we can spend all of our time in the forest.

And I'll… leave it at that. Hey, I need some plausible deniability if anything goes wrong.
Though, to be honest, Orochimaru-san's blank expression might be because of the fact that the backpack is a hideous mottled-orange-and-yellow-and-pink pattern. There was a mistake in the order, apparently. However, the structure was strong, and when I tested it out, it was remarkably comfortable… it's just a hideous color. And way too colorful for most shinobi parents. But for me… the fact that I got it for less than half of the retail price was enough.

Besides, I don't want to be mistaken for a backpack.

I run home, clinging onto the bag and cackling.

...that mood doesn't last. It was… like a break in the cloud-cover on an overcast day. Small, and brief.

When we return home… I go upstairs to snip off the labels. When I come downstairs to ask him to help me wash it, I find him sitting at the table with two cups of tea and a letter, face blank.

"Makoto-kun. I have… bad news."

My stomach drops, and I silently pull out a chair and accept a cup of tea.

Orochimaru-san sighs. "But first, I believe you deserve to know what has been going on. I will be frank with you. The Raikage gave an ultimatum after the death of the ambassador— the head of the killer, the head of the Hyūga clan head for the sins committed by member of his clan, or war." He pauses, as if to let the horror sink in. "Konoha isn't ready for war."

I feel as if every ounce of life from earlier just deserted me.

"Why?" I ask blankly. "Why… why would he do something like that? And then… does it mean… I started a war?" I grip the cup tighter, and my vision blurs.

But then a thought strikes me and my head shoots up. "Wait, they didn't… kill Neji, or something like that… right?" I ask, horror-struck.

"Of course not." Orochimaru-san scoffs. "However… Kumo has been after Konoha's bloodline limits for quite some time. They desperately want the Byakugan."

My heart feels as if it's lodged itself in my throat. No. No… no, no, no… please no.

I swallow around the lump in my throat. "So…"

Orochimaru-san doesn't look at me as he slides the envelope over. "...here. We should get you fitted for some new clothes. I'm not sure how civilians do this, but shinobi usually… well, I'll let you choose."

I accept the card, pushing aside the feeling that something has gone really wrong. It's a stark, blank, bone-white.

I open it.

For a moment, I don't register the words. Then, I wonder if I read it wrong. But… by the fourth run-through, there is no doubt. Not with the carefully-blank expression on Orochimaru-san's face.

Kobayashi Makoto

is invited to the funeral of
Kaminazuki… Jūgatsu. The tenth month. October. That's… in a matter of days, but I'm not focused on that.

Funeral. Hyūga Hizashi. He's… dead?

No… no, nonono. He can't be. I remember how he was during the Tsukimi festivities. He'd helped me scoop up that one white goldfish with the golden-yellow splotches during that one game of kingyo-sukui. He'd helped me bring it home, and promised to help me name it. It's still swimming on my desk upstairs, in that bowl. Hitomi-sama had brought it over. Now… now what?

And on that day we went fishing, he was laughing with Neji and I as he swung us around on the road, and he let me chase him after he ruffled my hair and stole my hat. Then there was Neji's birthday, when he'd help Shino and I organize everything.

I don't know how to react. It's hard to believe. Hizashi, dead?

When my vision finally returns to normal, I register a hand on my shoulder. I follow the arm to the shoulder to… Orochimaru-san. I blink blankly, eyes wet.

"Death for the good of the village is always a possibility for shinobi," Orochimaru-san says softly. "And even for civilians… all humans die. No one is immortal. Not yet."

My nose stings. I blink again, and my vision blurs. I look down, trying desperately not to cry. I swallow against this hard knot in my throat.

But the hand on my shoulder move to my back and pulls me forward. I stumble, but another hand copies the other one and pulls my head into a blue-clothed shoulder. I shift, but a voice interrupts me.

"It's alright to cry, Makoto," Orochimaru-san murmurs.

It's as if a dam breaks. Everything, all of the pain, all of the stress, all of the worry that I thought I'd overcome… it all floods back. I hug Orochimaru-san back, soaking his shirt with silent tears.

I… I shouldn't. But just for an instant… I'll cry. I'll let myself cry.

A funeral for Hizashi-san was held in the afternoon. Despite the sunny day, I was shivering in my new black funeral clothes from the biting wind. Standing next to Hiashi-sama, I held a white chrysanthemum in my hand. When the time came, I followed him to leave the chrysanthemum in a pile in from of a picture of a smiling Hizashi-san.

White chrysanthemums are quite sad, sometimes, you know? They're pretty up close, and you can see lots of subtle colors in them… but from far away, when they're paired with black… they just seem… blank. Lifeless. Colorless. Empty. They don't fit. Hizashi-san wasn't blank, or lifeless, or colorless. But… I don't know what flowers he likes. Liked. I never asked.

Do people ask others what flowers they want on their graves? I don't know. I don't think they do. But… now, I wish I knew. When I tried to find something… everything seemed so… so impersonal.

I wish… I wish I'd known him better. Instead, all I could do was to stand and stare at the ground with wet eyes and dry cheeks. I felt a bit like one of the white chrysanthemums, myself.
Hinata wasn't there, and I couldn't bring myself to feel sorry for her. I know it's not her fault, but… if we hadn't killed the Kumo-nin… no. Don't think that way.

I saw Neji there. Neji… no, Neji-san now… he looked sad. He felt sad. We stood next to each other. After… everything ended… I tried to talk to him. I was worried. I hadn't seen him since… since we returned.

...It didn't go well.

I still remember everything that happened. The emotions…

I might be easier if I just explain.

It's after the service, and everyone lingers around as if they're too scared to leave. Neji had run into the forest, and I'd followed after him.

He stops in a clearing, and I manage to catch up. I stand there, awkwardly for a moment, before trying to move closer. "I… I'm sorry," I murmur ineffectively. That's what you're supposed to say, right? I'm not sure what to do, but… "Do… do you want a hug?"

"Go away," he bites out, before fixing me with a glare when I don't. "I said, go away!" He turns away, eyes glistening again, and the ache of sadness in his chakra… it hurts. I just stand there. I… I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say… I would give him a hug, but… I already tried, and he doesn't want one. I reach out again, trying to offer comfort, but Neji slaps my hand aside and I wince at the sting. "Go away," he growls again, through tears. It's his next words, though, that… impact me the most. "Otouto-san died… he died because of you."

Wait, what? I stare, wide-eyed, even more terrified. Neji… he isn't just sad right now.

"Because of you… and Hinata, and… and the Main House! If he hadn't been… by his own brother… if you hadn't taken anything… if you hadn't been so stupid… if Hinata-sama hadn't…” he sinks down onto his knees, sobbing through gritted teeth. I shiver as I feel his sadness turn… turn to anger. It's almost like when you eat something… and it has that aftertaste? Or when you add something to a solution and it slowly turns a different color… it's as if the bluish cloud of sadness darkened abruptly, and slowly became more intense…

"It's all your fault." His words… they're all of my darker thoughts, verbalized. "Why did you have to take anything? We would have been fine!"

He lets out a tortured sob. "I hate you." Wait, what? He said it so quietly… I crouch down. "...I hate you. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I HATE YOU!" he screams, standing up and spinning away. His chakra darkens, and if I had to give it a color… I would say that it's turning this really dark, brownish purple… it's scary. It's really scary. I'm scared for Neji…

"I wish… I wish we were never friends," he sobs quietly.

The statement cuts through me like a knife. The term, 'I hate you…' … that term often slips out, especially among younger children. It's usually more of an expression than anything. But… Neji wishes that we were never friends?

Tears well up in my eyes.

No. No, Neji, please… you're… you're one of my best friends. You and Shino and Shisui and Itachi… I only have so many. What… what did I do?
Oh, wait… he just said that, didn't he? What did I do? It's obvious. I…

My eyes well with tears, and my nose stings, and… no, Neji. Please… I can't… I don't want to lose another friend! Please…

"Please," I whisper. "Please… don't say that. You… you can't mean it, can you?" Even his statement earlier, that he hated me… I've heard that before, from little brothers when they were crying, but… 'I wish we were never friends?' No. Please, Neji…

Neji ignores me, even as his emotions seem to consolidate and his tears slow down. "It's… it's all the Main House's fault… and your fault," he murmurs quietly, as though realizing a truth. "You're the ones responsible… If it hadn't been for you and what you did, Otou-san might have… Otou-san could've…. no, Otou-san would have lived! Otou-san would still be here right now!"

The silence following that statement hangs in the air like a tangible thing. I… I can't deny that, can I? If I had been stronger… if we'd all be stronger. If I'd been smarter. If I'd known more. If I'd tried to learn more."

I sit down harshly, staring at Neji, who gazes at me accusingly. Then, as if he found something he had been expecting but hoping not to find, his face crumples.

"I wish… I wish we'd never become friends!" he screams, "I wish I'd never helped you that day!"

'I wish… I had never helped you. He… he doesn't mean that, surely?' I think wildly. 'No…' A memory flashes into my mind, of how we'd first met. It had been during hanami… and Neji had caught me when I had fallen. We'd… we'd eaten together, laughed together, played together… and he's leaving? It… surely, it can't be true?

Neji stands up shakily, running the back of his sleeve over his eyes. "I wish that I never wasted my time on you! I wish… I wish that you never existed!" he screams. "I wish you'd just DIE!"

I stare, blankly, barely reacting even when he runs off, still crying.

Does he…

I guess… this means the end? Of our friendship, that is…

Surely he can't mean it, but… 'I wish you'd just die.' How do you say that when you don't mean it? Does… does Neji really mean that he wished I would die?

As if a dam breaks, I begin sobbing in earnest. I pull myself onto my feet, before stumbling away from the grove of trees… which I now recognize as the same one where Neji and I had met and picnicked, where we'd played, where he'd first met Shino. Our friendship had started there… it seems so cruel that it's also where it ended.

I stumble through trees, blurry-eyed, as I choke back tears. Neji… Neji… of course. I've lost another friend. That… that happens so often. I'd hoped… when I'd dreamed of living a different life Before, one of my biggest reason… I'd wanted friends. Friends that played with me, friends that knew me… friends that I might have dared to call, 'family.' I'd always seen this world as a place where close bonds were formed, where friends stayed.

But now… it's just like other worlds, isn't it? People change, and friendships fade. Especially for me. When I'd woken up as a newborn infant here, in Konoha… I'd hoped so badly that I could make friends, and keep them. But, now… 'Was it a vain hope?' I wonder, tears rolling down my cheeks as
I stare sightlessly at the sky.

It hurts, losing a friend.

It hurts even more, having your hopes torn and crushed.

It hurts the most, believing yourself to be a fool to have those hopes in the first place.

By the wind storm's blast
From Mimuro's mountain slopes
Maples leaves are torn,
Which turn Tatsuta River
Into a rich brocade.

— Noin

あらし吹く
三室の山の
もみぢ葉は
龍田の川の
にしきなりけり
— 能因法師

Arashi fuku
Mimuro no yama no
Momijiba wa
Tatsuta no kawa no
Nishiki nari keri
— Noin Hoshi

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: ...

...
So... sorry?

So much could have been different if Kumo didn't decide to be Stupid, Makoto doesn’t have enough life experience to make Good Decisions Regularly, and some things seem to be immune to the Butterfly Effect.

Luckily... or unluckily... life isn't going to wait for Makoto. And the Five Stages of Grief just aren't for him. He's not in denial (Hizashi-san is very, very dead), the only person he can be angry at is himself (plus one other, which we'll get more into later), and so on. Plus, there's going to be something else that's going to need all of his attention pretty soon.

Regardless, here's the first "arc" done! Yay! \(^_^)/

I'll be explaining the genjutsu thing in the next chapter and in chapter 16. Don't worry. And on a separate note... the next arc starts REALLY soon!

This OC is thanks to YokoChi150 (who commented as a guest) on Fanfiction.net!

And yes! I definitely need OCs, and if you submit an idea, I will guarantee that the character will appear, in some way, shape, or form, in the story. Eventually.

-ShadowAccio6181
Of Recovery and Moving On

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto is insecure about his friends, his friends do their best to help but don't really have as much of an emotional connection to anything, Makoto doesn't have time to grieve (and wonders if he should be more damaged by what happened), and Makoto makes a new friend.

And Orochimaru shows a human side!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If it were my wish

To pick the white chrysanthemums,

Puzzled by the frost

Of the early autumn time,

I by chance might pluck the flower.

I wake up the next morning feeling drained.

I remember what had happened the day before. After what might have been anywhere from five minutes to an hour, Orochimaru-san showed up. He hadn't asked any questions, or even spoken. I didn't speak, either. He simply bent down and picked me up, arranging me so that I was on his back. Then, still not saying a word, he carried me home.

It was almost as if… nothing had happened.

When I had cried myself to sleep after Neji decided he hated me, I’d woken up the next day in my bed, in my house. But… the problem is, I felt surprisingly… normal. It's like a part of me believed that the events of the previous day were just a nightmare. I couldn't really wrap my head around the idea that Hizashi-san was… was dead. Nothing seemed to have changed that much. The birds were chirping, the sky was clear…

Nothing seemed to indicate that in the course of one night, everything changed.

Things… shouldn't have seemed so normal. Maybe it was just the impact of sleep, but… what should I do? It's just… it seemed so… surreal.

In this world, what happens after people die? Hizashi-san… he probably made it to the Pure World, right? In the original storyline, he was reincarnated for the Fourth Shinobi World War…

So… how was I supposed to feel about that?
But the problem was, I wasn't as unaffected as I had thought. The emotions were just buried under a thin veneer... which was broken when I ran into Shisui, Itachi and one of Itachi's friends.

I had sprinted to Shisui's house, and Kagami-jiisan greeted me normally. I had shuffled into the kitchen, and I had asked Kagami-jiisan, "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel like. I think I should be more sad... but everything seems so normal. I'm just... confused. A bit overwhelmed. I want to just... move on. Is that... is that normal?"

Kagami-jiisan had actually helped a lot with his advice. He had told me that I was currently a little in shock, and probably slightly in denial. According to him, everyone dealt with death differently, and that most shinobi realized that. As long as I didn't let it weigh me down too much, whatever way would be fine. He'd also told me that I shouldn't blame myself... and when I'd wondered how he knew I was feeling that way, he'd told me that 'survivor's guilt' was very common, especially among shinobi, and it was better to know and understand that feeling earlier on.

According to him, there were three types: first, there was guilt about staying alive while others died; second, there was guilt about the things they failed to do – these people often suffered post-traumatic 'intrusions' as they relived the event again and again; third, there were feelings of guilt about what they did do, such as scrambling over others to escape. These people usually wanted to avoid thinking about the catastrophe. They didn't want to be reminded of what really happened.

Kagami-jiisan had explained that I could be feeling any of those. He had told me that I shouldn't feel guilty for what Hizashi-san did. According to him, there was very little a four-year-old could have done against a fully-trained shinobi. You know, the typical things that grown-ups tell children.

...I didn't tell him that together with Neji, I'd actually successfully killed one of the shinobi. For some reason, both of the deaths had been attributed to Hizashi-san... and Neji hadn't denied them, either. I decided that not taking partial credit for killing a jōnin was safer...oh, wait.

I'd also killed someone.

It's funny how when someone close to you dies and when you lose one of your best friends... such a thing no long takes precedence.

When I simply stared at my cup of tea after a while, he let me know that Shisui and Itachi were back. They'd heard about what happened, and finished their missions as quickly as possible. I... don't know what I feel about that, though I seized on the knowledge that they were back.

I... I need to ask Itachi or Shisui about what happened. I think. I don't.... I don't really trust anyone else to keep quiet. Because... if I hadn't, Neji would have died. I probably would have died... and Hinata would be in Kumo. I should probably feel guilty for causing pain to his comrades and family and friends... but I don't really feel any that guilty... more regretful that I had to do that. I'm also a bit thankful that my kunai throw had hit him in his neck, even if I'd aimed for just the general region of his body. I just feel... thankful, to be honest, that it was a clean hit, and that I'd managed to save Neji... even if he broke our friendship barely several hours later.

I'm just... overwhelmed. And so, after asking Kagami-jiisan where Shisui and Itachi were and bidding him a goodbye with a quick smile, I lapsed back into though as I headed over to one of the Uchiha shops that sold dango.

Looking around the busy shop, waving a hello to the person behind the register, I'd bounced on my tiptoes, looking around for Itachi and Shisui... and I'd found them pretty soon. I'd decided to greet
them in my normal way—ambushing via hug. I'd perfected this during my previous life, because my friend tolerated maybe one hug a day. For maybe half-a-second. (Then, it was let go or get threatened with the possibility of being judo-flipped.) In this life… it used to be Neji, to be honest. He was a bit awkward around those, but Shino usually just froze up… and he also dislikes physical contact to an unfortunate degree. Neji… he usually put up with it.

Now…

I shook my head, dislodging that thought. Neji didn't want to be friends, but… maybe in the future… in the original plot line, Naruto had managed to talk him back into a semblance of sense. Maybe…

I'd clenched my fists. I want Neji to become friends with me on his own… it was me who'd learned his birthday, me who'd laughed with him and played with him and spent time making all of those memories. Is it wrong of me… to want to help him myself? I decided then that I would continue to try and restore the friendship no matter what… because it doesn't really matter, I supposed… after all, what is pride when compared to friendship?

...That decision… I hadn't realized how pertinent it would become barely two minutes later.

But I want a hug. And so, I would get myself a hug.

I'd jumped onto the back of Itachi's chair—reasoning that in the interest of fun, it was probably better to surprise him, rather than Shisui, since he was lighter and thus, easier to topple—with a giggle of "Good morning!"

It's easy to pretend like nothing happened.

I'd been greeted with an "Hey, Mako-chan!" from Shisui, and a slightly more muted, "Good morning, Makoto. I… heard about what happened," from Itachi.

I… hadn't answered immediately, instead choosing to crawl onto Shisui's lap, since he was sitting next to Itachi, and because he could probably deal better with my weight.

"About that…" I'd muttered. "I… I'd wanted to ask you something. I already stopped by and spoke with your Ojii-san, Shisui, but…" I'd grimaced, wondering how best to phrase the question, 'I used that weird not-normal genjutsu-thingy again, and I was partially responsible for the death of the Kumo jōnin that kidnapped Hinata?' And… how to explain everything that happened in detail.

That was when I'd noticed an unfamiliar face. Who was sitting across from Itachi. Who I did not know… who was eating together with Shisui and Itachi?

I'd done the logical thing. I reached up and tugged slightly on Shisui's hair, clambering around so I could whisper-ask, "Who is that person, and… should I know her?" I had been worrying that I'd forgotten someone I had been introduced to… except for the fact that I didn't think I was introduced to her… but then again, I might have been, and I wanted to know if I needed to apologize for forgetting her.

Apparently, though, my whispering skills hadn't improved, and Itachi overheard. He introduced me. "Makoto, this is Uchiha Izumi-san. Izumi-san… this is Kobayashi Makoto."

I'd leaned over the table, sticking out a hand. "Good morning, Uchiha-san. Do you mind if I call you Izumi-san? It's nice to meet you." And before you ask, yes, I've decided to ask that of basically everyone I meet these days… mainly if I know other people from their clan. If it's a bit too rude… well, I'm a three-year-old, ridiculously adorable kid. I'm hoping they give me a bit of leeway.
She startles, staring at my hand for so long that I wonder if she's feeling alright. She hesitantly takes my hand… with three fingers. I sigh internally, reaching a little so that I grip the rest of her hand, before shaking firmly and letting go. Is it really that hard to shake hands with a kid? And… she hasn't answered my question, yet. "Um… Do you mind if I call you Izumi-san?" I repeat.

"Ah… not really," she answers, glancing at Shisui and Itachi. I frown a little, though it comes forth as a bit of a pout. She's probably just unused to children, but… I can think for myself, okay? They're not my minders.

She moves her chair back and stands up awkwardly, moving over to Itachi's side. She taps of his sleeve, whispering, "Ah… who is the kid?"

I want to thump my head against the table. She… must really have next to no interactions with people my age. I know I'm rather small, but…

"Makoto's a friend," Itachi responds, and I want to gesture dramatically at him. Yes. That's the right answer, people.

Unfortunately, Izumi-san draws… a logical, if annoyingly incorrect answer. "Are you babysitting the little kid or something?" she whispers. "I've had several D-ranked babysitting missions recently, but…"

I almost feel sorry for her. Most almost-four-year-olds are probably little hellions or monsters. But… do I really look that young? Or sound that young?

"Can we… move away or something?" she shifts a bit, rather uncomfortable, and I just blink at her. I… probably misheard, didn't I? But then, she continues. "We'll probably have to drop… her… off with the parents, but… it's been so long since we've been able to talk, with missions and everything. You're out of the village so often… do you really have to take care of… another kid?"

I just kind of… stare at her. Wait… is she talking about me? Behind me, Shisui twitches slightly, and I see Itachi shift a little in his seat.

"Your brother cries every time I tried to pick him up… and I want him to like me, but it's hard when he's throwing toys around. Besides… I just think it's harder to just have a break when you're burdened by a kid throwing a temper tantrum." She pauses, obvious uncomfortable, and I feel a rather not-nice amount of pleasure at her pain. Yes. Please do explain your problem with me. I would like to think that my current behavior isn't… really considered a temper tantrum. "I know the kid is currently really calm and everything… but you have a little brother right? You know how quickly their mood can shift."

Okay. From a purely objective point of view, her statement makes sense. I had lived through two little brothers in my past life… and whenever I had a friend over, I definitely wanted to move as far away as possible. However…

Surely I behave better than them?

Normally, I would empathetically refuse and sit there, regardless. However… Itachi shifts awkwardly.

I tap Shisui on the shoulder. "Is Izumi-san a good friend of Itachi's or something?"

He whispers back, "Well… I don't actually know their relationship, but I've teased Itachi about his 'girlfriend' before, and his female teammate… Shinko Inari, wasn't it? She's teased them about being together before. I know she was a bit of a fangirl back in the Academy, but she's not an extreme
fangirl."

I stare at them in a new light. Itachi knows her that well? He's... he's never really mentioned her before...

I sigh, hopping off of Shisui. I tug on Itachi's shirt. "I'll bug Shisui to go play, okay?" I murmur, before deciding to try and lighten the atmosphere slightly. "Have fun with your girlfriend," I tease, attempting to wiggle my eyebrows. I probably fail miserably, but... Itachi smiles a little, whether at my complete failure or in thanks, or at the joke, but... I don't think he feels that awkward anymore, so I count it as a win.

"Bye bye!" I wave, pulling Shisui along behind me.

Once we've reached a less-occupied area in the forest, the same one where we'd met, I finally decide to let my emotions out. That little... emotionally constipated feeling where you want to whine and cry and shout and screw your face up? I finally realized that said feeling had been building up for a while when keeping calm and happy-esque had become really uncomfortable back in the shop.

The waterworks start pretty much immediately, and Shisui seems to have been expecting it, with how he sinks down and just pats me on the back as I wail everything out. Everything from the kidnapping, and how useless I felt, and how guilty I felt for getting Neji and myself kidnapped in the first place, and how guilty I felt about Hizashi-san's death, and my frustration with not knowing how I was supposed to feel, and... even my insecurities regarding Neji. I'd been trying to be positive earlier, but when the dam breaks... everything just pours out and starts spiraling lower into this whirlpool of... darker, more depressing thoughts.

Even things I hadn't consciously thought of... like my insecurity when I realized Itachi hadn't told me anything about Izumi, and even my annoyance over how she'd kind of assumed I was too stupid and my wondering about whether her words were true, about whether I was really just an annoying tag-a-long with overly-variable emotions— something that's probably been building since the Incident at the Ino-Shika birthday party. Even how I was worrying if I monopolized too much of their free time... whether Shisui and Itachi actually also enjoyed spending time with me, when they probably had other friends.

I don't quite mention how I'd taken part in killing the Kumo jōnin, but... almost everything else.

I'd basically just broken down and cried.

But... Shisui told me about how neither of them actually had that many friends. They were liked and respected by the shinobi they worked with, but... they were a bit too young, a bit too skilled, and a bit too admired, to actually form close bonds. Mostly, others stayed at a distance... and according to Shisui, having someone who treated them normally was a rarity, which is why he and Itachi enjoyed spending time with me. He also chuckled and reassured me that I was far from a nuisance, and that Izumi-san was just unused to nice children...

Itachi's probably too nice for this world, but... Shisui's not too far behind.

I'd giggled slightly, hiccuping, when Shisui told me about the first time Izumi-san met Sasuke-san... and how Sasuke-san had cried, hysterically, until Itachi picked him up again.

I think... I feel better.

That's pretty good, because there was no time to sit around and cry and be depressed. As soon as Shisui carried me back, it was as if the clock, which had just started ticking, decided to make up for
lost time.

Okaa-san and Otou-san arrive back in a few days, which I've spent mostly with Shisui and Kagami-jiisan, but they can't stay for long.

Due to the high tensions between the shinobi villages, Konohagakure and Kumogakure, respectively, Okaa-san and Otou-san are to be sent, along with several other diplomats from the Fire Daimyo's court, to the capital of the Land of Lightning. They'll... have to discuss about what to do now, and about who... who to assign the blame. Kumogakure's already threatened war, but... no one wants more fighting and conflict, not even the Daimyo of Lightning.

After the chaos that resulted when I was assigned to stay in Konoha, Okaa-san's firmly decided that she's not leaving me behind a second time, and, as a result, we're accompanied by three rather accomplished shinobi... as well as one Uchiha Itachi. I don't know how she managed to get him but not his genin team, but she did it. (I personally think the others are just that far behind.) The three shinobi are Namiashi Raidō, Shiranui Genma, and Tatami Iwashi. They look like they're in their early twenties... which the exception of one, who informed us that he would also be able to take care of me, if necessary, and introduced himself as being 14. They were assigned to us, because, apparently, they're the most used to guarding high-profile people, and the most diplomatic amongst the Konohagakure shinobi. According to Sandaime-sama, they guarded the Yondaime Hokage... which I personally find a little hard to believe, since Tatami-san is really young... and no offense to him, but he doesn't seem particularly skilled... but then again, Shisui's already a jōnin, so...

I don't know.

And Itachi's mission? Officially, it's as a fourth body-guard. Unofficially... he's a really well-paid babysitter, and he's pretty much only in charge of me. It makes me feel pretty bad, especially since it just makes me feel like even more of a burden, but... he seems happy with it.

By mid-October, we're packing up to head for Kaminari no Kuni, the Land of Lightning. Thankfully, we're going to be traveling a bit separately from the other diplomats. It's apparently because, as overheard from a conversation between Okaa-san and Otou-san, the other diplomats probably aren't the fondest of children, and have the opinion that children should be seen and not heard... or better yet, not seen or heard.

...I already don't like them.

Yeah, I know. I should probably be terrified of heading to Kaminari no Kuni, because... of everything that happened. But the the capital isn't Kumo. It's just... like, the bureaucratic center, I think. It's where the Daimyo lives. But also... I can't be angry at Kumo, necessarily. Let's face it, Killer B's pretty awesome and so's Gyuki... and many shinobi, namely that one guy with the lollipop and the one with the longer hair and cool lightning thing, were quite frankly, hilarious. Even the eventual Raikage, A. So... all I can say is that I don't know enough. About anything. But until I can get a full story... I guess I'm reserving judgement. I know I've definitely got no strong feelings attached to the location or the shinobi in general. I kinda suck at generalizations or stereotypes. Really. I mean, yeah, I'm definitely going to be wary of anyone in grey with a white vest and a Kumo hitai-ate (headband) asking about bloodline limits, but... yeah. And if there's any trouble... I've got Okaa-san and Otou-san. Plus, Itachi's here now, and we've got an entire team of shinobi, so the trip, at least, should go smoothly.

...knock on wood.

So, Okaa-san takes care of my clothing and necessities again, but I'm given a bag that I can will with things I want to bring.
I have… no idea what to bring. I want my notebook, some scratch paper… my pencils. Probably not my calligraphy materials, though. I… I would normally bring a book. I've finished a lot of what I have… maybe I can ask the Library if I can bring some books outside of Konoha? Hmm…

I shuffle over to Okaa-san and Otou-san's room, knocking. Otou-san's out of the house, but Okaa-san's currently packing. "Okaa-san? I'm heading over to the library, okay? I should be back in about… two hours?"

"Hmmm? Okay, make sure you're back in time for lunch!" Okaa-san responds from through the door.

"Hai," I reply, before returning to my room. Library card… library card… where are you… aha! Found you!

Library card in hand, I pull on pants and a shirt, along with a sweater, before scrambling down the stairs to grab my shoes… before running back up the stairs to grab a tote bag. I might not need it, but… better safe than sorry!

I rush down the hallway, skidding to a stop before I enter the shop, this time with a considerably calmer speed.

I wave to Shinko-chan, who's reorganizing the shelves, and she waves back, an-OMPH!

I hadn't seen the person through the door before I rushed out. "Ah! Sumimasen… Jōnin-san?" I ask, tilting my head backwards. Wow… that's a surprise? I quickly move out of the way. "Oh. Orochimaru-san! Good morning. Why are you here?"

"O-O-Orochimaru-sama!" Shinko-chan squeaks, fumbling a canister of loose-leaf tea. "W-Welcome to Kobayashi Teas! Wha-What can I do for you?"

Orochimaru-san ignores her. "Makoto-kun. It's good to see you… up and about," he comments lightly. "It's a surprise to see you so lively."

I look down. Yeah… I hadn't been the most… energetic… person when he was over. Is my change in mood a good thing, or a bad thing, though? Is it bad that I seemed to get over Hizashi-san's death so quic—

A hand lands on my head, and I look up in surprise. "Mourning is understandable, but grief does nothing, for anyone. Life… is but a temporary, fleeting thing. For shinobi especially… the loss of comrades is always devastating, but dwelling too long on regrets is useless. People die. That is a sad truth of life. We are but mortal."

That's… really deep. I lean into the hand briefly. "Hai. Thanks, Orochimaru-san." I step back a little. "I thank you for your concern, Orochimaru-san, but… is there any other reason you came here?"

"Ah." He blinks, but quickly regains his composure. "Yes. I had meant to come yesterday, but… I had actually come to ask which tea you used in the recipe for tea eggs."

Oh. Right. That. Huh. That's… a bit surprising, though I can't explain why. "Actually… if you want, I can write down the recipe. The important part isn't really the tea, though red teas, and black teas work well, as does oolong… Okaa-san really likes using Tiegyuanyin oolong, though it might be a bit expensive. Pu'er tea works well. But the important part is usually the spices… you can change it up a bit, but I think it's best to stick to some combination of cinnamon, star anise, cloves, peppercorns… Sichuan peppercorns to be clear… and… fennel seeds, sugar… I find that brown sugar can be nice, but that's only if you like it sweet. Oh, and a little bit of sake adds some really nice flavor. But the important thing is to use dark soy sauce, koikuchi, instead… oh! Tamari works best,
though, if you have it. So if you want to use sake, don't use *mirin.* I dig in my bag, grabbing a pencil and a piece of paper. "But really, you just need the tea and the soy sauce. I like adding everything because it's fun to see how they change the flavor."

"Let's see…" I frown. "I think that's it? Well, just don't add too much water, but that's pretty straightforward."

I present my finished list with a flourish. "I wrote down which of our teas are the best, by how they're label-ah!" In my hurry, I'd knocked my bag off the table. Orochimaru-san, to my surprise, bends down to help.

"Ah… thanks! I think I have every… wait. My library card? I thought…" I look up to see Orochimaru-san holding it. "Oh! Thanks, Orochimaru-san."

"A library card?" he asks, curiously. "Were you planning on heading over before I ran into you?"

Technically… I ran into him, but… "Hai," I nod.

"If you don't mind me asking, why?"

"Ah…" I look down, slumping slightly. "Do you know about how Okaa-san, Otou-san, and I are heading to the Land of Lightning?"

He nods.

"Okaa-san told me to pack what I want… and I *want* to bring some books, but…" I slump. "I don't know if the library will let me."

"...no," Orochimaru-san agrees. "That would be against the policy."

I sigh, thumping my forehead against the table again. Okay. Time to go back to the drawing board.

"However…" I look up. "Which books are you interested in?" Orochimaru-san asks.

I blink. "Erm… just what I talked with you about. Anything about shinobi, for the most part? I also like stories, but it's hard to find books with good stories."

And they are. It's what made it easier for me to not read any of the books I found in the bookstore. Adventure stories… especially for younger kids… they've got a set formula. "It's easier to talk about stuff like history. Most stories… they're similar. There's a heroic shinobi, who does stuff, saves a princess along the way, and yay! He's a hero now." I sign again. "How many princesses are there? Orochimaru-san… you're a shinobi. How many princesses have you saved?" I rub my face. "I *like* some of the stories that Okaa-san tells me, like about how Izanagi and Izanami created the world, or how Amaterasu ran away to hide in a cave, or about how there's a rabbit in the moon, pounding mochi. I like the stories about Orihime and Hikoboshi. They're actually *interesting.*" I push myself back upright, slumping against the back of my seat this time as I pull my knees to my chest and glare at the table. "Shinobi are *interesting,* but… why do you need princesses? And how are they *always* in trouble?"

To my surprise, he chuckles slightly. "Actually… if you come with me, I have some books you can borrow… I think you would like them."

I blink. "You'd… you'd do that for me? You've only known me…"

"I've actually known you for a little longer than the mission," he responds smoothly. "I have known
Kimiko-chan for many years."

"Oh." I blink. "Is that…"

"That is the reason I was assigned to watch over you," he agrees, holding out a hand. "Well?"

"Books," I decide firmly, hopping off the table with my book-bag and taking his hand.

To my surprise, he takes me to an apartment. To my amazement… it's a really, really awesome apartment. There are books everywhere.

"Whooa…" I whisper, looking around in awe. "Your apartment is the coolest place. Are… all of these books are yours?" I ask, spinning around.

"Yes," he nods, before striding over to a bookshelf in the corner of the room and looking through it. "Feel free to sit down," he tells me, waving at the table pushed to the side of the room, next to a corner reserved for a small kitchenette. I pull myself onto a chair, staring curiously at what's on the table. I don't understand anything. There are diagrams… of something, along with the outline of a human body, but…

I stop, staring. That's… not… paper.

Half-hidden being a pile of books, right next to the window…

"Oh, wow," I whisper.

It's a snake.

I'm really scared of snakes. I remember one time, Before, when someone… a presenter or something, I don't know, had brought in a small snake, and let us hold… her? Him? It? I don't remember. But what I do remember… the snake was so soft. You'd think that snakes would be hard and scaly or something, but… it wasn't. Weirdly enough— and maybe a bit sadly— the skin reminded me of soft, textured leather.

And if the snake is here…

I tap the table gently. Snakes can feel vibrations, right?

"Hello?"

…

After a moment, I knock on the table, a little harder.

In the coil of dark scales, there's a small shudder, and… "What… do you need me for?" a soft voice hisses. A dark head rises from the coil, looking around, and I gaze, wide-eyed. My open mouth widens into an elated smile. I had read about it and watched it on a screen, but… it's so different to see it in real life!

"You can speak! And I understand you?" I gasp, delighted.

The head tilts, peering at me, extending closer. I stay still, trying not to make any sudden movement. "You… you are not scared of me?" A thin tongue flickers out.

I blink. "Should I be?"
The head hovers in front of me, and maybe I should be scared… but… I'm not. The snake could kill me. Yes. But… so could a shinobi, or even a normal person. I trust them not to. Why… why should this be different?

The snake opens its mouth wider, almost in a semblance of a yawn… and I see fangs, tucked away along the roof of its mouth.

"What's your name?" I ask. Something itches in my mind, like a half-forgotten memory, and… I think… "Or… what should I call you?" Something about names… I knew something about names… and I've forgotten now. Oh, well.

The snake regards me curiously… or at least, that's how interpret the stare. "I am Kiyohime," she rasps.

"I'm… I'm Makoto," I reply, smiling. "And… this might be rude, but… ah…” I look to the side. "Can I… can I touch your scales, Kiyohime-san?"

Kiyohime… Kiyohime-san regards me for a moment, before bowing her head. "Hold out your arm," she hisses.

Huh? I tilt my head, hesitantly extending an arm. "My arm?" I ask.

"You are warm and I wish to see my human," Kiyohime-san hisses winding up my arm. "You shall serve as my transportation."

I try and squash a laugh, especially as she winds lightly around the back of my neck. "I'm… I'm not sure I'm allowed to? But I guess… your human, that's Orochimaru-san, right? If you show me where to go, I guess…"

"I see you've met Kiyohime," a voice rasps. I turn. "Orochimaru-san?" I immediately note the pile of books he's carrying. "That's a lot of books."

"Indeed," Orochimaru-san replies, inclining his head, before quickly stacking the documents on the tables in a pile and dropping them in a drawer.

"Regardless… the books." He sits down, gesturing for me to take the opposite chair. I carefully sit down, making sure I don't hurt Kiyohime. "First… I was once fascinated by the origins of the ancient kami and had wondered if, perchance, they were related in any way to the origin of chakra, as well as the tales of various yōkai, whom I had researched after learning of how the monks at the Fire Temple use a unique form of chakra. I had theorized that the onmyōji of earlier times had used their own forms of chakra, and although I managed to understand that indeed, they occasionally dealt with concentrations of chakra through their own unique fūinjutsu… well, suffice to say, I have no need for the tales I gathered. Here is my adaptation of the complete illustrated Hyakki Yagyō, the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons, which includes the woodblock prints, but includes considerably more of the written word than the original manuscript. I have also added more entries, albeit without illustrations, including one of the more-famous onmyōji. Of course, some entries were simply about related phenomena and superstitions. There is also a volume your mother might recognize… here."


Ah. On the cover… 神代巻.
"I also have a book on assorted folklore. One of the tales actually includes Kiyohime's namesake."


Kiyohime-san hisses softly from where her head rests by my ear, and I turn slightly. Is that… how snakes laugh?

Orochimaru-san smiles briefly, before turning back to his pile of books. "Indeed. And then… I have several manuscripts written by my old teammate."

Huh? I'm confused… manuscripts? Writing? Isn't Jiraiya… a pervert? Why…

Orochimaru-san glowers at them. "I should have never told that idiot that he was incapable of writing… he ended up more than determined to prove me wrong, and dumped an entire bound copy of his 'stories,' which were inspired by our missions, apparently, on me as my 'birthday present.'" He scoffs. "I still wonder how he found the time. I haven't had the chance to get rid of this edition, yet, and I thought you might like it… they are not over-embellished in any way, and provide an accurate, if uncharacteristically interesting description of shinobi missions."

Oh. "Thank you so much!" I gasp. "But… are you sure… I mean, I'm sure it means a lot to you, and…"

And Kiyohime-san's laughing again.

"It's really no big deal," Orochimaru-san responds, waving off my concerns. "If anything, I'll be grateful for the extra space on my bookshelves."

That's… that's fair. When you don't want to throw things away… space becomes your most precious commodity. "Still, thank you. Really," I insist. "Can I… just take them?"

"Of course. In fact, if you are anything like Kimiko, I have more books that you would probably appreciate buried in storage somewhere." He frowns, before looking over. "Do you want help carrying them?"

"Uh…" I look at the stack. "Let's see…"

"That was rhetorical," Orochimaru decides, rolling his eyes and picking up the stack books. "I will walk you home. I daresay this is over three times your weight."

I grin sheepishly, before stilling. "Thank you," I tell him, and I mean it. "This… thank you. I just wanted to ask… I'm worried I might… damage something."

"These are the compiled books. My memory and multiple stores of notes shall suffice to recreate anything, even if they are lost," Orochimaru replies coolly.

I shrink in. "But…"

"It is a hobby of mine to memorize books, and recreate them from scratch." He looks over. "My… my mother used to say that knowledge on paper matters not, for it is only the knowledge inside your head that you keep."

I stare at him. "That's a lot of work."

"My first summoner was impressive, indeed," Kiyohime-hisses softly. "She raised me from an egg." She carefully extends herself over to the table, curling up again in a ball, before turning to stare at
me. "You are warm. When you come back, hatchling, you will let me nap on you."

I blink owlishly, looking at Orochimaru… who's also staring at me. Huh. He looks a lot like a snake like that. He blinks slowly, before standing up, and the moment's broken.

"I should return you before Kimiko worries." He turns, looking at me curiously. "It appears… that Kiyohime has taken a liking to you."

"I think I like Kiyohime-san, too," I decide nodding, before looking up hesitantly. "Should I… should I come back to visit her when I come back?"

Orochimaru-san pauses, before nodding slowly. "I believe she would appreciate that.

I don't have time to worry about hidden subtexts in conversations with snakes, though. There's another problem facing me…

…I can't bring all of the books.

Admittedly, that's not a new problem— it's one I faced every. Single. Time. I've ever packed for a trip Before. I think I've decided on bringing two books: The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi, and the first two volumes of what is actually titled, The Adventures of the Densetsu no Sannin. The name was on the inside cover, and… it's a surprisingly reserved title. And, of course, my notebooks, several sketchbooks… at this point, I'm bringing along my weight in books.

However, I'm pretty firm on one thing— I absolutely refuse to bring anything I'm too attached to. I've been on boats before… and based on my intuition, this isn't a cruise boat where you can theoretically have things and keep them safe and dry. I've been on small boats. Everything gets wet. And what doesn't get wet from water coming onto the boat… tends to get blown away with the wind.

I've lost watches, hats, and even a phone to the ocean.

The ocean is a wonderful example of Murphy's law. Even in a harbor, a placid sunny day can quickly turn rough and windy, and a nice, breezy day that's perfect for racing can have patches of still air. Anything that can go wrong probably will go wrong. And everything gets wet. At least, the bigger the boat is, the better your chances of nothing going wrong tend to be. Cruise ships are better than ferries are better than large sailing vessels are better than FJ-13's are better than RS Fevas. At least in terms of not getting your clothes wet.

I have no clue how big the boat is, but… I'm sincerely hoping I have a room. Below deck. That's dry. I've read too much about how older sailors, like… say, the Vikings would just sleep on deck. Or something.

That's great and all for them, but… I'd rather not.

Oh. And I still don't actually know to swim. I mean I knew Before, but I've never actually tried in this body… which makes sense, I'm not even four, but…

Thanks to whatever merciful deity for at least making sure Itachi's going to be there, too. I have the strangest feeling that this will not be the most fun trip. Hopefully, that's just nerves talking.

Hopefully.
If it were my wish
To pick the white chrysanthemums,
Puzzled by the frost
Of the early autumn time,
I by chance might pluck the flower.
— Oshikochi no Mitsune

心あてに
折らばや折らむ
初霜の
おきまどはせる
白菊の花
— 凡河内躬恒

Kokoroate ni
Orabaya oran
Hatsushimo no
Oki madowaseru
Shiragiku no hana
— Oshikochi no Mitsune

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: INTERESTING FACT OF THE DAY - Kiyohime's a girl from Japanese folklore who got turned into a snake. I'm not sure who came up with this character, because I've seen some variant of a summon named Kiyohime who belonged to Orochimaru's mother... but I'm crediting blackkat with her. If you don't know blackkat... you're really missing out. This author has some of the best time-travel fics on ao3, and a lot of other amazing stories. And I got a lot of inspiration from how Salachan9 portrays her in Unusual Meetings.

And this chapter might be a bit rough, but I cannot honestly figure out how to fix that... so if you have any helpful suggestions, please comment and let me know!

Other than that... say hi to Izumi! She's not really mean, and I think her reaction
to having a three-year old interrupt what she thought would be a nice outing with friends is entirely reasonable... but Makoto's not been having the best week, and... yeah. This is going to be... a bit of a running theme. Not everyone likes Makoto.

Trivia question to the readers: Who is Izumi in canon? And what happens to her?

And just a bit of a hint... the trip's not going to go smoothly. *chuckles ominously*

On an entirely different note, I'm basing my mental image of the Elemental Nations off of the one by xShadowRebirthx on Deviantart. It's not the same, but... until I figure out (and work up the courage) to post my ridiculously rough map... probably on something like imgur so I can then embed it in this story. Eventually.

Moving on... it's a long weekend! Yay! If anyone can actually guess what's going to happen, I will upload my next chapter on Monday. \( ^{\wedge}^{\wedge} / \) If not... well, given enough incentives (coughcoughcommentscoughcough), I will still upload the next chapter on Monday. \( \_\(\_\(\_\)/\(\_\) )\)

-ShadowAccio6181
Chapter Summary

In which Makoto... procrastinates feelings, and... gets in a bit of an accident.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

*It is by its breath*
That autumn's leaves of trees and grass
Are wasted and driven.
So they call this mountain wind
The wild one, the destroyer.

Living on a boat is quite anticlimactic.

Especially in the middle of the ocean.

I mean, it's not nearly as bad as being on a cruise ship, since we're still going along the coastline, for the most part, but… there's really only so much time you can stare at the ocean. And at first, I couldn't even read, because I'd just get a headache. That ended after the first week, thankfully.

The first week or two was pretty nice. We packed, traveled to a river, and boarded a boat, which we then sailed down the river to the ocean.

It was a small boat, so we docked for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Then… we reached the ocean.

We moved to a much bigger sailboat.

I will say, the food is pretty good. It's usually just seafood and rice, but… that's already great. They trail lines behind the ship during the day, and they usually catch something. There's also two large basins with seawater that they keep near the back of the boat, with live crabs and shellfish and stuff. They change the water about twice a day, once in the morning and once at noon, and if we ever stop for a little bit and set down anchor, they drop the cages over the edge of the boat with some bait. The water's usually too deep to catch any shellfish, but fish are easier to catch. Either way, when they pull the cages back up, there's more seafood!

Of course, it's slow and more than a bit wasteful, particularly in terms of money, but… it's *nice*. It's like an actual vacation.

Okaa-san says that Otou-san was actually the one who designed this boat (specifically, the fresh seafood storage) because he's always loved seafood and wanted to have a good way of storing it even when traveling… and because he was sick to death of the normal food on ships, and the rest of his family weren't much happier. Suffice it to say, I have a new-found respect for Otou-san.
What I have less fondness for… is the other, preserved foods. They're salty and sour. One of the best examples… is probably *narezushi*.

*Narezushi* is fermented fish pickled with rice. It's a very old dish, and goes to before we had refrigerators, so people relied on rice and salt to ferment and preserve the fish—usually stored layered in barrels—in the hope of saving it for as long as possible. *Narezushi* can be made with yellowtail, mackerel or *ayu*, but the most common type inland is *funazushi*, made from *nigorobuna* fish.

Most families have their own distinct recipe, but all share a similar methodology. First, the fish is scaled, gutted and preserved in salt for a few months. Then, it's combined with rice and left to ferment. As long as there's a dark storage space at room temperature, the fish can be left for a few months, years or even decades.

For a long time, people ate only the fish and threw the fermented "stinky rice" out, but then people started eating the half-fermented fish and rice together, which led to the creation of *nigirizushi*, the now more-familiar style of sushi where people put fresh, sliced seafood on a mouth-sized portion of steamed rice mixed with a bit of sweetened rice vinegar.

*Narezushi* is usually sold as one whole fish, covered in a goopy, yogurt-like sauce, which people then cut into thin layers and arrange atop a bed of rice in a pretty pattern. Sometimes, though, they prepare *narezushi* as porridge with hot tea, *ochazuke*, or even fry it up like tempura.

The thing is… no matter how it's prepared, *narezushi* is one of those foods that have a super, super strong smell and taste. They're stinky and ridiculously sour, like even more sour than *umeboshi*.

I don't mind it too much when it's prepared in the second method, but… I'm not eating the head, no matter what. I know Otou-san says that the sign of a good, properly-prepared *funazushi* is that you can even eat the head, but… I don't believe I am quite ready for that, yet. Maybe when I'm older. Like, a *lot* older.

Otou-san and Okaa-san are wonderful with the stories they tell, from anecdotes about traveling around the Elemental Nations and how different some of the other lands are to stories about gods and creatures and how different things were before the different Hidden Villages were established.

Is this how parents are normally like? Is this what a family should be like? It seems… like something out of a fairytale, like princesses and princes and knights and evil step-mothers and fairies and… and love and happily-ever-afters.

I love my family. I love my friends. I love this world. I just wish… no, not thinking about that. It's just doesn't seem real right now, if you know what I mean? It's almost as if… as if everything was a bad dream, I'm just on a vacation… and when I get back, I can go play with Shino and Neji and see Hizashi-san. Is this what they call denial? I honestly don't know.

But even so… I owe whatever deity brought me here… a very heartfelt thank-you. Whew. Knock on wood. Debts owed to a deity, even if there's only the slimmest of chances that deity exists, should never be left open-ended. That's dangerous. And even if they don't exist… well, I didn't think this world existed either, once. Of course, I might still be dreaming, but… regardless, better safe than sorry.

Aaaaand, moving on from those dreaded things known as… *feelings*… huh. Onto more feelings. Because Itachi amazing and wonderful and simply so *nice*. I'd normally feel bad for getting him roped into a *month-long babysitting mission*, but… I'm the one who's going to be gone for three
months, and he's already reassured me multiple times that he doesn't mind, so… I'll take his word for it. For now.

I am thankful he's here, though, because I might have expired from boredom and sheer monotony otherwise. Or I might have exploded from frustration.

You see, Okaa-san's been trying to teach me how to make a temari ball. They're basically just embroidered balls, but they have a long history. They're typically constructed from the remnants of old kimono, so as to not waste the silk. They take a long time to make, and a lot of care. The best temari are so tightly-wrapped that they bounce.

Traditionally, temari are often given to children from their parents on New Year's Day. Inside the tightly wrapped layers of each ball, the mother would have placed a small piece of paper with a goodwill wish for her child. The child would never be told what wish their mother had made while making the ball. Of course, some temari meant primarily as a toy would have "noisemakers" consisting of rice grains or bells to make them more fun.

I have one at home, actually, from my grandmother, Okaa-san's mother, though I didn't know it was so special.

Okaa-san's new excitement to teach me to make them is probably my fault, admittedly. I saw her making them, and well… questions led to answers led to more questions, and…

This is the end result. Apparently, Okaa-san had been thoroughly chastised for neglecting so many of her skills when she went back to her family, so she's now trying to pick everything back up again. That's great. And she's also eager to teach me, since I exhibited interest. That's also great.

What's not great? I am three years old. Okay, I'm almost four, but… my fingers are like baby sausages! My drawings are splotchy and not clean enough! My handwriting's still really rough! I still can't make nice circles or smooth, consistent lines! My calligraphy is cringe-worthy!

I. Am. A. Toddler.

And thus… needles… kind of hurt. And it's frustrating, too. Do you know how hard it is to get a small needle through tough fabric?!

I'm sad, too. I'd wanted to get good at making them, so I could give them to my friends as gifts for their birthdays next year. According to Okaa-san, temari are highly valued and cherished gifts, symbolizing deep friendship and loyalty, and the brilliant colors and threads used are symbolic of wishing the recipient a brilliant and happy life. See? Perfect for birthday gifts.

...and so, I've settled for learning to make kunihimo braids, instead. They're been used for everything from Shinto rituals, as accessories, to ornamental features in traditional suits of armor. Some types, like the obijime, are also used to tie kimono, and some others fasten haori.

I'm learning it the traditional way— finger-loop braiding. When we get back, though, Okaa-san says she'll teach me to use the marudai and takadai to create more complex braids more quickly.

There are a lot of different types. First off, there are more than 40 different basic ways of braiding kumihimo. Combined with different kinds of patterns and shapes, that means that the total number of types of kumihimo number around, like, 3,000. That's a lot, but they're all important.

Kumihimo represent an entire culture of braiding. They're used not just to bundle objects together, but the differences in their their use, color, and braiding style have also come to represent gender, indicate social standing, and show wealth. Those in positions of power
(coughcoughthenobilitycoughcough) use *kumihimo* to show off their status.

...

Sometimes I kinda wish Okaa-san didn't come from such a… old, noble, traditionally-inclined… important… family.

There is *so much* that I need to learn. I will need to learn the traditions of the Nakatomi, which is what the Fujiwara used to be (the name changed and that's basically it? Which is weird?), various musical instruments, archery, how to properly ride a horse (there's a way? As in, other than just not falling or making a food of myself?), calligraphy, art, games of strategy, how to use a sword, how to write poetry, and mathematics.

The first and last are probably unique to me. Other boys born to nobility just need to focus on the eight: music, archery, horseback riding, calligraphy, art, strategy, swordsmanship, and poetry. Some, who will need to manage stuff, might learn mathematics in addition to or instead of poetry, but that's usually just for scholars.

Girls usually substitute the horseback riding, strategy, and swordsmanship with the three classical arts of refinement—*kadō* (flower-arrangement), *kōdō* (incense appreciation), and *chadō* (tea ceremony).

I'm not sure about appreciating incense, but the other two sound interesting… and very familiar. I kind of want to learn them as well…but not now. Yep, I'm back to procrastinating. But seriously, can you blame me? The first ten's stuff I kind of have to do, regardless, simply because of who I am. The next two's stuff I feel an obligation (and an interest) in learning, simply because of my home—the tea shop. *Maybe* incense-appreciation will eventually end up there, but… I doubt it. I'm not the most fond of incense. But… the rest of what I want to learn is entirely on my own shoulders.

I don't *have* to be a shinobi. I don't *have* to learn every shinobi art. But… I want to. Chakra is amazing, and shinobi… they're amazing. I want to be part of the world that Itachi and Shisui and Shino and… and Hizashi-san and Neji-san and Kagami-jiisan and everyone else is a part of.

Or maybe i'm just a masochist and want to cause myself undue pain and stress. That's still a possibility.

But for now, I'm still young. I can leave that for later, even if later's just a day, or a month, or a year. Now… thanks to whoever gave me this chance, I can be a kid.

...

And that means playing silly games like cat's cradle. Itachi shows me how. I learned the two-person version *Before*… but then I forgot. It's called *ayatori* here. I never realized there was a one-person version, though. It's so cool! It's hard sometimes, on the fingers, and Itachi explains that it's traditional in the Uchiha to learn that as a child, since it helps prepare children to work with ninja wire.

We don't just play, though.

Even though it's a bit awkward running through some exercises and stretches, since we share a cabin, I show Itachi how I've progressed. He teaches me some *kata*, the forms for the Academy's *taijutsu* style as well as something I'm pretty sure is what the Uchiha use… but he simply smiles and doesn't answer when I ask. It might be just as well, because I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to learn those. They're *clan kata*.

But Itachi's the heir to the clan in question, so… I'll just follow his lead in this, I guess. Part of the most arguably-useless part of the voyage is probably my tendency to follow the sailors around to ask
them questions about all of the terminology.

I don't get everything, unfortunately. Most of the terms are just for parts of the ship. Sometimes, there are lots of different phrases for one part. Some are words that I actually know the English equivalent to. Others... are not. And other words... no one actually gives me a translation to, other than to say that they are rude. I do my best to mentally block them out. I have enough troubles with accidentally being rude that I'd rather not even have the memory of how to purposefully be rude.

Overall, it's a nice trip. The wood's warm and soft, it's pretty dry, and... it's just nice. Even the gentle rolling of the ship and occasional leaning don't bother me, after a while.

Of course, then a storm catches us by surprise.

It started at twilight, when the sun has set but there's still light around the horizon. The day had been cloudy, but all of a sudden, the wind dropped.

At first, everyone was just a bit wary. But when the wind shifted direction and seemed to become colder, before coming back stronger...

Everyone panicked.

It was a bad time, since we were finishing dinner. No one was really prepared. There was a shout, and then everyone just started running everywhere. Some people climbed up the masts, and... it was like they tied part of the sail to the mast, as if to make it smaller. I've read about that... I think they're reefing the sails. I don't know what they call it in this world, but it reduces the surface area and thus, the drag of the cloth, which makes it so they don't catch as much air.

Itachi found me, and we're try to keep out of the way right now. We cleaning up the deck as much as we can. We normally eat on the deck, with the fresh air, and... everyone just dropped their stuff and ran. Some people nearly trip on the plates, and... oh, no, the rocking of the boat means some almost fall into the ocean.

Yeah, there's a border around the deck, but it's a fence. There are gaps in the bottom, so that any water that gets on the deck can get out.

The captain runs to the big steering stick of the boat— the tiller— and points the ship into the wind. The shinobi, scarly enough, can't really help— they don't know how. They're below the deck, strapping everything down. Okaa-san and Otou-san are with them. My mind scrambles with a list of possible sources of danger. There's the lamps, and the flames for cooking, and... and everything paper, which needs to be wrapped in waterproof oilcloth and carefully shut away. There's the clothing, which could get damaged by salt water. They need to close the doors, to make sure no water gets through. And... and... they're dumping things over the sides?

Before I can run over and ask where we're supposed to be, they rush back down and... I hear hammering. They're... they're nailing down the entrances?

I almost run out, but Itachi grabs me, thankfully. By now, the boat's rocking pretty severely, and... I flinch as droplets of water hit my face. I squint upwards.

Of course. It's raining.

I almost fall as the boat tilts again, and there's probably bruises on my knees and arms from falling into things. I taste salt, and I'm not sure if it's from the waves that splash onto the deck or from panicked tears. It's scary, especially since I'm this small.
A sailor finds us and curses. He talks so quickly that I don't catch everything, but I hear something about being downstairs. The sailor runs a hand down his face and curses, before grabbing me and shoving me at Itachi, along with a line of rope. He loop the line around my midsection, just under my arms, wrapping it around several times, before tying two quick knots to secure it. Itachi, eyes glowing red, immediately copies him.

The sailor runs the two lines over to the nearest mast, where he secures them. I wobble on my feet, before decisively sitting down… and wincing. It's cold. I flinch, then blink furiously. The waves have gotten so high that they wash over the fence, and they splash me. I feel a tug on the rope, and I look over. Itachi! I crawl over, wincing as a splinter embeds itself into my palm.

This is too slow.

I carefully prop myself back upright, feet wide apart for balance, and shuffle towar…

The boat tilts again, and I trip. I catch myself on my hands, carefully crawling ove… something tugs, and I fall again, banging my face and elbows on the wood. Without that balance, I roll.

Ow! I bring up my arms to protect my fact, but… my knees and elbows are banged up and I'm dizzy because it's so dark and I can't see… and I manage to stop myself, but a bucket hits the side of my head, and I fall again, and I can't get my arms free of the rope!

The thin coil of rope that I had accidentally stepped in on my way over is now firmly wrapped, like a noose, around my ankle. I'm tangled in a mess of rope… I don't even know which lines I'm tangled in.

Something yanks at me, and I look up to see glowing red eyes and thankgoodnessItachi, and hands tug loose the mess of rope and I open my mouth to shout a 'thank you'... but a wave washes over me and I cough, sputtering… only to feel another sharp tug at my ankle and ow and I'm facing out now and nonononono… oomph!

The rope around my waist catches me, and for a moment, I hang there, relieved, but in pain.

But then I feel a creaking and my heart jumps to my throat and it snaps, and I topple forward, my head hits the floor and my arms hurt and I'm rolling and my back hits the railing, and for a moment, it holds, but everything's upside-down— no, that's just me… oh, no my legs fly back and I manage to crab the wooden railing but something pops in my shoulder and painpainpain and I open my mouth to scream because I'm falling and then…

Cold. So cold. I try to take in a gulp of air, but I only swallow sea water, which makes me choke and cough and flail. There's still a tangle of stuff around my legs… no, my leg, but my arm hurts and feels weird and I can't move it but I still try to claw myself up but I barely manage to cough up what water's in my lungs before a wave crashes over me and I'mupsidedownIcan'tseemyeyesburnmylungsburnIcan'tbreathe… but then I manage to kick at my ankle and I think the rope scraped my skin but it's off and the wave passes and I manage to bob back to the surface, coughing and sputtering as I try to take another breath of air only to get another wave in my face. It's smaller, thankfully, and I manage to gasp in air before my water-logged clothes and the rope around my chest that once kept me safe now pull me down.

This time, though, I keep my mind, and though my fingers and toes are numb with the cold, I manage, I force them to tug at the knot. I bob up, and I take another breath that's half-water and half-air, but I force my lungs not to expel everything immediately, and… got it!

I bob up again, trying to get numb fingers from bruised arms and a shoulder than won't work to grasp
a zipper. My jacket's catching too much water… it's too heavy. Another gasp of water-filled air and I bob back down, giving up on the zipper and tugging at the bottom, clumsily bringing it over my head—thank goodness I managed to kick off the shoes earlier, even if now my toes feel more like lumps of ice than parts of my body— but I barely manage to get it off my arm before I pop back up and I instinctively gasp at the air but the sodden cloth is over my face and I inhale water and… it's off. I manage to tread water for a little longer, just enough to cough up water and gasp for air before I feel the water rising and dive under, heart racing and air not lasting long enough and I force myself back up in time to gasp air and scream "KID OVERBO-" only to get cut off by a wave in my face.

I cough as I pull myself back up to the surface of the water, squinting through the burn of saltwater in sensitive tissues, shouting again, "HELP! KID OV-" only to get another gasp of water, and then my lungs burn and any breath I gasp doesn't last long enough and everything's dark and I can't see and my arms and legs they feel more like lumps of icy wood than limbs. I can't feel them, and it's only fear and adrenaline that keeps me moving. I feel like I've swallowed several gallons of ocean water, and inhaled about the same amount. My throat and sinuses burn from the salt, and… I'm tired and everything's numb and I'm sleepy and…

A hand grabs my arm. It tugs up… then down, as the wave falls and I squint through the water… red. Glowing red. I smile, but a wave in my face causes me to cough and splutter.

The hand's replaced with an arm, that latches under my arms, and I cling to it as my head goes under the water before I surface.

"Ma—koto" a voice sputters, next to my ear. "Don't… move! Try… try to float."

Itachi! I immediately obey his instructions as I stop pedalling frantically and try to lean backward, squeezing my eyes shut. He shoves something into my arms, closing my hands around it… a piece of wood? He pulls me through the water, which… seems to be calmer. I sputter and cough as small wave breaks over my face, but I don't let myself start flailing. It's actually easy, considering how numb my entire body feels, to just not do anything.

It's so cold… and now that I've stopped moving, I realize how tired my entire body feels. The adrenaline wears off quickly too, and I realize that I'm barely shivering anymore, even if my teeth chatter when I try and say anything.

I'm so cold… and so tired.

Maybe if I just… close my eyes a moment.

...I'm so tired…

---

It is by its breath
That autumn's leaves of trees and grass
Are wasted and driven.
So they call this mountain wind
The wild one, the destroyer.

— Fun'ya no Yasuhide

吹くからに
秋の草木の
しをるれば
むべ山風を
あらしといふらむ

— 文屋康秀

Fuku kara ni
Aki no kusaki no
Shiorureba
Mube yama kaze o
Arashi to iuran

— Fun'ya no Yasuhide

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: CLIFFHANGER! *rubs hands together, cackling evilly*

Okay, some of this took quite a bit of research. I actually made a very rough map (based on xXShadowRebirthXx's), and from there on, estimated distances based mainly on the times they mentioned for the Kazekage Rescue Mission and how fast it would make sense for shinobi to go. Then I had to go looking into the speeds expected for sailboats, and... yeah. I mean, I was then about to go looking into wind maps based on season, but I lost motivation half-way through. (That was also because it proved VERY difficult to find anything about wind patterns.)

And then I had to look into storms, when they were likely to happen (to figure out where to put this story arc), and what used to be the best approach to dealing with an approaching storm... there might be some inaccuracies. I tried my best. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ Let me know if you know for a fact something's not right. I'll try to fix it...

But I personally think Makoto not being all angsty makes sense- with everything that's changing, he's pretty much gone to the "denial" stage of grief. (You know, of that Five Stages of Grief thing? Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance? Yeah... Makoto's a mix of denial and acceptance, mixed with a strong dose of procrastination. And they're not linear, so being very sad will come up now and then, and so will anger.)

Also, in response to a comment, because it makes a lot of sense- Makoto's not particularly terrified of heading to Kaminari no Kuni, because... well, his parents are headed to basically where the Daimyo lives. That's not Kumo. And Makoto's honestly not sure about anything (because let's face it, Killer B's pretty awesome and so's Gyuki), but he's definitely got no strong feelings attached to the location or the shinobi in general. Plus, Makoto's read a lot Before. And also, he sucks at generalizations or stereotypes. Really. He's going to be wary about anyone in grey with a white vest with a Kumo hitai-ate asking about bloodline limits, but... yeah.
Plus, he's a kid. He's got his mom and dad, and Itachi, and that entire team of shinobi, so he's honestly not too worried because he's confident in the people around him. I'll also add that to the previous chapter.

So... please comment and let me know what you think?

(And if you have better knowledge of, or can tell me anything/direct me to anything regarding wind patterns (primarily for eastern Asia/southeastern Asia/the Pacific Ocean/the Atlantic Ocean) and how they change during the seasons (as well as hopefully why), that would be AMAZING.)

Best regards,

ShadowAccio6181
Of Sunshine and Storms (2/4)

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto kinda sorta majorly screws up, and it's Itachi's turn to be a Very Good Friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An autumn eve:

See the valley mists arise

Among the fir leaves

That still hold the dripping wet

Of the chill day's sudden showers.

I cough, painfully.

Everything hurts, stinging from the cold and the salt. My lungs, my nose… my throat…

And…

"I think you broke my sternum," I murmur hoarsely, coughing.

My eyes hurt, and they tear up as I blink.

I roll over onto my back… only to hiss and turn back. The grey, overcast sky is surprisingly bright.

A hand reaches under my neck and helps me pull myself into a sitting position.

Itachi.

I rest my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes.

I'm still so tired. And cold. My head hurts. And…

I pull back, blinking, and stare at Itachi, pushing the pounding in my head aside.

We're alive.

Those two words rattle in my head, and I open my mouth to verbalize them, but what comes out is… "You jumped in after me."

I blink, and a wave of panic washes through me.

I lean back, flinching as the sudden movement jarrs my head, and scan Itachi.
His clothes are damp, and the texture of his hair's weird, and his eyes seem a bit bloodshot, but… sighing in relief, I slump forward again.

Oh, thank the kami.

"We're alive," I murmur. "We're alive."

Tears bead up again at my eyes. I'm… I'm scared.

"We're not on the boat, are we," I ask rhetorically. "Itachi… do you know where we are?"

I mentally cast my mind for hints. Otou-san had shown me the path the ship would travel on a map, but… it's all hazy. Still, based on what I can remember…

A cold feeling goes down my spine. "We're not in the Land of Fire anymore, are we?"

Itachi thinks we're in Mizu no Kuni, the Land of Water.

At first, I feel almost relieved… but then I remember something, and I pale.

The Bloody Mist. The civil war. The Academy graduation exam. This… Kirigakure no Sato, the Village Hidden in the Mist, is in Mizu no Kuni and that's bad.

It's only when I open my mouth that I realize… I didn't read about that in the books.

Still, I have to tell Itachi.

"Itachi? Kirigakure doesn't like… other shinobi to be in Mizu, right?"

He stills.

Okay, that's good. Maybe…

"We should find a village, with people. They might be able to—"

"No!"

The refusal bursts out of my mouth. I can't think clearly, and my memory's fuzzy, but… Kiri's bad. They don't like outsiders. They're scared. Xenophobia, you might say. Strangers… even if they don't know that the Uchi—

Bloodline limits. They're bad to have. Season 1, Haku, ice. Bloodline limit… kekkei genkai. Sharingan. And my hair… I don't know if white's normal or not. Still, better not risk it. We'll need to hide. Itachi can't wear that shirt. And the shinobi supplies… that's dangerous, too.

I snap out of my mind when Itachi shakes my shoulder.

"Itachi, you need to get rid of the Uchiha crest. And the weapons pouch, and the bandages. Probably not the shoes, they're pretty common… I think." My mind races. "Is there mud? I need… ashes or soot or something. And we'll need different names. And…"

Two hands clamp down on either side of my head and a face moves to right in front of mine.

"Makoto. Don't panic. Breathe. In… out… in…"

As I instinctively obey, I suddenly realize that I was hyperventilating. And my heart… it's so loud.
And it's beating too fast. B-but…

"...in… out…"

After a few moments, I've calmed down.

I grab Itachi's hands before he moves away. "Itachi… thanks. I was panicking. But this is important. Mizu's dangerous. We… we need to try and get home. I don't know how. But what I told you? Why I panicked? It's important."

Itachi pauses.

"Please. Trust me." I hold my breath.

Slowly, Itachi nods.

I slump in relief.

After either five minutes or thirty minutes later, the clouds darken, no longer refracting as much light as earlier, and we're safely disguised next to a small fire below the branches at the base of a particularly large pine tree. I've carefully, deliberately frayed the kunai-cut fabric—thank goodness for frayed jeans DIY videos on YouTube—and rubbed ashes and mud through my hair, which is gross, but… my hair's no longer ghost-white.

We've hidden anything identifying, up near the top of the tree, tied to the underside of a branch and camouflaged by dense pine needles. It should be safe until the end of winter, especially if it snows. It was terrifying to watch Itachi climb that high up, and it's only thanks to how light he is that he even got that far up. A grown shinobi, or even a teenage one? Psh.

We're really tired, now, though. Itachi has some ration pills, or food pills, that are still okay, so we're not hungry. Not really. And we also found a small river leading to the ocean, with fast-moving water, so we're not thirsty, either. It's just… I kind of wish I could go to sleep, and wake up on the boat, or even in Konoha, and realize it was all just a dream.

It's cold, but itchy, and our clothes are too thin, even if Itachi managed to grab my thin jacket, and they're still damp from our dip in the stream after drinking to get rid of the salt, but… it's small in the hollow under the tree, and we dug it out and packed the earth and mud so that there was almost no gap between the ground and the circle of the bottom branches, and a bit of a hole in the space around the trunk of the tree.

With the fire, carefully made from the driest wood we could find, so as to limit the amount of smoke produced, and each other… we're comfy. The soil's just damp, not muddy, and we're more than a bit sticky, and I really don't want to think about the microorganisms and the bugs and everything in the soil, or how messy my hair's going to be in the morning— hopefully very, actually, considering the circumstances— but… we're warm.

My hands aren't numb. My nose doesn't sting. And yet… tears still well up in my eyes. It's not home. I can't even pretend it's home. I bury my face in Itachi's shoulder, swallowing hard. He wraps an arm around me and pats me on the back, comfortingly.

"Don't worry Makoto," he murmurs. "You'll be home, soon."
I shake my head, head still buried in his shoulder. "We'll be home. In Konohagakure."

I feel him shift.

"I've only ever failed one mission, Makoto," Itachi whispers. "I won't fail this one."

I fist my hand in the fabric. "You... you jumped in after me."

He doesn't move.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "If it weren't for me..."

"Don't apologize."

Itachi gently peels me off and sets a hand on my shoulder. "I should have gotten you inside, below deck. I should have caught you before you fell. My mission is to take care of you, Makoto. Don't apologize."

"...Still... I should have..."

His hand squeezes gently, and I curl forward again. "I'm sorry," I sob. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault, Makoto," Itachi sighs, hand on my head. "It's not your fault."

I shake my head. "If I had done things differently, then, this wouldn't have... this wouldn't..."

Itachi stills. "The Hyūga affair was not your fault. This is not your fault, either."

I swallow hard. "You... you're both in trouble because of me. Because... I'm silly and I don't do what I should do, and... and..."


"I don't want to go to your funeral!" I sob.

Itachi stills.

I take a shuddering breath. "I... I can't..."

Two arms wrap around me, pulling my closer, until he's squeezing me in a hug that almost makes it hard for me to breathe, but then he wriggles up? Huh? "Listen, Makoto."

I frown, wondering what I'm supposed to...

_Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump... ba-dump... ba-dump..._

I relax.

..._ba-dump... ba-dump... ba-dump...ba-dump..._

Itachi's alive.

..._ba-dump... ba-dump..._

That's his heartbeat.
"I'm alive, Makoto," Itachi whispers. "I won't die."

I take a deep breath. "You can't promise that," I sigh. "You're a shinobi."

I lift my head up, a corner of my mouth raised. "And that's why I need to be one, too. Because I'm not letting you die. Understood?"

Itachi laughs slightly, pulling me up. "Hai, hai, Makoto."

I grin through my still-damp eyes. "Got that? You're not allowed to die."

He laughs again, and I grin wider, and for a moment… we're happy.

The next morning is freezing. We wake up in a tangle of arms and legs, but even that's not enough to fend off the cold from what must have been a night downpour. The ground is a bit muddy, and it stick to our clothes. I should be grateful that we look completely anonymous, but… I'm tired. My throat hurts slightly, and my nose is running slightly, and it's gross, even if Itachi doesn't seem to mind. He's got a slight cough.

Hopefully, it's pass by later in the day. This has happened to me before, on vacations during the winter, and… it doesn't last. Usually. I hope this time won't be the exception to the usual rule. We don't exactly have honey and lemons and hot ginger tea and tissue boxes here.

We each swallow another food pill with water, and we make another fire. It's smoky, but… we're not under the tree with it, so we don't mind. Besides, it doesn't smell bad.

Speaking about bad smells… one thing that's extremely good about food pills? There's not enough… stuff… to exit the digestive system.

Yeah. I'll leave it at that.

But now… it's time to figure out what to do.

Using a stick— and a flash of Sharingan-red— Itachi traces a map onto the ground, complete with the boat's expected path.

"We should have been about here when the storm came," he gestures. "We should… probably be around these islands, in that case, but…"

I grimace. Ambiguity is not fun. Still, islands… "Itachi?" I ask. "Is there any way we can look out and see if there are any islands around?"

He frowns. "It's still overcast, so I don't have the best grasp on where the sun is. I believe that is north, but… I cannot be certain. You have a point, though."

I nod slowly. "Or… I guess we could try and find a village?" I chew at the inside of my cheek. "I could… it makes more sense for family to travel together. I can pretend to be your younger brother?"

I scrunch my nose. "That'll be really weird, but it's a good way to make sure we don't get separated."

Itachi nods, a ghost of a smile on his face. "I doubt Sasuke will mind too much." The smile drops. "The food pills won't last very long, though. I only brought a week's worth."
I sigh, rubbing my face… and grimacing, because my hands and face are both streaked in dirt. "We've already used up four. They're supposed to last…"

"I think shinobi usually take up to two a day. The stronger food pills can sustain someone for a full day. These are not the stronger ones, but given our smaller size…"

"One per day should be enough," I murmur, holding back a sigh. It works. It doesn't really taste like anything, but… it works. I should be more thankful.

"We should try and find a village. Perhaps… perhaps there is something we may do for food?" he wonders.

I frown. "Maybe. We need a backstory we both agree on, for when we get asked questions. And it's definitely better to do stuff than just to take what we need, even if it might be easier for you, since… you know. Still…" I hesitate. It's only a feeling, but…

"What, Makoto?"

I slump. "It's just… I don't think they're going to be… in the best condition. Or that they'll welcome us."

Itachi closes his eyes briefly. "Then let us pray that Amaterasu will gaze upon us kindly. We cannot do much more than that. If they don't… we shall face that problem when it arrives."

I gaze at the sky. "The sun isn't out. And… the Land of Water worships… the kami of the sea." I frown. "Amaterasu isn't really on good terms with her brother, Susanoo. He doesn't seem to like us either, given the fact that we're here because of a storm." I shrug. "Or maybe that was just bad luck and he simply doesn't care about us. But even then… that's kegare, right? And the kami hate kegare."

It seems silly to argue technicalities about something that might not even be real, but… kegare is like… uncleanness, usually caused by natural stuff that happens to you. Like natural disasters. It's perfectly normal, just like getting dirty, but you need to get rid of it (usually by washing it off), because it's not good. It's definitely better than tsumi, which is the bad stuff that sticks to you because you did something bad.

"We're alive, aren't we?" Itachi asks. "Maybe that's a sign that Ryūjin likes us."

I look over. "I didn't think… do shinobi also pay attention to… to the kami?"

Itachi smiles. "The Uchiha worship Amaterasu. By extension, they at least acknowledge the others… even if they consider them to be significantly weaker."

I nod slowly, before pausing. "Wait. They? So… not you?"

Itachi looks up at the sky. "What is the sun without the moon? What is the sky without the wind, or the storms, or the lightning and thunder? It seems foolish to me to risk making an enemy out of anyone, not when being a shinobi is so dangerous as it is."

I sigh, squinting up as well. "Well, we did take a dip in the cold stream-water… and smoke and fire are usually good, too, I think? So…"

Itachi stands up, brushing dirt off. "Do you have any ideas for the cover story? You had mentioned different names?"
I hum. "Does the Land of Water have any different names they prefer to use? I think I'm okay… Makoto's super common, according to Tou-san."

Itachi considers for a moment. "I believe they prefer names with relation to water, but… there are no set rules."

I frown at him. "Do you spell your name like the weasel?"

Itachi flushes pink. "It is a good name for a shinobi."

I look at him. "And?"

After a brief pause, he answers. "...yes."

I blink. "Huh." But in that case… "Do they have weasels on the islands?"

"I… believe so," Itachi answers hesitantly.

I pout, pulling at some of the grasses. "Guess we don't need fake names, after all. But… if we do, I'll call you Tachi. And I'll be Mako. But we do need a story for why we're here and to explain…" I wave a hand at us. "This."

"The best lies have a basis in truth," Itachi offers.

"I think it makes sense to say that we got caught up in the storm," I muse. "But then… they'll ask where we came from. So, maybe say we come from a different island?"

Itachi frowns. "They might ask which island. As well as the names of our parents and the village we're from."

"And maybe how we got caught in the storm," I sigh. "I think I'm young enough… and maybe you hit your head? Maybe… maybe we were fishing? Actually… nah, better go with playing. By the water. There are really rocky beaches and cliffs and tide pools with cool stuff, right?"

Itachi pokes at the ground. "I… do not know. My team and I have been to docks and harbors, and lakes and rivers, but… I thought that there are beaches by the water, with sand? Or simply grasses and plants."

I wince. I grew up with the internet… which doesn't exist here. "Okay. Just… trust me." An idea forms in my head. "We were playing. It was rocky. It started raining, and we tried to run home, but the rocks were slippery. You fell and hit your head. The waves got super big and we were swept out to sea." I pause. "You're… eight, right? No, you turned nine. That's old, but not too old. You're not that tall or… strongly built either, so we should be good."

I take a deep breath.

"This might be too much for me to ask, but… let me take the lead if we meet anyone? Just… don't look in their face or talk. Make it seem like your head hurts."

Itachi's too smart to know how to pretend to be not smart. On the other hand… I've had over three years of constant experience and prior reference. I should be fine. Just…

"Oh, and forget about all of your manners. Don't bow, don't worry about covering your mouth when you yawn or cough or sneeze… and don't be afraid to be messy. Or clumsy."

Itachi blinks, frowning slightly. "As in…"
"We're trying to be normal kids. Which means playing dumb, not acting like you spent every minute since being born training to be a shinobi, and not being well-mannered. Because normal farmers, especially poor ones, can't afford to teach their kids to read or speak really well… ahem, talk real good, and they don't have… don't got time for good manners, either." I resist the urge to wince at my own horrific grammar. "I've had time to play nice with 'normal' kids, and I hear a lot 'bout how I'm diff'rent, so… I think I might be a bit better than you." I pause. "and don't hold anyone's hand, either."

Calluses are hard to fake, and I've read enough that I know that calluses form different on different people's hands. My own hands aren't much better.

"...that makes sense," Itachi murmurs, sighing… and then he smiles, a small, almost-rueful smile. "I'm supposed to be taking care of you, Makoto," he murmurs.

"Why don't we worry about after we get home?" I ask, grinning. "I'll take repayment in onigiri and dango."

Itachi laughs. "You're too similar to Shisui."

"If he likes Mikoto-obasama's cooking too, I'll take that as a compliment," I reply, smiling. Inside, though… I'm worried. At this point…even Itachi's going to have questions. I'll have to explain. And to explain, I'll have to Remember. I don't want to remember. But…

In canon, Itachi dies. It's hard to Remember. Itachi's short and nice and has really big dreams and has eyes that see the world so clearly and makes time for me and likes me and is the first friend I met. In the story… he looks different. He looks tired and scary and he never smiles. And… and he dies. I don't want Itachi to die. But I don't want Itachi to… to stop being my friend.

I know a lot of stuff that might be useful. But… it's also dangerous, for Konohagakure. I love the village, but… that might not be enough. They might not believe me. I've read horror stories. Inoichi-jisan's nice, but… he's a shinobi. I don't want to leave Okaa-san or Otou-san. I want to grow up and be a shinobi and… and I want to spend time with Shino and N— and Itachi and Shisui and Kagami-jisan and… and everyone. I want to explore this world, to learn everything about it.

Even if Konoha decides to trust me and doesn't… doesn't k-kill me for being dangerous or on suspicions on being a spy or something… well, Danzō's already interested in me. I could be really useful. I don't want him to use what I know to do more of what he does. I am useful. I don't want to be useful for him.

And… if I'm useful… they'd treat me well. I don't want to be like one of those… those rare objects or manuscripts that you find in museums, locked up in carefully-monitored, heavily-guarded places where access is limited and people are scared to even breathe wrong. Okaa-san and Otou-san already can be really protective, but that's because they love me and because… well, I am three years old.

If they knew… they wouldn't want anyone else to risk anyone else being able to use me against them. I can think of way too many ways as to how someone with even limited resources could get rid of Konoha.

I don't want to be a Rapunzel. Or… I don't know, but maybe there's a way to get rid of memories. I treasure everything I remember. I… I don't want to lose anything. And those are my best-case scenarios. My worst-case? … I don't even…

I blink.
Itachi tugs at another knot in my hair. "Don't worry, Makoto," he smiles. "But first… it might be useful to cut our hair, too?"

I slump. Yeah. I'd realized, but… "I like my hair," I whisper.

"I know," Itachi replies, still trying to untangle my hair.

I hesitate, swallowing around a new lump in my throat. "Can… can you… make sure it looks okay?"

Itachi nods. "Of course. I'll do my best."

I take a deep breath. "In that case… okay."

Itachi grabs the one kunai we'd kept, which we'd have to bury later, but could theoretically be explained as a leftover from a war, and I probably should be more wary of someone literally holding a kunai by my neck, but… I trust Itachi. I feel short tugs… and then my head feels lighter, and there's a slight itchy feeling around my neck.

I brush away the cut hairs from my neck. At least there's no mirror for me to see how it looks.

Itachi turns and offers me the kunai, and… "I'm not sure this is the best decision," I laugh awkwardly. "it might be better if you're the one holding a kunai next to your neck."

"I trust you," Itachi says simply, and wow that's a lot of trust and pressure on me.

I practically hold my breath as I cut sections of hair. He even lets me shorten his bangs, and I carefully use a bit of water to change the part, and…

"Wow. That's looks really weird on you," I comment, leaning back. Itachi with short hair parted to one side and mussed up a bit in front? "I can safely say that you do not look anything like you do normally."

"As that is our goal, I shall take that positively," Itachi replies, dusting himself off, before shooing me aside and aiming a small fireball at the ground to char any pieces of hair. "Well, if we are ready… shall we?"

I take a deep breath. "Okay. No point in waiting. Hide the kunai… hide the cloth with the three food pills… and let's go try and and find some people!"

---

I mean, we found people? Technically.

We walked along the coast, trying to find a boat, or maybe a dock, or maybe smoke from a fire, or even the sound of people talking, but it's only around sunset that we see smoke. It's not big, probably not much bigger than a campfire, but…

It's people, and to two kids who've been walking around all day, that's already an accomplishment.

We quickly whisper, going over our plan, and then hurry over.

---

We arrive at a campfire on the beach with no sign of people around. It's darkening, and there seems to be a fog settling in, but hopefully not rain. It seems like a failed attempt, but… it's getting cold, and
the fire's so warm, and the fact that it's still lit implies there are people who built it and would come back for it. Plus, it's big and warm… and so we decide to stay.

We've almost fallen asleep when… something crunches, like… someone walking on the sand, and I open my eyes, feeling Itachi stiffen, too…

"AHHHHHHHHH!" I screech, flailing backwards and falling over Itachi and then dragging him back with me and…

I gulp as my eyes take in the armor and vertical stripes and general blueish-grey clothing. These look much more intimidating in person than on a screen.

I feel my breathing stutter and tears come to my eyes and I let them, because that's the most realistic and surely they won't kill a kid, and I let them bead up and fall and I let out hiccuping sniffles that build up as I grab onto Itachi and… "Wahhhh! Okaa-san was right and we were bad and now the scary Kiri-nin are going to kill us and eat us!"

I hear them burst into laughter, and I let my eyes open slightly from how they were scrunched up, even as I rub at my eyes with my hands and, "I-it's my fault, not Nii-tan, so you… you meanies can't hurt Ita-niiitan!" I cry, adding in a bit of a lisp.

I curl up, sobbing, praying that my charade would work and Itachi wouldn't do anything and… and a gloved hand rests on my head, patting it gently.

"We won't hurt either of you," a voice says softly. "Sensei… neither of us would do that."

I allow my eyes to open and my head to lift from my hands. "B-but… shinobi are scary and do bad things, like hurt people." I'm assuming, but since this is known as the Bloody Mist, and there was that graduation exam…

"Not everyone's like that," the nice person says. "I mean, I'm not scary, right?"

I blink amazed. His eyes… they're just like Otou-san's. I… I hadn't realized I'd find someone else with orange eyes. His face looks strangely familiar, but… "N-no. You're… you're really pretty!" I blurt, before ducking my head. Gah. Don't call strangers pretty.

Luckily, he laughs and doesn't take offense and… he's nice. That's so weird.

"What are you doing here, little girl?" He asks.

I pout, rubbing at my face. "I'm a boy. And… and…" I let my face crumple.

"Hey, shhhh… shh… it's okay, it's okay." He hesitates. "Was it the storm?"

I nod, hiccuping. "We were playing, and it was raining and Nii-ta… Nii-chan fell, and his head hurts, and the waves were super big and it was cold and… and… I want Okaa-san," I sniff, wiping my face with a sleeve.

"Here… my sensei's getting some food," he offers. "Why don't you two stay with us, and we can figure out how to get you back?"

I nod, beaming. "Food! Ta-chan, Ta-chan, food!" It's too dangerous to call him Itachi, especially if he ends up in the bingo books eventually and people draw links. Same for me, for that matter.

Itachi nods slowly, knuckles white where he's got a hand fisted in my shirt, acknowledging both the
food and my silent advice to hide his name. "Thank you."

"So, what are your names? I'm Utakata, and I'm fourteen."

His sensei's weird. But cool. He's got these round glasses, and these big black eyebrows and his weird mustache, and he wears blue *kimono*, or probably *yukata*, and purple *haori* jacket over it, and… he blows *bubbles*. Isn't that so cool?

I don't know much of what we eat, other than the fish, but it's hot and filling.

As we eat, we trade information. They learn that we don't know where we came from, that I'm a bit of an absent-minded kid, and that Itachi's basically a very polite rock in terms of expressiveness. We realize pretty early on that there's no way they're going to successfully find our parents, but that they might be determined enough to realize something's wrong, and so we say that Okaa-san died last winter (it was really cold even in Konohagakure, and that probably felt over here, too), and that Otou-san went fishing the day of the storm.

I'm the one who talks, and I go on tangents about things that fundamentally tell nothing… except for Itachi, for whom they convey a *lot*.

Thankfully, he doesn't talk.

…

I realize I might have done my job a bit too well when they offer to take us to Kirigakure.

…

Itachi and I share a look of absolute horror.

If we were actual shinobi trying to infiltrate? Bravo, A+, outstanding, standing encore!

Two lost kids trying to get home? Oh, %*#&.

An autumn eve:

See the valley mists arise

Among the fir leaves

That still hold the dripping wet

Of the chill day's sudden showers.

— Jakuren

むらさめの

露もまだひぬ

まきの葉に

霧立ちのぼる
秋の夕暮

— 寂蓮法師

Murasame no
Tsuyu mo mada hinu
Maki no ha ni
Kiri tachinoboru
Aki no yugure
— Jakuren Hoshi

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yay, fuzzy friendship/bonding moments. I love them. They're not much for plot, but they're important in making things make sense. And that's going to be kinda important for Makoto and Itachi, in the near future.

...

*laughs evilly*

They are in for such an... interesting... time.

Thanks to everyone who commented!

But yeah, I absolutely love comments, and requests to update sooner are actually good... for you. They're usually obeyed. Somewhat. When possible. *hinthinthint*

So yeah, if you're reading this... please let me know what you think! I try to respond to all comments.

...

On a separate note, does anyone else appreciate information dumps? And more importantly, would you comment if I posted chapters more regularly than once a week? Or a bit more irregularly? And... how do you feel about omakes?

Best regards,

ShadowAccio6181
Chapter Summary

Makoto and Itachi are in Kirigakure, and... Kirigakure kinda sucks.

But Makoto decides, "screw it," and is too grumpy because of the poor living conditions to properly wallow in sadness and misery, and decides to try and fix it. Somehow. (It's a bit rough)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

*In the mountain depths*

*Treading through the crimson leaves*

*The wandering stag calls*

*I hear the lonely cry*

*How sad the autumn is.*

I grab at Utakata-san's sleeve as I see the buildings coming up, out of the mist. Everything's... grey. Blue. This village is built right by the water, and there's a wall of grey stone practically at the water's edge.

It's scary.

Reaching behind me, I grab Itachi's hand, too. We're both cold and a bit clammy from the mist, but our new clothes, courtesy of the generosity of Utakata-san and his teacher, Harusame-san, are warm. Itachi's not as comfortable in the greys and blues, but... they're kinda pretty, once you get used to them.

I like Utakata-san. I also like his teacher. I feel almost bad for lying to them. Sometimes... I wonder if maybe we didn't have to lie. If we'd just told them... they might have understood. But now... it's probably a bit too late.

Hah. A *bit*. No, it's four days and probably more than a few *ri* too late.

I really don't like lies. Or lying. I end up with this weird twisting feeling in my gut... that annoying thing called a conscience. Yes, it's sometimes necessary... but at one point, I'm going to tell Itachi the truth. Maybe Shisui, too. And... I'm going to apologize to Utakata-san. And Harusame-san.

Eventually.

Maybe once I get home, and everything's nothing more than a funny anecdote, I can commision a mission to deliver a letter to them? A letter, a gift... just something to say both "thank-you" and "sorry."
They'll drop us off at the Kirigakure orphanage. And then... we can become shinobi, or find something to do in Kirigakure, and... yeah. I'm almost alarmed for Kirigakure. It's *that easy? Honestly, they should be lucky we're not there with any nefarious intentions.

I don't like Kiri-nin. I think I'm very safe in sticking to that as my default. Because they're mean to Utakata-san and they whisper and that's not nice, and I can tell that Utakata-san is hurt, even if he tries to hide it. Harusame-san seems upset, too.

I glare at them, even as Itachi tries to get me to stop. I don't *like* the attention, and I can that Itachi doesn't like it either, but...

"Mako?"

I blink, looking up. "Hai, Utakata-san?"

He smiles tightly. "Do you mind going with my *sensei? I think... it might be best if I wait outside."

I slump, nodding. "Hai." I glare sideways. "Kiri-nin are *mean."

Utakata-san laughs softly, but I can hear the tension. "They're... it's not their fault, Mako-kun."

I lean against his leg. "It's fine. We'll be fine. Don't worry." I straighten back up, mock-glaring. "Shoo."

Utakata-san genuinely laughs this time, ruffling my hair and patting Itachi on the shoulder. "Take care, Mako-kun. And Tachi... take care of yourself and Mako, okay?"

Itachi nods solemnly. "Hai."

I throw two arms around Utakata-san. "Thanks, Utakata-san. For everything." I lift my head, staring at him. "Really. *Thank you. You're super-nice and super-awesome, and you're cooler than all the Kiri-nin, so don't be sad."

Utakata-san smiles, crouching down and giving me a hug, before pulling Itachi in, too.

As he straightens up again, I almost start tearing up, but I force a smile on my face and wave happily. "Take care!"

Utakata-san waves to us, nods once to his teacher, and walks back out the gates.

Itachi grabs my hand, and we turn away, following Harusame-san.

Harusame-san stops us right before the gates of the orphanage, a round, grey, ominous-seeming building on the outskirts, right within view of the wall, and... well, it doesn't look friendly.

Itachi and I share a look.

Harusame-san sets a hand on each of our shoulders, crouching down. "Listen, children. Kirigakure... it's not the friendliest place. Keep an eye out. You will be each other's only friend and ally here. Utakata... he hasn't had a chance to see the worst parts of Kirigakure, even if many of the people don't particularly like him, for the simple reason that he is the grandson of the Sandaime Mizukage. But you will. Orphans... do not have an easy life. Don't mention that you know him. Don't upset *shinobi. You were right, Mako-chan. Many Kiri-nin are indeed like the monsters many civilians see us as. Stick together."
He sighs, looking around carefully, before pulling… a pack out from inside his jacket? "Keep this under your shirt," he murmurs. "In fact, keep an eye on everything you two own. Your clothes. Your shoes. Children who grow up on the streets of Kirigakure learn to be cutthroat. Be careful. I apologize for making the presumption for you, but… try to become a shinobi. Civilians… do not lead very happy lives in Kirigakure. It is dangerous for anyone. The Academy… has changed, but…” He sighs again. "Be careful. Kirigakure… changes people. I've done my best to keep Utakata away from everything. The Land of Water itself is… was beautiful. Once. Some places in it still are. I simply wish…"

He shakes his head, straightening back. "I apologize for the musings of an old man, and I hope you will not be upset at my presumption," he whispers, stepping back. "If you study hard… if you do not change… perhaps I can arrange to take you in as students, once you become genin. I am Harusame, a fūinjutsu master of Kirigakure."

Harusame-san sets a hand on our shoulders. "Take care, children."


Harusame-san smiles. "I will. Now… let's get you signed in?"

Harusame-san was right. Kirigakure… is not nice.

It's like there are tiers… or social ranks. There are nobles and super-strong clan shinobi and people like that at the very top. Then, there are the clan shinobi, and the jōnin. Next down are the normal chūnin shinobi and weaker jōnin or what I think might be tokubetsu jōnin. Then, there are the genin and weaker chūnin. Then, there are the civilians at the bottom. But to be honest… there are the civilians who are doing somewhat well, the civilians who are not doing well and the orphans… and at the very bottom? The children who grow up on the streets.

And for each rank? Those who are nice tend to be lower down. They're not treated well.

It's been almost three weeks since we arrived. After a bit of discussion, we were put into a room together. There's four rooms for the boys, with four beds in each. I think there's the same, maybe less, for the girls. There are two bathrooms. Each has four sinks, four toilets, and four showers.

That in itself isn't bad. What is bad… is the state everything's in.

…

There are thirty-seven boys and twenty-nine girls.

…

Yeah.

The water pressure is horrible, the floors are dirty and sticky (alarmingly so, at times), there's all sorts
of… things… living and growing, and…

And this is one of the better-off orphanages. It's a shinobi orphanage, so it gets a bit more funding. It's not one of the better shinobi orphanages, though, thankfully.

Those have actual shinobi in charge, which means the kids get better training and things might be better… but everything's a lot more strict, and they don't earn that much money for the longest times, because they have to pay the orphanage back, and they have to be a shinobi for a certain amount of time.

This place just has people teaching the children how to read and write, and a library, and several large, empty rooms for, presumably, training, as well as a physical exam every month.

There are only three adults here. One's this middle-aged man with a bit of a potbelly, and the others are women, though one's younger and one's older.

The children are in charge of cleaning up, helping prepare food… all of the chores that go into maintaining a place like this. It's honestly no wonder it's so run-down.

I start reaching out to the other kids as I try to figure out our situation.

...they're… they all seem so… so down or something. Metaphorically down, that is. I can't blame them. There's limited food, the water's always got this funny taste since we drink from the taps, and the sheets are thin and limited. There's always at least one kid sick, but even then…

It's better than the situation outside.

I managed to make friends with some of the kids, and they actually have friends outside. They're not lucky enough to be in an orphanage. You apparently need a shinobi of chūnin-rank or higher to get admitted to any shinobi orphanage, and the streets are supposedly better than the civilian orphanage they used to be in.

Let's just say that the people in charge weren't as nice as the people in charge of this orphanage. The people in charge of this orphanage are pretty neglectful, and they've seem to have lost any vitality, and it seems like some don't care, but… they don't deliberately hurt the children.

Outside… everyone's hungry. Almost no one has enough food. The children sometimes go hungry in favor of giving food to some of the other children outside, the ones who go through trash, but… they don't have much to spare. Even so, one tells me, after one of their friends died after the last winter… they try harder. But even amongst the adults, with homes and jobs and food… I see gaunt frames and thin faces and bony limbs everywhere. The shinobi are better, but… their eyes are hard and their faces seem almost mean. The children I follow drag me out of sight the moment anyone with a headband shows up.

Apparently, they're usually mean, and… they do bad stuff to some of the children, sometimes.

I don't want to think too hard into that, but I get an idea, and it's not good. It only gets worse when one of the older boys, with soft hair and good bone structure and a thin face says that at least it's better than in the Akasen. He was born there, and according to him? It's the place of nightmares. There are maybe two other children, both girls, who came from there, too. They agree.

They told me, early on, as well as Itachi, to never go there. Some of the ugliest kids might be safe, but… we would not. Too pretty, one laughed. The Akasen would swallow us up.
Itachi almost stabbed that older girl with a dull kitchen knife.

I stopped him, thanking the girl for the warning. She didn't have to. She laughed in my face and pushed me hard against the floor.

She doesn't like me.

Apparently, I'm a $% *% idealist (I didn't catch the word attached, but given how she practically spit it out, I'm pretty sure it's a curse word) who has no clue how the world actually works and I'll probably get swallowed up by the world when I get older.

She's not alone, either. There are meaner kids. They take what they can, and spend hours essentially… beating each other up. They call it training. They've got their sights set on getting out of the hellhole by being stronger and tougher and meaner and more cruel than anyone else.

The rest of the kids are either scared of them or hate them… or they worship them.

It's an interestingly mixed bag.

Speaking of Itachi, though… he's had the hardest time here. Especially now that we're poking around outside more… he almost… seemed like he wanted to kill someone. And he's normally a pacifist. But that night, he'd cried. I… can't blame him. He knows the cruelty of this world in the wars and battles of shinobi. How would he have known about this? Poverty, hunger… shinobi probably only see the places their missions take them to. Places like this… the people here can't afford missions, I bet.

I want to scream at times. By now, it's been almost seven weeks. And… as the weather gets colder, and winter sets in, everyone's life gets tougher, and I see more of Kirigakure.

I go out nearly every day to try and get food, supplies… and to try and make sure the children on the streets, who by now have become almost friends, will make it through the winter alive. We smuggle some into the orphanage, the younger ones, especially.

It's hard. I'm always cold, and… well, at least after a while, you get used to the hunger. It's never nice, but… not much is. I didn't really ever know hunger, not the empty, gnawing sensation in your stomach that sapped at your warmth and energy and happy emotions and just keeps growing. Honestly, sometimes I can't help but wonder if that's what being around a Dementor might be like.

But… I can't dwell on the hunger. But… I can't dwell on the hunger. I did that already. I want to go home and be warm and have a nice pot of hot oden and nap by a warm charcoal stove under soft blankets, but… I can't. And Itachi can't either. And it's probably mostly my fault, but I can't dwell on that because… because it won't fix anything.

Crying wastes energy and dehydrates you. Sitting still and moping doesn't get anything done. At least… at least moving around keeps you warm. Somewhat. Even if you don't really have the energy to burn.

Some kids steal. They steal money, they steal clothes, they steal food, and whatever else they can. Not all of us want to risk that, though. It's too dangerous, though as long as the people aren't shinobi… or well enough to hire shinobi… it's not too bad. I don't like it, but… by now, I understand. And I actually learn. I can't actually use many of my pickpocketing skills, since I'm not tall enough to pickpocket the adults with money— I learned on the other kids.

Many beg. It sometimes works. It's dangerous, though, when a shinobi or civilian in a bad mood
finds them, but it's more humiliating and cold than anything.

I've spent a day or two doing that, too, though after one person acted… creepily… and I ran off, Yuzu (the nice older kid from the Akasen) decided that it might be better for me not to do that. I haven't yet told Itachi what happened… I have a feeling he would not be happy about what happened.

I've… not quite the most-liked person right now. Everyone's opinions are… flip-flopping. Probably. For one, I may or may not have brought in several strays.

It's not really my fault, though! There was a group of… probably genin, tormenting the cat with the tiny kittens. And they are good at catching the vermin in the orphanage. Plus, they're soft and cut and fuzzy… and it's not like the messes at the beginning were that hard to clean off the stone floors. And those stopped after I managed to make a makeshift litter-box with sand— though I had to go all the way to the pond/lake, and then the river, to find sand. And I managed to find an old, broken training post with rope to be a makeshift scratching post. And it's not like they're bed is composed of anything more than fabric scraps that are too thin to be useable.

At this point, I'm just glad that I researched care for cats so exhaustively Before. I'd wanted a pet so badly… but now, I'll admit, they are a lot of work. At least cats aren't that bad compared to some other, higher-maintenance pets. And they kinda pull their own weight.

But… four cats are a lot. And we really don't have the room for much more. Or the resources.

There's a reason some kids were so angry with me even bringing in the cat and the kittens. And many, especially the meaner kids, don't like the new faces either.

We're really tightly strained.

It's hard to get wood and stuff for extra fires. You have to go pretty far inland, and then it's a lot of hard work unless you buy it, but that's expensive… and then you need to get it back. And pray that no one decides they want the wood, and takes it. Shinobi have done that before. But in that, we're lucky that it's possible for us to get it ourselves. The other things, the things we need to pay for? You need money for that. Other kids, especially the older ones, even if they're in the Kirigakure Academy… they try and find other work. Most get stuff for themselves, but are willing to share… sometimes. The nice ones get stuff to share.

But even still, the blankets are thin. Everyone's clothes are worn thin. The windows are drafty. There aren't fires. We can't afford to maintain them.

I want to change this.

I can't… I can't just leave after seeing this. Not after seeing the children with too-thin clothes who looked at me and Itachi with jealousy when we first came, but warmed up when I told them that we'd stay on the floor, and that they could keep the blankets. When we'd offered to cook, and made something actually palatable for once.

When we'd motivated the others by taking cleaning seriously and showed the others how to clean properly. When we'd re-ordered the beds, pairing them and laying the mattresses perpendicularly so that you could fit maybe eight children on each, instead of the three-or-so-max before, so everyone was warmer.

When we'd taken books from the small library and I convinced Itachi to read them out loud after dinner.
When I helped fix the horrible water pressure in the showers (and how they were all cold) by… appropriating some of the large tubs used for laundry and combined the two times. Because it's probably fine to scrub down children in laundry water, right? It's not like we can afford much more than soap, so there isn't anything too harsh. Plus, all of the steam keeps everyone warm. It's not the most sanitary, probably, but I think it's better than taking showers in ice-cold water, or some of the kids simply refusing to clean themselves.

The first important part is boiling the water with the doors closed until the air's warm and steam-filled. Then later, after the clothes go through, the kids scrub themselves in the tub with mostly-clean, albeit soapy, water. Smaller buckets are filled with water and used like a shower to clean off the soap. Yeah, we have to switch the water in the two larger buckets after every ten kids or so, but… it's efficient. We try and do it at least twice a week, even if we only can overlap the bath time with the laundry time once a week, and so it's not too bad. And you can fit up to three kids in each large tub.

But my point is… it's hard, but not that hard. I can fix this. Maybe not everything, but… I can make things better.

It's not easy. I'm only four. I look like I'm only four. And the other kids... well, how would you react to getting told what to do by someone half your age? The thing is, though... they've lost hope. They don't have direction. So as long as I'm not just talk and as long as I actually accomplish something and as long as I talk with confidence and explain things... my ideas are good.

And I've already done what I can.

...

But first things first, I need to figure out if I can get the meaner kids to stop undermining things. Because I'm still not sure why the girl (her name's Minori? I've also heard it as Miwa, but then she punched that kid in the face, so… maybe avoid that one?) hates me, but she's infamous in the orphanage. She's beaten up most of the other meaner kids, and most of the orphanage is scared of her. And yet… she's not like the mean kids. She cares. At least, I'm pretty sure she does.

The fact is, I need to be more respected to get things done. Or, I need someone respected. Because… I'm three. And Itachi's… been, understandably, more occupied with the library and secretly memorizing everything (thanks to the magically red-glowy eyes), which is important… but… I can't do that.

I can do this.

Already a bit over half of the boys at least listen to me. Maybe another quarter are sullen and difficult, but not hostile. For the girls, the numbers are more like a third and a half. The problem is the people who laugh and jeer and scoff at our efforts and sometimes deliberately sabotage what I'm trying to do.

Because it's hard to keep everyone working together when things go missing and everyone's hungrier and colder because someone else took most of the food and stole the blankets. It's hard to convince people to do something when they just keep replying, "Why?" and "So what?" and "I don't have to listen to you."

And sometimes, I almost want to cry. Sometimes, it's just me trying to wage a one-person war against the grime and despair that pervades the orphanage. Sometimes I wonder if there's even a point, and whether it'd be easier to simply stop caring.
But that's the thing, isn't it? This isn't my problem. Itachi and I have our families, and Konohagakure, and everything else. As long as we can get out, we'll be fine.

Everyone else here… they don't have that.

And if we can't get out… well, that's why I'm trying so hard. The place is already significantly cleaner. Everyone's a bit happier, with some of the new setups. Everything's looking up!

And so, of course, that's when the kids start getting sick.

Oh, %^#&.

In the mountain depths
Treading through the crimson leaves
The wandering stag calls
I hear the lonely cry
How sad the autumn is

— Sarumaru

奥山に
紅葉ふみわけ
鳴く鹿の
声きく時ぞ
秋は悲しき
— 猿丸大夫

Okuyama ni
Momiji fumiwake
Naku shika no
Koe kiku toki zo
Aki wa kanashiki
— Sarumaru no Taiju

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: Kiri's... not necessarily the best place. And Makoto doesn't always make the best decisions, as you can see. Any decision that plays a part in getting you trapped in Kirigakure counts as *not very good*.

I wanted to explore more of the world, though, and I wanted this to reflect a bit of Makoto growing up. He's practically allergic to commitment and responsibility and being productive... but he's also a bit of a bleeding heart and he can also be very productive when he has a strong enough motivation. And in this case, he is *very motivated* to fix the $#%^-%-hole he's going to have to stay in.

This is also going to come into play again (after this arc) in the... eventual future.

I hope you liked the chapter! In response to a review... yes. I still need OCs. I will ALWAYS need more OCs. If you need a template, just look back to the one in the first few chapters. The thing is... when you're building a world...

I'm not sure if you realized this, but... THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. I need civilians, I need chunin, I need jounin, I need genin, and I need them to be from Kirigakure and Kumogakure and Iwagakure and Sunagakure and Konohagakure and the larger countries and the smaller countries (Land of Noodles, Land of Tea, Land of... Snow... just look in Narutopedia. There are a lot of them.)

And speaking of OCs... Minori's an OC from Slyfoxcub on Fanfiction.net!

-ShadowAccio6181
Chapter Summary

In which Makoto makes friends, gets stuff done... and has to say goodbye again soon, because they're making plans to get back to Konoha!!! ^_^)/

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

Coarse the rush-mat roof
Sheltering the harvest-hut
Of the autumn rice-field;
And my sleeves are growing wet
With the moisture dripping through.

It starts with a cough.

It's almost hilariously fast how that escalates. Because... it's cold and damp. Everyone's packed together... partially through what I did. The kids don't cover their mouths. There isn't a lot of soap or hot water. There aren't really tissues. There definitely isn't hand sanitizer.

...yeah. People get sick, really fast.

The room plans don't help, and... sometimes, I blame myself. It's actually slow to pick up on, at first. Sore throats in the morning and sniffles are pretty normal in the mornings, especially as the weather gets colder. ...that's a mistake.

I pick up on it after several kids lose their appetite. But the others don't agree, and some got upset when I tried to keep the kids in bed, with extra water and food. Some also get upset with me when I try to rearrange the rooms.

They only start listen to me when one kid wakes up with a high fever and coughs up blood.

It's really bad at that point, and Yuzu, who was hesitant to upset anyone earlier, finally decides that the situation is severe enough to ignore a few people's preferences. And so, it's quarantine time.

I'm honestly not sure whether it's the best idea, but we put the most severely ill people in one room, and the mildly ill in another room.

My already-busy day just gets even busier, because now... now I don't really sleep well, either. I tie a clean scrap of cloth around my nose and mouth and try to shove fluids— water, watery vegetable broth, watery rice porridge— down their throats. Another few scraps of cloth double as handkerchiefs, and it's gross, especially when I have to wash the cloth (which is painful in the cold water, because even heading out for wood twice a day now only manages to make sure that the
water/broth/rice is somewhat warm and that the rooms aren't freezing)... but who else is going to do it?

Not everyone cooperates, mind you, especially one of the shinobi-wannabes, but when one shinobi-wannabe refuses to cover her mouth when coughing and three other kids get sick... well, I literally tackle her to the floor, with two hands around her throat, and practically choke her into compliance.

I still remember what I told her.

"You do not have the right to give anyone else cause to get sick or die. You can get yourself sick. You can decide to be selfish and cruel and be mean to people and take stuff and eventually maybe die alone in a ditch somewhere. But you don't have the right to decide that for the other kids here."

Minori actually whistled and patted me on the head. The last thing was probably meant to be condescending, but... I mean, I can't be sure. I did remember hearing her laughing a bit as she walked away.

I know some people have hang-ups about not hitting girls, but... I get a little homicidal when I'm fed up with people being Stupid, okay? And I used to be a girl.

And later, Minori actually nods at me and helps me manhandle some of the more stubborn kids into the rooms later on and enforce the new rules of... covering their mouth and nose when they cough or sneeze or yawn... washing hands... and you know, basic hygiene and etiquette.

Unfortunately... Itachi and Yuzu basically team up to give me disapproving looks and lecture me on using my words instead of fighting, though Yuzu actually adds on a good-job and a wink.

Aren't differences in cultural and social values fascinating?

Because the older kids... and younger kids... well, they all seem to give me more respect now. They actually listen when I tell them to cover their mouth when they cough or sneeze. They actually listen when I tell someone to stop hoarding food, or make them line up for the bath.

It's... kinda nice.

Mind you, it's not perfect. Minori tells me in an aside that I'm wasting my time, that it's happened before... and over half the kids died. It's then that I realize what some of the older kids are doing. They've need going outside and coming back covered in dirt... Minori took me over and showed me the massive hole.

They'd been preparing for burying some of the kids.

My stomach turns, and I almost throw up, and Minori's actually nice for a few moments when she pats me on the back. It's what she says when she turns back for the orphanage that really hits me, though.

"You keep wandering around with your head in the clouds," she calls back, as she heads back to the front door. "I'm not sure where you come from... but Kiri's different. You can't get anywhere just dreaming. If you want people to follow you, to help you... be tough. Prove that you can actually put something where your words are."

She's got a point. And so... I start with forcing fluids (water, watery broth, watery rice, etc.) down throats and trying to keep fevers down. I gather every extra scrap I can and pile it over the people sick. I wash their blankets as often as I can. Everything I can think of, that I can feasibly do... I do.
I distribute thinner scraps and, through a lot of effort, convince the kids to keep them over their noses and mouths— the closest equivalent to a face mask that I can improvise. It's hard keeping an eye on them, since they're not the most comfortable and the scraps are very easy to lose, but… we manage. I also make sure they wash them every day.

My luckiest break is when I… kinda get lost on my way to find firewood, take several wrong turns… and I stumble into a grow of bamboo. It's not big, but… it's bamboo. It takes nearly a week, and I'm practically dead on my feet by the end because of how far away it is, but I manage to snuggle in talk cuttings of thin, green bamboo. I'm not sure how much I should cut, but I keep the stalks as long as I can. If I can transplant it… bamboo grows fast. And it's easy to make into water cups. And it's wood. I'm not sure how it got here, because I'm pretty sure it's not the best with colder weather, but… it's here, and that's all that matters.

When I get back, I find the part of the building right by the wall. Bamboo's super hard to get rid of when it spreads. I don't know if people will be happy with it after it grows a bit, but this way, they'll hopefully have a really hard time of it. Now that it's here, maybe… maybe we'll have firewood next year.

I go back every day, even if my legs shake and I can't feel my feet or hands. After the third day I return with too-cold hands, Itachi goes with me.

The shovels are rusted and too big for my small hands, but we make things work. I use the leftover bath-water to water the bamboo, which I plant outside out of a lack of any extra buckets to let them grow roots. Worst comes to worst, I can try and get more.

But it's enough. That little patch of bamboo that took me a week to find is what helps us the most. It had seemed so ordinary… but it was as if there was gold inside.

The cups I get from the older, more mature stalks of bamboo mean that everyone gets their own. And a few days later, the first fevers break. And little leaves of green start appearing on the bamboo outside.

Then, I take whatever produce we have that's unfit to eat— rotten tomatoes, onions, broken up cloves of garlic, potatoes with too many eyes… any vegetables/fruits that are going bad, and whatever scraps from existing vegetables we can spare. Celery is chopped with an extra few inches at the bottom and put into bamboo cups with water to (hopefully) germinate, as are bottoms of onions, cut with extra room.

Anything without seeds is torn into smaller pieces. I bury them in the freshly-upturned soil that had once been intended as a grave. It might be too cold for anything to grow right now, but hopefully, it'll compost. The soil's not really chalky or clay-like, so I have hopes. Then, maybe by spring, by summer, there'll be things sprouting. And, by next fall… the orphanage might have food.

Minori finds me as I'm turning the mix of soil and rotting vegetables and wood dust and leaves and pine needles gathered from the forest.

"You're not a normal kid, are you?" Minori asks. I freeze. "At least, you're not the child of farmers, or fisherman… maybe shinobi, but I don't think so. You can read. You can write. You look like you're three, but you talk like you're thirteen."

I can't even turn to look at her.

"I don't know what your life was like before this. I don't know who you were. I don't really care, to be honest."
She sighs, and my limbs finally unfreeze enough for me to turn and stare at her, gaping.

"I don't know why you're helping us. I don't know if I like everything you try to do. But..." she looks at me. "You helped us. And that means something. This place is the closest thing I have to home. And..." she looks away. "I can't do the being nice stuff. And Yuzu doesn't like to do stuff, because it's hard to do that and be nice. I've been watching you. You... you say you're going to get stuff done... and then you actually get stuff done."

Minori slumps against the wall. "I respect that. Ridiculous, I know. You're what, three? But... you're not. And my point is... I don't think you're a spy or anything. But... I see you. And your friend. My point is..." she hesitates. "I owe you one. Everyone here owes you one."

She claps a hand on my shoulder, before turning away. "My point is that... I can help. With whatever. Find me, 'kay?"

I'm left staring at her as she walks back to the orphanage.

It's still winter. There's still people sick, and it's still cold, and we definitely don't have everything we want or even just need... but... this is a start.

I smile, looking at the sky. It's cloudy and doesn't honestly look that different from the night before, but... now, it's as if everything is cast in a new light.

This place... it's rough and damp and cold and in desperate need of a complete renovation... but, now? There's hope.

I run over to the front of the orphanage. If Minori can help me... oh, I'm so excited!

If we can actually mobilize everyone... ack! I've got so many ideas, I don't even know where to start!

The first thing we do is give everything a good scrubbing down. There's only one room, and the people in there aren't really severely sick.

Everyone made it through. I can even begin to describe how stoked (or thankful) I am.

With Yuzu and Minori, everyone in the orphanage falls into line. The first priority (and the easiest to accomplish) is a daily "P.E." lesson. Currently, it's just running and learning how to get away from angry people who might want to hurt someone, but Minori's got a look in her eye, and I think it's not going to stay that way for long.

Our next priority is teaching the kids to read.

I can't quite put into words why I think it's so important, but... there's just something that tells me it is. It should open up possibilities, something that everyone's in desperate need of.

The adults... well, they fall into line. The nice one (the young woman) actually knows how to read and write, so we put her in charge of the classes. Minori, surprisingly enough, is a bit like her teaching assistant. Her handwriting is really pretty, which is actually a bit of a surprise.

She helps Itachi and I come up with a set of lesson plans.

There's now a pretty solid rotation of who does what. Winter's barely halfway over, but everyone's confident that they'll make it through to spring. And then, whenever everything sprouts... well, I've
told Yuzu what to do.

Shinobi training is now a lot more mandatory for everyone. I really want to make sure they at least know how to defend themselves. Surprisingly... or I guess not surprisingly, Minori's merry band of aspiring shinobi do a pretty good job at that.

...

Everything's going smoothly, but... then Itachi says we need to go then, or we won't be able to get home until after all the snow melts.

I don't want to, but at the same time... I want to see Okaa-san and Otou-san and Shino and... and Shisui and Kagami-jiisan and I want sweets and tea-stained eggs and...

And now I feel guilty. Because if I missed everyone... Itachi probably feels the same. Shisui. Mikoto-obasan... Sasuke... and everyone.

I've already kept him away so long. And if we'd just told Utakata-san and Haru... Harusame-san, we might have been home already.

I can't regret helping Yuzu and Minori and everyone and making so many friends, but... I've done enough, I think. They can stand on their own now. For me... I need to go home.

It's not going to be easy. It's a long way, and we need a lot of stuff, but... I trust Itachi. And... I'm not about to underestimate Minori. She said she owed me. I guess... it's time to collect.

I mean, she could have taken it a lot worse. And hysterical, breathless cackling isn't really that weird a reaction.

But I know I've made the right choice when Minori claps a hand on my head and ruffles my hair (which has grow out quite a bit by now), and laughs, "no wonder you had your head in the clouds... you're one of those tree-huggers."

The next few weeks are filled with preparations. The entire circumstances of our arrival should have been a secret... but by now, it seems that everyone in the orphanage is whispering about it, and Itachi and I find small donations from just as many people.

I'm worried, but also touched. So many people are helping us.

Even the girl I'd tackled helps. She takes the time to trace a detailed copy of a map of the Land of Water and the Land of Fire onto birch bark. She carves it into the wood, and then let's ink soak in, so as to make sure it won't run.

Perhaps the most touching part is when Minori pulls me aside and tells me to try and visit... and gave me permission to call her by her birth name, Miwa, from 海 (mi) meaning "sea, ocean" and 和 (wa) meaning "peace, harmony," a beautiful name for a little girl, but... Minori hadn't wanted it. It was too soft, too nice, and she'd left it behind with her mother when she left the Akasen, the Red Light District.

Of course, the pouch of kunai and shuriken, and the bag of scrolls that several of the shinobi-in-training quite literally shove into my hands are touching, too.

I try and memorize everyone's face and name. I want to remember them... and maybe it's a bit selfish, but.. I want them to remember me, too. And I want to be able to find them again. Eventually.
It's then that I start thinking. That day. What seems like half a year ago. White chrysanthemums. *Shiragiku*. And all the links… from the association with death to how it's practically my signature color. What if… I use it as… as a logo, or a token or something? I think it might be a bit presumptuous, especially since I think the Japanese emperor used a sixteen-petal golden chrysanthemum as the symbol of… of the imperial family or something.

But that was *Before*. And even so… it seems… rude, I guess. I don't know. But…

I stare at the sky.

Twelve. Twelve petals. Yes… that number means a lot to me… or rather, it *meant* a lot *Before*. any times, that was my number in class. I haven't thought of it in so long… I almost always had to write it next to my name, probably so the teacher had an easier time sorting our assignments, and it was the number on my cubby, my folders… the slot where I turned in my homework… and the funny thing was, it was that way for many, *many* years. I only stopped getting assigned the number 12 after I stopped having a number assigned to me.

I think about it a little longer. Twelve… it's actually a really cool number. It's the product of the first three factorials… it's divisible by 2, 3, 4, and 6… Wait. Three… and four? Three was one of my favorite numbers *Before*, and four? Isn't that one of the unlucky numbers… oh, right. It is… because it sounds like 'shi,' which means 'death.'

And… I guess it's a bit fitting, since I'm coming up with it during winter. After all, don't snowflakes have six sides? So, if there's no center… and it's twelve pointy petals… yeah. Yeah, I can see it!

I practice carving it into bamboo, and after a few days, I present Minori and Yuzu with a stack of circular medallions, each with a chrysanthemum. Most of them are simple, green petals on light brown, but some have the petals carved out, and two in particular are very intricate. I'd managed to trace and then carve the kanji for truth, 真, into each completely-brown petal.

Those are the ones for Minori and Yuzu, and I carve the kanji for their names into the back. For Minori… I carved the kanji for the sea, for seaweed, and finally… for peace/harmony. Yuzu was simpler— he just got the fruit.

Everything after that is an embarrassing mess of feelings and watery eyes and hugs and promises that might not be kept, but are made for the sake of being made.

They're early goodbyes.

Because the most likely way for us to get out is to go through the forest, and the easiest way to do that is to get out the day right before the new moon, and then sneak past any of the patrols with the help of the darkness.

And that will be in two days.

…

I mean, I consider Juliet a bit of an idiot (who falls in love, gets married, and commits suicide in the course of less than a *week*), but this parting is indeed a bittersweet sorrow.

Coarse the rush-mat roof

Sheltering the harvest-hut
Of the autumn rice-field;
And my sleeves are growing wet
With the moisture dripping through.
— Emperor Tenchi

秋の田の
かりぼの庵の
苦をあらみ
わが衣手は
露にぬれつつ
— 天智天皇

Aki no ta no
Kariho no io no
Toma o arami
Waga koromode wa
Tsuyu ni nure tsutsu
— Tenchi Tenno

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yay! Makoto's making friends! *sniffs dramatically*

...the next chapter, things take a rather dramatic turn. SPOILER ALERT!

So yeah, this chapter... well, nothing much happens. Minori's awesome, and a bunch of things get set up for the future, but... \_(ツ)_/¯

I hope you enjoy!

...

And I got inspiration for a lot of this arc from Of the River and the Sea on Fanfiction.net. If you haven't read it, it's an amazing Self-Insert story. Here's the url: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10996503/1/Of-the-River-and-the-Sea

And there's also Decaying Bluebells, which is also pretty great!
(Seriously, a lot of people like dumping their characters in Kirigakure. I mean, it's an amazing plot idea, but... it's just *so* depressing long-term. But it's also really interesting. So... this is my compromise! I'm hoping to also include this sort of world-building for the other nations, but don't hold your breath. There are a *lot* of them, and I don't want to compromise plot in favor of just world building. ...which is a bit hypocritical, I guess, considering several of the following chapters, but... you'll have to wait and see. ^_^ )

-ShadowAccio6181
Of Storms and Heading Home

Chapter Summary

In which Itachi is a ridiculously capable eight-year-old (thanks, Kishimoto), and the journey home is pretty rough.

Also known as the chapter in which Makoto gets very, very sick.

(You don't spend that much time with people who are that sick and don't get sick yourself.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If I see that bridge

That is spanned by flights of magpies

Across the arc of heaven

Made white with a deep-laid frost,

Then the night is almost past.

The day we leave is… remarkably anticlimactic. It's a cloudy day, with the beginnings of a drizzle, and just as chilly as the day before.

My hesitation to leave is obvious. All of the kids came to see us off, and… I really don't want to leave. I didn't really do much. I want so much to see if my plans for a bit of a kitchen garden can bear fruit, pun intended. And if any of the plans to later expand into trapping, hunting, and fishing to supplement the food supply can actually work. There's just so much that I feel obligated to do and see… it almost feels like I'm running away from the problem.

But Minori's too pragmatic to allow for that many tears. She and Yuzu bring me all the way to the forest, partially as a cover, and partially to see us off.

"You've done what you can, you sentimental idiot," she sighs, shoving at me. "Now, go. Shoo. Your promises mean jackshit if you can't stay alive, you know? Go. Like, now now. Go, get home, stay alive, get strong enough to do something about this shithole, and then come back and fix things. Got it?"

I hug her, trying not to cry. "Got it," I mumble in a muffled, thick voice.

"Yeah, yeah. Now stop being the sentimental crybaby you are and just go already," she scoffs, punching lightly at my shoulder. "You got any advice for the midget, Yuzu?"

"Take care of each other," Yuzu tells us, giving me a hug. "Get home safe, okay?"
I nod, swiping at my face with a sleeve.

"Thanks… thanks for everything." I smile through the tears. "Really. I couldn't have done any of it without you."

"We couldn't have done it without you either, Makoto," Yuzu replies.

"And… you're stalling," Minori calls in a sing-song voice, kicking at a rock. She tosses us our packs. "The rain's a bit softer right now, and I don't know how long it'll last. Go. We'll be fine without you. You've done enough to make sure of that."

I chuckle weakly.

Itachi grabs my hand. "Thank you," he murmurs, bowing quickly. "I... I wish you the best.' And then, he turns, and promptly drags me off. I twist, and wave until Minori and Yuzu disappear between the trees.

When they do, I turn forward. Okay. That's over with. I can't worry about that any more. Now… it's time to focus on getting home.

It's… not that hard to sneak through the forest, even if there are sometimes when we almost bump into Kiri-nin. Mind you, it probably wouldn't have been that easy for many other people— Itachi and I are skinny enough to hide behind some very young trees. And to be honest, that might not have been the case three months ago. Near-starvation is sometimes useful, apparently.

...I would rather not have the other side-effects, though.

When we come to the beach, we find a tall tree and climb as high as we can to wait for the sun to set. It's damp and drizzly, and soon a light mist starts to rise, but we're both very much awake. Yeah, it's partially because of the cold and the damp, both exacerbated by the fact that we aren't moving, but… this village isn't known as the Hidden Mist for nothing.

When the light turns orangey-red and then fades to a faint blue glow… after a cursory check to make sure there aren't any shinobi nearby, we carefully climb down. I hop onto Itachi's back, tie myself in place with rope and cloth donated by the orphanage, and then… he runs. Straight onto the water. It's terrifying how pitch-black it looks without the moon, and the clouds that come with the rain don't help. The waves aren't big, but they're there, and together with the rain and the slight splashes… we don't exactly dry out.

Still, by now… I'm tired, and as per our plan, I doze off, relying on Itachi to navigate. With any luck, if we departed correctly and don't veer off in any direction…

... 

... 

I wake up to Itachi shaking me as we get to a small island.

Okay.

Step one, done.

We find a suitable tree, and quickly climb up. The sheets and some creative use of wire and rope
make a hammock, and Itachi sleeps as I head back down to set some snares and go fish. We missed
dinner as we waited for the sun to set, but Itachi needs to rest. He's... well, for lack of a better word,
transportation. This entire plan depends on him having the strength, mental acuity, and chakra to
literally run across the ocean. Of course, it doesn't help that he has to carry me. I'm light, but I'm not
that light.

And then there's the whole matter of the fact that he's nine. Like... that's... what, a third grader?
Third-graders are supposed to be learning to make presentations and the mechanics of making their
own "business"... which almost always sucks, because I really don't want that bead necklace, even if
I am literally given fake paper money to pay for it. Like, thanks... but no, thanks. I don't want the
goop, I don't want to play that lame game... actually, I do want the succulents, even if they're
overpriced, because I was getting the money for free... and thus getting the plant for free. But the
point is, nine isn't old enough for anything. Except, apparently, be a shinobi and do everything that
goes with it.

...I don't find that many fish that are big enough. Everything's so small. And... and I don't know
what plants are edible. Note to self, when I get back, I will look up and practice identifying edible
wild plants. Somehow. Well... I'm pretty sure there are dandelions here, but... it's winter.
Dandelions don't grow in winter.

But that's fine. If I drink enough water, I'm not as hungry. And it's not like I ate that much in
Kiriakure, either. Plus, it's not like there are convenient bathrooms here, and well... it's cold.
Besides... Itachi needs it more than I do. I don't know much, but I do know that using chakra
consumes a lot of energy.

Regardless, the entire thing goes pretty smoothly for the first few islands... but then I wake with a
sniffle and a sore throat... which turns into a rather persistent dry cough. I make sure to drink a lot of
water, but... I'm not that hungry. Just a bit of rice and water over a fire make a nice rice porridge, or
okayu. And... and that's enough. I'm just glad that the kids were willing to give us the small, dented
metal pot with a kinda-rusty handle. It wasn't like they'd miss it too much... probably... which is the
entire reason I accepted it in the first place. I mean, I don't want anyone to get sick or die during the
winter, okay?

It should be enough. And okayu's easier to make than rice, which has a chance of burning or getting
too sticky if we don't put enough water. For the porridge, just liberally pour in water and heat it. And
that's probably the best thing to eat while sick, especially when we throw in some shitake mushrooms
that we find on a fallen tree. (Yes, we made sure. They're pretty distinctive). And when you add in
fish, or the small birds that we sometimes manage to get, or whatever clams I found at the beach or in
the ocean before my hands got too numb to function... it's not bad. I don't find them that often, and it
doesn't change the fact that we're mostly eating water (because nobody could spare that much rice),
and there isn't much wood, but... Itachi's gotten very good at sustaining a small Katon: Gōkakyū no
Jutsu. And if you find some clean rocks and heat them up, like, a lot a lot... they keep the heat. And
sand works somewhat well, too. And... I know ocean water's almost definitely not the cleanest, but
it's salty. So you probably shouldn't take my word for it, but it's not bad as the base for a soup if you
boil it. Plus, it's really easy to find when you're quite literally running over the ocean. And when
you're out of sight of any islands... well, the water can't be that bad over there, right?

The important thing is that it's hot and at least temporarily filling.

My cough is annoying, though. I've taken to wearing my old cloth handkerchief over my mouth to
make sure I don't pass whatever I have on to Itachi, too. He's getting worried. But I should be fine,
right? I mean, I'm pretty sure these are the same symptoms that the kids at the orphanage had... and
they were fine, right?

And the pains in my chest… that's probably just asthma. It's cold. And I had asthma Before, so… it's probably nothing, right? And my headache… the fact that my muscles hurt… that's probably just because I'm so tired. But really, sticky clothes are so annoying. And it's not like it's easy to get the sea salt out when you only have one change of clothes.

It's getting harder to wake up and stay away. I don't know why, but it seems like everything feels even colder. My head definitely hurts, and… and Itachi's worried. The bouncing when he runs, whether over water or across the island, makes my head pound and…

…oh. I have a really high fever? Maybe… maybe that's why I feel so cold?

But I need to be careful.

I can't get Itachi sick.

Itachi says that I shouldn't worry about him right now. That's silly. Why wouldn't I worry about him?

I'm starting to cough up blood… it really hurts when I cough. It hurts my chest and my throat and jolts my head. But… if the kids could make it through, I definitely can… can't it? Itachi says my fever still hasn't broken and it's been almost a week… has it? I don't know. I just want to sleep.

But… then Itachi says it's been two weeks, and… I'm scared. What if… what if I don't get better? I don't want to die.

And so, when Itachi settles down the next night, I tug on his sleeve. "Sorry, Itachi. I know… I know you're tired. Sorry. But… remember what I told you before? When… with Utakata-san. And Harusame-san?"

Itachi nods, clearly distracted. "Shh… don't worry, Makoto. Just rest. You need to keep your strength up."

I shake my head, wincing as the pounding starts up again. "Nnngh… no. No. Listen. I… I'm not three."

"You're almost four, Makoto. And we'll make it home, I promise." Itachi squeezes my hand. "And then we can get oden and sukiyaki and dango and everything. And then Shisui wants to take you to see the bonfires in the Uchiha compound. So rest, okay?"

"No…" I shake my head again. "You don't… don't understand. I wasn't… always Makoto. And… I thought this was a dream, you know? Something I made up. Because it was an anime… a manga. A story. And I was tired, so tired. I wasn't good at anything. Not… not good enough. Too late. For everything." My eyes actually tear up. "Too lazy. Liked stories. Liked pretending… pretending they were real. Because it was so cool. The main characters had such close friends, and everything was interesting, and… and… and I wanted to be like that. And then… I just went to sleep, and kept sleeping… and like in the morning, when you try to stay asleep? Tried to keep sleeping. But then, it was raining and… you."

I smile faintly. "Real. It was real. 'Cause you taught me hiragana and katakana and kanji and 'm not that smart. Not creative. But I'm good at drawing, now. And writing. And I look nicer. I didn't look that pretty Before. Everyone said I looked pretty, but… I wasn't. Didn't run. No sports, or exercise… too lazy. Didn't like sun. Or bugs. Just sat. Then… then I wanted to dance. But no time… school."
Busy. So happy here. Friends."

I curl into Itachi. "Friends, right?"

Itachi strokes my hair gently. "Yeah... friends. But Makoto, what is... this... su-ku-ru? And... a-ni-me?"

I groan. Shouldn't the last... nope. Not now. "Later. Tired. But school... like the Academy. Learn."

"To be a shinobi?" Itachi asks.

I bark out a slight laugh, immediately regretting it, and curl into Itachi. He's warm and I'm so cold... "No. All civilians," I mumble. "No war. Not me. Adults... eighteen-years-old. At least. Me... I was... almost sixteen. I think. Not sure. Slept long, long time. Not... not street-smart. Not... not world-smart. I was completely oblivious. I never really... never really grew up." I blink. Oh, wait. That was in English. Whoops. "Young... young mind? Soul? Didn't really grow up. Easy to be little kid. No... no expectations. No responsibility, work... simpler. Happier. I can learn. Just learn. Like how to make sukiyaki and what flowers mean and how to write nicely and how to go shopping for food and... and how to be with friends. How to be nice. Itachi and Shisui and Kagami don't... don't know me. Not scared. Don't make jokes 'bout how smart I am. Or that 'm too serious. Or bad in group projects."


"So happy," I whisper. "Don't... don't want to go. Thanks, Itachi. And Shisui. And Shino and Aburame-sama and Shinko-neechan and Neji and Hizashi-san and Mikoto-obasan and Fugaku-san and... and Okaa-san and Otou-san and everyone. So happy."

More tears well up in my eyes, and I can feel my nose tingling. Ew. It's probably going to run.

I sniffle, wincing as my headache gets worse again.

"Don't want to die," I mutter, sadly.

Itachi's hand tightens on my shoulder. "No... no, Makoto. Don't say that. You're not going to die."

"Scared," I murmur. "Don't know... what happens. Sanzu no Kawa?" I ask. It's the river of three crossings, and... "Don't have money, though. To cross. Or... or the river Styx. And I don't know anything about the Egyptian underworld. And I'm not exactly Christian... I was more atheist, I guess. So not Jewish or... Islamic? Oops. Muslim. No. Nothing. Or Buddhist."

I cough again, grimacing at the taste of blood.

"I think... I'd like if I could meet cool shinobi. Like... like Shisui's parents, and his Obaa-san. You think they know me?" I smile weakly, looking at the sky. Ah, it's getting a bit brighter. "Then, I could still ask questions. And learn. And hear stories. I like stories," I sigh. "I... I don't want this to be a dream." I snifflle again and curl up tighter around Itachi. "Don't want to wake up. Don't want... I want Itachi. And Shisui. And Okaa-san and Otou-san and Kagami-jiisan and Shino and... and everyone."

A sleeve blots at my eyes, and I blink.

"Don't worry about that Makoto," Itachi sighs, carefully pulling me up to a sitting position, and then arranging me so that I'm on his back again, before tying me in place. "You are not going to have to worry about that, because you're not going to die. Understand, Makoto?"
I let out a light huff of amusement. "Mmm."

"We are going to get home, and then you are going to explain what all those words mean, as well as what you mean by 'story,' and tell me about your other life… only if you want to." He leans his head back slightly, nudging at me. "I am fairly sure that I exist. I feel quite real. And if you say that you believe this world to be real because you do not believe you could have made up that many kana or kanji? Then I shall simply have to show you more things. No imagination could possibly be that diverse, and no dream could be that thorough."

I smile. "Thanks… Itachi. You're a good friend, you know? Thank you."

Itachi shifts slightly, and then gently pats me on the head with a hand. "Rest, Makoto. We should reach the Land of Noodles soon. It will be warmer, and… my Sharingan is distinctive enough of my clan that we should be able to acquire a doctor. And it will be warmer, and we can get better clothes, and we shall most likely be picked up by a patrol around the border before long. Rest."

I hum in agreement, before letting my eyes slide shut. I'm so tired…

It rains that day. Heavily. I hear thunder.

My fever worsens.

I know everything should be getting warmer, with how far we've gone, but…

I'm still so cold.

I'm coughing up blood again…

… it's hard even to think…

Itachi’s scared. I can't stomach even rice anymore. Or cold water. Everything just… comes back up and it hurts and I can't breathe, but…

I keep coughing.

It really hurts…

...my head…

…my throat…

…it hurts to breathe. And… and it's so cold.

Itachi keeps telling me to stay awake.

But… I'm so tired, and it's so cold, and… and surely sleep can't hurt?

I wake slowly to sunlight and… I hear birds.

I blink, groggily, and yawn.

Something’s weird… my eyes widen. It doesn't hurt! My throat. Or my head!

A hand rests on my forehead and I almost flinch away because it's not Itachi's— too big— but then
something happens and there's something green and there's someone telling me to sleep, and... and everything feels so heavy, and... I sleep.

The second time I wake, it's to the sound of someone sighing. Loudly.

"That kid is amazing. No joke. And so are you... I still can't believe I'm speaking like this to a nine-year-old, but... don't worry. He'll live. As for you... honestly. Take a rest. Get some fluids into you. Sleep. Like, actually sleep."

The girl sighs again.

"We should stay put at least another eight hours here... now that Tsunade-sama's not panicking, I should be able to convince her. Don't worry. For all her... uh... traveling, we're still Konoha shinobi. And I am at least a chūnin in rank. Rest. We'll take care of you."

I yawn, slowly turning onto my side. Ugh, everything feels so heavy.

"Chū-nin?" I croak out, before turning and coughing. "Ko-Konoha? Konohagakure no Sato?"

Itachi immediately rushes over and grabs my hand... or I guess, more accurately, my wrist. I see his head nodding slowly, and... I blink, then shove two fingers under my jaw, right at the top of my neck.

"You're counting my heartbeat?" I ask, gratefully accepting the glass of water and sipping at it, grateful that it's not cold. I hate cold water. Or ice water. Like, lukewarm is best, or anything between that and scald-my-tongue hot

"You were very, very sick, Makoto," Itachi answers seriously. "I was worried..."

I grin, a wide gleaming expanse of... probably-not-that-shiny teeth. "That you'd fail your mission?" I ask teasingly.

Itachi doesn't smile. "Makoto. I was worried I'd lose you."

My smile drops. "Sorry," I mumble, curling up. "I... I didn't mean to worry you."

"It's not that," Itachi sighs. "But..."

He suddenly pulls me into a hug and I almost squeak from the surprise. "I'm glad you're okay," he whispers.

I grin through suddenly-wet eyes. "I'll probably be more scared once I actually wake up and realize how scary everything was, but..." I draw back. "We're in the Land of Fire, right? And we're okay!"

I turn to the dark-haired onee-san in the purple kimono-style dress.

Oh, and she's not my sister, but, like... she's a... young... female. Anyone a bit older would be addressed as Oba-san, even if they're not my aunt. And older... well, Obaa-san is viable, as long as they, you know, look old. It's just polite. And of course, the same applies for... males, too. Guys? Men? Boys? I really need to find an age-neutral term that isn't as awkward as "male."

But I distinctly remember her mentioning... "Tsunade-sama? Like... like Densetsu no Sannin no Tsunade, Tsunade of the Legendary Three Nin?"

"...yes?" the girl replies. "And..."
"So we're in the Land of Fire, then." I prod.

"Yes," she answers. "Oh, and where are my manners? I'm Shizune. I'm... I'm Tsunade-sama's student. And this is Tonton!"

She gestures towards the... pink pig. With a vest. And a pearl necklace.

I blink.

I mean, it's one thing seeing it on a screen, and another to have a pig right on the floor next to you. It's kinda like... it's one thing to have a car explode dramatically on screen in front of a backdrop of crumbling infrastructure... and it's another thing entirely to have that happen in front of you. This is almost exactly like that, just... not as immediately life-threatening. Or terrifying.

"It's... nice to meet you, Tonton?" I squeak, leaning down and extending a hand. "I'm Makoto. And sorry if this is rude... but are you a summon?"

The pig snorts, nudging at my hand.

O-okay, then?

I turn to Shizune-san. "Ah, Shizune-san? Did I offend Tonton or something, or..."

"Oh, Tonton's not a summon," she explains. "She's just my... pet."

"Oh," I nod, understanding, before turning back. "Well, it's nice to meet you anyways!"

I smile at Tonton, before turning back to Shizune-san, and laughing awkwardly. "Whoops."

She smiles. "Don't worry! Even though Tonton's not a summon, she's very smart and a really big help at times." She sits at the foot of the bed, scooping up Tonton. "Are you feeling better?"

I think. "Well... my head doesn't hurt, my throat doesn't really hurt, I'm not that cold... and I'm tired, but..." I look at Shizune-san. "I don't think that counts?"

She hums, moving forward to rearrange my pillows and helping me sit up against them. "Okay, I'm just going to quickly check on everything..."

And my eyes widen again. Because her hands are glowing green and that's so cool. "Woah... I really want to learn that in the future," I murmur, awestruck, as she runs them over my head and throat and around my chest.

"Konohagakure can always use more medic-nin," Shizune-san comments. "How old are you, Makoto?"

"Almost four." I answer. "What's the date?"

"December 12th," Shizune-san responds.

"My birthday's in nineteen days!" I grin. "I'll turn four on December 31st!"

She blinks. "Wow. Well, I'm going to want you resting here for at least another day just to make sure you don't relapse, even if I'd honestly prefer two or three. The hospital can fix you up from there."

I turn to Itachi. "I know you mentioned this before, but how are we paying for everything?"
Itachi looks away, and Shizune-san laughs sheepishly. "Well... it turns that we actually borrowed some money from your Otou-san's family at one point... and well, considering that we owe you money, we're basically working off that debt."

Huh. I never thought that the Legendary Medic-nin's gambling habits would actually be useful to me. Well...

"The debt was also enough to cover treatment for me," Itachi adds softly. "I can pay you back after we return to Konohagakure."

"What? No!" I exclaim. "It's the least I can do, and I think Otou-san and Okaa-san will agree. It's only thanks to you that we're here, especially after I..." I look down. "Especially after I basically got us into that mess. At least MinorI's willing to try and find Utakata-san or Harusame-san and explain for us." I pause. "Well, me."

Itachi squeezes my hand.

I look over, and... he's smiling? "'We're here, and we're both alive;'' he paraphrases. "You said that, I believe?"

I laugh... and then surprise myself with a yawn.

"You're still probably tired from the healing," Shizune-san comments. "Sleep."

I nod, yawning again. "Itachi... you sleep, too. You ran a lot," I murmur, sliding down and shifting against the pillows.

He shifts in next to me, and I shift to our now very-familiar position, but now Itachi keeps several fingers on my wrist. At this point, it's practically second nature, and the faint ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump is a reassuring sound.

The next day, we leave around noon, after a meal provided by the inn. I haven't yet seen Tsunade-sama, like, at all, but Shizune-san assures me that it won't be rude for me not to find her. Shizune-san's actually going to head back with us, because in her words, "Itachi-san needs rest, and carrying you would be a bit too much work. Besides, I refuse to risk a patient getting sick after I see to them. It would hurt my reputation... and my pride in my skills as a medic-nin."

And only Shizune-san, that is. Apparently, Tsunade-hime doesn't want to be anywhere near Konohagakure, to lessen the chance that Sandaime-sama would send a team to bring her back. And she really doesn't want to go to Konoha, which... well, I have my own opinions on that, but I'd rather not voice them.

So, now... despite all that... I'm on Itachi's back and Shizune-san's carrying supplies— ours and hers. Because, it turns out, I weigh less than our equipment.

And I'm glad. Tree-hopping was absolutely terrifying the first couple of times Itachi carried me. It's dizzying, and the feeling in your stomach doesn't make things any better. But now... I'm used to Itachi, and... I honestly think I prefer him to Shizune-neesan, even if Shizune-neesan is stronger and has more training and experience. Now, the sight of the floor moving and the branches that sweep past might as well as be on a movie screen for all I care. There is still a slight twisting sensation in my gut if I don't look ahead, but I'm not longer terrified. I trust Itachi.

While we were running home, I usually slept when we tree-hopped, but... these days are different. There's almost too much to eat, thanks to Shizune-neesan, and we sleep an almost ridiculous amount...
every night. We take plenty of rests, and… and it's just more relaxed, you know? Almost more like… like a vacation. It's really nice having an "adult" again.

We're almost home, and despite the exhaustion that weighs down my eyelids, my mind won't drift off.

Eyes still closed, I murmur, "Hey, Itachi? What do you think is going to happen when we get back home?"

He stiffens slightly.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't pretend you don't know Itachi," I sigh. "Don't try to soften anything. I know, best case scenario, that my parents are in Kaminari no Kuni, the Land of Lightning, which unfortunately means that I'm alone for the time being. I'm still rather sick… and I'm not a genin. Despite my maturity, I can't really do anything. I need food and shelter, not to mention medical care, for a while. Hopefully, if my parents are still alive, and nothing happened to them in the storm, these problems are only temporary. However…"

"Your parents are almost certainly safe," Itachi reassures me. "We should be able to contact them as soon as we return to Konoha. In addition, I will probably attempt to ascertain whether the accident was truly accidental or… I'm not entirely willing to overlook that slight flare of chakra I felt…"

I practically choke on air. "Wait, what? You didn't mention anything before. What do you mean… not an accident?"

Itachi shrugs slightly. "I have a slight suspicion that one of the… sailors… on the ship might have been attempting to assassinate you," he murmurs. "It might have been simply my imagination, but… regardless, it would be better to prepare for a worst-case scenario. What I cannot figure out, however, is why. But now that I know your father's family is rather well-known…"

I bite my lip. Okay, things just got a lot scarier if that entire… clusterf was on purpose. But…

"There's more I need to tell you about Okaa-san's family," I whisper into his ear. I mean, I trust Shizune-san, but… this is kinda private. "When we get back. I think… I don't know who else I should tell, but… I think Sandaime-sama and Yamanaka-sama know. Okaa-san probably meant for it to be private. But… it's important. And I want you to know."

Because… it seems almost ludicrous to say, but… if there are… assassination attempts… on me, then Itachi should know. And probably Shisui, and maybe Kagami-jiisan. And maybe Mikoto-obasan, too.

"My primary mission parameters were to get you and your parents to Kaminari no Kuni safely, and my secondary mission parameters were to enable your well-being," Itachi replies, after a little bit. "Until either you are in Kaminari no Kuni, or your parents dismiss me, I am still responsible for your general well-being. And based on my understanding of your abilities, you have not yet learned the Hiraishin no jutsu, the Flying Thunder God technique, of the Nidaime and Yondaime?"

"Thanks, Itachi." I crack a smile. "But no, I have not. And so, unfortunately, I can't teleport over. Though… I have been working on my calligraphy, so maybe fuinjutsu isn't too far away in my future."

Itachi actually smiles at that. "You should rest, Makoto. I'll wake you as we approach the gates, if you like? It would be less alarming to the other travelers if we approach on foot by means of the
main road…" He sighs. "You should definitely rest. My team has probably already returned from Kaminari no Kuni. And… I have just made the slightly-alarming realization that we are likely presumed to be deceased."

I groan, raising my head slightly. I've got a feeling about what that means, and… "So… what are our chances of being accosted by a herd of Uchiha clan members? And maybe crying fangirls?"

Itachi shivers. "Please, don't even joke about the latter. But you will probably be greeted by that same group of Uchiha… and perhaps two worried Aburame, and maybe even a Hyūga, if I'm not mistaken."

I huff, slumping. "They probably don't know."

After a moment, I amend my statement. "Hopefully, they don't know."

Itachi nods. "You have a point… however, I am relatively certain that if Shisui knows…"

I groan again. "He's probably panicking isn't he? …I probably should be more sympathetic, but the fact is, we're not dead, and I'm exhausted. You probably are too, for that matter…"

"Well, I have been assured in the past that taking amusement in the non-serious suffering of others is considered 'normal' by the general populace. And to be truthful, I am of the opinion that you need considerably more food."

"Meh. If I do, you definitely do. I can feel your ribs. Might as well savor my last breath of freedom before I'm admitted to the hospital… are the stories about the food really true? And the medic-nin's tendency of tying shinobi to their hospital beds?"

"Well, I am sorry to inform you that, yes, those stories all have a basis in truth. However, as long as you don't disobey the medic-nin's orders, you should still retain a degree of freedom." At this, he pauses. "I must confess, I am currently taking a degree of joy from your suffering."

I grumble. "Ha, ha, ha. But no, seriously, let me get some stuff from the house first… it's probably very boring at the hospital. Oh, and if I give you my library card, can you check out some books for me? Please? Pretty please with dango on top?"

"Well, my mission is to take care of you, so I don't see why not. Besides, medic-nin dislike loud noises in the hospital… so I hope you do not mind if I use you as a shield against some of my… more enthusiastic family members and… ah… admirers."

"Translation: you're going to hide out in the hospital."

"Well… i would say that 'hide out' is rather crude… perhaps 'seek refuge' would be a better term."

"...can you bring a target and teach me how to throw shuriken, then? Please?"

"You remind me of Sasuke right now."

"Oh, phooey. You know I'm at least more focused than he is. Plus, I'm also comparatively more self-sufficient."

"Comparatively. And… how old are you again?"

"Don't tease me. You know. I'm four?"

"...if you say so. I distinctly remember you telling me that you were… almost sixteen?" Itachi thinks
I blanch, and a wave of nausea sweeps over me. "No. No. Don't even joke about that." Figures. Maybe I have a bit of age dysphoria? Is that even a thing? "I'm four. Unless you'd rather consider me your age?"

"It would give a more solid explanation for why I find it so easy to speak with you," Itachi muses. "However, i am currently carrying you."

Ah. Touché.

"Why don't you take a nap?" He suggest. "I'll wake you when we're there."

"Mmm'kay," I mumble. "Don't push yourself too far…"

If I see that bridge
That is spanned by flights of magpies
   Across the arc of heaven
Made white with a deep-laid frost,
   Then the night is almost past.
— Otomo no Yakamochi

かささぎの
渡せる橋に
置く霜の
白きを見れば
夜ぞふけるにける
— 中納言家持

Kasasagi no
Wataseru hashi ni
Oku shimo no
Shiroki o mireba
Yo zo fuke ni keru
— Chunagon Yakamochi

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: Okay, the interesting fact of the week is that "anime" is actually not a Japanese word. Or, not originally. It's just short for "animation." And apparently most of what we call "manga" is actually "komikku" in Japan or something? ＼(ヾ(´∀`)ノ／

So, the Power of Money is truly incredible, but really everything's more thanks to Shizune being a bleeding heart. The money was so that Tsunade wouldn't just grab Shizune and run, because at this point, she's kinda avoiding any Konoha shinobi as if she's five and they have cooties.

Itachi's a bit concerned about the former life thing, but not, because one of his two best friends in the world was basically on the doorstep of death, and he was tired and just too relieved to be alive and still kinda running on adrenaline.

And… yeah. It's actually kinda good for them that Mizu's basically an archipelago of islands (I've got this mental image of something a bit like Hawaii, in terms of distance between islands).

Itachi's still probably the most ridiculously awesome nine-year-old in the Elemental Nations right now. (Kakashi became a genin at six, and he fought in a WAR. Nothing makes sense, except for there's a lot that makes a semblance of sense… mainly that since there is plenty of precedent for ridiculously OP children, Makoto's actually not the weirdest thing that's ever befallen this… world.)

And Itachi's actually probably a bit relieved at the whole thing, because now everything makes a bit more sense. He's used to dealing with people about twice his age, remember? Genius. And plus, he's got Sasuke as a reference for normal three-year-olds, and Makoto is nothing like a normal three-year-old. Now, he's got confirmation, and he can stop wondering if that's how everyone felt about him.

On a different note… this entire story's from Makoto's perspective. He's not the most reliable narrator. He can't read minds.

…

Well, not yet. You'll have to wait for that.

Anyways, I hope you liked it, and please, please, PLEASE leave a comment! \(^_\_^)/

-ShadowAccio6181
Of Explanations and... Interesting Accidents

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto gives some... slightly-overdue explanations, and Shisui being bad at teaching yields... interesting results. And worldbuilding. There's always world-building.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Snow falls and

The year comes to an end,

It is at this time that

Truly, evergreen

The pine tree seems.

I blink.

Then, I look around.

I'm inside a hospital room, hooked up to an IV.

Huh.

I stare at it for a moment. Well, that's a new experience. I move my arm a bit more. That doesn't hurt too much. I mean, it's really weird, but I've had blood drawn before, and... the experience isn't that different. It's nowhere near comfortable, but...

Wait.

Where's Itachi? And Shizune-san?

It's not a big room, there's one other bed, and...

I carefully shift into a sitting position, vision blurring for a moment as the blood rushes out, and swing my legs over the side. I hop down gingerly, keeping a careful grasp on the bed, and shuffle over to the other bed, keeping a hand on the metal stand with the IV bag attached. Thankfully, it has wheels. Unfortunately... the floor's cold.

And...

It's Itachi!
...Wait. It's Itachi. He's also in the Hospital. Hopefully, it's not anything too serious… but I mean, Shizune-neesan checked him over, right? He can't be that badly off.

Still…

I carefully shove the IV so it's by the bed, then carefully clamber up, wriggling until there's room for me. I also rather insensitively make sure that my feet are… well, they very much appreciate the new source of warmth. I grab Itachi's wrist and then place two fingers… not there, not there… ah.

*Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump…*

Tension that I didn't even realize I was carrying evaporates. Now I'm kinda tired… I look around the room.

I'm in the hospital, I'm pretty sure it's in Konoha… I mean, there's that somewhat-familiar overall theme of this painfully sterile white-ness, and… I wrinkle my nose. The air in here is too dry, too sterile, and filled with that scent that's unique to hospitals. And the hospital sheets are too light, the pillow's too thin, and the bed's too hard. Blergh. At least it's not that cold, now.

The sheets and hospital gown are still really annoying, though. I shift, trying to get more comfortable. They bunch around my legs in weird ways, and *they're too thin,* and they make these weird crinkling sounds, and…

"Oh no!" My eyes shoot open, and… oh. There's a strange… medic-nin... in the room? She spins around. "Where did…" Her eyes fix on me, and she sighs in relief. "Oh, there you are."

She comes over. "Oh, good, you're both awake!"


He blinks, then pushes himself up. "I thought they gave you a separate bed, Makoto?" he yawns, covering his mouth.

"They did." I nod.

Itachi looks over at the nurse. "Is Shisui here?"

I blink. "Shisui's here? Already?"

"You were sleeping for the last day or so," Itachi comments. "That was enough time for *everyone* to learn that we are here."

I shuffle deeper into the sheets. "Everyone?"

"Everyone," Itachi affirms. "And unless I am mistaken by what time it is…"

"Mako-chan! Itachi-chan, you're both awake!"

My eyes widen, and I grin. "Shisui! It's been, like, *forever!* You wouldn't believe everything that happened, and… and… I don't know why I'm crying, but…" I swipe a hand across my eyes.

"Itachi told me a lot of it! You two seriously got shipwrecked? In *Mizu no Kuni?*" He leans in closer, covering his mouth with the back of a hand. "And what's this about you living in Kirigakure?" he whispers conspiratorially (but not all that quietly).

I chuckle awkwardly. "Ah… a lot of it's probably my fault. But…" I pull a faux-serious expression
onto my face. "I'm sorry, Shisui. But at this point, you're not going to be at the top of my 'cool shinobi' list anytime soon."

"Wait, what?" Shisui gasps in mock-horror, moving his raised hand to grasp at his chest. "Oh, the tragedy!" he whines, before switching moods immediately. "So, tell me. What did Itachi do?"

Oh… nothing much," I grin, looking sideways. Itachi buries his head in his palms and waves a hand at me, as if to tell me to just get it over with. "Just… jumped off the boat after me… he's got three tomoe in the Sharingan now… memorized half the library, and… well, he just ran across the water all the way from Kiri." I shake my head in mock-disappointment.

"No way," Shisui whispers, awed quiet for real this time. "Seriously?"

He looks at Itachi with wide eyes, who in turn stares pointedly at the wall.

"Oh… yeah, I don't think I can beat that," he laughs, clapping his hands and finally snapping out of his shock. "Moving on! Good news, I've got a couple of days I can take off, you'll be staying with me and the old man for the time being, and… your parents are fine."

Shisui grins as he delivers the news, and I sigh in relief, flopping back onto the pillow.

"We were actually really worried about you two… we'd gotten a messenger hawk about a week ago, which had come from the Land of Lightning. Your parents will start heading back as soon as the mountain passes clear, probably in about a month. Your aunt will be getting married, though it's been postponed for another round of negotiations… they estimate the wedding will take place in about another year or two. Your family are the ones who were really really worried about you; they actually asked for a B-rank to figure out what happened and get you and Itachi back, followed by a D-rank to take care of you until they get back, which should be in six weeks or so. After Fugaku-san realized Itachi was also missing, he decided to bump it up to an A-rank and pay the difference himself."

Shisui pauses in his monologue to rub at his eyes, a serious look shadowing his youthful face when he continues. "Seriously, you guys are ridiculously lucky… Mizu's a mess right now. Like, there are a bunch of rising tensions and… I'm not even going into the details." He shoots us a carefully casual look. "So, you got shipwrecked and ended up in the islands around the outside of Mizu no Kuni? Man, you're so lucky not to run into any shinobi from Kirigakure… or get close to that village."

I nod. Message received. Keep mouth shut.

"Luckily, you two got back before we sent a team out, and Itachi technically fulfilled the "getting you back" part, so he'll be getting half the pay for the B-rank." Shisui holds a hand up to fend off Itachi's protest. "Nuh uh. Mako-chan's parents insisted. A hawk got to us, like, the day right after you arrived. We'd barely just sent out a hawk of our own, and… well, somehow they knew." Shisui shrugs. "And then… you've got someone coming for you in about two weeks, and until then, you're with us!" He grins, arm twitching as he resisted the urge to wrap it around the shoulders of his bedridden friends. "Me and Itachi basically pounced on that mission when the Sandaime brought it up."

Shisui pauses slightly.

"There were a few hitches… like, the Yamanaka volunteered, and so did the Nara and Akimichi." He winces. "That's a sometimes-annoying thing with even one of those clans wanting something. The other two immediately jump onboard, and well…" He shrugs. "And then the Hyūga also volunteered… and the Aburame… and I kinda wish you weren't this easy to like, Mako-chan. But
that's been fixed, the Hyūga who pushed for you staying with them was pacified by us agreeing that you'd be able to go and visit, same with the Aburame, and... well, the Yamanaka are already helping to take care of your shop, so everything's basically fine. And, of course, you're only staying with us for about two weeks, which is about how long it will be until whoever this kyōfu of yours is comes back to Konoha." Shisui frowns.

I blink. I've heard that word before, but... "Shisui? What's a... kyōfu?"

"Person your parents got to agree to take care of you if something happens to them," Shisui explains. "Shouldn't you know?"

I shrug. Moving on... "So, when can I get out? The sheets are thin and scratchy and I really want some nice hot genmaicha."

Shisui thinks for a moment. "Technically? I think Oyaji started signing you out as soon as we realized you woke up, so... just pull out the IV and hop on my back." He shrugs. "I mean, Itachi's already technically out but he wanted to wait for you.

I stare at the both of them. "...What about you just get a nurse, instead?" I suggest.

"That also works," Shisui decides.

Nearly a koku later, I am free, and I've also managed to finish intruding in Shisui's room. I got the futon I used to use from my closet, and Itachi helped set it up. Shisui served as a pack mule for my favorite ceramic cup, my multi-colored pillow, and several changes of clothes while I took a bath.

Oh, the luxury of hot water again... and nice, warm clothes and everything...

I daresay that Itachi feels the same.

And following that train of thought, now that I feel refreshed and rejuvenated... time to explain. But it needs to be private, because I really don't want anyone else to know. So, when in doubt... ask Shisui.

That's what brings us here, to Shisui's room.

"Itachi, I'm going to explain everything to you as soon as I find somewhere private. Shisui..." I rub at my hand, nervously. "We're going to tell you about everything that happened during our... uh, trip, but... you have to promise to believe me. To not talk to anyone about what I tell you. And... I need someplace where nobody can eavesdrop."

"...how's the basement?" Shisui suggests.

I frown, consideringly. "Itachi, what do you think?"

"Kagami-jiisan has some privacy seals, I believe," Itachi offers.

"Okay," Shisui claps his hands. "Give me a bit of time..."

A quarter-koku later, we're in a seal-secured pantry in the basement that probably doubled as a bunker at some point, and I'm about to explain.

"I'll explain more about Mizu in a second, but let's just say... I know stuff. Stuff I shouldn't know. About the past... and about the future. But it's not accurate. Not in the details." I take a deep breath.
"And that's because I used to be a fifteen-year-old civilian girl in a world where shinobi, chakra, and the elemental nations didn't exist. Don't ask me to explain. I'm not entirely sure I can. But I'm certain I'm not making that up."

I sign. "To be honest, I thought this…" I wave a hand around me. "Was a dream at first."

I rub at my face. "The thing is… I've changed. I'm no longer the person I used to be." I look up. "I like being three. It's not like I'm almost twenty. If anything… think of it as a mix between the two. I told Itachi to think of it like I'm about his age, maybe a bit younger. I don't know how to prove anything, but…" I scratch at my head. "It was really different in that other world. One of the easiest ways to show you… there was a different language? And I think I can teach you guys it?" I offer. "And if I get better with it… Shisui, you know that weird way I found of doing genjutsu?"

"The way that's entirely dependent on your chakra control, your focus, and your ability to image things in your head? Yeah, too well." Shisui frowns. "The details still don't look right for me, and it always takes so long to start… but yeah? What about it?"

"If I can, I want to see if I can find some way of showing you that world through genjutsu." I reply. "And…" I bite my lip. "You know how Information, and especially the Yamanaka, have that technique of seeing people's memories? I want to see if I can learn that… and if instead of seeing other people's memories, I can show other people my memories. I don't know how it works, and I don't know how I'm going to get that jutsu, but…" I shrug. "Until then, I think trying to get better at that genjutsu's my best bet."

Shisui whistles. "A lot of people know of it and that it exists… but I think it'd be a bit hard to get ahold of. You'd be looking at the Analysis Team from the Konohagakure Intelligence Division… and that works really closely with Torture and Interrogation. Maybe if you make a friend there who's willing to bend the rules a bit, but…" He pauses. "Wait, there's a junior member there who sometimes drinks with us. If anyone starts a poker match…"

I blink. "Shisui? I know this is going to sound weird, but why are you… doing… this…" I flap my hand, unable to put it into words.

"You're my friend, Makoto," Shisui says simply. "I like to think of myself as a pretty good judge of character. At the very least… I've got good eyes. And you're not lying. You weren't lying about this, just as you weren't lying about the foods you like or about not knowing how to read or write before or… or really anything else. Plus, I think you might joke about a lot of things, but you wouldn't about something this serious… unless you were trying to make things seem less serious. And most importantly, I don't think anyone would come up with that story as an excuse. Like, it's ridiculous." He pauses. "And that's why I think it's real."

I take a shaky breath. "Thank you… for putting that much trust in me. But you should know… my mom's from the Fujiwara clan. And… until one of my uncles gets a kid… I'm the heir to that family. And I'm also heir the Kobayashi merchant empire." I exhale slowly. "Just thought you should know. But that's not really that important. The reason I told you not to tell anyone… I know stuff I shouldn't know. About this world. Because… you see, there was this… story series… about this world. It was made-up, something just for fun. Many people thought it was just for little kids. I didn't… I didn't like my life. I wasn't happy with me. But that's not really important. The thing that is important is that I buried myself in stories. I liked reading about other people, people with exciting lives who could do stuff… people who weren't me. Pathetic, boring me, who was lazy and distracted and not focused and just not good enough with things… especially people."

I angrily swipe at my tears, looking down.
"I always thought the world moved too fast, that people expected so much from me… that I was too old, too late to do what I wanted. It seems like one day, I just… woke up here." I look up. "My years here have been the happiest in my life. I didn't really have friends… Before. The entire… the entire way that world worked was different, and it's complicated, but what's important is that I know things are going to happen and things are going to go badly and I don't want that to happen but I don't know if I can change things… or even if I want to."

I take another breath.

"Like, Orochimaru-san might become a missing-nin when Sandaime-sama finds how that he's been experimenting on children… but I don't know if that's true anymore. And he might end up invading Konoha during the Chūnin exams in… what, seven years?" I sniffle. "But I know Orochimaru-san, and… and… and he likes books and snakes and Kiyohime-san, and he's given me a lot of books and everything and he talks to me like I'm not a stupid kid and… and I like him."

I cough, sniffling again. "And Hizashi-san was supposed to die when Hinata turned three years old, in December! Sorry. Jūnigatsu. And… and I wasn't there or anything, so everything changed, but… but Hizashi-san still died."

I look at at Shisui and Itachi. "I don't know enough, but… it's enough that I don't want many people knowing what I know. Or even that I know stuff."

"...is there anyone specific you think of?" Itachi asks.

"A person who I don't want to know what I know?" I ask, to clarify. "Danzō."

"The Councilman?" Shisui squeaks. "But…"

"He tries to steal your eyes because of the Mangekyō Sharingan, which causes you to kill yourself by jumping in the Naka river to give Itachi the Mangekyō Sharingan, and then makes Itachi kill everyone in the Uchiha clan except for Sasuke because they're planning a coup, and then Itachi has to go become an S-ranked missing-nin in an S-ranked missing-nin organization that's trying to collect all the bijū in this super-big statue that's actually a corpse that used to be in the moon to achieve peace by threatening everyone, except they're not… I think… and there's two Madara's or something who are really scarier than should be possible, but they're trying to either get a girl or Hashirama or do something with or about his brother Izuna who looks like Sasuke but isn't, because it turns out that gathering all the bijū make this scary… monster/tree/flower-thing that can do something to the moon to either kill everyone, turn them into zombies, or put everyone one into a happy genjutsu that no one can break except for that giant glowy monster-thingy… ah, the Susanoo, and then there's something about a rabbit goddess with an eye in the middle of her forehead."

I take a deep breath. "If you're confused, don't worry, so am I. And that's not even everything. Because Sasuke ends up obsessed with revenge and runs off to find Orochimaru, Itachi's dying and decides to commit suicide through Sasuke, and there's a somewhat-unrelated thing about people coming to life as paper dolls."

They both blink. Simultaneously.

I remember something urgent and facepalm because how did I forget that in the first place?!

"And that reminds me, I need to find someone again and get them to cure Itachi, because otherwise he's going to get sick and die before I turn eighteen." I look up. "Oh, and everything's going to happen before I turn seventeen. Probably."
"...Okay," Shisui draws out slowly. "I'm going to go out on a limb and speak for both of us when I say that I'm going to want you to repeat that again." He pauses. "Maybe a little later. But for now… there's this technique that I got out of a chūnin in Information when he was drunk… and it's supposed to protect your mind from a lot of things. Even the Yamanaka jutsu and truth serums. I think I know someone who knows someone who knows someone else… and that someone else is this kunoichi who's going out with Dokuraku."

He leans forward, whispering. "And Dokuraku Mawashi is on the Analysis Team with Yamanaka Inoichi, and he's about 24 years old, so he's one of the youngest people there. I can try and see if I can get that technique."

I pause, thinking. Wait… something that protects against mental intrusion and even truth serums? That sounds an awful lot like… "Occlumency," I whisper.

"Huh? What's that?" Shisui asks. "O-cu-ru-men-shi?"

"It's something from a different story that I read…" And holy $%^#. I don't know much about chakra, but I'm pretty sure it can do anything under the sun. Except maybe time travel. I don't know much about that. But… why can't I see if the fan-theories on Occlumency work? It's not like it can hurt me, right? "And I think I have an idea that doesn't involve doing something that I think might be against the rules," I grin, excited.

But then… how do I test it? I chew on the inside of my cheek. "I think it would probably be best if I just… don't give anyone a reason to think I might know too much."

A hand sets itself on my head, and I turn to look at Itachi. "I do not know much about the future. But I am grateful that you let me know ahead of time."

I nod. "I'm not sure if this helps… but there were two theories about why you were sick. One is… tuberculosis. It's… a lot like what I had earlier. It's dangerous, and you might die from it, but… it's… transmitted? Like… if someone near you is sick, then you might get sick. If that's the case… you might not get sick. I hope that's the case. If that is the case… you get pains around here," I gesture at my chest, "and you might cough up blood, but… I think it's fixable. I'll have to read a lot more books and learn a lot more words to explain better, but… that should be fixable. I think. What's not as fixable…"

I grimace. "Microscopic polyangitis. That's a lot more uncommon, and… even in my world, we didn't know how to fix it. It's not something you get, it's something you're born with, but it doesn't always show… and… a lot of people think that part of the reason it started up was because of the Sharingan. More specifically, the Mangekyō Sharingan."

I shrug helplessly, caught and spinning in a web of fan theories and speculation that I haven't dug into for years.

"I don't know. I really don't know. This wasn't in the actual story, and… it might not happen, anyways. But…" I bite my lip, clenching my first in helpless frustration "Just… be careful, okay? Both of you," I add, looking at Shisui, too. An image of them both smiling as they die, covered in blood, flashes across my mind and I shudder. It takes me a moment to shake myself back to the present, and when I do I have to change the subject abruptly for the sake of my sanity. "I think I've got an idea about a code we can use, but… I do want to teach you the language, it's just… I'd rather no one knows that I know something like that."

Itachi nods. Shisui… hesitates. "I don't think I'll have time to learn another language," he says regretfully. "With ANBU and being a jōnin and everything…" He sighs, clapping a hand on my
...no. Shisui's right. "It's not," I say regretfully. "There's... there's a proper order to put words in, and it's... it's really different. And then if you want to speak it correctly..." I sigh. "Yeah. You might be too busy. But," I perk up. "I'll give you some things to memorize, okay? So if you need to tell us something..."

Shisui grins. "Thanks, Mako-chan!"

"I look forward to learning, Makoto," Itachi says.

"You taught me to read and write... so I'll teach you the same!" I smile. "It's only fair!"

"But first things first," Shisui interrupts. "After everything you told us earlier... there's no way I'm not showing you some more stuff!"

---

About a koku or two later, as the sun is setting, I'm sprawled bonelessly over Itachi's back.

I would feel bad, but... he volunteered. After weeks of him carrying me around like this... and after even more weeks of of sleeping huddled together in a blanket-burrito in an effort to conserve heat... it's really hard to go to sleep alone. Itachi mentioned how he'd found going to sleep difficult, and how he kept on waking up at night.

...

I mean, I get it, too. I really didn't like being in the hospital alone. Everything's just so... different. We'd established some pretty set habits. And now...

Don't get me wrong. It's warmer and the air smells faintly sweet and not salty, and... it's home. But over those months away... Kiri had become a second home, in a sense, and everything that happened over there slowly became "normal".

...

Still, I don't think either of us are going to find it hard to go to sleep today. I'm utterly exhausted, and I doubt Itachi's much better off, especially with how he insisted on carrying me.

Of course, Shisui looks like a dewy spring daisy and is pretty much skipping along next to us. Seriously? At least try to empathize a bit.

...

...mind you, the soreness might also make it harder to go to sleep, which will make the blanket-burrito more important. You can never quite tell.

My muscles are completely worn out. Shisui's absolutely evil with how much he made us run. And not, like, jogging-running. It was more like... sprinting-for-your-life running. And then suicides. Well, they're not called suicides here, but... I guess some things don't really change. And then we switched to jogging with occasional bursts of sprinting-for-your-life. And then sit-ups. And then push-ups. Which I am, to no one's surprise, very bad at. And then planking. And then punching and kicking and learning to fall and everything, which I am actually not that bad at. I mean, I was just a first degree in taekwondo Before, and it wasn't that serious, but... I know some stuff.
But then… more running. And everything all over again.

I managed to beg off after three repetitions, and then Shisui helped me through the stretches while Itachi kept exercising. Apparently… well, Kirigakure wasn't the best for his… physical condition or fitness level. It wasn't that good for me, either, but with how my muscles are practically jelly and the fact that I'd already gotten them down once before… it's not too bad. It's helpful to have another person, though. It's easier to stretch… your back? Your spine?... when you have another person to help you fold yourself in half. Same with the arms-behind-your-back thing.

Now… I'm like the jello before you put it in the fridge. I am basically liquid, and I'm probably going to regret this tomorrow, but… meh. No pain, no gain.

At least… oh, yum! Kagami-jiisan made nikujaga, with potatoes and beef and… I'm starving, but… at the same time, I can't eat that much before I'm full. That's another souvenir from Kiri, I guess.

But later, after I've helped with the dishes and Kagami-jiisan made tea and warabimochi for the two of us and Itachi's probably getting some stuff from his house and Shisui's out training in the nighttime, because apparently he wants to make sure he doesn't bump into trees when he uses the shunshin at night without the Sharingan… I remember something, and I ask Kagami-jiisan. "Kagami-jiisan? I was wondering… is there a story behind the kanji for my name? I was just wondering… is there a story behind the kanji for my name? I was just wondering… some kanji have origins from, like, pictures or something, and I was curious…"

"Of course, Makoto-kun!" Kagami-jiisan exclaims, grabbing a brush, ink, and some paper from a drawer. "Can you write it for me?"

I oblige, carefully drawing it on the paper, and frowning at the finished result. I need to work on my handwriting more.

Kagami-jiisan looks over and hums. "Oh, you're quite good at calligraphy, Makoto! And… ah. That kanji… it's actually really interesting."

He pauses, thinking, and I mentally raise an eyebrow. Because… well, interesting can be good… but interesting can also be rather… not good. (After all, "May you live in interesting times" was a traditional curse in the Before for a reason.)

"This kanji, makoto, means 'true,' 'real,' or 'genuine,'" Kagami-jiisan elaborates, tapping at the character with the handle of the brush. "But, it originally had a… a bloodier meaning. My memory is fading, but I think it was used… to refer to a dead body, by… disaster. Some people thought the world after death was just… eternal and changeless, so this kanji developed the meaning of 'eternity.' Now, we just use it as a meaning of 'truth,' but…” He grins wryly. "It's an interesting name for a shinobi… we live side-by-side with death, after all. But at the same time… truth? A shinobi, traditionally, lives and breathes deception. Your name… it is a common name, but… it is quite interesting, nonetheless, Makoto-kun."

I grin weakly.

Yeah. Interesting. Sure.

...

Did my parents know all of that when they named me?! I mean, probably not, but… at this point, the coincidences are getting a bit alarming.

The next morning, Shisui wakes me up early with a scroll tossed straight at my head.
"Your new training schedule, Mako-chan! If you're going to be a shinobi and have time to manage all of the nonsense that being an heir to anything requires, you're going to need to make the most of every second you have! Itachi woke up ages ago, and he's already waiting at the training grounds with what we need, because it's time to get you used to using chakra!"

...and yup, that's a pillow I'm wrapped around, not another human being. 

Curse my sudden need for productivity and improvement.

And Itachi couldn't have left that long ago— the blanket's still warm, and…

OKAY ALREADY!

Sheesh. I got it. I'm up. You really don't need to splash me with cold water.

I stretch, yawning.

And a quarter- koku later, just enough time for me to splash some water in my face, change, brush my teeth, fill several bamboo water-bottles, and scarf down a small bowl of okayu, rice porridge, with a few chopped negi, green onions, we're at one of the Uchiha training grounds.

"Now?" I ask, shivering. "The sun isn't even up, yet!"

"The horizon's got light, and that's more than enough during the winter," Shisui responds cheerfully, breath misty in front of him. "Now, stretch! Don't worry, you'll warm up soon enough."

Teeth chattering and muscles sore from yesterday, I reluctantly oblige, hissing as sore muscles stretch and wincing as the damp dew and frost on the ground ends up on my feet. Open-toed and open-heeled shinobi sandals? Probably useful, but… also really, really not.

A few moments later, Itachi runs over, and… "I love you," I breath in awe, happily accepting the thermos of genmaicha and sipping at the green tea brewed with roasted, popped brown rice, and practically melting as the heat spreads me and thaws my slightly-numb fingers. "See Shisui? Can't you be nicer, sometimes? My body is still very much three years old!"

*(I thought he was 4 already… am I imagining things?)*

"Oh, you're almost four," Shisui shrugs. "Besides, didn't you say to treat you like Itachi?"

"...imagine me as the same mental age as Itachi," I hiss. "I am still three, and while I've trained myself out of naps, I do sleep about the same amount as an average three-year-old who's almost four!"

"Ah." Shisui nods. "Don't worry, that'll get shorter once you start using your chakra more. So… chop-chop!" He claps. "Ten laps, don't let me catch you, but don't get too far ahead of me either!" He turns to Itachi. "You already know what to do, so… do what you usually do?"

I take advantage of the distraction to start running, wincing as sore muscles moving.

This is not going to fun.

---

A full koku later, Shisui's practically sitting on me during my stretches as he starts to lecture me on chakra. Itachi, thankfully, holds several scrolls with illustrated images that clarify the rambling lecture.
Chakra is a form of life energy that all individuals produce to some degree; those who run out of chakra will die. Produced within the "chakra coils" that mainly surround and connect to each chakra-producing organ, the energy circulates throughout the body in a network called the "Chakra Pathway System", which is similar to the cardiovascular system. Certain people, such as shinobi, have learned to generate more chakra and release it outside their bodies through pressure points called tenketsu in order to perform jutsu.

Chakra is created when two other forms of energy are moulded together. Physical energy is collected from each and every one of the body's cells and can be increased through training, stimulants, and exercise. Spiritual or mental energy is derived from the mind's consciousness and can be increased through studying, meditation, and experience. These two energies becoming more powerful will in turn make the created chakra more powerful. Therefore, practising a technique repeatedly will build up experience, increasing one's spiritual energy, and thus allowing more chakra to be created. As a result, the ninja is able to do that same technique with more power. This same cycle applies for physical energy, except the ninja needs to increase their endurance instead.

At any given time, a ninja will have a "maximum" amount of chakra that they can form and use before it runs out and they need to rest to replenish it. With practice this maximum can be increased, but to a certain extent as they are limited to the quantity and strength of chakra that their genetics grants them.

Each person's chakra is different and as such gives off a unique chakra signature, which sensor type ninja are able to detect. Chakra signatures are passed genetically, allowing a person's clan to be identified by their chakra; over time, entire populations can have perceptibly different chakra. One's chakra signature can be altered in and because of a few different phenomena. Chakra signatures that are similar to each other (such as that of a parent and child) are sometimes able to resonate when near each other. Each person's chakra also has a unique "colour" that can be seen by those with dōjutsu (the anime tends to colour all normal chakra light blue). Even if chakra is separated, like with clones, changes made in the chakra signature of the original will result in the separated chakra mimicking those changes.

Chakra is essential to even the most basic technique. Through various methods, the most common of which is hand seals, chakra can be controlled and manipulated to create an effect that would not be possible otherwise, such as walking on water, exhaling fire, or creating illusions. Chakra is ordinarily not visible to the unaided eye unless it is highly concentrated or manifested in large amounts. This is rarely seen due to the restrictions of eight specific tenketsu known as the Eight Gates, which limit the amount of chakra an individual can release at a single given time.

Because chakra takes time and a great deal of training to gradually build up, the key to its use is not actually having large amounts of chakra but instead being able to sufficiently control and conserve it. This is called chakra control. In order to have good chakra control, a ninja should only mould as much chakra as they need to perform a given ability. If they mould more chakra than is needed, the excess chakra is wasted and they will tire out faster from its loss. If they don't mould enough chakra, a technique will not be performed effectively, if at all, likely creating problems in a combat situation.

General training methods for improving one's moulding and manipulation of chakra are a series of chakra control exercises that commonly include the leaf concentration, tree-climbing, and water-walking exercises, but also include leaf floating, leaf spinning, kunai floating/balancing, senbon floating/balancing, and various exercises pertaining to an individual's natural or, for a more
advanced individual, trained elemental-type. A good way to build up chakra in the body is to spin it into a tight spiral, which helps smooth out chakra circulation and build up the chakra coils and tenketsu. Whether to spin the chakra left or right is dependent on the way the user's hair grows. For me, I spin my chakra to the right.

Hand seals are often used to manipulate chakra more easily, allowing shinobi to execute their techniques faster and more effectively. Shinobi who are extremely skilled at chakra control often specialise in genjutsu or become medical-nin.

Chakra can also be used for general performance enhancement. By moulding the chakra into key points of the body, usually the hands or feet, a shinobi can greatly augment their physical prowess. Certain shinobi are able rely on this skill to improve natural endurance, improve general awareness, and even perform superhuman strength. Moulding one's chakra can also improve mental prowess, and can make users able to process information more efficiently.

When casting a ninjutsu, the two necessary methods of manipulating chakra are referred to as shape transformation and nature transformation. Shape transformation deals with controlling the form, movement, and potency of chakra. Nature transformation deals with changing the physical properties of chakra into an element. There is also the nature transformation of Yin and Yang, which deals with changing the ratio of spiritual and physical energies within chakra. These two methods can be implemented separately or together in order to create a technique, though ninja who can use both simultaneously are pretty rare.

... I'm glad they're not coddling me or moving too slowly… but I'm lazy by default! And this is a lot of information, even if I know most of it already!

And now, chakra control?

Urgh. This isn't going to be easy.

Actually… I think I was wrong. It's very easy.

"By the kami, Makoto-chan, you're almost scarier than Itachi!" Shisui exclaims, spraying water. "Seriously, I feel like something is up with the water here," he comments, examining his water bottle. "You two aren't normal. I already knew that, and that isn't necessarily bad, but… you were a civilian in a world without chakra. So, how in the name of Amaterasu's holy light are you so good?" He shakes his head and takes another drink of water.

"I mean, it takes a really long time, and I need to really focus, but… this is way easier than I thought it would be," I think out loud. "I should try getting faster at it, and be able to do some things subconsciously… and I really need to get stronger, because it's weird that water-walking… or I guess, water-sitting is easier than tree-walking."

"Yeah, I'll say," Shisui mutters.

"Hey, Shisui?" I ask. "Does meditation help? I know you mentioned circulating chakra while meditating, but…"

"Yeah, it helps to make you more aware of your body and chakra, even without moving chakra" Shisui replies. "Why?"

"...based on how you explain it, I think I was meditating for, like, most of every day every since I
kinda woke up here," I mumble. "I mean, it's like sleeping... and it's the easiest way to pretend to be sleeping or make sure your mind's quiet enough for you to go to sleep."

"...right." Shisui buries his head in his hands. "You mentioned that. You slept, because you were tired and thought everything was a dream and didn't want to wake up. But it wasn't sleep so much as meditation..."

"And chakra's pretty and fun to play with?" I add sheepishly.

Shisui stares at me. "So you were basically meditating for what, at least three koku, every day, for almost four years. Maybe less now, maybe more earlier on because I know how much babies sleep." He leans back, sighing. "You know what? Let's find a lake. My day's crazy enough as it is... so let's stick with a time-honored tradition and see how big a fireball you can make."

A short walk later, we come to a... "I did not know you guys owned that big of a lake," I comment. "Do you ever swim in it? Go fishing?"

Shisui laughs. "Sometimes. Mostly, though, we use it to practice Katon jutsu. It's safer than most of the training grounds."

He leads me down to a wooden pier that extends a short ways into the water, and turns to me. "Okay. Normally, we don't start anyone off this early, but I think you can handle it. These are the hand-seals— Tiger → Snake → Ram → Monkey → Boar → Horse → Tiger." He demonstrates them slowly. "You think you got them?"

I frown. "You know, I don't know any of these. So like... if I burn myself, it's one you."

Shisui sighs. "Yeah, I guess, but... can't you just learn these now? Like... take a deep breath, then Tiger... Snake... Ram... Monkey... Boar... Horse... and Tiger, and blow. And then see? Fireball!"

I frown, going through the hand seals. Gah! It's slow and awkward, and... you know what? I remember what Shisui's chakra did. And I think the Tiger's enough, right? Because each element has a specific hand seal usually associated with it... and wasn't the Nidaime supposed to just use one hand-seal or something?

I shrug. Worst comes to worst, I end up in the Hospital. Okay. Deep breath, form your hands into Tiger, pull on the chakra, give it that little twist I felt Shisui's do as he brought it up, let it build up and kinda wrap it around itself and build and build and build in my throat, and then that sharp jerk, like striking a match, and tease out a thread and bring it out but don't breathe... and blow... and...

I wince at the heat and the feeling of pushing so much of my chakra out. When I start feeling lightheaded and my lungs are basically empty, I quickly cut off the stream of chakra, let the heat dissipate (because I remember researching forest fires and just fires in general and burnt lungs sounds highly unpleasant), and then gratefully suck in a breath of slightly-charred air, panting.

"Okay, that takes a lot out of you. And wow do I need to work on making that faster," I gasp, letting myself slump down into a sitting position on the dock.

I glance over at Shisui. "So, what do you think? It was too hot for me to keep my eyes open, but... big? Average? Tiny?" I ask, gesturing with my hands... but then I stop. Because... Shisui's just staring.

"Hey, you okay?" I ask, waving a hand in front of him and jumping. "Shi-sui... Shisui!"
He blinks, then looks down at me. "That was… well, really slow. Like… did-you-fall-asleep-or-something slow. As in, I got bored waiting for you to make the next hand-seal. But…" He looks over at the lake again, rubbing at his face with one hand. "You did that with one hand-seal. One!"

He's got two handfuls of his hair at this point and he's pulling hard. "Nothing makes sense anymore!"

I stare at him. "What? I couldn't remember the hand-seals and they felt a bit weird, like… like being tickled or something or getting your cheeks pinched… so I figured that if hand-seals are just there to shape your chakra, why not skip that middle step and just make the chakra do everything without worrying about making hand-seals?"

"...okay. Okay." Shisui takes a deep breath, then breathes out, then takes another breath. "Makoto, hand-seals are like…" he flails his arms, looking for a comparison. "They're like… kana. They're standardized, they all do slightly different things, and you put them in different combinations to get words. Or, in this case, jutsu. What you did…" Shisui pauses. "It's like if you drew the word instead of spelling it out."

Huh. That's an interesting metaphor and not one I would have thought of… but… wait a second… "So I either need to draw it faster… or learn the kana and what they all mean or sound like separately, so I can make any word I want!" I cheer. I hadn't thought of it like that before, but… oh, that could be so cool!

"Exactly!" Shisui grins. Then he frowns. "Wait, no, that's not it at all."

I shake my head. Because it's not kana, which are simple and easy and all sound like one thing in particular. It's… it's more like English, where nothing's really certain unless someone tells you, and there's different spellings for any pronunciation, and the meaning can be anything depending on the context… like "clip" can mean to attach something, or detach something. "It is. It's just… like my language, not yours! Or…" Or actually… it's like kanji. Because there's at least two ways to pronounce anything, the kunyomi and onyomi, and there are simplified words and not simplified words, and… "Or it's like kanji. But like… old kanji, like in the poems that Okaa-san likes? Where everything's confusing, and weird, and… and…"

"You know what?" Shisui sighs, grinning. "I give up. Learn the hand-seals, try to remember the sequences for the jutsu, do whatever you want… but just… you keep doing that, okay? Because it's got a lot of potential. I just… can't. Don't get me wrong. It's really cool. But… it's also a bit like seeing a pig fly. It's just too weird," he laughs, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "But then, what about you makes sense? Come on. Let's go find Itachi and get you started on memorizing all the hand-seals."

And so that week passes with little fanfare, as Shisui enjoys the most of his days off by practically running me into the ground. By the end, I've mostly forgotten what not-sore muscles felt like, I now only feel a stretch in my splits if I stack two pillows under each foot, and my fingers can brush against my ankles when I'm in a backbend. I can also do five good pushups, hold a plank for the length of time it takes Shisui to finish a stick of dango, and not be out of breath after two repetitions of the… getting-to-be-more-fun-now-that-I-see-the-improvement-and-don't-just-feel-the-pain exercises.

It's not just physical exercises, though.

By now, I've officially memorized all 12 basic hand seals, each of which is based off a different animal in the zodiac. In no specific order, they are:

Rat (子, Ne)
Ox (丑, Ushi)

Tiger (寅, Tora)

Hare (卯, U)

Dragon (辰, Tatsu)

Snake (巳, Mi)

Horse (午, Uma)

Ram (未, Hitsuji)

Monkey (申, Saru)

Bird (酉, Tori)

Dog (戌, Inu)

Boar (亥, I)

...

And I have found that I am very good at chakra control... but also very not good, in the sense that it takes me forever to do anything, and it's very easy for me to get tired or lose focus after a while. And I am good at sticking leaves to different point in my body or floating various sharp, pointy objects over my body or rotating them... but kunai are really heavy and shuriken aren't much better, and I can't do more than, like, two. And two's already hard. It's like... patting your head and rubbing your stomach at once.

Hard, but not impossible. Never impossible. I know, in the stories, the main character just used shadow clones. But... I can't do that. And why do I need to do that? I want to learn that technique, eventually. Shadow clones seem ridiculously useful. I asked Shisui, and he showed me the technique multiple times, with different numbers of clones, but... there's so much chakra pushed into each one. There's a pull and a twist, and then... multiple pulls, like the opposite of gravity, and then you push and wind up the chakra again, almost like yarn or cotton candy, until it's dense enough and the right shape and you push just a bit more, to shift the chakra kinda... not a lot though, and to harden the outside, even as you dust or pull the extra chakra off like a poof of smoke, and then... voila! Clones.

I've also gotten a bit more practice in with that weird genjutsu-thing of mine, though.

There's some good news... but mostly bad news.

Good news— the possibilities are limited only by my imagination.

Bad news? Well... there's a rather long list, which includes everything from causing myself headaches to relying a lot on my focus and ability to basically imagine everything photo-realistically. That's really not easy. Once, I basically dumped Shisui in a world composed entirely of rough graphite sketches. And then everything was blurry with some oddly specific object. And then everything was impressionistic. And then everything was dots. And then everything was way too bright or way too dim or way too grey-out. And then the objects seemed to glow. Yeah... I just started having fun and basically f#$ with him half-way through. ˘(ツ)˘

His reactions were fun! And it's not like they couldn't work— according to him, they were all very
But of course, the biggest problem is the most consistent problem— it takes what seems like forever to get working, and it's hard to focus for long. And moving illusions? It's like that multi-tasking issue all over again.

Still, it's really useful when I'm trying to hide something else, though it's a slightly different formula. It's like… making spider-web of chakra so that whenever someone looks at a spot, they just see the illusion. It's a bit more tiring, but it's something I quickly get the hang of. Like, if we're playing hide-and-seek and I cast a genjutsu over Itachi so that Shisui doesn't find him. Itachi can't really move that much, but… it's really cool, and Shisui keeps rubbing his face, so I think I'm doing well?

It's also not that easy to break, as long as I infuse it with some faint feelings of this-is-perfectly-normal-and-of-course-it's-real, which is actually pretty easy since I've been trying to convince myself that this world is real since… time immemorial. Denial is a very powerful tool.

I still want to see if I can use memories for genjutsu, though. Otherwise… I'm going to need to basically turn my head into a 3D modeling computer that produces photorealistic CGI. Do I even have that much storage space? And my mental images take, like, anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour to just form. It's a lot like doing… addition or subtraction or multiplication or division of multiple, really long (as in, six-digit-plus) numbers. It's ridiculously easy to lose track of things halfway through.

On a separate note, feelings are easier to transfer, as well as certain trains of thought, but… it's hard to pull up a feeling that you're not currently feeling, okay? But I made Itachi smile (with teeth) and skip, so… I'm not too bad at making people feel a stronger version of what I'm feeling, I guess. (I'm not repeating that, though. For those few minutes, Itachi acted so out of character that… it was scary. And very disturbing.)

But another thing I found out that should be common knowledge but probably isn't— the genjutsu are harder to break if the person doesn't want to break out and if it's realistic… so now I've got a really cool technique that I call "Sleeping In." It's basically soft, fuzzy darkness with that feeling of soft blankets and complete lethargy and warmth and comfort.

I'm very familiar with that feeling, and apparently it's quite irresistible to over-worked shinobi.

It's also the only thing I remember in enough detail, since for that, I don't really need to worry about any visual details. Now, I'm just trying to improve the aspect of smell… hearing… and maybe taste? That's something I realized pretty early on. Reality is perceived through five senses. If you're casting a genjutsu on someone… unless you can guarantee that there's no conflict… it's going to be relatively easy for them to realize that they're under a genjutsu.

The Sharingan really isn't fair. Shisui managed to cast a Makoto-style genjutsu on me several times… and they see things so clearly, and they see the chakra moving, too, and it's like everything's brighter… and of course, the eidetic memory is so unfair. But yeah, unless someone manages to intuit what chakra looks like (and when Itachi showed me, it looks a little different for each Uchiha)... no one's going to successfully throw an Uchiha into a genjutsu anytime soon. Especially since with the changes in perception from normal vision to Sharingan vision, you'd have to anticipate the exact moment, and… that's hard.

And you have to literally be staring at the person while they do that. And hope that they didn't close their eyes. And spend enough time with an Uchiha to realize when the vision changes (it blurs slightly while the eyes start getting red, a bit like a camera zooming in, and settles when the tomoe stand out clearly in the red of the rest of the eye).
On an entirely separate note… a lot of people have been visiting me recently.

I mean, technically speaking, it's probably more accurate to say that I was visiting them, but… the sentiment isn't dissimilar.

Yamanaka-sa… *Inoichi-ojisan* was one of the first people. That visit was pretty straightforward. He commented on how he relieved he was that I am okay and asked if I was doing well, if I missed my parents, and so on.

I stopped to talk with Shinko-chan a bit at the shop— thankfully, everything's going pretty well—and I greet many of the customers, who exclaimed at seeing me. Many rushed over to pinch my cheeks and comment on how I should eat more, but I endured their affections with a smile and did my best to field questions and politely managed to excuse myself (run away) relatively.

Aburame-sama verbally expressed his gladness that I am well, and Shino actually hugged me, then invited me over to his birthday again. Shino also gave me a *really* heavy box, clumsily-wrapped in silver paper, and Aburame-sama passed me a card. They both wished me a happy birthday, and extracted a promise from me to not open if before my birthday.

The last visitor was probably the biggest surprise. After all, it's not everyday that Hitomi-sama of the Hyūga clan comes to visit you in person. She, too, gave me a present in advance for my birthday, but it's what she did next that surprised me the most, though.

She bowed low before me and thanked me for saving Hinata and Neji.

I reacted with surprise, begging her to raise her head and that I didn't need the thanks, that Neji was my friend and I just did what I could and that… that I should be the one bowing my head, for what happened with Hizashi-san.

Hitomi-san simply shook her head and pulled me into a tight hug as I allowed myself to cry and mourn for Hizashi again, with someone who could actually understand why I missed Hizashi-san so much, who actually remembered Hizashi-san as who he was.

After that, as I hiccuped and wiped the wetness from my eyes, Hitomi-san insisted that I not feel guilty for any of what happened, that otherwise she might have had to mourn for three and not one, and at my surprise, she explained that yes, she would have mourned for me as well.

Hitomi-sama also asked that I not take Neji's words as the words or thoughts of all of the Hyūga, and that despite our rather… forcibly-terminated friendship, I was still more than welcome to visit the Hyūga compound… and that indeed, she rather insisted that I visit her at least once every other week, hopefully with Shino-kun and keep her up to date about what's happening in my life.

I was too scared to refuse— I don't know how, but she happened to wear the exact same… *smile*… that I've learned to fear from Mikoto-obasan, and well… it turns out that ingrained habits are rather hard to ignore.

Somehow, despite all other shocks during my conversation with Hitomi-sama, it's what she says as she leaves that shocks my worldview the most.

Why?

Well, it turns out… IT'S ALMOST CHRISTMAS!

Well, not *Christmas*. Technically. It's called the "Rinne Matsuri," or the Rinne Festival, and it's on December 22-23, or whatever two days bracket the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year,
but... it's a time to give people presents and do nice things, so it's basically Christmas. And... evergreens (mainly sasaki, which is also popular in purification ceremonies) and red and green and gold and silver are still the traditional colors, so it's like nothing changed. Though it's roast duck that's popular, and the entire thing's a bit more like Chinese New Year with the red and gold and focus on family and tradition of giving money in red packages... it's still so fundamentally Christmas that I want to jump in the air for joy.

The amazing-ness continues, though. The week between Rinne Matsuri and the New Year is basically a non-stop festival for the Uchiha. As in, seven days of stalls on the street, of festival food, and of lots and lots and lots of fire and explosives.

The Uchiha light bonfires and set out lanterns starting on sunrise of the day after the Winter Solstice, and they don't come down until the first day of the new year. And everyone gets up early for the first sunrise of the new year.

I honestly can't wait. It seems awesome.

It is awesome. The sun's setting on New Year's Eve now, and the last week (and a few days) have been awesome.

Shisui has still been training me as only a person with way too much time on their hands can— I don't really have anything I need to do, so that means I basically have eight hours a day open for training. And, true to form, Shisui's determined to squeeze as much into those eight hours as is possible.

That might not sound like a lot, and it actually got better with the festival (three hours, not eight), but... even one minute of sparring with someone is enough to exhaust me. That's not good, but the point is... that's a lot of time. And yeah, a lot of it is spent stretching and/or studying and/or doing things that aren't quite physically intensive, but... that still leaves a lot of time for Shisui to drive me to exhaustion.

The only thing I can say is that the enormous bathtub is probably what saved me during those days.

And that it's only thanks to the previously-torturous training that I improved so quickly, so I guess I like it. To an extent.

But now that I've got a solid base down, having fun is our main priority, especially today, and it shows. I've probably eaten twice my weight in food during the festivities, and neither Itachi nor I look nearly as starved that we did maybe just a few weeks ago. And today, it's my birthday, and Itachi and Shisui and even Kagami-jiisan somehow both found time to get me presents and hide them until today.

Kagami-jiisan got me a soft blue-grey coat (with a hood) with soft leather fastenings across the front, lined with soft white fur. It's loose enough, with enough fabric in the sleeves, that I'll have plenty of room to grow into it. It doesn't hurt that it almost reaches my knees right now, of course. I absolutely love it. It's soft and warm and fuzzy and there's a high collar, so I can just duck my head and nuzzle into the soft fur.

Shisui got me a books on nutrition and training appropriate for growing shinobi. Apparently, I'm a bit too thin, but also... I personally think he wanted to give me food, but also wanted to make sure his
gift was useful. (And based on how loose some of the pages are, and the comments on the side-margins, he's read through this before, which logically should devalue the gift, but makes me like it more. There's just so many tips and the commentary is so funny!)

Itachi… I think went a bit overboard. He got me a freaking *encyclopedia* on plants. It covers everything from which plants are poisonous, to which are edible, to which have medicinal uses, and it includes plants from all over the Elemental Nations, wild and not. Each entry has a colored, life-sized picture of how it looks in real life, from pretty much every angle. And… here's the kicker— in *this* world… each of those images was probably hand-drawn.

Yeah. I was panicking over how much it cost… but then Itachi reassured me that it was his mother's, and that it had been compiled by Uchiha, using the Sharingan, so it was probably as close to accurate as it could get.

… and then I started panicking that I was taking some sort of Uchiha heirloom.

But it *is* a ridiculously useful gift. Especially since there are notes in the margins that Itachi said were written by Yamanaka-s… gah, *Inoichi-oji-san*, regarding the meaning of various plants in *hanakotoba*. Apparently, there's no direct meaning of flowers (a lot of the meaning is based on inference and context), and sometimes people disagree, but it definitely helps.

Itachi's even made sure that there are plenty of empty pages and blank space, so I can even add notes! (Though honestly, I think I might first have Yama… *Inoichi-oji-san* do it. I glad for the truly ridiculous amount of empty space, because that means Itachi guessed what I might do, and maybe I can ask Yamanaka-oji-san to add in notes about when the plants grow and how to plant and take care of them and maybe even how to tell if some of the fruits are ripe…)

The only minor source of exasperation? It's… a bit too much for me to carry, with how big it is and how heavy it is. I'm not being ungrateful! It's just… I'm really going to really need help getting it *out* of the compound and back home.

Shino and Aburame-sama got me several books— not *quite* encyclopedias, but… not really too far from that status. There's a book on butterflies, one on bees, one on spiders, one on how to keep spiders away from you, and… and from Shino, a small handmade pamphlet on *kikaichū* that I'm pretty sure he sneaked in without express permission… alongside the actual insects themselves, which were inside a small jar with mesh-covered holes in the lid.

I'm honestly… rather flattered. Shino wrote that he had worried about me, and that the he wanted me to keep some *kikaichū* on me, so if I ever got in trouble, they could find him or his father. And that they would live as long as I feed them a bit of chakra every now and then— not too much, just enough for them to slow down, maybe twice a week or so. He also wrote to bring the jar when I went play next time, and that he'd show me more stuff.

And… folded in the card was a ribbon. A pale, white, almost impossibly-thin ribbon.

Spider silk. Shino actually figured it out! It's a bit rough, and clearly hand-made from the multiple imperfections that can be seen when examined closely, and yet… it's *amazing*. And motivating. Because Shino's also working hard, so that means that I need to as well.

Not sure of what to do to feed the *kikaichū*, I tried pushing a tiny bit of chakra into the leaves at the bottom of the jar… and the insects swarmed the leaves, so I guess it worked?

Hitomi-sama gave me a book on goldfish, a bag of feed, and a beautiful, circular blown-glass vase that honestly looks like a hollowed-out marble, due to its many colors. When I visited her a while
It's still alive. Hitomi-sama had looked after it when I'd forgotten it in the process of getting my stuff from the Hyūga compound. When I stopped by, already with an idea of why she wanted me to, she gave the goldfish, complete with the little porcelain bowl I'd put it in, back to me.

I named it Hizashi.

And immediately after leaving Hitomi-sama, I'd headed over to Yamanaka Flowers, where... where I'd "bought" a wide, flat, circular flower-pot, with the holes in the base, and asked if they had any... well, I didn't know the words for expanded clay aggregate, but it did exist and I did manage to get some, and it turns out a form of hydroponics/aquaponics apparently does exist, even if it's not quite that popular, but the important part is that I am now well on my way to setting up the fishbowl with a filtering system, because I have never owned a fish or a pet or any other living thing and therefore have no idea how some things work.

What I did have was a privileged upbringing and educators who valued teaching children to be eco-friendly and environmentally aware... and the internet. So, thus... this.

I step out of Yamanaka Flowers with a jingling of bells. In my hands, I hold seven sweet pea plants, in shades of blue and purple, tied together with a bluish-purple ribbon. Their color matches the cloudy sky... and my emotions. I slip around the crowds of people, careful not to crush the delicate stems and I slowly near my destination. I dodge rectangular white stones, making sure to tread only on grass, as I look for a specific stone. I lay the flowers at the foot of the stone reading "Hyūga Hizashi."

Sweet peas for goodbye. Four, shi, for death.

"Thank you. And... I'm sorry, Hizashi-san," I whisper. "I'm sorry it took so long for me to come by. I'm sorry you had to do what you did. And... I'm sorry I couldn't keep Neji from... everything." A sad smile lifts the corners of my lips as I trace the carved name. "Sayonara." Goodbye.

It's not 'see you later,' or 'take care,' or something like that. You don't use sayonara for that, usually. It's for... more permanent good-byes.

And I'm not a fool. This... it isn't a 'see you later,' or 'take care.' It's a good-bye that's probably months too late, a goodbye that shouldn't have needed to be said so soon, but...

It's good-bye.

I wasn't in the most cheerful mood after that— too pensive and solemn for the exuberance and excitement that should properly accompany a holiday, but... it's hard to remain pensive and solemn when there's a kotatsu and sweet, sticky mochi and hot tea.

Honestly, one of the best parts of winter is probably eating around a kotatsu, one of those tables with a quilt over a small fire, together with friends. In fact, it's one of the times when I'm grateful for how small I am— I'm the perfect size to take a nap under it.

But it's not too long later that the three of us are wrapped up in a large, thick quilt on the roof of Kagami-jiisan's house, sitting on another folded quilt, looking at the stars. Itachi promised to teach me about the constellations, and how to navigate with them, and Shisui cheerfully joined in.
There are 28 star houses (that is to say, constellations) which run the circumference of the sky. The Heavenly Emperor divided the sky into the northern, southern, eastern, and western quadrants, each with seven star houses and each ruled by a divine beast— Seiryū, the Azure Dragon of the East, Byakko, the White Tiger of the West, Genbu, the Black Tortoise of the North, and Suzaku, the Vermillion Bird of the South.

It's cold with the sun gone, but Shisui shows me a chakra exercise to keep myself warm— molding chakra and circulating the chakra really quickly throughout the entire body. Apparently, it also helps if you relax and picture a fire along your spine… and it somehow actually does. It might be like the placebo effect, but.. it's pretty cool.

But even then, the lateness gets to me, and my eyelids get heavy. Itachi and Shisui will stay up until the sunrise, and below us, Kagami-jiisan's probably doing the same thing. They're taking one last time to remember and dwell over the old year.

I try, but… even thoughts of Shino and Neji and Shinko and Team 2 and everything that's happened this year get fuzzy with sleep, and I… just drift off.

Itachi wakes me up when the sky is still dark. It's colder than before, but there's another blanket, and sandwiched between Itachi and a now-snoozing Shisui, the only place I'm cold is my face.

My eyes are sticky, and I rub my face as… I try to remember what I was dreaming of before I woke up. Kagami-jiisan says that dreams right before the new year can be very important, but… I don't remember. I'm pretty sure I had a dream, but…

Oh, well. At least… I think it was a nice dream, though. So maybe that in and of itself means something.

But I lean over and flop on Shisui, poking him until he stirs, and together, we watch as the horizon lightens gradually.

"What do you want to do in the new year, Makoto, Itachi?" Shisui asks, yawning.

I think. There is so much I could say, or I could even resort to my default for New Year's Resolutions- I don't know. But… this time, I think I do know.

"...I wish to deepen my ties with my existing time and try to spend more time with you two, as well as my family," Itachi says.

I hum. "That's a good one." I pause. How to phrase it… "As for me… I want to… no, I'm going to learn more, and I'm going to get stronger."

I turn. "What about you, Shisui?"

He grins mischievously. "It's not quite as impressive as yours, but… I think I'll try and see if I can train my bunny rabbits as ninja bunnies!" He pauses. "And of course, I'm still going to try and be faster than the Yondaime, but…"

He looks over and shrugs, and I don't know why, but I start laughing, a slight wheeze, and Shisui falls backward as he starts laughing, too, and when I turn over, Itachi's smiling, and then he looks away and I see his shoulders shake…

And then pretty soon we're all laughing.
And through my laughter, squinting, I see two sets of eyes, Sharingan-red, memorizing the scene, even as the sun rises on the new year.

…

Seriously, that giant flaming ball of gas has the best timing, but does it really have to shine in my face?

---

雪ふりて年のくれぬる時こそつひにもみぢぬ松も見えけれ

Snow falls and
The year comes to an end,
It is at this time that
Truly, evergreen
The pine tree seems.

\( yuki\ furi\ te\ toshi\ no\ kure\ nuru\ toki\ kosotsu\ hi\ ni\ momi\ jinumatsu\ mo\ mie\ kere \)

---

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:** Yay! They're back!

…

Okay, it's not-training-montage time.

\(^{(^_\_)}\) / Oh a side note, shoutout to my new beta, bg3929! She's AWESOME, and hopefully, there'll be fewer… easily picked-up-on mistakes in the chapters from now on!

And also, slyfoxcub is still awesome with how she lets me bounce ideas off her!

Now, onto disclaimers…

...I don't know *kanji*. I'm assuming that some characters are more simplified than others, and some characters have more than one spelling because some people prefer the older way of writing it. And I am not familiar with Japanese poetry, either, but in my attempts to translate *waka* (like the poem above), I've found that translating software never get anything close to the versions translated by humans. And I know a bit of old Chinese poetry, and I know that written stuff? You need someone to tell you what everything means. It's like… poems written in older-than-Shakespeare English. Some, you might have an idea of, but for the most part, unless you're really familiar with that style, you're going to need someone who
studied it to translate for you. (For example, "wherefore" doesn't mean "where," but "why." And "sweetmeats" don't have anything to do with actual meat, usually.)

I really, really, REALLY need to emphasize this. Chances are, someone reading this knows this entire subject better than I do.

…

If I do anything wrong, PLEASE LET ME KNOW HOW TO FIX IT!

…

I think that's all.

-ShadowAccio6181

P.S. Brace yourselves. There's... going to be quite a bit of character development, character introduction, worldbuilding, and just sheer information-dumping going on in the next few chapters. Just... be warned, don't worry, I'm pretty sure it'll still be at least (somewhat) interesting…

…

I'm going to stop digging myself into a deeper hole.
Of Godfathers and Continued Training

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto trains more. And we find out who that mysterious godfather is.

(Hint: It's Orochimaru.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

梅がえにきゐるうぐひすはるかけてなけどもいまだ雪はふりつつ

To the plum tree's branches

The warbler has come.

That spring is here

He sings, although

Still the snow is falling.

Ironically, for me, the beginning of the new year is more… of… not an end, per say… that's bad luck… but… let's just say a lot of things changed right after.

For one, my parents are coming home! We had left in… the middle of jūgatsu, October, about. The trip was supposed to take anywhere from a bit over five weeks to maybe seven. They were supposed to arrive late November, stay about four to six weeks, then leave and arrive late February.

So just two months, and then I'm going to see Okaa-san and Otou-san!

For another… I finally found out who my kyōfu is.

And I'm going to stay with him for the two months or so.

…

I guess it's good that we had the months to acclimate, and that I figured out how to substitute pillows and a blanket cocoon for Itachi.

…

Moving on.

Yes, he's a he. And he's also a shinobi. A pretty good one, actually. And… here's when it gets embarrassing, because… it turns out I actually know him. Better than I thought, actually.

It's the friend of Okaa-san, the one with the long, silky hair and smell like bitter, flowery not-tea and
nice voice, the one who I thought could be a girl or a boy. The one who gifted me the colorful pillow with the bean bags inside (that I sometimes used to practice my aim), the set of wooden *kunai* and *shuriken* that my parents had mostly confiscated (which I liked to use to practice handling the actual *kunai* I'd gotten, due to the decreased risk of injury and the lighter weight), and the nice doll that was actually probably getting dusty in the cabinet in my room.

...it's also the very nice person who gave me multiple books, already took care of me once before, and has a snake Summon named Kiyohime.

Yeah.

I guess that right after a kidnapping involving a dead person, and then a truly catastrophic funeral, was maybe not the best time to initiate conversation, and I'm mostly annoyed at myself for not figuring it out.

It was… rather awkward waiting in the Sandaime's office, dozing off, waking up *just* enough for my mind to partially-recognize the feel and smell of that mass of dark hair, but and then starting a conversation while half-asleep… and then waking up fully half-way through, and then having to explain my surprise.

...yeah. It was *really* awkward.

I hadn't really prepared for… the change-of-caretaker thing. And… I'm honestly not sure how to go about negotiating things like curfew, bedtime, supervision, etc. What do people normally do? (What a *toddlers* would normally do is, at this point, irrelevant, as I've long since given up on trying to keep *that* standard. Thankfully, the detached nature of my parents' choice of guardian allows me the freedom to indulge some of my more… peculiar tendencies.)

Though, to be honest, I'm actually grateful that I got Orochimaru-san as my *kyōfu*. He actually realizes that I have a brain.

So, in short order, we've negotiated a set of… guidelines. And they're quite interesting, not necessarily in the content, but… in showing more of who Orochimaru-san is.

I will be staying with Orochimaru-san at his family home. (Because his apartment is more for storage, work, and convenience and not particularly suited for multiple people to live in at one time.)

I will keep Kiyohime-san with me at all times while outside the house, and preferably within the house, but that's not required. There is no set curfew or bedtime, necessarily, but breakfast will be a half a *koku* after sunrise, lunch will be at midday, and dinner will be half a *koku* after sunset. If I miss any meals, there will be leftovers in the fridge and various snacks in the pantry. If I choose to eat outside, Orochimaru-san keeps some spare *ryō* in a jar on the shoe cabinet. If that is not enough, I am also allowed to ask for extra money, provided it is within a reasonable range and is for a sensible purpose.

I am allowed to call him Orochimaru-ojisan, but I am under no obligation to.

There are no limits on what I may say or ask, provided that I am polite.

Any… well, if I do anything meriting… punishment… that will be discussed at a later date. (Neither of us really wanted to think too deeply on this one.)

I am responsible for keeping my room tidy. I will put my dirty laundry in a hamper by the entrance of my room. Laundry will be washed at least once a week, and… while I'm not technically *required* to help out with that (or any other extra chores), help would be appreciated. (Plus, it's rude not to, so I
Orochimaru-san has stuff to do during the daytime, but he will make breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and eat those meals in the house. If I need him while he is working, I am to ask Kiyohime-san. His genin team has passed the exams to become chūnin a few months ago, so he has some free time, but he still has responsibilities, such as for the Research Division.

If I need help locating anything, I am to ask Kiyohime-san.

I am strongly recommended to listen to Kiyohime-san, but that's not really a rule. (Apparently, Kiyohime-san likes asking for food a lot, and I am strongly recommended not to listen to her at those times.)

Is that all?

Oh, and… after I mentioned some cases in which I probably can't keep Kiyohime-san too close by, such as while training with Shisui or Itachi or Kagami-jiisan… Orochimaru-san's going to teach me! I mean, he looked a bit annoyed and muttered a lot about the dangers of slapdash or incomplete education and reckless prodigy-jōnin who really shouldn't be allowed to influence youth, and then decided that he would take over most of my education in those matters.

All I know is that I'm super excited to learn from him.

But first, there are other things to do. Like, for example, Sarutobi-ojiisama has a grandson! Orochimaru-san took me to visit, at the invitation of Sarutobi-sama, and… his eldest son is named Kazuma, as in in, meaning "true harmony." And Asuma's name means "true tomorrow" (明日真). I know. I asked. And now Konohamaru, literally being named after Konohagakure? Someone needs to get this guy a retirement, because I think he's become a bit to focused on… making sure everything goes well and stuff.

Konohamaru was born the day right before my birthday, on the thirtieth. And he's tiny and pink and squishy, but also cute. In a way. And he actually makes me miss my littlest brother Before. He was also born December 30th.

And that makes me realize… he's going to be an absolute brat. I can just see it. But it's not without reason. Maybe I can change that a little? Because I know for a fact that I'm not going to be sucking up to a baby. Also, despite the fact that I really don't like spending extended periods of time with children… maybe I can visit sometimes? Sandaime-ojiisama seems to like the idea, so…

...I honestly don't know. All I know is that this insufferable infant's already made a mess (of my life, emotions, and plans), within the first minutes of me meeting him.

…

And now he's started crying, which means it's time for me to beg a hasty retreat.

After that it's Shino's birthday, which means procuring a gift and bringing that (along with the jar of baby kikaichū which I'm still not sure about), to the restaurant with the private room and the scenic view where we'll be eating lunch.

All of the foods are pretty mild, which is what Shino likes, but I've found that a lot of Aburame are
like that. There's lots of Shino's favorites, like wild grass salad and winter melon soup, and Torune-san's also there. I hadn't known that he was a bit like... Shino's adoptive brother, since Shibi-sama took him in when his father, Shikuro Aburame, died while he was still young.

It's really cool how poisonous his insects are, though, and I'm practically itching to know why.

I also took the opportunity to thank Shino and Aburame-sama for the books they gave me as a birthday present, and expressed my awe over the spider-silk ribbon.

Apparently, Aburame-sama actually didn't know, and he also praised Shino over his improving chakra control. It turns out that Torune-san was the one who helped Shino figure out how to, essentially, weave cloth.

Later, after eating, when Torune-san and Shino and I went out to play, I took out the jar of kikaichū, and I asked Shino about it.

Apparently, newly-hatched kikaichū have only two links—they instinctively know their parents and the hive from which they were born, and they recognize the person who first fed them chakra. They can also learn to recognize other people through chakra.

Torune-san was quite surprised about what Shino did... and so was I, when I understood the ramifications. Apparently, it was as if he adopted me into the clan.

...

Yeah. It turns out that there's maybe a precedent for Aburame doing that for their genin teammates or eventual partners, but... it's rare for it to happen this young.

Torune-san helped Shino and I figure out a way for me to... work with the kikaichū, since I wasn't quite up to the Aburame tradition of letting the kikaichū live inside my body, but neither did I feel quite up to returning the kikaichū, either, since I thought it would be... rude or a bit mean or maybe insensitive or maybe like I'm saying that Shino doesn't mean as much to me as I apparently do to him.

I don't know. Sometime along those lines.

But we quickly found maybe-possible substitutes, under the condition that Shino would actually tell Aburame-sama about the entire thing later.

We managed to figure out that the kikaichū would be happy with slightly damp pockets of soil and leaves in this... well, essentially, this bamboo cup, with a cloth lid (and a strap that can go over my shoulder)... that I can carry around without attracting too much attention, and Torune-san helped us... renovate... the little glass container with the air holes in the lid to make it more friendly for kikaichū, and gave me care instructions on how to feed them (such as making sure that my chakra is calm and neutral before pushing it out a little and letting the kikaichū eat it, preferably in my hand).

He also lectured Shino on talking to him before doing possibly-reckless things in the future, and told him to make sure to communicate with the kikaichū at least once a week.

But that shouldn't be too hard, since I can just carry them in that pocket and walk over to the compound once or twice a week.

So, now that that's done and over with... time to see what Orochimaru-san's got planned in terms of teaching me! I mean, based on what he commented, he probably has some ideas, and he's a super-smart and rather capable jōnin (and that's probably an understatement) with students that he has taught previously, so... I'm excited.
I mean, it's not like he can be worse than Shisui, right?

Sweet *kami*, he's worse than Shisui.

But it's not in things like… trying to get me to make fireballs and *ninja* before teaching me the hand-seals. No. It's a lot worse.

Because he's actually thought about this before, and he's got a ridiculous number of scrolls and notebooks filled to the absolute brim with plans and theories… and he seems even more motivated than Shisui was to teach me. According to him... the Academy has become pretty sucky. Plus, Shisui's got missions and stuff, you know?

…

Orochimaru-san has a *lot* of time.

…

It was at that moment that I realized I may have bitten off more than I can chew; apparently I'm now a Sannin's guinea pig.

You see, Orochimaru-san's goal was to create… in essence, the shinobi equivalent of a noble, or… or a Renaissance man, I suppose.

He wanted to discover how best to create the basis for a well-rounded *shinobi*, as efficiently as possible without interfering with things like physical growth.

And this means that he decides to micromanage absolutely *everything*. It's not in a bad way! He's smart enough to realize that cultivating genuine interest and passion and intrinsic motivation is the most successful in the long run, as well as that children occasionally do need breaks.

But… for example, he's seen the book Shisui gave me on nutrition, turned his nose up at it (apparently, it's not quite detailed enough or age-appropriate for four-year-olds), and presented me with a meal plan for the next week, from how much water I should try to drink to what snacks I am to be allowed, as well as how much to eat and when. It's not that restrictive or anything, more of a "don't eat too much before doing heavy exercise" and "make sure you don't skip any meals, either. Food will fuel your training."

He also gave me a crash-course on nutrition, and… it was very thorough. Sufficed to say, I now know the vocabulary for things like… protein, lipids, carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, etc.

Orochimaru-san also checked about what I'm interested in… and he practically *beamed* when I couldn't pick anything and told him, "...everything, I guess."

And so… I now have a rather comprehensive, relatively straight-forward plan. Everything's in small blocks, as measured by an hourglass Orochimaru-san pulled of out seemingly nowhere, which seems to measure a bit under half an hour, about a quarter- *koku*.

Mind you, the time measurements are basically approximate only, and are prone to change, depending on… circumstances.

But basically, the expected schedule is as follows:

   **Wake up half a *koku* before sunrise.**
Get dressed/ready in the span of about one block of time

The next three blocks are for exercise and/or taijutsu.

Breakfast is the block that starts a half-koku after sunrise

The next four blocks are for weapons practice.

Snack block is the block that ends two koku after sunrise

The four blocks after that are then for studying and doing, essentially, book work.

Lunch (and a break) takes up two blocks starting at noon.

The four blocks after that may be used for napping or studying.

The next two blocks will for studying or weapons practice.

The three following blocks will be for taijutsu.

Dinner is the block starting around sunset

The next two blocks are for studying.

Go to sleep by about a koku after sunset.

…

Pretty straightforward, right? Simple, easy, familiar, perfect for a training montage or something…

Except training montages never actually manage to happen for me.

Don't get me wrong— the first day was great. I have very good beginners' luck. We covered everything, I got everything…

And it's on the second day that things really started to slowly collapse, and by a week… and then, several weeks… well… I'm rather less enthusiastic.

Because math. By now, I have nightmares of counting rods and abacuses and grids on cloth on tables. And inference and reading-between-the-lines are seriously annoying. I mean, I used to like history. I still sometimes do. But when Orochimaru-san wants me to pick out inaccuracies and bias and carefully-avoided topics… deciphering propaganda and understanding lies by not looking for outright lies, but who or what is carefully not mentioned is probably useful, but not easy. Memorizing parts of the body and the terms for it was hard enough Before, but with kanji? It's an absolute nightmare. Even taijutsu… it's not hard, per se, but my muscles hurt and I'm even more sore (and in places I didn't realize I could be sore), which slows me down, and I usually end up practically falling asleep in the bathtub.

And weapons training, especially throwing weapons, is possibly the most frustrating things on the planet. It's basically hours of doing the same thing over and over and over again, except the results end up all over the place. It's absolutely infuriating, and more than once, I've simply dropped… sorry, meticulously retrieved, cleaned, and put away my weapons, and then moved onto stretching in an effort to not throw a tantrum. I am four. It is well within my rights to throw a tantrum… but… that sets bad precedents and so I can't. No matter how much I want to.

I hug Kiyohime-neechan and take a few deep breaths and let the pain of stretching and the steady
pulse of glowing chakra ground me... and then go back.

But sometimes, even stretching hurts. Yeah, there's not the sharp pain of tearing muscles that haven't warmed up properly... but sometimes it's hard to breathe and it hurts because of how long you have to hold it and you want to cry, but it's necessary and important and so you grit your teeth and try to breathe and then get up and do it all over again. That's when it's useful to have someone like Orochimaru-san or even Kiyohime-san, because they'll help make sure that, like, your legs are straight and you're stretching for long enough. But then, the next day? When your muscles are sore and it aches to move? You have to make yourself warm up again, even if you need Kiyohime-san to chase you or practically pull you along, and then you repeat until, one day, it doesn't hurt as much, and then you need to make the stretches more difficult.

And so, some days, when things get especially frustrating and I'm staring at information I should know, or when the words just blur out and I end up staring at the same page for most of a block, or when I don't see any improvement and I'm ready to scream... I ditch. I go find Kagami-jiisan, and sometimes Shisui and Itachi, and just lie in the sun and focus on my breathing and my heart-rate and the sounds around me of birds or wind or leaves and turn that focus inward, to the glowing rivers of chakra that pulse and spin and flow, and turn that outward.

Shisui explains the basics of chakra natures, and lets me start on those exercises when I bug him.

The Five Basic Natures (五大基本性質, Godai Kihon Seishitsu) are the five elemental chakra natures, which are the foundation of all elemental ninjutsu.

- **Fire** (火, *Hi*) is strong against Wind but weak against Water.
- **Wind** (風, *Kaze*) is strong against Lightning but weak against Fire.
- **Lightning** (雷, *Kaminari*) is strong against Earth but weak against Wind.
- **Earth** (土, *Tsuchi*) is strong against Water but weak against Lightning.
- **Water** (水, *Mizu*) is strong against Fire but weak against Earth.

Me? I'm... well, it's never too accurate for young children, but I have an affinity for fire... and water, which according to Shisui, is rather interesting. I'm not too surprised, though. Before, my mother had said... well, I'm not really sure, but in Chinese belief, every child is born with various affinities that define their... personality or something. I don't know. But most people get around three, or maybe four. It's rare for someone to get more or less than that. According to my mother... I was fire and water, which promised rather... temperamental results.

I know I shouldn't be disappointed, but... is it wrong to say I kinda am?

The Uchiha know fire, so I start with that— I start with meditating in the sun and trying to burn dry leaves or as is a bit more practical, thin pieces of paper. I think it's like... pushing out a cloud of chakra, which serves a bit like the fuel, then giving it this sharp jerk, as if... striking a match or something. But then it's hard to control, and... I don't think it's the best way. When Shisui does it... it's as if he just... heats up his chakra or something, and it burns the moment he pushes it out. I'm trying to figure out how to do that.

Water... Shisui doesn't know much about that, but he finds a book in the library, and apparently I'm supposed to meditate under a waterfall, and then practice pulling water out of stuff. Like... a pond, or a lake, or a stream, or a river, or a waterfall, or the air. And eventually, I should be able to get water out of chakra.
I don't like meditating under a waterfall. I can't control fire. And moving water is like trying to scoop up a goldfish with a rice-paper paddle… with already-existing holes. No jerks, no sudden movement, be slow, but not too slow… it gets frustrating at times. And I need to literally put my hands in the water to get a chance at moving it.

But seriously, at this rate… I'm going to need any opponent to sit down and wait for me to get any jutsu ready.

The taijutsu is, ironically, one of the easier parts. Orochimaru-san thinks that the Academy's style is too easy, and teaches me the style that he's learned in the main Fire Temple (which seems really similar to what I knew about… that one thing for Chinese monks or something. Shaolin? Kung fu?).

I start off learning the basic skills, which include stamina, flexibility, and balance, which improve the body abilities in doing martial maneuvers and set a good base for further improvement. Flexibility and balance skills are known as "childish skills," and they've been classified into 18 postures that I'm currently learning.

Then, I'll graduate into the power skills, which include two types of meditation, internal (stationary) and external (dynamic), the latter of which includes stuff like… the four-part exercise, something called a eight-section brocade, and something with the really weird name of "muscle-changing scripture." The power skills also include the seventy-two arts, which are composed of thirty-six soft and thirty-six hard exercises, as well as combat skills, which refers to stuff like various barehanded, weapon, and barehanded versus weapon routines (also known as styles) and their combat methods.

Seriously. Orochimaru-san isn't just obsessed with ninjutsu, even if that's most of his focus. He practically hoards knowledge of literally every kind.

But I also start learning to actually fight. Shisui had focused on just conditioning, for the most part. Orochimaru-san… well, I get another few belated "birthday presents"— two pairs of gloves with a bit of extra padding over the knuckles, as well ointment meant for cuts, scratches, bruises, etc., just in case. The gloves work to basically prevent me from breaking skin… and that's it. Calluses help protect the knuckles when punching, and it's bad to rely on any tools… but I'm a kid (and a rather important kid at that, given Okaa-san's family), so I get a bit of leeway in that matter.

This, ironically, is one of the activities I find more soothing. No, it's not easy, and punching or kicking at rope wrapped around wood really hurts, but… I can take it a bit slower. For the most part. Because after I get better at basic punches and kicks, Orochimaru-san starts introducing sparring, just to get me used to trying to hit a moving target, as well as for conditioning— and yeah, I can't spar for more than about a minute without practically passing out, so that needs serious improvement still.

He also teaches me… well, how to fight with a kunai.

(He is also very, very happy that I've trained myself into being more-or-less ambidextrous. I apparently spared him a lot of the trouble.)

But yeah, that's surprisingly necessary. It's hard to overcome the instinct that says not to inflict pain, but if you actually want to cut someone… you can't hesitate or flinch, and you need to know exactly how much strength to put into it.

I learn by sparring Orochimaru-san's clones (usually Earth/Doton, because they can take more
damage than most other clones), who take it easy on me. As in, they don't kick or punch me. But then… they don't need to. Do you know how hard it is to land a hit on that guy? Just chasing that clone around, trying to land a hit, is absolutely EXHAUSTING. Especially when you're already exhausted from an entire day of exercise!

But then I go lie down, cool down, sip at some water (don't gulp, too much water in your stomach hurts when you jump around), and get up again despite trembling limbs.

...but seriously, I go through a lot of water. As in, about five bottles a day.

And at the end of the day, make sure you eat a solid meal with a lot of protein… and with the vitamins that Orochimaru-san somehow found the time to specially formulate for you, because otherwise, you'll hurt more the next day.

And apparently, I should just be glad that he doesn't think it's a good time to try fighting through pain. Serious injury, that is. As in, nothing broken. Bruised ribs, bruised legs, bruised anything… minor cuts… those are all fair game. Orochimaru-san is really good with medical ninjutsu, so I can't say I mind. Yeah, it's torturous… but it's not like it's more tortuous than his other ideas.

Like taking a page out of Shisui's book. That's how I found that Kiyohime-san can be summoned in different sizes.

Do you know how terrifying it is to have a two-meter-long or three-meter-long or five-meter-long snake chasing after you?

...

Mind you, it's pretty fun at the end of the day, when Kiyohime-san carries me as a two/three/five-meter-long snake. It's like a rollercoaster, but cooler. And considering it's easiest for her to carry me in her mouth… well, it's awesome to be up that high, and giant-Kiyohime-san gets less terrifying as things go on, especially since she usually doesn't want to hurt me.

During the weeks I spend with Orochimaru-san, I don't just learn about shinobi. I also learn quite a bit about him. For example… he kinda misses Tsunade and Jiraiya. She's… off doing stuff, and Jiraiya's also off doing stuff, and… he's the last of the Sannin in Konoha, and he's really… not sad or upset, per say, but… he's hurt and bitter and a bit angry and that also applies to how Konoha sees him. And to how his sensei sees him. They see him… as this really scary, creepy person, but even that description probably doesn't do anything justice. He likes being scary and creepy and intimidating and having people be scared of him… but I think he also sometimes wishes that people weren't always scared of him and that people didn't automatically flinch away.

He won't change, he won't pretend to be someone he's not… but he's also lonely. I think. Because I was like that, too, Before. I was smart and too focused, and… especially in group projects, I kept trying to make everything perfect, to get everyone to focus and just work, and…

...and people didn't like that. They were intimidated by me. No one ever really invited me after school, or to a party, or anything. And I thought that was normal. But then when I looked around and listened… no. It wasn't. But by that point everyone thought they knew me, and I couldn't change, and… and I wouldn't change that much, because that was me, even if it really hurt to know that people didn't like me.

It's just like that for Orochimaru-san. He really loves Konohagakure, and from what I know, Namikaze Minato made a wonderful Yondaime, but… was it really fair to Orochimaru-san? No. But
life isn't fair, and being Hokage is like… a bit like being the class president or homecoming king/queen (I'm guessing, since I've only heard about that in media) or something. It's popularity.

And it's hard to change when people already think they know what to expect from you, and eventually… maybe it's easier to let yourself sink back into that mold and tell yourself that it's fine and at least it's better than the alternative and it's not completely false and ignore that little ball of resentment and anger and sadness and force it down because that would just make this worse and try to get away and try and make a new start in… for example, college. I just needed to ignore everything and work hard for four years and then I could leave and try to fix myself in a place where people didn't have anything to expect from me like in high school (because so many of them knew me in middle school and I didn't realize I had to change then and they already thought they knew who I was). Except…

Orochimaru-san can't do that. He's a shinobi. He's one of the Sannin. He can't leave Konoha. So maybe it's not the exact same, but I can't know because most of it's inference and conjecture, because he won't tell me, but… I can't help but feel a little bitter, too.

So days like that, when we've gone into the busy part of the village and he's gone all quiet, I shove a book at him and flop on him with Kiyohime-neesan and make him explain stuff to me. Because he's almost like… like Kiyohime-nee-chan, with humor that's a bit dark and morbid and constant threats and all teeth and not-human movement and eyes that aren't sparkly or soft, but... but he's also like Kiyohime-nee-chan in that he'll grill squid for me on some of the days when he sees the scars everywhere on the training post except the target and I'm quiet and my eyes are a bit too red, and he'll bring wagashi and higashi from that shop Okaa-san normally buys from sometimes, and half of what he makes in that room I'm not allowed in, with the glass beakers and stuff that I'm a bit scared to touch, is products for his hair.

I'm not kidding. He loves his hair, and according to Kiyohime, it's like his mother's. He actually also makes stuff for my hair, and it's got ingredients I'm honestly not sure I understand everything that goes into it, but my hair feels thicker and looks shinier and doesn't really tangle much, and after I start using the stuff in the vial that he gives me after I come back with some slightly charred ends, my hair's harder to char. After I mentioned my mild asthma issue… and how it usually started because of exercise... well, two days later, one package of pills to use if it ever flares up, a pack of quick-acting medication if I ever had to exercise without warming up, and a powder-type thing if the first two preventative measures don't work. Apparently, pressurized substances aren't really a thing, so... yeah, no inhalers.

He actually consumes bits of poison with his food, because that's what his mother taught him to do, to keep building up an immunity, because only incompetents carry antidotes on individual missions, and when I ask if I can do so as well, he hesitates a little but lets me help and teaches me and lets me hold leaves that leave my hands itchy and painful and slightly red, and teaches me what some poisons taste like (bitter, but not like tea leaves), and makes me a schedule and list so I can safely build up immunities later, after I advance enough. Poison… well, it poisons you. You want to take it easy until your body overcomes it.

I realize that that's what he smells like. The slightly bitter/flowery/sweet not-tea. Poison.

He spends a lot of time in the 44th Training Ground, the Training Ground of Death, and he takes me in that horrid orange-and-pink backpack-carrier-thing on the days when he goes in to get samples of plants or animals, and... it's amazing in there. It's like a... a Wonderland, with all of the mutated flora and fauna, and no one ever goes in there. Not like the other training grounds, where shinobi might look and gawk and whisper and shy away.
He really likes his summons, and lets them wind all over him while he works. And his hands are almost always stained with... poisons or ink or something, because he spends so much time on stuff like that, and when he's working with books and papers and scrolls, he puts his hair up in a loose low bun and sometimes wears glasses for small text.

He absolutely *hates* cold food.

We run through a carton of eggs (each with twelve eggs) every week.

He likes ranting about idiots during dinner. I learn a lot during this actually, since it's basically a what-not-to-do list, blooper edition. Some things are obvious, but a lot are *not*. Those are only obvious to someone like Orochimaru-san.

Every Obon, he makes lanterns for Nawaki and Dan, Tsunade's little brother and her... boyfriend. Nawaki was one of his first students, and he regrets his death. He also burns incense for his parents, and he keeps a small shrine for them in a corner of the house, where he has their picture (and yeah, he really does look a lot like his mother), even if he doesn't float the lanterns he makes down the river.

Having such a clear view of human mortality, with how he's lost his parents and students, and I think... he's scared about dying before he can achieve his goals, even if he won't put it that way or admit it.

And his goal... is to obtain all the techniques and gain a true understanding of everything in this world? I can understand that. Isn't that a bit like what I want to do? There's this amazing world with so many possibilities... and I want to learn everything I possible can. And I'm also scared of death. I remember what I told Itachi, and it's true. I don't want to leave. So I guess I understand him a little.

He's almost painfully pessimistic at times, too, and has a pretty harsh worldview. Like, I'm pretty sure he would love Nietzsche if he existed here. Like, "the person who has a why to live can bear almost any how", "that which does not kill you will makes you stronger," and "to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering."

I actually start calling him "Oro-sensei," sometimes, as a bit of a joke, after he tells me about his goals and ambitions, since *korosenai* means unkillable, and then that becomes "Koro-sensei," but since I don't want to rip off that one anime with the orange octopus-sensei, that then becomes "Oro-sensei." Yup. It's a bad pun. But I like it, and he actually smiles when I use it, so... _adc(\(\Upsilon\))/\(\Gamma\) .

---

Orochimaru-san constantly dumps scrolls and books and other sources of information on me. He has a *lot*, and apparently he's taking this time as the opportunity to comb through the more basic ones and toss them at me, so as to free up space.

One of the things he tosses at me, in between scrolls on jutsu that he's long-since mastered and decides to give me "for later," are the scrolls on the Fire Temple monk's style of taijutsu. (He gives me a *lot* of stuff that will "be useful a little later.")

They're well-organized, with rough explanations of the type of style at the beginning.

Oro-sensei advised me to consider the animal-based styles that are the most popular: the Five Animal styles. They're usually either Tiger, Crane, Leopard, Snake, and Dragon... or crane, tiger, monkey, snake, and mantis, which seems really familiar— wasn't that what they did in Kung Fu Panda?

Yeah... no. I'll stick to the first five.
There are also a lot of other animal styles, like a different group of twelve slightly different styles consisting of dragon, tiger, monkey, horse, alligator, cockerel, hawk, swallow, snake, ostrich, eagle, and bear—and a lot of non-animal styles to boot.

Interesting fact: Oro-sensei actually based his style off the snake style, even if he's built it further from there.

He advises me to do the same later—to build a personal style for myself off a mix of existing styles, which makes it harder for people to kill me if they know some of the individual styles.

I'm immediately intrigued by Leopard style, though I'm also interested in some of the other ones…but from what I remember of Before, and my experience in taekwondo…I'm probably not very suited to some of the other styles. I'm also probably not the best suited to this one either, but…eh, I really shouldn't think too long on this. I like overthinking things, and I tend to be pretty indecisive, so…. learn this, and if I regret it later, I'll learn another style later.

Plus…for this one, I can get help from Shisui. He's good at speed, and if the leopard style relies on it…that can be useful. Other things about it are also appealing—it's supposed to be a "midway" point, it doesn't seem that overused…which probably shouldn't be a motivator in my decision, but it is. And some of the parts…"aggressive speed," "hit, damage, and run style designed to overcome superior forces with inferior resources," "techniques are geared towards single, two or three technique combinations that cause a lot of damage, disorientate or even blind the attacker," "especially effective against larger opponents," "the leopard claw can be used to rake, claw, and rip at the face and throat of an assailant"…they sound really cool, okay?

I think of of the cats I'd left in Kiri…and of my family's nickname for me Before. Xiao Mao-Mao, Little Cat.

Tigers look nicer, and snakes are really nice…cranes are pretty, and dragons seem awesome, and I know mantises can be super cool, but…it also seems like they're too flashy. Leopards…they feel like something I can actually be like without trying too hard or changing myself, if that makes sense?

The emphasis of Leopard style is in speed and angular attacks. The leopard does not overwhelm or rely on strength, as the tiger does, but instead relies on speed and outsmarting its opponent. The power of the style derives from its aggressive speed. The leopard practitioner will focus on elbows, knees, low kicks, and leopard punches. Leopard style is a hit, damage and run style designed to overcome superior forces with inferior resources. Counter attacks are sudden, indirect and short, with the aim of landing a debilitating technique.

The goals of leopard-style are to develop muscle speed for external strength, teach patience, and use the leopard punch for penetration and lower body springing power.

The leopard style was founded on the creators' observation of the movements of the leopard in the wild, and therefore practitioners of the style imitate these movements. Leopard style techniques are geared towards single, two or three technique combinations that cause a lot of damage, disorientate or even blind the attacker. Blocking is wasted in Leopard - the style can be summed up with "Why block when you can hit?" It does not rely on rooted stances, and would only assume a stance while in attack in order to launch at the opponent. This hit and run technique of the leopard, something especially effective against larger opponents, is unique to the animal.

The primary weapon is the leopard fist, which can be likened to a half-opened fist. The primary striking surface is the ridge formed by folding the fingers at the first phalangeal joint; the secondary striking surface is the palm hand. Strikes include the phoenix eye, which is a punch to pressure points including the eye and temple. It is formed by lifting only the index finger's knuckle while the
rest are kept in a usual fist form. The leopard fist can also be modified by slightly lifting the fingers to form a claw. The leopard claw can be used to rake, claw, and rip at the face and throat of an assailant.

The leopard style is thought to be a midway point between the Tiger and Crane styles, the strength and height.

An interesting technique of the leopard is the ability to simultaneously block and strike the opponent. This is not commonly used in the harder martial arts (like the other styles, for example). The sheer speed of the leopard is a defining characteristic of the style.

Plus… I don't have that good endurance, but I do have a pretty fast recovery time. At least, that was the case Before. I'll probably do best with a hard-hitting style where I can get in and get out quickly.

Oro-sensei wants me to learn Dragon-style or Snake-style, which are interesting, but… they require quite a bit of endurance and muscle strength. He also wants me to learn the Tiger stances, too, mainly as training and to get stronger. There’s two different schools of it, apparently. I don't like one, but I kinda like the other— the one with the open hand.

Still, most of what I'm currently doing and learning are being used primarily as training. I can't actually use a lot of skills in battle yet, mainly because I am tiny and would be crushed and cannot actually use my opponent's weight against them because they would simply pick me up and- Ahem. You get the point.

Plus… apparently, according to Oro-sensei, I am too laid-back for how smart I am and how much potential I have, and Shisui has been a bad influence, so he is going to 'fix' that -even if it kills him.

And so things go relatively smoothly. I start looking at the forms for the leopard style around midway through February, even while still working on the seventy-two arts and the combat skills. I don't really like the styles or the methods. There aren't really mirrors, not like in the dance studios, so it's hard to self-correct, and I have to rely on Oro-sensei and Kiyohime-neechan for help.

I cannot wait until I have enough chakra to make shadow clones. Then, I will actually be able to see myself doing this.

But then, it also means that it's hard to see what he's sometimes talking about, because I can't see myself. Luckily, I have pretty good body-awareness, so I, like… know where my limbs are in relation to the rest of my body. For the most part. When I'm concentrating. The details are a bit harder, though, so I guess it's lucky that it doesn't usually matter.

Regardless, it's not the forms themselves that are hard. It's the transitions, the movements… they need to be sharper, stronger, etc. I've started wearing loose, long, slightly-heavy sleeves and pants so I can practice that snap of clothing that's supposed to happen with every strike.

Bleh. This is the exact same thing I struggled with Before, in taekwondo. And it's hard. It's not just strength. It's like… keeping your body loose and relaxed up to the point of the strike, which is when you tense up just long enough to deliver it, then immediately relax again.

Even apart from that… unlike taekwondo, a lot of these forms are… smooth, and flowing, and they require very firm muscle control. It hurts, holding a squat… or a moving squat, which is like when you shift your torso from side to side, without moving your feet or straightening up. But these? For the most part, they require flexibility and strength, and the forms are harder to do after exercising.

Luckily, Oro-sensei lets me practice a little of my forms right after warming up, but Oro-sensei says
that continuing to try to work on them after exhausting exercise is **good practice**, because I have absolutely horrible stamina.

Gee, thanks. I know.

But it isn't unpleasant, now. I've improved a lot, and ok, while the continuing pain and frustration isn't the most pleasant… it's proof that I am continuing to improve. And besides, it's nice on the private training grounds around the house—there are lots of plum trees, since they were Oro-sensei's mother's favorite flower/tree, so currently, I train under blooming *ume*, plum blossoms. And they're absolutely beautiful.

But it's also kinda bittersweet, because… Okaa-san and Otou-san are returning home soon. Like, *really* soon.

Now, it's as if everything was this fantastic adventure or a dream that's… going to end.

Like, I'm not going to be able to spend that much time with Oro-sensei anymore.

And he gets really quiet when I ask him about it, so… I don't think he's looking forward to me leaving, either. Which is nice for me! When I had to deal with little kids, I practically counted down the minutes to when they would leave.

But… I feel kinda bad. I made sure to let him know that he should come over whenever, but… that seems so small when he gives me a bangle-bracelet with a small concealed blade and the specific contract for Kiyohime-san… and a vial of his blood, sealed inside.

I actually cried while hugging both him and Kiyohime.

Like, full-out *bawling*.

…

That was embarrassing. But seriously, it means *so much* to me. Because that means that Orochimaru-sensei likes me enough to let me be able to summon what is probably his closest link to his mother, and it means that Kiyohime likes me enough to let me summon her. And it means that they both trust me enough not to lose something so important, even if Orochimaru-sensei assured me that the seal for the vials are tied to my blood… and that his blood is necessary for anyone to summon Kiyohime. So, as long as I'm decently careful… only I can use it.

There are limits on how big I can summon her, however, and Oro-sensei has to help me practice it to the point where I no longer flinch at cutting a finger on a blade and smearing blood over the contract and pushing in chakra, then catching the vial, and then… well, I can now summon a very tiny, yarn-needle-sized Kiyohime. And at that size, she's actually the perfect size to wear a bit like an ear cuff, or to wind herself inside a small braid. I should know. We've experimented.

…

And so, when Oro-sensei drops me off at Kobayashi Tea and I hug him one last time and say "thank you… for everything", and wave as he walks off and then go inside to see my parents for the first time in *months*… it's bittersweet.

That sense of deep pensive-ness doesn't last for long, though. It can't. Not with Okaa-san and Otou-san bawling over me.
To the plum tree's branches
The warbler has come.
That spring is here
He sings, although
Still the snow is falling.

ume ga e ni kiru guhisu haru kakete nakedomou imada yukiwa furitsutsu

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yay! Training montage! And... I entirely blame blackkat (on ao3). I'm sorry. Orochimaru has been redeemed for me. Plus, I thought it would really work well into the story... as well as help flesh out Makoto's character. The interesting part comes a little bit later, though... in chapter 21. *wink* (^_^)

This chapter is actually complete... and understandable, again thanks to bg3929!

Okay. A little bit of analysis into the chapter that's probably a bit necessary to ward off some comments— Makoto's a rather unreliable narrator. And he's definitely special in this regard— Orochimaru's not a nice person. Just putting that out there. Makoto's currently... probably categorized as something between an interesting experiment, a rather irreplaceable possession, and a cute pet. Just putting that out there.

*sniffs happily*

Makoto's going to grow up into such a bad@ss!
Chapter Summary

In which... Makoto learns a lot of stuff. Fashion has *rules*, people... and so does shōgi. And go. And trust me when I say that there's a *lot* to learn about them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for *[notes]*

---

吉野川きしの山吹ふく風にそこのかげさへうつろひにけり

*By the Naka river*

*The yellow mountain roses on the bank,*

*With the gusting wind*

*Make the shadows on the river bed*

*Pale away.*

...You know, I’d thought the entire not-training-montage thing was over and done with.

Unfortunately.

Now? It’s not.

Unfortunately.

This entire thing has been a bit of a no-win scenario. Because I’m going to be meeting Okaa-san’s family, in early *gogatsu*, and… well, everything I worried about while on the ship? It’s now real.

Traditions (which Okaa-san *still hasn’t managed to explain*), music, archery, equestrian… stuff, calligraphy, art, strategy, swordsmanship, poetry, and math. Oro-sensei’s already taken care of everything I need about the last thing, though.

But then there’s also court etiquette, apparently.

Which, I’m pretty sure, is everything I hate about social interactions… and then some.

Like… apparently I don’t talk right. Or walk right. Or smile right.

Which I get, but…

…I really think there would have been a better way to do some stuff?
Because… this… well, I mean, Okaa-san is a wonderful person and tries really hard to be a good parent… but…

I’m just kinda digging myself into a bigger hole. I’ll show you.

You see, it all starts a couple of days, maybe a week, after Okaa-san and Otou-san come home.

Those were… nice. Boring, yes, but not bad. And after… everything that happened… that’s fine. Fine. Perfectly fine.

Okaa-san and Otou-san brought me back some wonderful souvenirs that also doubled as birthday presents, namely clothing, trinkets, and other cool stuff — Kumo has some really cool products, namely some produce, fabric (especially anything animal-produced… like some really soft fur/wool-based clothing and dried meats), and some valuable metals and other minerals — and they’re cool. I mean, I like them.

But… it’s just a bit weird being relaxed and not having anything to do. I mean, even during the festivities, I was busy having fun.

So after many days of just hanging out in the shop and taking the opportunity to relax and plan out a long-term strategy… and use things like the chalkboard that Oro-sensei had gotten for me to explain things after I had continuously mixed up some parts of the human body (which was really embarrassing and something I really would rather forget but it keeps haunting me) to practice writing English… well, first, surprise! I’ve actually decided to… do that. Again. Yay.

The thing with the blackboard in the first place… it’s nice being able to stick pieces of paper to cover things up and… basically make a complicated, multi-part flash card. And it helps with remembering things in a larger context. Like, blood flows from here to here … and then can divert here, from where it goes here … which also does this and this and this … and so on.

But now, I just prop it up on a wall and use it to practice writing, which isn’t really preferable for reasons (I mean, writing on paper is very different from writing with thick markers on a giant, vertical board), but… when I really, really don’t want anyone to ever find even a hint that I know something like English… and when “anyone” involves Danzō and his hidden society of crazily-skilled emotionless weapons… I don’t think it’s really paranoia when someone will actually be out to get you if they find out about what you know? And when that someone knows you? And might possibly hold a grudge after you may or may not have publically humiliated them and make them a bit of a laughing stock or source of humor or entertainment in… various circles…


So yeah. I’m practicing writing English because I finally have a way to do it that I’m hoping is private enough to… do that. Because it’s more about the skill and my memory than actually recording anything… yet.

Oh, wait. I’m planning to teach Shisui and Itachi… or mainly just Itachi…

…I’ll get to that later. Like, maybe another month? Or just… after May. Sorry, gogatsu.

But the important this is that one day, pretty much out of the blue… “Makoto-kun! Come with me for a moment, won’t you? I want to take you to meet an old friend of mine.” She laughed. “It’s in a bit of a… dangerous area, I guess, so don’t bring anything!”

And I logically reacted with… “Okaa-san? Uh… the sun’s setting? I thought we were going to have
I just… blanked at that. “Um…”

And Okaa-san laughed. “Don’t worry. You’ll be with me, and it’s not that complicated once you get a hang of things. Just… you probably shouldn’t try to head there yourself, at night.”

Yeah. I wasn’t any less confused.

But then… we headed over to the place with the red… lanterns… and let’s just say that I became a lot less confused. Red lanterns? This is the Akasen, the Red Light District. And I’ve heard a lot of horror stories from Minori, and Yuzu didn’t really reassure me, with how he never contradicted Minori’s horror stories (which, to be fair, were horrifying because of how little emotion she put into them. When you talk about stuff like that, you should make it sound like you’re exaggerating, but… she wasn’t).

A couple dozen steps in… and well, it turns out that even in Konoha, those stories bear some weight. You really can get robbed blind, just probably not as quickly. And everything’s definitely in better condition, but… it’s Konoha, not Kiri, so I guess it makes sense there’d be a lot of differences.

What is surprising is how well Okaa-san handles it. Like, I didn’t know she could be that cool, with how a hand darts out quickly to grab a kid by the back of the shirt, and “I would appreciate it if you returned that.”

Of course, the kid protested. “I didn’t do nothin’!”

“I’ve been here before,” Okaa-san smiled, and oh, no, I know that smile why do so many people have that exact same smile?! “Please give my bag back.”

And he did. He immediately returned the small, nicely-embroidered bag that Okaa-san keeps coins in and that I didn’t even see him take. Which raised a lot of questions, so… “Okaa-san?”

“I’ll explain more, later,” Okaa-san replied, still smiling.

A little ways later, we came to a rather tall building with a rather ornate entrance, and Okaa-san went around to the back. Okay. She pulled out a set of keys and let herself in… and at this point I was getting seriously weirded out, but a couple of hallways and rooms with bustling people and fabric and makeup and all sorts of stuff later, we came to a door, on which Okaa-san knocked, and someone opened it, and…

“Hisa-chan! Long time no see!” Okaa-san smiled happily at the woman in the kimono, with the slight frown-lines around the mouth and forehead.

“Kimiko?” the woman asked. “What are you doing here?”

Okaa-san turned to me. “Makoto-kun, let me introduce you to a dear friend of mine. This is Hisagiku, the Okaa-san of Amanosenzai.”

O-okay? “Uh… good morning… Hisagiku-san,” I greeted, bowing. “It’s… nice to meet you?”
The woman just sighed, turning to Okaa-san. “So, Kimigi- sorry. Kimiko.” She rubs at her face. “What are you doing here? Why are you here?” She paused, thinking, and groaned again. “Wait. No. Is it… oh, no, don’t tell me—”

“Could you please teach Makoto-kun some etiquette lessons?” Okaa-san asked, smiling sweetly. “I’ll be taking him to meet my family in samaetsuki, and well…”

“You need me to bail you out of trouble again, don’t you?” She sighed. “You haven’t changed one bit. So… let me guess… etiquette, tea ceremony, reading people, lessons in dressing… dance, playing the shamisen, the shimedaiko drum, the fue flute, and the koto? But if I remember correctly, you had a boy. So… board games?”

Okaa-san just laughed. “Why not everything?” She looked at the woman… no, Hisagiku-san, bringing a hand up to her cheek. “That wouldn’t be a problem?”

“…no. I don’t think so.” Hisagiku-san sighed, rubbing her eyes. “I’d forgotten how weird you were… it’s honestly no wonder that you like Konohagakure as you do.” She took a deep breath. “Okay. I can work with this. Satsuki, you said?” She stares at the wall, thinking. “So, now it’s kisaragi, the second month… and then the fifth month… I’ve got two months, probably at least eight weeks… I can work with this,” she muttered, nodding, before looking over again. “I still think you’re crazy, but… you’re paying for the lessons, right? Any budget?”

Okaa-san smiled. “Thanks so much, Hisa-chan! Nine weeks, actually. And of course!” She frowned in mock-offense. “Who do you take me for?” Okaa-san laughed. “I want the best for Makoto-kun, as you might have expected, and… just take it out of my account,” she winked, waving a hand. “I mean, I don’t have any reason not to trust you with that… right?”

Hisagiku-san just stared, deadpan. “…Yup. You have no changed one bit.” She yawned, covering her mouth, before waving us out. “…It’s late, and we’re all busy. Most of us do stuff during the day, but some work in Information, you know, and they have late shifts. Plus, with everything… we’re going to get busy, so I need you two out. And it’s getting dark and you really shouldn’t be this reckless, Kimi-chan. Out. I’ll see you two tomorrow morning, it was nice seeing you and Makoto-kun again, but out.”

She saw us to the door.

“You’re so lucky that there is actually a precedence,” she sniffed. “But seriously,” she looked straight at Okaa-san. “Be careful. Some people aren’t quite as clean as us, and Mako-kun would make a very pretty taikomochi… and he’s pretty enough that some might be tempted to turn him into a kagema. We’re not in Keishi anymore, and not many know Makoto. I know there’s a reason, but…” Hisagiku-san sighed again, flapping a hand as if to wave the the depressing topic away. And yeah… it was depressing. I know enough from everything Minori told me that… yeah, moving on.

“I’ll put him with… let’s see… I’ve been training Miyagiku as my atotori, my heiress, but… she won’t do well with him. Ah! I know. Emigiku is still a maiko, but that won’t be for long. You’re lucky, she’s a very talented up-and-coming geisha, and I think she’ll like Makoto. She’s still a bit busy, and she spends a lot of time with Miya, but I think having a dependent will do her good.”

Hisagiku-san then pretty much threw Okaa-san and I out. “Now, shoo. You got what you came for, it’s probably almost that kid’s bedtime, and it’s time for me to do what I need to do. We can catch up tomorrow. Good night.”

And with that, the door closed in our face.
Yeah. That happened yesterday. So now… I’m standing in one of the nice *kimono* Okaa-san bought for me, waiting by the back door.

The night before, I learned a bit more about Hisagiku-san and how Okaa-san knew her. Basically, they were friends in the capitol, and… yeah. That’s about it. Apparently, she wasn’t really a noble, and more of a servant/entertainer/something. I’m not sure about that part. But it’s tradition for the Fujiwara to make sure any born of the clan also understand and be friends with people who are… not nobles. Who have the freedom to look around and *listen*, because a lot of things in court aren’t said, and it’s important to have someone who can hear what people won’t whisper around you.

Seriously. Keishi sounds *really* scary sometimes.

But apparently, because I’m growing up in Konoha, things are a bit different?

The door opens, and I look.

“Good morning, Hisagiku-san,” I murmur, inwardly cursing at my voice’s tendency to go up an octave when I’m nervous.

“Good morning, Makoto-kun,” she yawns, covering her mouth. “Okay… let’s go. We don’t have all day, I haven’t slept yet, and I want to get you situated as soon as possible so I can actually go to sleep.”

I trail behind her meekly, until we get to the same place I was with Okaa-san yesterday.

She lets me in, and then spins to face me, grabbing a fan and snapping it open. “Welcome, Makoto-kun, to the *Karyūkai*, the ‘The Flower and Willow World.’” She smiles. “*We geiko* are the willows because of our grace, strength, and above all… our *subtlety*. The *oiran*, the colorful, flashy flowers of our world, tend to stick to the capitol, but there are many… who pursue similar careers, here.” She frowns. “Your mother might just kill me for this… but there are many women here who… screw this. You know how you have a penis?”

I practically choke on air, turning red, but Hisagiku-san plows right on. “Girls have something called a *vagina*, which is connected to something called a *uterus*, which lets them have babies. Grown-ups sometimes like to… play a grown-up game, where…”

“I know!” I screech. “It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me.”

Please, no. I already know everything that goes on in The Talk, I don’t need the verbal or visual instruction again. I think. I don’t care if this breaks my cover. I’m honestly not thinking about what may or may not happen if she thinks too deeply into why a four-year-old knows this stuff.

I just really, really, *really* don’t want The Talk.

Hisagiku-san blinks, frowning. “How do you know?”

I blink. Uh… “When Okaa-san and Otou-san and I went to Kumo, I got lost in Mizu no Kuni with… with one of the *shinobi* who came with us, and I made friends with some people who used to live in the Akasen in Kiri?”

She stares at me, frowning. “I don’t quite understand the full story, but I don’t want to know. Got it?”

I nod furiously.

“*Verbal response, please,*” she raises an eyebrow. “You may call me Okami-san.”
“Hai, Okami-san,” I reply.

“Okay.” She turns. “That’s over with… this okiya is known as the Ama no Senzai, the garden of heaven. You will be learning here until you have mastered what we have to teach.” She looks over slightly. “With any luck, you will form bonds that will last a lifetime.”

After a moment, she speaks up. “Your mother has mentioned that you show interest in being a shinobi.”

“Yes… Okami-san,” I reply.

She stays quiet for a while, but then speaks up again. “The first kunoichi was a whore. In fact… the first shinobi were likely prostitutes. In the Warring States Era… shinobi existed before then. Shinobi existed even before the Sage of Six Paths himself,” she whispers.


“When you visit your family, look in the records. Your family is old, Makotokun. Very old,” Hisagiku-san murmurs. “Old enough to the point of having records that go back a thousand years, old enough that many born of the clan simply do not have the time or inclination to read even an eighth of all of the books.”

“Whoa,” I breathe.

“Servants, entertainers, and especially prostitutes… we know everything,” Hisagiku-san continues. “We talk to one another. Sometimes it’s just which clients are nicest and pay the best, which are harsh and cruel and stupid… but we know everyone from street rats to nobles.” She turns to look at me, mouth in a sideways smile. “You should learn to use your mind and keep your mouth shut. Most men… they talk. Maybe to impress or brag or simply for the want of someone to listen… all people talk. Men, most often.” She turns back to the front.

“The first and foremost skill of a geiko is not the art of seduction or dance or anything. Those are mainly maiko. A geiko is skilled in the art of conversation. Or rather, more specifically, in the art of listening and making the customer talk.” She laughs. “There is a shinobi… Jiraiya of the Sannin. He is widely known as a pervert, and it’s well-known secret that he is the author of… an adult series, known as Icha-Icha.” She quirks her lips in a slight smile. “They’re not bad, and give a lot of insight in what men want from women. I might have you read them and analyze the books… they are popular despite their bad writing for a reason.”

“But his perversity serves a secondary purpose— he is a spymaster. Of course a pervert will frequent brothels and ‘massage houses’ and tea houses,” she scoffs. “And if you consider assassination… assassination is a woman’s art. Poison, needles… senbon… it is absurdly easy to kill someone,” she says dryly, turning to look at me. “Remain vigilant. And be kind above all, but not foolish. For it someone wants you dead… your servants are your first line of defense, but killers come in all guises.”

She goes silent again, and I suddenly realize we’ve come to a door.

“We don’t have kimono in your size, but your mother has prepared for that, thankfully,” she sighs. “Okay. Let’s get you everything you need.”

I stumble inside and look back, wide-eyed.

“Pick a cubby. Then…” she smirks, and a shiver runs down my spine. “Well, first, I’ll show you around. Don’t worry. Just stay close to me, speak only when spoken to, don’t make too much noise,
and don’t break anything. Understood?”

I nod nervously.

“And after…” she chuckles ominously. “We’re going shopping.”

Ow. I hate geta sandals. My feet hurt. Emigiku-oneesan’s really nice, though!

Yeah. She’s going to… essentially, be my onee-san, because that’s how the okiya works. There’s a strict hierarchy, based on the time one enters the okiya, though one’s skills also help to establish one’s place in the hierarchy. There’s supposed to be a formal ceremony and everything… but I’m not technically training to become a geiko. And I’m four. So the traditional ceremony is altered a little (for example, I’m not a girl), and quickly done.

It’s not quite the same as most older sister/younger sister hierarchies in the okiya. For one, I’m not going to be a typical… maiko - in-training. I need to learn everything, but… well..

Traditionally, geiko begin their training at a young age. Some girls are bonded to geisha houses, okiya, as children. Daughters of geisha are often brought up as geisha themselves, usually as the successor (atotori, meaning "heir" or "heiress" in this particular situation) or daughter-role (musume-bun) to the okiya.

A maiko is an apprentice and is therefore bonded under a contract to her okiya. The okiya supplies her with food, board, kimono, obi, instruments, and other tools of her trade. Her training is very expensive, but she will repay her debt with what she earns later on. It’s basically an investment. This repayment may continue after the maiko becomes a full-fledged geisha and only when her debts are settled is she permitted to move out to live and work independently. Bit harsh, but… it makes sense.

A maiko will start her formal training on the job as a minarai, which literally means "learning by watching" at ozashiki banquets, where she’ll sit and observe as the other maiko and geiko interact with customers. This is a way in which she will gain insights of the job, and seek out potential clients. Later on, after a ceremony, she’ll become a maiko, and the same thing will continue, for the most part, but she’ll take a more and more active part in entertaining. Their kimono, more elaborate than those of the geiko, are intended to do the talking for them. Maiko (literally “dance girls”) are apprentice geisha, and can stay as maiko for up to five years. During that, they’ll learn from their senior maiko and geiko. The onee-san and imōto-san relationship is important. The onee-san, any maiko or geiko who is senior, teaches the younger maiko. The maiko will learn proper ways of serving tea, playing shamisen, dancing, casual conversation and more.

There are three major elements of a maiko’s training. The first is the formal arts training. This takes place in with specialized teachers. The second element is the entertainment training which the maiko learns at various tea houses and parties by observing her onee-san. The third is the social skill of navigating the complex social web of the hanamachi, the flower towns. This is done on the streets. Formal greetings, gifts, and visits are key parts of any social structure here, and for a maiko, they are crucial for her to build the support network she needs to survive as a geisha. For me… that’s the way I’ll get information and build up goodwill for me amongst any people. A noble who’s not at least somewhat well-liked by the people isn’t likely to stay a noble for long.

Maiko actually look very different from fully qualified geisha. They are… essentially, the epitome of traditional femininity. The scarlet-fringed collar of a maiko’s kimono hangs very loosely in the back to accentuate the nape of the neck, which is considered a… rather erotic area. She wears the same white makeup for her face on her nape, leaving usually two, but sometimes three stripes of bare skin exposed. That is also an… erotic symbol. Her kimono is bright and colourful with an elaborately tied obi hanging down to her ankles. She takes very small steps (partially due to necessity, because those
Kimono are not made for large steps and will trip you if you try) and wears traditional wooden shoes called okobo which stand nearly ten centimeters high (and are insanely difficult to walk in).

There are five different hairstyles that a maiko wears, which mark the different stages of her apprenticeship. The hairstyle with kanzashi hair-ornamentation strips is most closely associated with maiko, who spend hours each week at the hairdresser and sleep on holed-pillows to preserve the elaborate styling. I, luckily, don’t have to do that. Maiko can develop a bald spot on their crown caused by rubbing from kanzashi strips and tugging in hairdressing and just the general weight of the hair, but most wear that as a badge of honor.

Around the age of 20–21, the maiko is promoted to a full-fledged geisha in a ceremony called erikae (turning of the collar), and she’ll remain as a geisha until she retires.

…

Cool. But seriously, being a maiko is really hard work. And expensive, too.

Starting with kanzashi, those pretty hair ornaments.

Because… well, first-off, there are a lot of styles, namely, several basic kanzashi styles that traditionally followed more complex hana (flower) and seasonal arrangements. So yeah, there’s a standard for what to wear during… basically each month. And maiko have to worry about that.

But first…

Bira-bira – These are composed of metal strips attached by rings to the body of the ornament so that they move independently, pleasantly tinkling, which is sometimes accentuated by additional bells or long chains of silk flowers called shidare.

Kogai – A two piece kanzashi made of bekko (tortoiseshell) or other materials such as ceramics or metals that feature a design on each end. Kogai means sword and refers to the shape of two pieces make up this kanzashi, which looks like a sword and its sheath. They are often sold as a set with an accompanying kushi comb.

Tama – Ball style kanzashi. These are decorated with only a simple colored bead on the end. Traditionally a red tama is worn October–May and a green tama is worn June–September.

Kushi are comb-style kanzashi. These are usually rounded or rectangular combs made of tortoiseshell or lacquered wood that are often inlaid with mother of pearl or gilding and placed into a mage (bun-style hairdo). The spine of the comb is often wide in order to allow maximum space for a design, and in many cases, the design will extend into the teeth. Flower-combs, hanagushi, are made by gluing folded pieces of silk to a wooden base comb and are a popular, non-formal alternative.

Kanoko Dome – heavily jeweled accessories crafted with some or all of the following: gold, silver, tortoiseshell, jade, coral, pearls and other semi-precious stones. While the general shape is rounded, they are also found in other shapes, with flowers and butterflies being the most popular. The kanoko dome is worn at the back of the wareshinobu hairstyle of the junior maiko and has two prongs that hold it securely in the mage.

Ōgi – Also called hime-style kanzashi, these are metal, fan-shaped and kamon-imprinted kanzashi (kanzashi with an imprint of the family crest) with metal streamers held in place by a long pin. These are usually worn by maiko in the hair just above the temple. New maiko wear two on the day of their debut (misedashi).
And that’s just the beginning.

The characteristic **kanzashi** of **maiko** are **hana kanzashi**. These are created from squares of silk by a technique known as **tsumami** (pinching). Each square is folded multiple times with the aid of tweezers and cut into a single petal. Flowers are made from these folded fabric petals and may contain anywhere from five petals to 75 or more, depending on the particular flower made.

A **hana kanzashi** is a cluster of these flowers, and may or may not include **bira-bira** and/or long streamers of **tsumami** petals, fashioned to look like, say, hanging wisteria petals.

Generally, **hana kanzashi** are worn in pairs, one on either side of the head, often with a complementary **kushi** and/or with several individual flowers scattered about the hair. The flowers are glued to backings of metal or cardboard that are attached to a wire and are bunched together to make bouquets and other arrangements. Additional detailing of stamens is created by the use of **mizuhiki**, which is a strong, thin twine made from **washi** paper, and is often coloured and used for decorative works.

The **kanzashi** that Itachi got me is kind of a mix between the **kanoko dome kanzashi** and **hana kanzashi**, with the trailing stuff being a mix between **bira-bira** and **tsumami** petals. When you add that unique-ness to the fact that it doesn’t come in a pair… well… there’s a reason it took so long for it to be sold.

And that’s not even addressing the fact that it’s a mix of the standard decorations during **multiple** months, because normally, **geiko**, and especially **maiko**, wear different **hana kanzashi** for each month of the year.

See what I mean by dedication?

The seasons dictate which kind of hair ornament is worn. Usually this applies mainly to **geisha** and **maiko**, who tend to be the only ones to wear **kanzashi** often enough for seasonal changes to be noticeable. Since **maiko** wear more elaborate kanzashi than their senior **geisha**, seasonal changes are even more important for them.

**Mutsuki** (ichigatsu, 一月, January) — The design of this **kanzashi** differs from year to year, but usually has an auspicious New Year theme. **Shōchikubai** is a popular choice, a combination of pine (**shō**), bamboo (**chiku**) and plum blossoms (**ume**), in the colors of green, red and white, which are usually associated with celebrations. Other popular additions to the **kanzashi** are sparrows (**suzume**), spinning tops and **hagoita** (...kinda like these paddle-thingies?).

**Kisaragi** (nigatsu, 二月, February) — Usually trailing deep pink, or sometimes red, **ume** plum blossoms, which are to be seen everywhere at this time and symbolize young love and the approach of spring. Another less common theme is the pinwheel and the flower-ball (**kusudama**) that is worn for Setsubun.

( **Setsubun** (節分) is the day before the beginning of spring. The name literally means “seasonal division”, but usually the term refers to the spring Setsubun, properly called Risshun (立春), celebrated yearly on February 3 as part of the Spring Festival (春祭 harumatsuri). In its association with the Lunar New Year, spring Setsubun can be and was previously thought of as a sort of New Year's Eve, and so was accompanied by a special ritual to cleanse away all the evil of the former year and drive away disease-bringing evil spirits for the year to come.)

(There’s a custom known as **mamemaki**, which is usually performed by the **toshiotoko** (年男) of the
household (the male who was born on the corresponding animal year), or else the male head of the household. Roasted soybeans (called "fortune beans" (福豆 fuku mame)) are thrown either out the door or at a member of the family wearing an oni (demon or ogre) mask, while the people say “Demons out! Luck in!” (鬼は外! 福は内! Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!) and slam the door. This is still common practice in households, but many people will just attend a shrine or temple's spring festival where this is done. The beans are thought to symbolically purify the home by driving away the evil spirits that bring misfortune and bad health with them. Then, as part of bringing luck in, it is customary to eat roasted soybeans, one for each year of one's life, and in some areas, one for each year of one's life plus one more for bringing good luck for the year to come.)

(At Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines all over the country, there are celebrations for Setsubun. Priests and invited guests will throw roasted soy beans (some wrapped in gold or silver foil), small envelopes with money, sweets, candies and other prizes.)

(Some people also eat uncut makizushi called ehō-maki (恵方巻), literally “lucky direction roll”), a type of futomaki (太巻, "thick/large rolls"), in silence on Setsubun while facing the year's lucky compass direction, determined by the zodiac symbol of that year. Also, some families put up small decorations of sardine heads and what I think are holly leaves (柊鰯 hiragi iwashi) on their house entrances so that bad spirits will not enter. Ginger sake (生姜酒 shōgazake) is customarily drunk at Setsubun.)

(It was really fun to do everything with Emigiku-oneesan!)

Yayoi (sangatsu, 三月, March) — Trailing yellow and white flowers… of a species I don’t know the English equivalent of… (nanohana) and butterflies, as well as peach blossoms (momo), narcissus (suisen), camellia (tsubaki) and peonies (botan). A rare kanzashi featuring dolls that feature in the Hinamatsuri (Girl's Day Festival) can also be seen during this month.

Uzuki (shigatsu, 四月, April) — Trailing soft pink cherry blossom (sakura) mixed with butterflies and bonbori lanterns, signaling the approach of summer. Cherry blossom viewing (hanami) at this time of year is a major event. Also, kanzashi consisting of a single silver (or sometimes gold) butterfly (cho) made of mizuhiki cord are common.

Satsuki (gogatsu, 五月, May) — Trailing purple wisteria (fuji) and irises (ayame), usually in blue or pink. Irises denote the height of spring while wisteria is a flower often associated with the imperial court (wisteria viewing parties have been celebrated by nobles for… a very long time, and is one of the biggest reason I’m visiting my family when I am).

Minazuki (rokugatsu, 六月, June) — Trailing green willow (yanagi) leaves with nadeshiko, or less commonly, hydrangea (ajisai) flowers. Willow is a traditional image associated with geisha. This month is the rainy season, and therefore willow (a water-loving tree) and the washy blue of hydrangea are appropriate.

Fumizuki (shichigatsu, 七月, July) — Kanzashi featuring a display of fans. These will usually be of the round uchiwa variety, but occasionally folding fans (sensu) are also featured. The fans refer to the Gion Festival which takes place at this time, and usually involves large parades of portable shrines (mikoshi) and dances. This is more in the capital, though. Fans are a staple component of keeping cool, and the motifs featured on a maiko’s fan kanzashi vary each year, in line with the festival. There are common themes such as dragonflies and lines denoting swirling water. Other kanzashi worn during July are the fireworks kanzashi and tsuyushiba (dewdrops on grass).

Hazuki (hachigatsu, 八月, August) — Large morning glory (asagao) or susuki grass. The susuki grass appears as a starburst of spines. Senior maiko wear white-backed silver petals and junior maiko wear pink-backed silver petals.
Nagatsuki (kugatsu, 九月, September) — Kikyō. The purple tones of this flower are traditionally associated with autumn. Often these will be mixed with bush clover.

Kaminazuki (jūgatsu, 十月, October) — Chrysanthemum (kiku). In the Land of Fire, yellow chrysanthemums are symbolic of the emperor’s family because they’re descended from Amaterasu. Senior maiko will wear one large flower while junior maiko will wear a cluster of small flowers. Typical colors include pink, white, red, yellow, and purple.

Shimotsuki (jūichigatsu, 十一月, November) — Trailing autumnal leaves that are usually composed of the very popular maple. Maple viewing is the autumnal equivalent of cherry blossom viewing. Ginkgo (ichō) leaves and… this-other-tree-whose-name-I-forgot’s leaves are also seen.

Shiwasu (jūnigatsu, 十二月, December) — Mochi is made at this time of year, and is often used to decorate trees, to represent white flowers. It is thought to be good luck to wear kanzashi featuring mochibana, or rice-cake flowers. Kanzashi worn by maiko in the capital also feature two maneki, name plates used by kabuki actors, which are initially blank. Traditionally (there), maiko visit the theatre and ask two of their favorite kabuki actors to autograph them with their kabuki… nom de plume. Kanzashi for senior maiko feature green bamboo leaves, while junior maiko have a colorful assortment of lucky charms.

New Year — At this time of year all maiko and geisha wear unhusked rice ears in their hair (maiko wear it on the right while geisha wear it on the left). These kanzashi also feature eyeless white doves. The maiko and geisha sometimes fill in one eye and ask somebody they like to draw the other for good luck in the coming year.

There’s actually a similar thing for kimono.

Only, that’s even more complicated, because there are too many colors and patterns, and… it’s honestly a bit of a mess, and one that I got into because I might as well be a cat, with all the trouble that I get into because of my curiosity.

...but this is one example list of colors and themes, after a not-so-quick explanation into how complicated just the belt part of a kimono is.

The wide women's obi is folded in two when worn, to a width of about 15 centimetres (5.9 in) to 20 centimetres (7.9 in). Mind you, these are approximate. It is considered elegant to tie the obi so that the folded width is in harmony with the wearer's body dimensions. Usually this means about a tenth of her height. The full width of the obi is present only in the decorative knot, musubi.

A woman's obi is worn in a fancy musubi knot. There are at least ten ways to tie an obi, and different knots are suited to different occasions and different kimono.

See? Complicated.

There are many different types of women's obi, and the usage of them is regulated by many unwritten rules not unlike those that concern the kimono itself. Certain types of obi are used with certain types of kimono; the obi of married and unmarried women are tied in different ways. Often the obi adjusts the formality and fanciness of the whole kimono outfit: the same kimono can be worn in very different situations depending on what kind of obi is worn with it.

For example...
Darari obi (だらり帯) is a very long maru obi worn by maiko. A maiko’s darari obi has the kamon insignia (crest) of its owner’s okiya on the other end. And seriously, it’s really long. Like, longer than three people lying in a row with each person’s feet above the next person’s head.

Fukuro obi (袋帯, "pouch obi") is a grade less formal than a maru obi. It has been made by either folding cloth in two or sewing two pieces of cloth together. If two cloths are used, the cloth used for the backside of the obi may be cheaper and the front cloth may be, for example, brocade. Not counting marriage outfits and in really formal places, the fukuro obi has mostly replaced the heavy maru obi as the obi used for ceremonial wear and celebration. A fukuro obi is often made so that the part that will not be visible when worn is of smooth, thinner and lighter silk. This is just about as long as one-and-a-half adults.

When worn, a fukuro obi is pretty similar to a maru obi. Fukuro obi are made in roughly three subtypes. The most formal and expensive of these is patterned brocade on both sides. The second type is two-thirds patterned, and it is somewhat cheaper and lighter than the first type. The third type has patterns only in the parts that will be prominent when the obi is worn in the common taiko musubi.

Hoso obi (細帯, “thin sash”) is a collective name for informal half-width obi. It’s usually just a bit shorter than the fukuro obi.

Hanhaba obi (半幅帯 / 半巾帯, “half-width obi”) is an unlined and informal obi that is used with a yukata or an everyday kimono. For use with yukata, reversible hanhaba obi are popular: they can be folded and twisted in several ways to create colour effects. Tying it is relatively easy, and its use does not require pads or strings. The knots used for hanhaba obi are often simplified versions of bunko-musubi. As it is more “acceptable” to play with an informal obi, the hanhaba obi is sometimes worn in self-invented styles, often with decorative ribbons and such.

Kobukuro obi (小袋帯) is an unlined hoso obi with slightly different dimensions.

Hara-awase obi (典雅帯) or chūya obi (昼夜帯, “day-and-night obi”) is an informal obi that has sides of different colours. A chūya obi (“day and night”) has a dark, sparingly decorated side and another, more colourful and festive side. This way the obi can be worn both in everyday life and for celebration.

Heko obi (兵児帯, “soft obi”) is a type of very informal obi made of soft, thin cloth, often dyed with shibori. Its traditional use is as an informal obi for children and men, and there were times when it was considered totally inappropriate for women. Nowadays young girls and women can wear a heko obi with modern, informal kimono and yukata.

Okay, now a small side-note into the process of making kimono or obi … or just clothing.

Shibori (しぼり / 絞り) is a manual resist-dyeing technique, a technique in which the person tries to prevent all of the dye from reaching the fabric, which produces patterns on fabric. (If that sounds familiar, it is. It’s basically fancy tie-dying.)

There are an infinite number of ways one can bind, stitch, fold, twist, or compress cloth for shibori, and each way results in very different patterns. Each method is used to achieve a certain result, but each method is also used to work in harmony with the type of cloth used. Therefore, the technique used in shibori depends not only on the desired pattern, but the characteristics of the cloth being dyed. Also, different techniques can be used in conjunction with one another to achieve even more elaborate results.

(Another similar process is tsutsugaki, (筒描) is a technique of resist dyeing that involves drawing
rice-paste designs on cloth, dyeing the cloth, and then washing off the paste. The rice paste is typically made from sweet rice, which has a high starch content and is therefore rather sticky. The paste is applied through a tube (the *tsutsu*) similar to the tubes which are used by bakers to decorate cakes. A related process is to apply the paste through a stencil; that is called *katazome*. For this, the cloth is typically cotton, and the dye is typically indigo, so the design is usually white on blue.

Banners for shops or other purposes are sometimes made in this manner.

The designs are often creatures from mythology such as the crane or the tortoise, or a family crest, *kamon*, or a name in *kanji*. Flowers and trees are common motifs as well.)

So, some techniques:

*Kanoko shibori* is basically tie-dye. It involves binding certain sections of the cloth to achieve the desired pattern. Traditional *shibori* requires the use of thread for binding. The pattern achieved depends on how tightly the cloth is bound and where the cloth is bound. If random sections of the cloth are bound, the result will be a pattern of random circles. If the cloth is first folded then bound, the resulting circles will be in a pattern depending on the fold used.

*Miura shibori* is also known as looped binding. It involves taking a hooked needle and plucking sections of the cloth. Then a thread is looped around each section twice. The thread is not knotted; tension is the only thing that holds the sections in place. The resulting dyed cloth is a water-like design. Because no knot is used, *miura shibori* is very easy to bind and unbind. Therefore, this technique is pretty popular.

*Kumo shibori* is a pleated and bound resist. This technique involves pleating sections of the cloth very finely and evenly. Then the cloth is bound in very close sections. The result is a very specific spider-like design. This specific design requires very precise technique.

*Nui shibori* includes stitched *shibori*. A simple running stitch is used on the cloth then pulled tight to gather the cloth. The thread must be pulled very tight to work, and a wooden dowel must often be used to pull it tight enough. Each thread is secured by knotting before being dyed. This technique allows for greater control of the pattern and greater variety of pattern, but it is much more time consuming.

*Arashi shibori* is also known as pole-wrapping *shibori*. The cloth is wrapped on a diagonal around a pole. Then the cloth is very tightly bound by wrapping thread up and down the pole. Next, the cloth is scrunched on the pole. The result is a pleated cloth with a design on a diagonal. The patterns are always on a diagonal in *arashi shibori* which suggest the driving rain of a heavy storm, hence the name.

*Itajime shibori* is a shaped-resist technique. Traditionally, the cloth is sandwiched between two pieces of wood, which are held in place with string. The shapes prevent the dye from penetrating the fabric they cover.

…

Back to *obi*.

*Hitoe obi* (単帯, “one-layer obi”) are made from silk cloth so stiff that the obi does not need lining or sewn-in stiffeners. One of these cloth types is called *Hakata ori* (博多織), which consists of thick weft thread interwoven with thin warp thread with a stiff, tight weave; obi made from this material are also called *Hakata obi* (博多帯). A *hitoe obi* can be worn with everyday *kimono* or *yukata*.

*Maru obi* (丸帯, "one-piece obi") is the most formal obi. It is made from cloth about 68 cm wide and
is folded around a double lining and sewn together. Their bulk and weight makes maru obi difficult to handle, but it’s very traditional as a part of a bride’s outfit. It’s usually fully patterned and often embroidered with metal-coated yarn and foilwork.

Manaita ("chopping board") obi — the thickly padded and often outrageously decorated obi worn by oiran and kabuki actors. Oiran are… well, very fancily-dressed prostitutes. Basically. They only really live, like, in the capitol, and… it’s… complicated, okay?

Odori obi (踊帯, “dance obi”) is a name for obi used in, you guessed it, dance. An odori obi is often big, simple-patterned and has patterns done in metallic colours so that it can be seen easily from the audience.

Sakiori obi is a woven obi made by using yardage or narrow strips from old clothes as weave. Sakiori obi are used with kimono worn at home. A sakiori obi is similar to a hanhaba obi in size and extremely informal.

Tenga obi (典雅帯, “fancy obi”) resembles a hanhaba obi but is more formal. It is usually wider and made from fancier cloth more suitable for celebration. The patterns usually include auspicious, celebratory motifs.

Tsuke obi (付け帯) or tsukuri obi (作り帯) or kantan obi (簡単帯, “easy obi”) is any ready-tied obi. It often has a separate, cardboard-supported knot piece and a piece that is wrapped around the waist. The tsuke obi is fastened in place by ribbons. Tsuke obi are normally very informal and they are mostly used with yukata.

And now? Accessories.

An obiage (帯揚げ,”“obi bustle”) is a scarf-like piece of cloth that covers up the obimakura and keeps the upper part of the obi knot in place. It’s somewhat customary for an unmarried, young woman to let her obiage show from underneath the obi in the front. A married woman will tuck it deeper in and only allow it to peek. Obiage can be thought of as an undergarment for kimono, so letting it show is a little provocative.

(Ooh, how absolutely scandalous. Mind you, the nape? Like the part of the upper back right under the neck? Yeah, that’s also very “sexy.” I guess subtlety is the name of the game here… for relatively old-fashioned civilians, at least. It’s almost refreshing, compared to Before.)

Obidome (帯留, “sash clip”) is a small decorative accessory that is fastened onto obijime.

Obi-ita is a separate stiffener that keeps the obi flat. It is a thin piece of cardboard covered with cloth and placed between the layers of obi when putting the obi on. Some types of obi-ita are attached around the waist with cords before the obi is put on.

Obijime (帯締め) is a string about 150 centimetres (4.9 ft) long that is tied around the obi and through the knot, and which doubles as decoration. It can be a woven string, or be constructed as a narrow sewn tube of fabric. There are both flat and round obijimes. They often have tassels at both ends and they are made from silk, satin, or brocade. A cord-like or a padded tube obijime is considered more festive and ceremonial than a flat one.

Obimakura (帯枕, "obi pillow") is a small pillow that supports and shapes the obi knot. The most common knot, taiko musubi, is made using an elongated round obimakura.
And now, for *men’s obi*, which needs an entire different set of… stuff.

I love life. *cue sarcasm*

So, formal *obi* worn by men are much narrower than those of women, and it is worn in much simpler fashion than women’s *obi* — it is wrapped around the waist, below the stomach and tied with a simple knot in the back.

But again, there are many different types.

*Heko obi* (兵児帯) is an informal, soft obi, free flowing and made of tie-dyed fabrics, usually habutai (one of the most basic plain weaves of silk fabric), cotton, etc. It is tied very informally. Adult men wear the *heko obi* only at home, usually, but young boys can wear it in public, for example… at a summer festival with a *yukata*.

*Kaku obi* (角帯, “stiff obi”) is another obi used by men. Depending on the material, colors, and pattern of a formal *kaku obi*, it can be suited to any and all occasions from everyday wear to a close relative’s funeral. (I guess I know what I’ll be wearing most when I grow up.) A *kaku obi* typically is made from very thin silk. It is worn in the simple *kai-no-kuchi* knot.

…

So… cool, I guess? I’m just waiting for when this helps me assassinate someone or helps to prevent me from being assassinated by someone. It’s honestly a bit of a toss-up for me regarding which will come first.

…

And then you get into *obi* accessories.

…

You know what? It’s basically just *netsuke*. Yeah, they’re a lot of *netsuke*, but I’m not getting into that, okay? From what I can tell, there aren’t as many regulations. For everything else, there are right ways and wrong ways (at least in the Land of Fire), and it’s useful for knowing if there’s a disguised *shinobi* trying to kill you… or for making sure others don’t know you’re a disguised *shinobi* trying to kill them… but I just like *netsuke*, okay? They’re the cool carved things used to hang stuff, and they’re like little collectables. End of story.

Because seriously, children also have their *own* style of… everything, and that’s more important.

Children are dressed in *kimono* especially for the *shichi-go-san* (Seven-Five-Three) celebration, when girls aged three and seven and boys aged five are celebrated by being brought to a temple or something.

Yay. I can’t wait to finally be allowed to wear *hakama* … basically, formal trousers.

But children’s *kimono* outfits, in general, resemble those of adults and their parts are basically miniature versions from adult’s pieces. The youngest children wear soft, scarf-like *obi*, which are pretty comfortable.

So, children's *obi* types:

*Sanjaku obi* (三尺帯, さんじゃくおり, "three-foot-long obi") is a type of men's *obi*. It is named for its length. The *obi* is sometimes called simply *sanjaku* (三尺). It was popular among the people as
the obi for yukata-like kimono because of its ease of use. According to some theories, the sanjaku obi originates from a scarf of the same length, which was folded and used as a sash. A sanjaku obi typically is shaped like a kaku obi, narrow and with short stitches. It is usually made from soft cotton-like cloth. Because of its shortness, the sanjaku obi is tied in the koma musubi, which is much like a square knot.

Shigoki-obi (しごき帯) is mainly used with trailing kimono, and is used to tie up the excess length when going out. Nowadays the shigoki obi’s only function is decorative. It is part of a 7-year-old girl’s outfit for the shichi-go-san.

Tsuke obi is a popular obi used for children because of its ease of use. There are even formal tsuke obi available for children, and it’s what Okaa-san usually puts me in. These obi correspond to fukuro obi on the formality scale.

Awesome.

Onto the knots.

The knot of the obi is called the musubi (結び, むすび). These days, a woman's knot often does not keep the obi in place, so much as it functions as a large decorative piece in the back. The actual knot is usually supported by a number of accessories: pads, scarves and cords. While putting on the obi, especially when without assistance, there is a need for several additional temporary ribbons.

There are hundreds of decorative knots and they often represent flowers or birds. As everything else in a kimono outfit, the knots are regulated by a number of unwritten propriety rules. Generally the more complex and showy knots are for young unmarried women in festive situations, the more subdued for married or mature women or for use in ceremonial situations.

In earlier days, the knots were believed to banish malicious spirits. Many knots have a name with an auspicious double meaning.

Types of knots:

Asagao musubi (朝顔, あさがお, "morning glory") is a knot suitable for yukata. As its name suggests, it resembles the morning glory. The knot requires a great length of obi so it can be usually only be made for little girls.

Ayame musubi (菖蒲, あやめ, “iris”) is a very decorative and complex knot that resembles a blossom of iris. It is considered suitable for young women in informal situations and parties. Because of the complexity and conspicuousness of the knot it should be worn with more subdued, preferably monochrome kimono and obi.

Bara musubi (薔薇, バラ, "rose") is a contemporary, conspicuous knot. It is suitable for young women and can be worn to informal parties. Because of the complexity of the knot, a multi-coloured or strongly patterned obi should not be used. The patterns of the kimono should match the knot representing an occidental flower.

Chōchō musubi (蝶蝶, ちょうちょう, “butterfly”) is a version of the bunko musubi, tied using the hanhaba obi. Most ready-made obi (tsuke obi) are made with the butterfly knot.

Darari musubi is a knot nowadays used mainly by maiko, dancers and kabuki actors. It is easily distinguishable by the long “tails” hanging in the back. Courtesans and daughters of rich merchants, among others, could also have their obi tied in this manner. A specific darari obi is needed for
making this knot in full length.

(There also exists a half-length version of the *darari musubi*, the so-called *handara musubi*. According to tradition, a *minarai* (*maiko* -to-be in training) wears her *obi* in this style. *Maiko* wear this knot for specific dances.)

*Fukura-suzume musubi* (ふくら雀, "puffed sparrow") is a decorative knot that resembles a sparrow with its wings spread and is worn only by unmarried women. It is suitable for formal occasions and is only worn with a *furisode*. Traditionally, the *fukura-suzume musubi* worn with a *furisode* indicates that a woman is available for marriage... but, well... I don’t think most people pay that tradition much attention these days.

*Kai-no-kuchi musubi* (貝の口, "clam's mouth") is a subdued *obi* which is often worn by men. Sometimes older women or women seeking a somewhat masculine air to their outfit tie their *obi* in this knot.

*Koma musubi* (駒結び, square knot, literally "foal knot") is often used with *haori* strings and *obijime*. The short *sanjaku obi* for children is also tied in this way.

*Taiko musubi* (太鼓, "drum knot") is the most common *musubi* these days. It is simple and subdued and resembles a box. The *taiko musubi* is suited for both old and young women in almost any occasion and goes with almost any kind of *kimono* and, in some cases, even with *yukata*. Only *furisode* are considered too formal and youthful to be worn with the *taiko musubi*. Nowadays the *taiko musubi* is usually associated with the *taiko* drum, but the origin of the name does not relate to the instrument. The knot was created at the time of the festive opening ceremony of... some bridge or another? I don’t know. Some geisha attending to the event tied their *obi* in a new, conspicuous way that was thought to resemble the shape of a *karuta* playing card, a variation of a simple men's knot used then. And then, it was later adopted by other women. By the creation of the *taiko musubi*, the accessories *obiage*, *obijime* and *obimakura* were also established. These accessories belong to most kimono outfits used today.

*Nijūdaiko musubi* (二重太鼓, "two-layer drum") is, as its name suggests, a version of the common *taiko musubi*, worn with the formal fukuro obi. Fukuro obi are longer than the more commonly used Nagoya obi, so the obi must be folded in two during the tying of the knot. The knot has an auspicious double meaning of “double joy.”

*Tateya musubi* (立て矢, "standing arrow") resembles a large bow and is one of the most simple *musubi* worn with *furisode*. Apparently, it is the most suitable knot to be used with the honburisode, the *furisode* with full length sleeves.

*Washikusa musubi* (鷲草, "eagle plant") is basically a bow which resembles a certain plant thought to look like an eagle taking flight. Talk about convoluted references.

Now, finally, for the seasonal patterns.

...all I can say is that I’d better end up having... like, an S-ranked assassination or infiltration mission or something where this knowledge saves my life. Otherwise, I’m going to demand... a refund, or something. And even if that mission does happen... I’m going to have to resort to being extremely petty, and just wearing outrageously expensive female *kimono* for multiple years on end, before I can feel satisfied that I have put this knowledge to sufficient use.

Other than that... hopefully I remember everything properly. And hopefully, I’m explaining everything the way I’m supposed to. Because sometimes, simplifications don’t make things simpler.
Other times, simplifications are just plain wrong, and mean that I didn’t understand something correctly.

...and in this case, it either means a fashion faux pas... or potentially deadly consequences. The latter come into play when the person making the fashion faux pas is a shinobi trying to kill me... or me, when I’m somewhere I really shouldn’t be.

Okay, enough with the depressing possibilities. Onto the... slightly less-depressing list of all the ways to avoid fashion faux-pas-es.

So, first off, mutsuki (ichigatsu, 一月, January). For New Year’s Week (Matsu-no-Uchi), formal kimono with family crests are worn (irotomesode, hōmongi, tsukesage, and so on). Young women wear chu-furisode.

Fabrics are rinzu or donsu (a kinda damask, I think?) with a glossy sheen. If chirimen is used it’s good to pick the kind that has a rough, bumpy texture. For patterns woven into fabrics, choose from ones like somewhat large repeats of your family crest (kamon), interlocking Buddhist swastikas (sayagata, because well... yeah, these were originally Buddhist, and really should just be another reason for why Hitler sucks), stylized rising steam (tatewaku), mist (kasumi), stylized ocean waves (seigaiha), flowing water (ryū-sui), large arabesques (ō-karakusa), or any of the many, many auspicious patterns out there!

...yay. *cue jazz hands*

Colors are those appropriate for early spring: cheerful light color, like pink, blue, light purple (usu-murasaki), cream, beige, and young grass green (waka-kusa-iro). Grey is also a nice choice if it’s a bright tone.

With patterns like auspicious ones (kichi-jō), a mix of scattered nature and court ones (go-sho-doki), and classical court ones (yū-soku), a single embroidered family crest (kamon) on the middle of the back will lift the formality of the kimono higher than a crest that is only dyed.

Obi are usually made of the kara-nishiki brocade, colored brocade (iro-nishiki), gold or silver brocade (haku-nishiki), haku-ichou (an obi made from only gold leaf and a single color’s thread, the contrast creating its monochrome pattern), saga-nishiki (a brocade mixing a dyed silk weft with gold/silver/lacquered paper warp). Various brocades are used and so mainly fukuro obi, good-luck obi, are worn.

Appropriate patterns include very dignified ones like mei-butsu-gire, patterns reminiscent of Noh theater costumes (nō-shō-zoku), auspicious ones, and classical court ones. While keeping age-appropriateness in mind, it’s fun to create refined coordinates with gorgeous obi that use gold and silver threads mixed in with color ones!

So now, for accessories. Obi-age are plain or gradated rinzu silk, or beautiful fabrics like full shibori. Obi-jime are in styles like yurugi weave in dignified colors.

(Karamiori is the term that includes all loom techniques that make use of intertwining threads to create the structure of the weave. Karamiori is an old and highly respected textile production method. Here, karaori is divided into three basic styles based on structure: sha (紗), ro (織), and ra (羅). Sha is the basic leno weave, ro adds additional areas of flat or twill weaves and ra maintains the concept of twisted threads but allows both warp and weft to be freed and recombined to form highly intricate weaves.)
Naga-juban are lined and collars are white shioze habutae silk. Additional fake collars can be layered to suggest an elegant effect.

(As a side note, shioze is a type of fine habutae silk using very fine vertical threads and thick horizontal threads, moistened and tightly woven. After weaving, the fabric is scoured and dyed.)

Footwear is zōri in “enamel” or saga-nishiki brocade. Colors should be bright and cheerful to coordinate with the kimono and suggest the beginning of spring. The heel should be a little high, to go along with the month’s gorgeous kimono.

Coats used with hōmongi and tsukesage are generally made of rinzu or mon-ishō and are the michiyuki type. To protect against the cold, warm items made of things like velvet and cashmere are must-haves. Also, for cold weather you can put in another layer of lining on the sleeves of your naga-juban with the same fabric as the outside of it.

And if it’s a shinobi trying to kill you, they can probably regulate their own temperature with chakra, and won’t want the extra weight.

…

The best colors for ichigatsu are bright colors like pink, blue, cream, beige, young grass green (waka-kusa-iro ), or auspicious colors like deep green (fuka-midori ), deep red/crimson (kurenai), madder red (akanei-iro), gold (kin), silver (gin).

Lucky patterns include the auspicious set of pine, bamboo, and plum (shō-chiku-bai), scattered treasures (takara-zukushi), as well as court patterns, snow on bamboo leaves, a holly-like plant (sen-ryō), coralberry (man-ryō) and winter camellia (kan-tsubaki).

Flowers associated with January include the set of pine, bamboo, and plum, old pine trees (rō-shō), young pine (waka-matsu), pine in stylized diamond shapes (matsu-bishi), old pine trees (ume-no-koboku), weeping plum (shidare-ume), vertical plum branches (yari-ume), plum blossoms and branches done in a circular pattern (ume-no-maru), a thing called nanten, willow (yanagi) specifically a decorate cord made of tied-together willow (musubi-yanagi), winter peony (kan-botan), and something called yuki-yanagi.

Still other patterns associated with January are the crane (tsuru), tortoise (kame), red-crowned crane (tanchō-zuru), folded paper cranes (ori-zuru), sparrows in winter (kan-suzume), bush warblers in plum blossoms (ume-ni-uguisu), auspicious patterns like phoenixes (hō-ō), scattered treasures, treasure ships (takara-bune), open folding fans (sen-men), colored paper (iro-gami) because of the New Year’s “first writing of the year” (kaki-zome), small narrow prayer-papers (tanzaku), toy balls (ke-mari), the character for long life (kotobuki寿), and the character for good fortune (fuku福).

Seriously. There are way too many, but… I guess it’s important. For fashion choices. I don’t know.

But also… some advice from Emigiku-oneesan.

On wearing lined kimono for the celebration of the New Year: There are many times of year that call for formality in the tea room, but this time of year we can truly experience a ceremonial atmosphere as many people wear formal kimono like irotomesode, hōmongi, and layered white habutae collars. Young women wear formal kimono like furisode or hōmongi.

For the first tea ceremony of the year, you can also wear tsukesage or iromuji. Either way, all kimono should have a family crest. Kimono patterns should be auspicious ones, classical court
patterns of a formal variety, plants and flowers, or the like.

For kimono patterns, try to avoid very large or showy ones as they will throw you out of harmony with your surroundings. For kimono worn this month, *fukuro obi* match best. Choose *obi* in heavy brocade featuring noble and dignified patterns like those mentioned above.

---

*Kisaragi (nigatsu, 二月, February)*

This month’s *kimono* are lined and made of materials like *rinzu*, *mon-ishō*, *chirimen*, *tsumugi*, etc. Finely patterned designs of blizzards or small hail, *seigaiha* (stylized ocean waves), small arabesques, *kikkō* (stylized tortoise shell), *shikishi* (paper boards used for writing), and other seasonal patterns are appropriate.

In the case of *chirimen*, *hitokoshi chirimen* or *kawari-chirimen* are good choices.

Colors are warm, quiet ones such as navy (*kon*), purple-red (*aka-murasaki*), ink black (*sumi*), bracken green (*warabi-midori*), and a type of yellow ochre (*ōdo*).

For tea ceremonies held at night, pale colors will look nice in the darkness of the tea room. Also, remember that the first half of *nigatsu* is still winter, while the last half marks the beginning of spring, so outfits will need to be coordinated appropriately.

Now, *obi*. It’s easy to suggest the coming season by wearing a dyed *Nagoya obi* featuring early-blooming spring flowers. As for accessories… *obi-age* change to plain *rinzu*, while you can play around more or less with which type of *obi-jime* you’d like. *Naga-juban* are lined. *Han-eri* (collars) are white *shioze habutae* or *chirimen*.

Footwear features colors like navy, wine red (*enji*), tea brown (*cha*), and scarlet (*aka*), or basically strong colors that are clearly defined. *Zōri* sandals with heels that are a little high are nice.

As for colors… basically light crimson (*usu-beni*), egg yellow (*tamago-iro*), young shoot green (*wakana-iro*), a kinda celadon-ish green (*aoji-iro*), navy, purple-red, and ink black.

Patterns… barren trees in winter (*fuyu-kodachi*), light snow (*awa-yuki*), stylized overlapping pieces of broken ice (*kori-wari*), a type of bird… I think the bush warbler (*uguisu*), picture prayer boards (*e-uma*) and bells (*rin*) for Setsubun (the Bean Throwing Festival), then plum (*ume*), daffodil (*suisen*), camellia (*tsubaki*), holly (*hiiragi*). If you’d like to use a seasonal pattern, go with snow. Snow on bamboo leaves (*yuki-mochi-sasa*), stylized snowflake rings (*yukiwa*), blizzards, large snowflakes (*botan-yuki*)... yeah. Another favored pattern is plum blossom, a prized flower of early spring. “The first to bloom, its chaste beauty appears in the deep cold of winter,” blahblahblah. It’s nice to look at, but it gets a bit boring after a while, no offense. It is also considered an auspicious flower.

When it comes to variations like plum branches (*eda-ume*) and stylized plum blossoms (*kōrin-ume*), there are many designs but ones done in the bright, sharp colors of spring are best, at least according to Emi-neechan.

The thing is, the first third of the month should show the last traces of winter, while the last third of the month should suggest spring. See? Yeah, complicated.

Other stuff… flowers associated with February are plum (*ume*), this kind of willow that literally translates to cat willow (*neko-yanagi*), *kan-boke*, *sawarabi*, etc.

Lined kimono for the first day of spring, around February 4, require a bit more thought, though. The
day before this First Day of Spring is the Setsubun festival. On Setsubun, in order to ward off evil spirits, fish/dragon scale patterns (uroko) and “seven color cords” are good choices for patterns.

On this day we can see many people using red, white, purple, yellow, green, blue and gold for obi-jime colors and fish/dragon scale patterns on obi.

---

Yayoi (sangatsu, 三月, March)

Kimono are lined and usually made of rinzu, chirimen, and donsu silks, or tsunugi, with spring-related patterns. In the case of chirimen silk, it’s best to use things like hitokoshi or kawari-chirimen. For rinzu silks or “mon-ishō” silks, patterned-silks, woven designs of spring-related things like flowing water, mist, waves, and flowers bring a feeling of freshness. For colors, light colors hazy with white or grey suggest spring. It’s good to use slightly muted colors like brown-red (azuki), gray (nezumi), pale pink (sakura), na-no-hana yellow, young-grass green (waka-kusa), light blue (mizu-iro), fresh green (waka-midori), silver-gray (gin-nezu), finch green (hiwa-iro), water light blue (mizu-asagi), cream, light orange, and neutral warm colors with white in them.

Patterns reminiscent of spring dyed on a gradated background are suitable, as are plain-color kimono with family crest(s).

In situations where a fukuro obi is called for, it’s best to choose something with a small pattern like what you see on some “fukusa” (tea cloth wrappers). Regarding accessories, obi-age are gradated rinzu silk or shibori, and obi-jime are somewhat narrow like the “kanze-hineri” or “yurugi” (crown-style) types.

Naga-juban are unlined on the body part only, and are plain or gradated. Han-eri are white shioze, habutae, or chirimen silk. For footwear, choose zōri with slightly high heels in bright colors that coordinate with the kimono.

In the first part of the month, lined coats are used with unlined coats coming into use in the middle of the month. By the end of the month we see unlined or sha (gauze silk) lined ones. Wearing a coat that coordinates well with the color of the kimono creates a sense of elegance.

For patterns… well, due to Hina Matsuri (Doll Festival/Girls’ Day), popular patterns include the dolls (hina-ningyō), flutes (fue), and taiko drums… the shells from the shell-matching game (kai-awase), formal folding fans (ōgi), flowing water/streams (ryū-sui), spring gradated colors, mist (kasumi), and starting in the middle of the month, cherry blossom patterns (sakura). Due to the opening of beach-going season… assorted shells (kai-zukushi) and shell baskets (kai-oke) are also good.

Sangatsu flowers are cherry blossoms (sakura), cherry blossom branches (eda-sakura), weeping cherry (shidare-zakura), falling/scattering cherry blossoms (chiri-sakura), dandelion (tampopo), violets (sumire), fields of spring flowers, peaches (momo), kobushi, ren-gyō, primrose, sakura-sō, etc.

Another thing about this month and the assorted spring lined kimono… March 3 is the Doll Festival/Girls’ Day, Hina Matsuri. This festival is counted as one of the classical Five Festivals. It’s a girlish and splendid festival with the traditional doll decorations, peach blossoms, and… I think turnip blossoms or something?

(By the way, the Five Festivals? Not sure if I’m mentioned them before, but they’re a Big Deal.)

Kochōhai — on New Year’s, the nobles processed before the emperor during the Jinjitsu
celebrations.

Kyokusui — on the third day of the third lunar month, courtiers floated rice wine down a stream in the palace garden. Each guest would take a sip and then write a poem, and the festival continues as hinamatsuri.

Ayame no hi — on the fifth day of the fifth month, mugwort is hung to dispel evil spirits. Celebrated as the iris festival at court, it also goes by tango no sekku.

Kikkoden — on the seventh day of the seventh month, offerings are made during the Tanabata festival, which celebrates the annual crossing of the Weaver and Cowherd constellations.

Chōyō no en — on the ninth day of the ninth month, a celebration was held that originally featured chrysanthemum wine, and still sometimes does, but now is more associated with the autumn rice harvest. It is also known as the kiku no sekku.

Tea ceremonies held around the Doll Festival should offer konpeitō (the special colored sugar candy that looks like tiny colorful stars that I absolutely LOVE) or arara (roasted mochi pieces) in a special cylinder kind of sweets container called a furi-dashi.

And in Emi-neechan’s opinion, “like shaking the furi-dashi to reveal colorful pieces of candy as they fall out, we can enjoy a colorful Hinamatsuri atmosphere by using brightly colored kimono with fine patterns (komon) while sitting near the kettle hanging over the tea room’s hearth.”

...I’d rather take the candy, though, personally speaking.

And the anniversary of this hugely influential tea ceremony master or something’s death, Sen no Rikyu’s, is also in March.

...I feel “yay” would be inappropriate, but it’s useful to know, again, who’s trying to kill you. This is usually observed on March 28, especially by this one popular school of… something. If you go out on this day, an iromuji with crests and a mature, quiet obi are suitable.

So, I think I might be beating a dead horse, but if someone’s out with anything colorful… chances are they’re a shinobi trying to kill you. "_(Y)\_"/

(Of course, these are, like, tea-ceremony-type etiquette rules. If you can pass that, no one should have a problem with you. But at the same time… it’s a really high, really expensive bar, so don’t kill the suspected shinobi. They might just be someone with a bad teacher or not enough money to afford the proper attire. I take no responsibility for anyone else’s mistakes… at least, not until I become a team leader or a jōnin-sensei, or… you know what? Moving on.)

Generally, the woven background pattern of an iromuji (formal single-color kimono) can include things like mist or clouds, stylized ocean waves (sei-gai-ha), the flowing of water (mizu-no-nagare), patterns taken from famous things, arabesque designs (karakusa), or other suitably formal patterns. If using a floral background pattern, it should feature stylized flowers in repeating circles (like the kamon).

Kimono colors should be chosen from composed ones that reflect the colors of spring flowers. Obi with a black background are not used this month (too reminiscent of all-black mourning obi).

Nagoya obi in background colors like silver gray (gin-nezu), maroon (ebi-cha), seaweed green (miru no midori), light tea (shibu-iro), ash gray (hai-iro) with hand-drawn and dyed seasonal flowers or the lotus flower (hasu) match the season well.

Woven (tsuzure) Nagoya obi with small patterns like mei-butsu-gire or old court patterns (koten)
are good to use. With **obi-jime** and **obi-age**, loud and flashy colors should be avoided—just like the kimono colors this month, plain and subdued colors that won’t stand out too much are used.

And… **tsuzure**’s basically a variation on plain-weave fabric where the pattern is woven using the horizontal threads.

---

**Uzuki (shigatsu, 四月, April)**

The theme this month seems to be understated beauty, dressing in harmony with spring rather than trying to outdo it.

...so, basically… if I ever feel the need to undergo a rebellious phase… this would be the month to dress in neon **kimono**.

...

Yeah, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. If it does, I’m relatively certain I can pull it off, but… I’d rather not.

Kimono should be in brilliant **rinzu** or **donsu** silks and **mon-ishō** (solid-color fabrics with patterns woven into them) silks. In the case of tea ceremony, choose light **hōmongi** or **tsukesage**. It’s good to mainly use colors like purple (**murasaki**), light pink (**usu-beni** or **usu-kurenai**), light blue (**mizu-iro**), ink black (**sumi-iro**), light brown (**usu-cha**), and light green (**usu-midori**).

Good patterns to use include **michi-naga-dori** (a pattern that resembles collage art with “torn” edges between different patterns), **go-sho-doki** (bright or flashy pattern featuring scenery scattered with flowers from all four seasons blooming and items from ancient court life, like ox-drawn carriages or formal cypress wood fans), and flowers like cherry blossoms, peony, and wisteria.

For **obi**… **shioze** silk **obi** with dyed spring patterns, or **obi** with flowers rendered in gold brocade are appropriate. In the case of woven obi, use single-color brocade obi like gold leaf, platinum leaf, silver leaf, or **haku-ichō** (an obi made from only gold leaf and a single color’s thread, the contrast creating its monochrome pattern).

As for accessories, **obi-age** should be plain or gradated **rinzu** silk, with **obi-jime** chosen to match the type of kimono worn. If **yurugi** (crown-style) type **obi-jime** are used, they should coordinate well with the kimono.

Other than that… **juban** become unlined, and it’s good to use plain light colors or small, fine spring patterns. Collars are white **shioze** or **habutae** silk. For footwear, choose bright colors that coordinate with the colors of the kimono.

For colors… go with bright, golden yellow (**yama-buki-iro**), purple, light pink, light blue, ink black, light brown, pearl gray (**shin-ju-iro**), and light colors that are clearer and brighter than March’s colors.

As for patterns… wisteria (**fuji**), peony (**botan**), willow (**yanagi**), streams/flowing water (**ryūsui**) and scattered court and nature patterns. For cherry blossoms (**sakura**), use the blossoms (**sakura-bana**) the first half of the month and the petals (**hana-bira**) the second half of the month.

Other flowers associated with this month are the **moku-ren**, mountain rose (**yama-buki**), **ko-de-mari**, a kind of orchid (**shun-ran**), green/budding willow (**ao-yagi**), this type of peony (**shaku-yaku**), and “autumn of bamboo” (**take-no-aki**). I’m not sure about the last one, but I think it’s called “autumn of bamboo” because around this time of year bamboo leaves turn yellow and drop off,
resembling autumn and making way for new leaves.

Cool. Who knew, right? So, if you ever see new bamboo in *shigatsu* in the Land of Fire… flare your chakra, break that illusion, attack, and ask questions a little later. Just kidding, of course.

…for the most part.

Other than that, patterns associated with this month are swallows (*tsubame*), deer (*shika*), green/unripened wheat or barley (*ao-mugi*), curtains at cherry blossom viewing parties (*hanami-manmaku*).

Now, regarding lined kimono with spring flower patterns… for tea ceremony, it’s the season for getting out of the tea house and doing an “open-air tea ceremony” in the middle of nature, which means lots of seats available.

Although it’s called the simple phrase “open-air tea ceremony,” according to the true purpose of the ceremony and place kimono worn will still keep their different ranks: *chu-furisode*, *hōmongi*, *tsukesage*, and *komon*. You can’t bust out a furisode just because you feel like it—you still need to think about which rank of kimono would be appropriate for tea ceremony even if the setting is more informal than usual.

However, because the outdoors are alive with the fresh beauty of spring in full bloom, a lighthearted pattern in a monochrome spring color can look good and suggest the loveliness of the season around you. Rather than trying to compete with cherry blossoms in full bloom, azaleas/rhododendron (*tsutsuji*), and peonies, it’s best to try wearing things that subtly or humbly hint at the season to look nicest.

…

And it’s not really explicitly stated, but if you see someone with an unlined kimono… say it with me… they’re probably a shinobi trying to kill you. All kimono this month should be lined. Unlined kimono don’t kick in until June.

*Satsuki* (*gogatsu*, 五月, May)

Kimono are lined. Fabrics include *kotoshi chirimen* or *kawari chirimen*, and for woven things *mon-ishō* silks (single-color fabrics woven with patterns in the background) are used. *Rinzu* silks feature refreshing patterns like flowing water or streams (*ryū-sui*), waves (*nami*), running bamboo (*sasa*), or a mix of scattered nature and court patterns (*go-sho-doki*).

Colors are bright tones while reflecting the season. With dyed patterns, it’s good to go with things like flowers that bloom in the beginning of summer, general evergreen plants (*toki-wagi*), seasonal scenery (*fū-kei*), and dyed gradations.

For the first part of the month, wear lined kimono. Starting in the middle of the month, things like kimono that are unlined on the body part, slightly translucent lined *ro* and lined *sha* silks can be worn to stylishly hint at the coming season.

This month, brocade-weave (*nishiki-ori*) *fukuro obi* use the same materials as spring obi, but through colors and patterns it’s good to give a sense of summer drawing near. Rather than multicolored obi, go with monochrome or something like gold/silver brocade to create a cool brilliance. Other than things like tapestry-weave obi (*tsuzure*), for more lightweight wear you can use *shioze* or *habutae* silk obi painted with seasonal designs, or *chirimen silk Nagoya obi* with dyed patterns.
In the case of lined ro or sha kimono, a medium-weight summer obi is a good match.

The obiage and obijime for this month are similar to spring ones, but the colors and patterns are brighter, losing their darker and more muted tones. Obiage are lightweight chirimen or rinzu. Obijime types include narrow maru-kara-gumi, kanze, or yurugi.

Naga-juban are hitoe — choose light colors featuring things like summer flower patterns or gradation.

Collars are shioze habutae, tabi are lined white calico, and footwear is enamel in light colors.

For colors… use slightly pastel-y colors? Like… well, in art, the term is “tones,” which refers to highly saturated colors mixed with neutral ones to dull them and make them softer. Examples include light purple (asa-murasaki), wisteria purple (fuj-i-iro), greyish-pink (hai-zakura), light blue (mizu-iro), celadon (seiji-iro), and turquoise blue.

Patterns… peony (botan), something called hana-mizuki, flowers and birds, young bamboo (waka-take), seasonal scenery, gradated patterns, and a mix of scattered nature and court patterns. Other flowers associated with May are… I think paulownia (kiri), bitter orange (tachibana), lily (yuri), green maple leaves (ao-kaede), Japanese iris (hana-shōbu), what I think might be a type of iris (kakitsubata), something that’s probably another type of iris (ayame), I think pear flower (nashi-no-hana), bamboo (take, though young bamboo is probably most accurate… so you know what to do if someone’s wearing mature bamboo…), u-no-hana, miyako-wasure, etc.

Other patterns associated with May are the flower raft (hana-ikada), both the nock/fletching of an arrow (yahazu or yabane) and armor (yoroi)... those are mainly due to Boys’ Day being in May, hollyhock (aoi) patterns due to the Hollyhock Festival (Aoi Matsuri) in May, carriages (mi- kuruma), parade floats (dashi)...

Regarding lined kimono for furo, the portable stove for boiling water used for summer tea ceremonies: May is the season of bright green, because of the plants. After the fifth, the first day of summer, tea ceremonies mark the boundary between spring and summer by switching out the hearth for the portable furo.

The tatami mat that replaces the hearth, fresher and greener than the mats around it, heightens the newness that comes with the first tea ceremony of the year to use the furo rather than the hearth.

This month’s kimono are lined. Outside of the kimono, it’s important to use utensils and arrange the room in a summer-like fashion. Winter and spring kimono give a different feeling than summer ones, and it’s helpful to choose fresh colors, light fabrics, and simple designs, so as to avoid creating a heavy look.

The beauty of a kimono lies in its colors and patterns, but how it fits with the obi can also change the impression it gives. While some spring and autumn obi, like dyed obi and such, are light to begin with, we also want their patterns and materials to give a sense of the season. White obi with painted flowers like peony, iris, green maple leaves, wisteria (fujī), and I think clematis (tessen) convey a light feeling pretty well, according to Emigiku-nee-chan.

Also, it’s a popular season for open-air tea ceremonies. On days where you’re likely to sweat, it’s good to wear dō-bitoe kimono. Dō-bitoe, or “chest-single-layer” kimono are kimono where the bottom half, back sleeve edge, and sleeve cuff edge are lined, leaving the chest area and sleeves unlined. When worn, dō-bitoe look like regular lined kimono.

From mid-month on, naga-juban change over to ro and collars become shioze as more ways to dress
cooler.

With things like *sha*-lined kimono, even if they get a little water on them they won’t shrink so they’re very handy for long trips or time spent in the *mizu-ya*, the room next to the tea ceremony room where utensils are washed. Even though they’re made of *sha*, because they are sewn as lined kimono there is no problem with the formality level.

---

**Minazuki (rokugatsu, 六月, June)**

This month, lined kimono (*awase*) are replaced with unlined (*hitoe*). Regarding fabrics, *kawari-chirimen* silk crepe (an “improved”, more wrinkle-resistant form of *hitokoshi-chirimen* silk), and *komayori ro* silk are suitable for wear.

Colors include bellflower purple (*kikyō*), this sort of thistle red that’s really confusing and seems to ranges from light, cool pink to bright, cool pink (*azami-no-aka*), indigo (*ai*), a greyish dark green (*rikyū-nezumi*), light green (*asa-midori*), indigo, greyish dark green, and light blue (*mizu-iro*). Generally, cool-toned darker colors are classic choices and more traditional, but paler colors (colors with more white in them) are gaining popularity. With dark colors, accompanying colors like white or scarlet (*ake*) are good.

The wearing of dark colors at the beginning of unlined (*hitoe*) kimono season is an old custom. Pairing such colors with accessories in cold, clear colors creates a feeling of refreshing coolness. All accessories should be summer-weight. *Obi-age* should be plain or *ro* silk in graduated colors. The *obi-jime* should be a thin braid or in summer-weight *ra* silk. The *naga-juban*, the one-piece underlayer kimono, should be *ro* silk. Generally, the collar and *naga-juban* are the first to change over to *ro* silk, but there are situations where stylish people will also change the obi over to *ro* early as well. The collar (*han-eri*) should pretty much always be *ro* silk in white. Things can get… sweaty with the heat this month.

With white *naga-juban*, the material becomes *ro*. Collars are white *ro*, and *obi-age* change to *ro* as well.

Opaque *Nagoya obi*, made of “tapestry-weave” *tsuzure* and *shioze* fabrics, are used with opaque kimono. The standard for transparent kimono is to use *Nagoya obi* made with tapestry *ro* (*ro-tsuzure*), or *ro-zome*, and *fukuro obi* made of *ro* or *sha* silk. But from the middle of the month onward, it’s stylish to hint at the coming summer by pairing a transparent obi with an opaque kimono.

And then… obi change over to summer-weight obi. If we think about it, opaque obi go with opaque (*sukenai, 透けない*, literally “not transparent”) kimono, and transparent (*sukeru, 透ける*, literally “transparent” or “see-through”) obi go with transparent kimono. (It basically just refers to how thick the fabric is.) *Nagoya obi* made of tapestry-weave, gold brocade (*haku-nishiki*), and *shioze* silk are worn with opaque unlined kimono. Since long ago, it’s been considered harmonious to wear tapestry *ro* or *ro Nagoya obi* beginning halfway through June and onward. *Sha* obi are popular, but fit best with *koma-ro* transparent kimono.

Patterns that can be used include seasonal flowers or classical court patterns (*yū-soku*). There’s this… dayflower (*tsuyu-kusa*), pampas grass (*ito-susuki*), lilies in general, or other such seasonal flowers or scenery that create a feeling of coolness are essential. Hydrangea (*ajisai*), a different flower that’s a bit like an iris (*hana-shōbu*), lily (*yuri*), green maple leaves (*ao-kaede*), water patterns (*sui-mon*), distant mountains (*tō-yama*)... and other flowers are summer chrysanthemums (*natsu-giku*), evening primrose (*tsuki-misō*), bamboo lily (*sasa-yuri*), something like a fringed iris (*sha-ga*)... yeah.
Other patterns associated with June are open folding fans (sen-men), flat round fans (uchiwa), firefly cages (hotaru-kago), flutes (fue ... because they are played at summer festivals), and drums (taiko).

Opaque Nagoya obi, made of “tapestry-weave” tsuzure and shioze fabrics, are used with opaque kimono. The standard for transparent kimono is to use Nagoya obi made with tapestry ro (ro-tsuzure), or ro-zome, and fukuro obi made of ro or sha silk. But from the middle of the month onward, it’s stylish to hint at the coming summer by pairing a transparent obi with an opaque kimono.

And by opaque, I mean sukenai (透けない, literally “not transparent”), and by transparent, I mean (sukeru, 透ける, literally “transparent” or “see-through”). Basically, it’s about the thickness of the fabric.

Footwear is low-heeled, and should be coordinated with the colors of the kimono and obi to create a refined impression.

Other than that... unlined kimono should be during the rainy season (tsuyu). Kimono become unlined in June, but there are two types of unlined kimono, transparent and opaque. Before the rainy season begins, opaque fabrics are used. Once the rainy season begins, transparent are used.

Examples of fabrics include soft, unlined chirimen silk in various types such as “willow” (yoryū), “daybreak” (shinonome), and Takasago. Nowadays, improved versions of these are sold under the name kawari-chirimen. Yoryū gets its name from its slightly bumpy vertical texture, resembling the draping branches of the willow tree. Shinonome has a slightly bumpy horizontal texture, which probably implies a sunrise. Takasago is basically... pretty high-end. Emi-nee says that she thinks it might be named after the famous play/motif, which celebrates a husband-and-wife pair of enchanted trees in two different places, one being in Takasago. They appear as an old man and old woman and are considered good luck and symbols of a full and happy life.

An example of transparent fabrics is koma-yori ro. It’s made of twisted silk threads, so it’s thicker than normally-woven ro. Another characteristic is its firmness.

Other than that... Emigiku-nee says that because summer-weight kimono are worn from June to the last part of September, it’s always convenient to have one on hand.

Fumizuki (shichigatsu, 七月, July)

Unlined kimono (hitoe) and lightweight kimono (usu-mono) are worn. Before the start of the rainy season, hitoe are worn. After that, kimono change to lightweight (meaning ro and such).

Seriously. A lot depends on when it starts to rain.

During midsummer, hemp kimono (asa) of high quality plain-woven hemp cloth (jōfu) are worn. Nowadays, it’s also fine to wear them from the beginning of July for the entire month, but... well, that’s not the case for everyone. So... just... be careful if you see someone with that too early.

Colors such as refreshing white (shiro), dark blue (nō-kon), light blue (mizu-iro), light gray (usu-nezumi), white (shiro), black (kuro), dark red (enji), brown (cha), green-tea green (matcha), light purple (asa-murasaki), off-white/cream (kinari), black tea (kogecho), and light “wisteria” purple (fuji-iro) are preferred. Mind you, solid-black fabrics or black-on-black patterned fabrics are reserved for mofuku (mourning wear), which... is a bit too depressing for summer. Therefore, it’s important to have another color mixed in. But they’re still good, because transparent material in dark colors also creates a feeling of coolness.
For *obi* material, *ro* and *sha* are best suited. Because *obi* and *kimono* of this season share many of the same motifs, namely summer grasses and scenery, it’s stylish to pair a *kimono* and *obi* with related motifs. With plain-colored *kimono*, an *obi* dyed with blooming flowers is good for creating a sense of the season.

Accessories like *obi-age* are made of material like *ro* and *mon-sha* (a type of *sha*) silk in plain colors, dyed in the shibori technique, or gradation, but they are worn tucked down into the *obi* as much as possible. This is because “seeing less of it than normal creates a cooler feeling for the viewer.” I have no idea what that means, though. *Obi-jime* are made of transparent *ra* silk or finely braided cord (*hoso-himo*).

*Naga-juban* (the kimono worn under the other *kimono*, against the skin) is made of lightweight material like *ro*, *mon-sha*, or *asa*. Collars are *ro*. As a side note, when it comes to *naga-juban*, *ro* types are used for *ro* kimono, *sha* type for *sha* kimono, and *asa* type for *asa* kimono. Basically, the stuff that’s inside should match what’s outside.

*Ro* kimono are the norm for July kimono. *Ro* is woven with stronger, finer threads than normal *chirimen* silk, which allows it to be woven with lines of weave left open, making it transparent.

*Kurotomesode*, *hōmongi*, *tsukeshage*, *komon*, *iromuji*, and dyed kimono in general are all made of *ro*. Basically, anything formal, semi-formal… or even just with dyed patterns (as opposed to a woven patterns) needs to be *ro* silk.

Outside of *ro*, things like *sha* and *natsu-yūki* exist, but these are textiles dyed before weaving. While these are generally said to be unsuitable for tea ceremony, if one restricts oneself to plain-color *kimono* with *kasuri* patterns… well, there are cases where this is seen.

Undergarments made of hemp are also best… but well, plain-weave hemp fabrics, no matter how comfortable, are not the best for tea ceremony, because of the *kasuri* patterns. But they’re still rather fashionable. Paired with lightweight *obi* like dyed-pattern hemp obi, woven hemp *hassun*-style *obi*, that is, *obi* with the particular weave that result in a visible darning/finishing stitch along the edge, or *ra*-silk *fukuro obi*, these *kimono* will look light and breezy.

Besides that… well… another cool thing is that generally speaking, fabrics dyed before being woven into a bolt of fabric are considered more casual than those dyed afterward.

When it comes to colors such as light "water" blue (*mizu-asa-gi*), pale purple (*usu-murasaki*), and silver-gray (*kin-nezu*), pairing a *kimono* with an *obi* of a similar shade of that color or one with a white background makes a harmonious pairing and one of coolness.

Patterns include flowers like morning glory (*asa-gao*), a flower known as *hotaru-bukuro* (which literally means “firefly bag”), *kara-ito-sou*, summer grasses (*natsu-kusa*), water lily (*sui-ren*), running water/streams (*ryū-sui*), waves (*nami*), and stylized snowflakes (*yuki-wa*), though that’s often used just for its unique scallop-edge shape, which can be filled with other flowers or motifs… like boats (*fune*), bridges (*hashi*), *tanzaku* (the paper wishes that are hung from trees during Tanabata festival, bobbins (*ito-maki*), etc. Mind you, *tanzaku* in terms of patterns is also sometimes just the oblong rectangular shape, filled with other motifs.

Still more flowers are a type of hibiscus (*ō-shoku-ki*), another hibiscus (*kō-shoku-ki*), a type of orchid (*sagi-sō*), *hiru-gao*, *yū-gao*, *nadeshiko*, summer bush clover (*natsu-hagi*), *mizu-aoi*, and *ito-susuki*.

---

_Hazuki_ (hachigatsu, 八月, August)
Kimono in this month are made of lightweight/sheer materials like ro, sha, and hemp. The beginning of the month is still the height of summer, so hemp rather than silk is still predominant.

After the first official day of autumn, dark colors are desirable. Things like ro and sha silks are the same: after the first day of autumn, dark backgrounds are preferred to white backgrounds, as they help create the sense of coming fall. Patterns are mostly autumn plants and flowers, to express the coming of the new season.

Again… hemp obi are paired with hemp kimono, ro obi are paired with ro kimono, and sha fukuro obi with sha kimono. Other than that, obi for this month are lightweight, as the aim is to endure the heat of the season.

Seriously. It gets crazily hot in hazuki.

Obiage are ro or mon-sha in plain colors or gradations, while thin kumihimo-style obijime are used. Silk nagajuban are (again), supposed to be used with silk kimono, and hemp nagajuban with hemp kimono. Collars should also match the nagajuban they are attached to in terms of fabric: a silk ro collar for a silk nagajuban.

Colors are usually things like light beige, tea-brown (ocha), really light blue (mizu-asagi), dark blue (nō-kon), white (shiro), a type of purple (shion-iro), off-white (kinari), crimson (aka or sha), etc. What are really nice are transparent background material with dark colors, paired with patterns that look like plain colors from a distance… but show themselves to be small designs close up. The most important thing to remember about the color scheme is that it “should create a feeling of coolness”… whatever that’s supposed to mean.

Patterns include tsuyukusa, fuyō, hageitō, obana, asagao, mizu-hiki-sō, ju-zu-dama. flowing water or rivers (ryūsui), insects (mushi), dragonflies (tonbo), hōzuki (which are these plants that look a bit like red lanterns), lightning (inazuma), swirls or whirlpools of water (uzu-maki), and any of the classical “seven fall plants” (nana-kusa). Those include bush clover (hagi), kikyō, kuzu, fuji-bakama, ominaeshi, pampas grass (susuki), and nadeshiko. Basically, anything that invites the feeling of autumn is a good choice.

Nagatsuki (kagatsu, 九月, September)

Kimono in this month are sheer or unlined. Sheer ro and sha, which is lighter than ro, can be worn on especially hot days. After the ninth, which is the date for the the traditional “Chrysanthemum Festival” in the old “Five Seasonal Festivals” tradition (go-sekku), kimono change over to being unlined. That day is called chō-yō (literally “increase of days”), and the festival started in the imperial court. On that day, poets and authors were invited to write pieces and enjoy chrysanthemum sake.

In addition to the chrysanthemum sake, in a typical household, there was the custom of the kisewata. A cloth would be covered with chrysanthemum petals, and once the cloth was infused with the scent of the flowers, people would cleanse themselves with it. The belief was it would purify them and keep away illness.

…but no, we’re supposed to be focusing on kimono.

…

At this point, part of me seriously wonders if I’m the only one who would still think that this new chance is a good thing. And then I remember that this is at least better because people have very low expectations of me (thanks, four years of existence), and I’m very, very thankful again.
So, fabrics like hitokoshi chirimen, kawari chirimen, and mon-ishō are suitable, but brilliant rinzu silks are to be avoided.

For obi, ro tapestry (tsuzure) is best, even while sheer fabric weaves like ro and sha are used in fukuro obi this month, just as they were in July and August, it’s good to suggest the coming fall by using a slightly heavier material. Unlined kimono (not just sheer ones) can be tied with a tsuzure obi. However, in the last part of the month, obi should also be in fabrics like brocade (nishiki) and tsunugi.

Kimono fabrics are ro in the first half of the month and solid, unlined ones (hitoe) starting mid-month.

Regarding the wearing of unlined kimono in the first part of autumn… well, nagatsuki is the same as minazuki, or rokugatsu, the sixth month (June), in that, technically, sheer items should not be worn. However, given that the weather can still be hot in the last lingering days of summer, summer transparent fabrics can be worn during the first part of month if the kimono gives a sense of the coming fall through its color and the obi matched with it.

Other than that… obi-age are ro, obi-jime are slightly thin. Naga-juban (the underlayer kimono) are ro, as well as han-eri (collars). For footwear, summer zōri in dark colors are best. Oh, and and while ro is usually used for naga-juban and han-eri, they can be traded for naga-juban and han-eri in heavier material if cold weather arrives early.

And yes, this is important enough that it is still repeated — ro obi are worn with ro kimono, and obi made of things like tsuzure and nishiki-ori are worn with unlined kimono.

Now, for colors.

For one, because the weaker fall sunlight is tinged with yellow, kimono that are too white or too bright will look dull. With sheer kimono in sha, ro, or the like, it’s best to have a dark- or deep-colored background over a white one. Colors should reference the colors seen blooming in fall fields, like the purple of the bush clover (hagi), the yellow of the ominaes,hi, and the brown of waremokō.

A naga-juban’s color should be similar or complementary to the kimono.

Calm colors in neutral hues are appropriate. Colors that harmonize with nature at this time of year are good choices: deep navy (fukai-kon), light ink grey (usuzumi), ochre (ōdo-iro), scarlet (ake), light tea (usu-cha), grape (ebi-iro or buddō-iro), and colors that are tinged with yellow.

The lights and darks of an outfit should be carefully balanced through through the kimono and obi choices… and it’s also important to consider also how the pattern of the obi will harmonize with the pattern of the kimono.

Dyed patterns shift from monochrome to color. Embroidered patterns should be ones like the “seven grasses of fall” again (nanakusa), which are, again, bush clover (hagi), kikyō, kuzu, fuji-bakama, ominaes,hi, pampas grass (susuki), and nadeshiko, or insect cages (mushi-kago), pine crickets (matsu-mushi), bell crickets (suzu-mushi), the first wild geese of the season (hatsu-kari), grass with dew (tsuyu-shiba), tsuyu-kusa, waremokō, mizubiki-gusa, and flutes (fue) and taiko drums due to autumn festivals… until they switch to chrysanthemums (kiku), the moon (tsuki), flutes (fue), and gourds (hyōtan).

Kaminazuki (jūgatsu, 十月, October)
The calendar switches over to lined kimono as we enter the month some actually call “The Chrysanthemum Month.”

Yeah. I really like October, now.

Appropriately colored rinzu silks and beautifully lustrous fabric with woven patterns are preferred. Since long ago, the colors for this time have been the many true ones of fall, such as calm reds, yellows, browns, black, and red-brown (azuki-iro).

Patterns are overwhelmingly dominated by chrysanthemum. Next are dignified ones like scrolls of sutras or religious writings (kyō-kan), scattered treasures (takara-zukushi) or classical court patterns (yū-soku). Other patterns are chrysanthemums along a wooden fence (magaki-giku), gingko (ichō), autumn leaves (kōyō), nuts/fruits/berries (ki-no-mi), ears of rice (inaho), grapes (budō), persimmon (kaki), flutes (fue) and drums (taiko) due to fall festivals, and sparrows (suzume) and small clapper-style instruments (naruko), large-bloom chrysanthemums (tairin-no-kiku), spider mums (ran-giku), small chrysanthemums (ko-giku), wild chrysanthemums (no-giku), ivy (tsuta), and fallen leaves (ochi-ba).

This month marks the end of using the portable furnace for heating water during the tea ceremony. It’s nice to have a tea room that feels old or worn-out, in the spirit of the “remains” (nagori) of the season. The word comes from the tea leaves used to make both thick and light tea. Chatsubo, the pot used to store a year’s supply of tea leaves, runs out around now and always has a few leaves left around the mouth of the pot after a year of use, and these are called nagori and honored with the nagori-no-chaji tea ceremony.

This month’s kimono should also reflect the “wabi” spirit and be subdued and tasteful.

With tasteful, subdued color kimono, it’s best to wear an obi with fall scenery drawn in black, and an obijime in a color like red or yellow to give the sense of autumn leaves and color. Good colors for this month are fallen-leaf warm yellow-orange (kuchiba-iro), tea brown (cha-iro), yellow ochre (ōdo-iro), asa-murasaki (light purple), reddish-brown (azuki-iro), gold (kin), silver (gin), and ink black (sumi-iro).

It’s best to choose colors that match the season in fabrics like chirimen or rinzu, and go with moderate or subtle patterns when wearing kimono like hōmongi or tsukesage. For komon, go with small patterns like flowers or fallen leaves. Whichever you choose, stick with only a few colors, close to a monochrome color scheme.

On plain kimono, it’s nice to have the lining at the bottom hem feature a seasonal pattern.

In this month, a lot of dyed obi are made of shioze silk. For motifs, hand-drawn chrysanthemums are especially popular this month, so it’s fun to try creating interesting coordinates of kimono and obi with them. When it comes to brocade (nishiki) fukuro obi, they should be kept as casual as possible. Stylish fukuro obi are good, too, but they should also be kept light. Patterns are dignified ones like mei-butsu-gire and patterns reminiscent of Noh theater costumes (nō-shō-zoku).

Obi-age are made of things like winter-weight rinzu or chirimen in plain or shibori styles. Obi-jime are flat style (hiru-uchi, also known as hira-gumi) or yurugi-style.

Because yurugi-style obi-jime can be worn throughout the year, they are very handy for tea ceremony wear. Naga-juban feature the same lined sleeves as winter-weight ones, but are unlined in the chest area. Collars are also fabric like shioze habutae silk or chirimen. Footwear is “enamel” zōri.
Regarding the color of the lining… it’s best if it matches the kimono in color. Also, a monochrome pattern matched according to personal taste works well, too.

Shimotsuki (jūichigatsu, 十一月, November)

Kimono are lined and made of fabrics like rinzu and donsu silk with patterns woven into the fabric itself, mon-ishō. The woven patterns are interlocking Buddhist swastikas (sayagata … you know, because Nazi’s actually aren’t a thing in this world, thank the kami), chrysanthemums (kiku), sarasa, nashi-ji, and dignified ones, like scraps of old patterns mixed together (kodai-gire), are suitable.

Also, for tea ceremony, it’s best to avoid shiny and lustrous fabrics to help create a tasteful atmosphere. With chirimen, it’s best to choose chirimen of a rough, bumpy texture to help deepen the feeling of fall.

Colors are autumn ones that are soft and dark like yellow ochre (ō-do-iro), beige (be-ju), dried-leaf brown (kareha-iro), green tea (matcha), vermillion/scarlet (shu-iro), and dark red (enji). Beyond these colors, gray and navy (kon) can be charming as well.

Preferred patterns are fall flowers, fruits, nuts, berries, or picture scrolls depicting natural scenes.

On a slightly different note, though… the “kuchikiri-no-chaji” tea ceremony, when the seal is broken on a jar of tea for the next year, is like New Year’s for people who are obsessed with tea (coughcough), so kimono with family crests and formal outfits are worn. Meanwhile, “kai-ro”, when people start using the built-in hearth in a temple or tea ceremony, is equivalent to the New Year’s first tea ceremony, so bright and showy kimono are allowed.

The “kuchikiri-no-chaji” (“breaking of the seal ceremony”) tea ceremony this month follows the “end” of the tea ceremony year in jūgatsu, October. From this month on, we start using new tea and to do this, break the seal on a new jar of tea for the year. With this and the return to using the built-in hearth ceremony (kai-ro), it’s like a new year has begun. Therefore, this ceremony in formality is supposed to be much like the actual New Year tea ceremony.

If you are invited to a kuchikiri-no-chaji or kai-ro ceremony, you should wear a kimono with crests paired with a formal obi featuring a classy pattern. In this situation, you need to be very formal. It’s appropriate to wear high-level patterns like old court patterns (koten) or hōmongi or tsukésage with fall-like painted patterns. Obi are brocade-weave (nishiki-ori) fukuro obi.

For obi during the rest of the month, fukuro obi with flowers done in (kara-nishiki) are suitable. However, big patterns should be avoided. Even if the wearer is young, it’s best to go with small or medium patterns. It’s ideal to use patterns like ones reminiscent of Noh theater costumes (nō-shō-zoku) and classical court ones (yū-soku). For dyed obi, it’s also possible to use ones with tea flowers (cha-ka) drawn on them.

Accessories like obi-age are plain or shibori made with fabrics like rinzu and chirimen. Suitable obi-jime are ones like kara-gumi-style or yurugi-style. Naga-juban are made of fabrics like rinzu with lined sleeves and an unlined chest area. Hada-juban (the underwear layer worn beneath the naga-juban) are made of gauze. Collars are white shioze habutae silk.

For footwear, it’s good to choose deep- or dark-colored “enamel” zōri with a slightly high heel.

Good colors are yellow ochre, “fallen leaf” warm yellow-orange (kuchiba-iro), green tea (matcha-iro), navy, silver-grey (gin-nezu), orange (daidai-iro), and dark red.
Patterns should be fruits/nuts/berries, wild chrysanthemums (no-giku), fruit, wild geese (kari), a mix of scattered nature and court patterns (go-sho-doki), patterns coming from old stories and legends (mono-gatari), and classical court patterns (yū-soku). Also good are the flowers associated with this month, namely camellia (tsubaki), which can be used from jūgatsu (October) to shigatsu (April), scattered fall leaves (chiri-kō-yō), gingko (ichō), a medley of fruits/plants (fukiyose), kan-giku, sazanka, bamboo (take, due to the peaking of new leaves on bamboo at this time called “the spring of bamboo”, or take-no-haru), and pine needles (matsu-ba), which can be used from now until the “first bath” (hatsu-yu) of spring in shigatsu, or April. Also, cranes (tsuru) are good.

Shiwasu (jūnigatsu, 十二月, December)

Lined kimono are worn in this month. In the case of fabrics that have patterns woven into them, the type called mon-ishō is a good choice. Patterns include small, repeating ones like crepe weave (nashi-ji), interlocking Buddhist swastikas (sayagata), and yeah, this was a bit of a shock, but like I’ve already said… no Nazis. Seriously. Did they have to desecrate the meaning of a religious symbol?), interlocking chrysanthemums (muji-na-giku), and kara-kusa done in a slightly glossy sheen. If chirimen is used, it’s advised to go with hitokoshi-chirimen or kawari-chirimen.

For patterns, you generally see ones like the “loyal retainer” (giji) or “safety in the home” wishes (ka-nai-an-zen) style of tiny, repeating patterns (edo-komon). You should choose unsaturated colors like grey, purple-chestnut brown (murasaki-kuri-iro), or reddish-brown (azuki-iro).

When going to a tea ceremony in tsumugi, it should be plain or dyed. Splash-pattern kimono (kasuri), even expensive ones, are not appropriate and should be avoided.

For obi … the point of any kind of brocade (nishiki) obi in this situation is to avoid being flashy. Instead, it’s best to have restrained monochrome designs in lacquer (urushi) or gold and silver leaf (kin-gin-haku). With a less-formal komon kimono, a tsumugi obi works as well. Patterns are ones like “treasure house” large, stylized circles (shou-so-in), kara-kusa, and sarasa help to bring the whole body together through the choices of pattern for both kimono and obi.

For tea ceremony lessons, you should be very careful to not appear informal when wearing informal materials like wool or tsumugi. With komon or a plain kimono, young women can wear a narrow (hanhaba) obi tied in a butterfly knot (chō-musubi) or bow-tie knot (ichi-mon-ji). Those who prefer a stylish look can wear a woven Nagoya obi of the hassun variety.

Accessories like obi-age are plain-color chirimen, while obi-jime are plain-color yurugi-style. The point is to have a clean, simple look. Naga-juban become lined, while collars are white shioze habutae or chirimen silk. Footwear is leather or “enamel” zōri, and with slightly-low heels. Coats are essential for the cold weather. Long kimono coats (dōchūgi) are appropriate. Plain, deep colors and fine patterns (komon) are appropriate.

When considering colors, it’s good to match the naga-juban in terms of brightness to the colors of the kimono itself. For kimono colors, it’s best to go with light colors… but not a variety of them all at once. And for komon kimono, it’s best to choose smaller, rather than larger, patterns.

Colors like white, grey, reddish-brown, brilliant scarlet (hi-iro), a darker red (akane-iro), reddish-purple (ko-dai-murasaki), mustard yellow (karashi-iro), dark green (shin-ryoku).

Regarding patterns… there’s an interesting bit of wordplay involved in some of the patterns. There is a word that basically translates to “from the beginning to the end,” pin-kara-kiri-made. This “kiri” refers to an ending, which in this case, refers to the end of the year. However, it also refers to the flower, and as thus, kiri -flower patterns are seen on both kimono and obi in this month. Other ideal
patterns are fallen leaves (ochi-ba), kan-giku, snowy landscapes (yuki-geshiki), snowy mountains (fuyu-yama), barren fields (kare-no), barren winter trees (fuyu-kodachi), frost-covered trees (ju-hyō), floating sleeping birds (uki-ne-dori… which is prettier than it sounds), a type of citrus (yuzu), nan-ten, kara-kusa, and sarasa. There are also flower like daffodils (sui-sen), man-ryō, rō-bai, and combinations of chrysanthemums (kiku), camellia (tsubaki), and bamboo (take).

So, all that’s cool and all, kanzashi are pretty and symbolism is super, super cool (and probably useful in figuring out who’s actually a maiko or geisha and who’s a shinobi trying to kill you… speaking of which, if you see a relatively new maiko with two fully-painted lips, run), but the only thing that’s really important is that a lot of this is torture.

No, seriously. And it’s not just the issue with memorizing everything and training my eyes to pick out these patterns and categorize colors and fabrics from a distance…

Well, some things are cool… or will be cool… but remember my struggles with writing?

…

Now take those and shove them in a blender without a cap. They’re everywhere now. Instruments? My fingers refused to work. I played piano before, I knew this problem. And I really, really THOUGHT IT WAS OVER WITH AFTER ALL THAT HANON AND SCALES AND CZERNY AND MACDOWELL AND BACH’S ACCURSED INVENTIONS WITH THAT TWO-PART… I DON’T FRANKLY CARE!!!

I apologize for my rant. I liked the result of the practice, but I was more than fed up with the practice itself. There is a reason I quit around eighth grade, and that reason was that no matter how good I was, I just didn’t have the time, inclination, or motivation to practice. There was no passion. That ended… like… before middle school.

So now, I’ve got a bunch of string instruments and a flute. Yeah, it’s… more than a bit annoying that… well… sheet music doesn’t exist and thus I have to MEMORIZE everything, but… hey, it’s good practice, if you discount the headache. Besides, I don’t know enough songs— and the songs that I do know aren’t nearly long enough— for that to be a big problem. The drum’s actually not bad. I like the drum. But… I never really played string instruments Before, and well… let’s just say I have newfound respect for violinists and cellists and violists... literally anyone who played a string instrument.

My fingers hurt. The strings are physically painful. For the koto… it’s hard reaching for everything (my arms are short), remembering where all of the strings are, and memorizing the exact locations on the string to pluck and press. The last part is pretty universal. Like… the shamisen. It’s a bit like a guitar. Insert previous complaints.

The flute, though… oh, no, that thing comes with its own set of nightmares. Namely, I can’t blow right. Like, I am incapable of exhaling air in the correct manner to get a nice sound. And that’s not counting the issues with moving fingers and dropping the instrument (which makes my teachers really annoyed, I’ll tell you). But… there are days when I can’t even make a sound. On the good days, there’s like a pi-pi sound… and on the bad days, it’s more like… soo-soo-soo …

Yeah. I just can’t purse my lips correctly.

Kiyohime just keeps laughing at me. And I have to summon her a lot, because she decides I sound too terrible to stand and just scooches off to the Summoning Realms. Like, seriously? And I mean, she also wants to spend time with Orochimaru-san, and you can’t really summon a summon who’s
already in your world… so we both need to wait for when she jumps into the Summoning Realms to have any chance of summoning her. At least, I do.

I mean, of course, she can just slither over, but… a massive snake in the Red Light District or the okiya isn’t the best idea… and neither is a tiny, needle-sized snake. So, hence… compromise.

And then there’s etiquette. A little different for me, because I luckily do not have to worry about taking tiny, mincing strides and and shuffling and constantly maintaining bent knees (I wince in sympathy when I watch some of the other onee-san’s lessons), but… it’s still annoying.

I think I’ve mentioned this before… but there’s a right way to walk. And talk. And smile.

No hesitations (just be quiet), no mumbling, no noises, carefully enunciate everything, don’t ever abbreviate words, always be polite, never sound as if you are accusing anyone, never raise your voice, don’t ever sound confrontational, keep quiet (children are seen and not heard), don’t scratch yourself, don’t twitch your face (especially don’t twitch your nose)...

…don’t bother Kiyohime when she’s napping on your head …

It’s a bit of a nightmare. Or… well, it gets easier, but on bad days, I just want to scream and cry and throw a tantrum. Or punch someone. Only, I don’t want to punch someone, because after I punch someone, I’ll either end up sad that my punch was bad or sad that I hurt someone. You just can’t win.

I’m honestly not sure whether I should be glad that Hisagiku-san refuses to coddle me… or wish that she would take things a bit easier.

But no, there aren’t any baby training-wheels. She treats me like most of the other teenage maiko, and the instructors follow her lead.

I know I was sheltered before, but I’ve learned more than I possibly ever wanted or needed to know about…

…you know, there’s no point in tiptoeing around it.

Sex. S-E-X. I am more-or-less completely desensitized. At first, I flushed and stuttered and tried to avoid it and probably practically tripped over my kimono at one point. Now? The conversations and giggles of the other onee-san, and some of onii-san, don’t bother me at all. and I’ve walked in on a lot of stuff.

...on a cooler note, I’ve learned a lot of new words.

But yeah, there are male prostitutes, too. Who perform… well, both roles. There’s a surprising amount of equality here. Who cares where on the gender spectrum you fall? When someone’s trying to kill you, there are higher priorities. Who cares who you like? When the chances of dying are this high, no one really cares who you like or are sleeping with. And if people do care, it’s more in terms of “do you have an heir? Yes? And you will teach that heir the family techniques and everything? Cool. That’s all we care about.”

It’s usually only civilians who usually have any hang-ups, and I guess when they live in in shinobi villages… they’re not exactly going to verbalize any complaints. I mean, would you criticize the trained killers you live basically next door to?

And more about that… yukata and most kimono are kinda gender neutral. But… not everything.
Clothing is important. Specific people wear specific colors, especially amongst nobility and in the capital.

During the Warring States Era, one of the emperors or princes established a system that’s… the Twelve Cap and Rank System. Officials are supposed to wear silk caps decorated with gold and silver, and a feather that indicated the official’s rank. The ranks in the twelve level cap and rank system consisted of the greater and the lesser of each of six virtues: virtue (徳 toku ), benevolence(仁 jin ), propriety (礼 rei ), sincerity (信 shin ), justice (義 gi ) and knowledge (智 chi ).

This was to replace the old kabane system. Kabane (姓) were titles used with clan names in pre-modern Japan to denote rank and political standing of each clan. There were more than thirty. The kabane were divided into two general classes: those who claimed they were descendants of the imperial line, and those who claimed they were descendants of the gods. My family claims both. At first, it was a bit chaotic, but eventually the kabane were reformed into the eight kabane system.

And then came the cap-and-rank system. The primary distinction between the kabane system and the new color-coded system is that the cap and rank system allows for promotion based on merit and individual achievement. In the old system, a person’s rank was determined entirely based on heredity. Which is, you know, pretty good for me, but… not that good for people in general. And unhappy people = very short-lived nobles.

In this system, the highest-ranked color is deep purple, daitoku (大徳), representing greater virtue. Then, there’s light purple, shōtoku (小徳), lesser virtue. That’s where the Fujiwara come in… a lot because fuji is a light purple. I’ll explain more about that a little later.

Deep blue and light blue are greater and lesser benevolence, daijin and shōjin (大仁 and 小仁); the reds are for propriety, dairei and shōrei (大礼 and 小礼); yellows are for sincerity/honesty, daishin (大信) and shōshin (小信); white is for justice, daigi and shōgi (大義 and 小義); and black is for knowledge, daichi (大智) and shōchi (小智).

Now, regarding purple and why it would have been ridiculous for the Fujiwara to wear anything other than purple— for a long time, ordinary people were forbidden to wear purple clothes. The color was very expensive because it needed to be extracted from shigusa , which was very difficult to grow. It also required a lot of effort to dye clothes with it. In Noh performances, purple and white are often used for the costumes of the emperor and kami . Other characters absolutely do not wear any shade of purple in their costumes.

Also… the wisteria flowers, or fuji , are purple. When my family came into power… well, let’s just say according to Okaa-san, we tried very hard to maintain close links with the royal family. Many daughters of the clan married into the royal family. It wouldn’t be proper for a Fujiwara to not wear purple. But… also, fuji is a light purple. And you need to give some room to grow, so while there are a lot of Fujiwara who have been and are allowed to wear dark purple, that has to be earned.

But more about my family, because it’s freaking awesome … and because I had to suffer through learning about it.

The Fujiwara started as the Nakatomi clan, the Nakatomi-uji. The Nakatomi were influential because along with the Inbe clan, the Nakatomi were one of two priestly clans which oversaw certain important national rites, and one of many to claim descent from divine clan ancestors “only a degree less sublime than the imperial ancestors,” namely Ame-no-Koyane-no-Mikoto. The clan also claimed Takemikazuchi, who was a kami of maritime travel, but later evolved into the kami of thunder and sword kami, as their ujigami, or clan deity. One emperor, who lived almost before the Warring States, established the role of a Master of Ceremonies (saishu), and this office was commonly held.
by a member of the Nakatomi clan. Now, it’s a member of the Fujiwara clan. True, the Nakatomi didn’t have much material wealth, but their spiritual and ritual importance placed the Nakatomi and Inbe second only to the Imperial House for a long time.

One influential clan leader, Nakatomi no Kamatari, was granted the name Fujiwara by a later emperor as a reward for loyal service to the sovereign, and thus started the Fujiwara clan. As I mentioned before, my family brought itself to where it is now through… essentially monopolizing the positions of sesshō (the regent for an underaged emperor) and kampaku (the highest ministers of the imperial court). So, we’re basically the “power behind the throne,” and have been so for centuries. But, we’ve actually never aspired to supplant the imperial dynasty. Instead, the clan’s influence stemmed from its matrimonial alliances with the imperial family. By having emperors marry Fujiwara, their heir, the next emperor, would, by the tradition of that time, be raised in the household of his mother’s side and owe loyalty to his grandfather.

Talk about playing the system.

So, we got the kabane of ason because of one emperor or another (which was the second highest, and pretty good, considering the first was only for members of the imperial family), the person who got that had four sons; and each of them became the progenitor of a cadet branch of the clan. The Northern branch, the Hokke, came to be considered as the leaders of the entire clan, and they’re the ones who played the system.

So… some prominent Fujiwara occupied the positions of sesshō or kampaku more than once, and for more than one emperor, and lesser members of the Fujiwara were just (*insert sarcasm here*) court nobles, provincial governors/vice governors, members of the provincial aristocracy, and samurai. (Hey, the clan originated in the north. They’ve got some ties to the Land of Iron and the samurai there.) And we’re the last of the four great families (meaning, we’re the only one that still has significant amount of wealth/influence/power).

So yeah, I don’t want to annoy/offend anyone in my family.

Especially since I’m planning on becoming a shinobi … wait. Can I be a shinobi? I mean, there’s the mortality rate and everything. And I don’t remember what was the entire schtick between the samurai and shinobi, but for some reason I don’t think they got along.

Oh, well. Best be optimistic and make sure they’re happy with everything else about me, at least.

---

That’s probably not going to happen.

I officially hate learning board games. The two big ones are shōgi and go. I, luckily, don’t need to know how to play them well… yet. I am four. But I need to at least know how they work, because I am trying to cram four years of noble upbringing into… a few months. I am a Fujiwara. I am supposed to outshine any and all other noble children and blah, blah, blah.

I’m not sure how I’m supposed to do that if I hate them, though.

So… shōgi is a two-person strategy board game. Literally, it’s the general’s (shō, 将) board game (gi, 棋). Two players face each other across a board composed of rectangles in a grid of 9 ranks (rows) by 9 files (columns). The first player is sente, and the second player is gote. There aren’t any different colors, but you can figure out which pieces belong to which player by the orientation.

Each player starts with a set of 20 wedge-shaped pieces of slightly different sizes. Except for the kings, opposing pieces are undifferentiated by marking or color. Pieces face forward (toward the
opponent's side), and that shows who controls the piece during play. This is important, because *unlike* chess, you can capture an opponent’s pieces and then use them later. (Hence, general’s game.) Each piece has its name written on its surface in the form of two *kanji*, usually in black ink. On the reverse side of each piece, other than the king and gold general, are one or two other characters, which are sometimes written in red (especially in amateur sets). That side is turned face up during play when a piece is promoted… which is something I’ll get back to later. The board is nearly always rectangular, and the rectangles are undifferentiated by marking or color. Pairs of dots mark the players’ “promotion zones,” which is *also* something I’ll get back to later.

The pieces from largest (most important) to smallest (least important) are:

One *ōshō* (王将, king general) or *gyokushō* (玉将, jeweled general) for each player.

( *Note: The first is for the better player, the second is for the… not as good player. Usually.* )

One *hisha* (飛車, flying chariot) which can get promoted to a *ryūō* (龍王, dragon king)

One *kakugyō* (角行, angle mover), which can be promoted to… something that’s called either *ryūma* or *ryume* (龍馬, dragon horse)

Two *kinshō* (金将, gold general)

Two *ginshō* (銀将, silver general), or *narigin* (成銀, promoted silver)

Two *keima* (桂馬, cassia horse), or *narikei* (成桂, promoted cassia)

( *Note: cassia is a type of tree. No, I don’t know why it’s the name of a type of horse. Ask the people who made up this game, not me* )

Two *kyōsha* (香車, incense chariots), or *narikyō* (成香, promoted incense)

Nine *fuhyō* (歩兵, foot soldier), or *tokin* (と金, reaches gold)

…

There are also abbreviations for each one, but… those are for, like, the hardcore players. I’m not one of them. Don’t worry about them. And it might not be clear, but more important pieces tend to be physically bigger.

Each player sets up friendly pieces facing forwards, towards the opponent.

In the rank nearest the player:

The *ōshō* or *gyokushō*, the king or jeweled general, is placed in the center file

The two gold generals are placed in files adjacent to the king

The two silver generals are placed adjacent to each gold general

The two trees (because yes, that’s what I’m calling them, they’re abbreviated to *kei*, cassia, anyways) are placed adjacent to each silver general

The two incense chariots (and honestly, who needs incense chariots in a war?) are placed in the corners, adjacent to each tree (cassia horse)

That is, the first rank is 香桂銀金玉金銀桂香. (These are the abbreviated names, by the way. I’m
not sorry. But basically, it’s a mirror image. Kinda)

In the second rank, each player places the angle-mover in the same file as the left cassia horse, and the flying chariot in the same file as the right cassia horse. So… there’s a lot of empty space.

In the third rank, the nine foot-soldiers (honestly, they’re basically pawns) are placed one per file. So that’s simple… right?

Wrong. There’s an apparent order to placing the pieces on the board. There’s the ōhashi order and the itō order. At least I know which one’s safest for me to use. Apparently, the person who made the itō order was descended from a female member of the clan who married out. I don’t know when, and I don’t know the relation, but it’s always nice when I don’t have to choose. I am naturally very indecisive.

I still haven’t decided which hand to use when writing most of the time, for heavens’ sake. Don’t make me choose stuff. I don’t like choosing stuff. I will overthink everything and probably still end up making a bad decision. DON’T MAKE ME CHOOSE. ANYTHING.

But, it’s still important to know both.

Pieces with multiples are placed from left to right in all cases.

For both, the center general is first, followed by the gold generals, then the silver generals, and finally the cassia horses.

This is where the two methods diverge.

In itō, the player now places the foot-soldiers (left to right starting from the leftmost file), then incense chariots, and then the angle-mover and then the flying chariot.

In ōhashi, the player now places the incense chariots, then angle-mover, then flying chariot, and finally the pawn foot-soldiers (starting from center file, then alternating left to right one file at a time).

And then, you figure out who goes first with a piece toss, or furigoma. One of the players (usually the one with the ōshō, or king general) tosses five foot-soldiers. If the number of tokin, promoted pawns, facing up is higher than number of unpromoted pawns, fuhyō, then the player who tossed the pawns plays gote and goes second. I honestly have no clue as to whether it’s best to play first or second. I’ll let you know when I actually get good at this game.

Now… the rules. Of actually playing the game.

First, just like chess, the point is to checkmate the “king.” That’s the ōshō or gyokushō.

Most shōgi pieces can move only to an adjacent square. A few may move across the board, and one jumps over intervening pieces.

The incense chariot, angle-mover, and flying chariot are ranging pieces. That means that they can move any number of squares along a straight line limited only by intervening pieces and the edge of the board. If an opposing piece intervenes, it may be captured by removing it from the board and replacing it with the moving piece. If a friendly piece intervenes, the moving piece must stop short of that square; if the friendly piece is adjacent, the moving piece may not move in that direction at all.

A king general or jeweled general (玉/王) moves one square in any direction, orthogonal or diagonal.
A flying chariot (飛) moves any number of squares in an orthogonal direction.

A angle-mover (角) moves any number of squares in a diagonal direction. Because they cannot move orthogonally, the players' unpromoted angle-movers can reach only half the squares of the board, unless one is captured and then dropped.

A gold general (金) moves one square orthogonally, or one square diagonally forward, giving it six possible destinations. It cannot move diagonally backwards.

A silver general (銀) moves one square diagonally, or one square straight forward, giving it five possible destinations. Because an unpromoted silver can retreat more easily than a promoted one, it is common to leave a silver unpromoted at the far side of the board.

A cassia horse (桂) jumps at an angle intermediate to orthogonal and diagonal, amounting to one square straight forward plus one square diagonally forward, in a single move. Thus the cassia horse has two possible forward destinations. These cannot move to the sides or in a backwards direction. The cassia horse is the only piece that ignores intervening pieces on the way to its destination. It is not blocked from moving if the square in front of it is occupied, but neither can it capture a piece on that square. It is often useful to leave a cassia horse unpromoted at the far side of the board. A cassia horse must promote, however, if it reaches either of the two furthest ranks.

An incense chariot (香) moves just like the flying chariot except it cannot move backwards or to the sides. It is often useful to leave an incense chariot unpromoted at the far side of the board. An incense chariot must promote, however, if it reaches the furthest rank.

A foot-soldier (歩) moves one square straight forward. It cannot retreat. These capture the same as they move. A foot-soldier must promote if it arrives at the furthest rank. In practice, however, a pawn is usually promoted whenever possible. There are two restrictions on where a pawn may be dropped.

All pieces but the cassia horse move either horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. These directions cannot be combined in a single move; one direction must be chosen.

Every piece blocks the movement of all other non-jumping pieces through the square it occupies.

If a piece occupies a legal destination for an opposing piece, it may be captured by removing it from the board and replacing it with the opposing piece. The capturing piece may not continue beyond that square on that turn. Shōgi pieces capture the same as they move.

(Normally when moving a piece, a player snaps it to the board with the ends of the fingers of the same hand. This makes a sudden sound effect, bringing the piece to the attention of the opponent. This is also true for capturing and dropping pieces. On a traditional shōgi-ban, the board-thingy, the pitch of the snap is deeper, delivering a subtler effect. It looks really cool when you do it well, but it’s not that easy to do. I’ve dropped a truly ridiculous number of pieces by trying to hold it that way.)

A player’s promotion zone consists of the furthest one-third of the board – the three ranks occupied by the opponent's pieces at setup. The zone is typically delineated on shogi boards by two inscribed dots. When a piece is moved, if part of the piece's path lies within the promotion zone (that is, if the piece moves into, out of, or wholly within the zone; but not if it is dropped into the zone), then the player has the option to promote the piece at the end of the turn. Promotion is indicated by turning the piece over after it moves, revealing the character of the promoted piece.

If a foot-soldier or incense chariot is moved to the furthest rank, or a cassia horse is moved to either of the two furthest ranks, that piece must promote (otherwise, it would have no legal move on subsequent turns). A silver general is never required to promote, and it is often advantageous to keep...
a silver general unpromoted. (It is easier, for example, to extract an unpromoted silver from behind enemy lines; whereas a promoted silver, with only one line of retreat, can be easily blocked.)

Promoting a piece changes the way it moves. A silver general, knight, incense chariot, or pawn has its normal power of movement replaced by that of a gold general. A flying chariot or angle-mover keeps its original movement and gains the power to move one square in any direction (like a king general or jeweled general). For a promoted angle-mover, this means it is able to reach any square on the board, given enough moves. A “king” (king general/jeweled general) or a gold general does not promote; nor can a piece that is already promoted.

When captured, a piece loses its promoted status. Otherwise promotion is permanent.

A promoted flying chariot ("dragon king", 龍王, ryūō) moves as a flying chariot and as a king general/jeweled general.

A promoted angle-mover, a dragon horse (龍馬, ryūma), moves as a angle-mover and as a king general/jeweled general.

A promoted silver, 成銀, narigin), moves the same as a gold general.

A promoted cassia horse, 成桂, narikei), moves the same as a gold general.

A promoted incense (chariot), 成香, narikyō), moves the same as a gold general.

A promoted foot-soldier, or “reaches gold” (と金, tokin), moves the same as a gold general.

Captured pieces are retained in hand and can be brought back into play under the capturing player's control. The term for piece(s) in hand is either mochigoma (持ち駒) or tegoma (手駒). On any turn, instead of moving a piece on the board, a player may select a piece in hand and place it—unpromoted side up and facing the opposing side—on any empty square. The piece is then one of that player’s active pieces on the board and can be moved accordingly. This is called dropping the piece, or simply, a drop. A drop counts as a complete move.

A drop cannot capture a piece, nor does dropping within the promotion zone result in immediate promotion. Capture and/or promotion may occur normally, however, on subsequent moves of the piece.

A pawn, knight, or incense chariot may not be dropped on the furthest rank, since those pieces would have no legal moves on subsequent turns. For the same reason, a cassia horse may not be dropped on the penultimate (player's 8th) rank.

There are two additional restrictions when dropping pawns:

1. Two Pawns (二歩, nifu): A pawn cannot be dropped onto a file (column) containing another unpromoted pawn of the same player (promoted pawns do not count). A player with an unpromoted pawn on every file is therefore unable to drop a pawn anywhere. For this reason it is common to sacrifice a pawn in order to gain flexibility for drops.

2. Drop Pawn Mate (打ち歩詰め, uchifudzume): A pawn cannot be dropped to give an immediate checkmate. (Although other pieces may be dropped to give immediate checkmate.) A pawn may, however, be dropped to give immediate check as long as it is not also mate. It is also permissible to mate a king with a pawn that is already on the board.

It is common to keep captured pieces on a wooden stand (駒台, komadai) which is traditionally placed so that its bottom left corner aligns with the bottom right corner of the board from the
It is common for players to swap angle-movers, which oppose each other across the board, early in the game. This leaves each player with an angle-mover in hand to be dropped later. The ability for drops in shōgi means that it’s very complicated. No piece ever goes entirely out of play.

When a player’s move threatens to capture the opposing “king,” (ōshō or gyokushō, king general or jeweled general) on the next turn, the move is said to give check to the “king” and the “king” is said to be in check. If a player’s “king” is in check, that player’s responding move must remove the check if possible. Ways to remove a check include moving the “king” away from the threat, capturing the threatening piece, or placing another interposing piece between the “king” and the threatening piece. It’s basically chess.

To announce check, one can say ōte (王手). However, this is not required, even as a courtesy. It’s nice when you’re playing a beginner, though, because they usually don’t realize. I’ve done that before. Not realizing I’m in check, I mean. It’s… pretty embarrassing.

The usual way for shogi games to end is for one side to checkmate the other side’s “king,” ōshō or gyokushō, after which the losing player will be given the opportunity to admit defeat. However, there are three other possible ways for a game to end: repetition (千日手 sennichite), impasse (持将棋 jishōgi), and an illegal move (反則手). The first two – repetition and impasse – are rare enough that I don’t really bother trying to remember them, and well… I am the amateur of amateurs, so no one actually bothers ending the game over an accidental illegal move. There are a bunch of moves that you just can’t do, and I think I’ve accidentally done most of them. Multiple times. I usually accidentally drop or move a piece to position where it cannot move or move my “king” (gyokushō, jeweled general. I mean, I’m probably never going to play king general) into check. They usually just tell me, and then I fix it.

And regarding impasse… it has to do with this thing called “entering king,” nyū gyoku (入玉), which I don’t actually understand. That much. Like, I know it exists, and… nothing more. I might not even be explaining it correctly, but it’s a bit like… when an opponent’s “king” (ōshō or gyokushō, the king general or jeweled general) has entered a player’s own territory and it gets really hard to mate or checkmate. And if both players’ kings are in entering king states, aï-nyū gyoku (相入玉, double entering kings), the game becomes more likely to result in an impasse. Then, the winner’s decided by their pieces. Each flying chariot or angle-mover, promoted or not, scores 5 points for the owning player, and all other pieces except kings score 1 point each. A player scoring fewer than 24 points loses. If neither player has fewer than 24, the game is just a draw. That’s still too complicated for me, though, so I basically just know that it exists.

I mean, I usually just lose. I don’t need to worry about impasse and whatnot.

And speaking of “just losing,” there’s a way for that. (I mean, duh, it’s a game. It’d be boring if there wasn’t a way to win/lose.)

If the king is in check and there is no possible move which could protect the king, the move is said to checkmate (tsumi, 詰み) the king general or silver general. Checkmate effectively means that the opponent wins the game as the player would have no remaining legal moves.

The losing player will usually resign when the situation is thought to be hopeless and may declare the resignation at any time during their turn, but… well, if I actually did that, I’d have to resign before even starting, so I usually just end up play until the other player inevitably checkmates my gyokushō. That’s also because I’m not good enough to recognize a tsume (forced mate sequence).

And then, I bow and say makemashita (負けました, I lost) while placing the right hand over the
piece stands. The last thing’s symbolic of the practice of gently dropping one's pieces in hand over
the board in order to indicate resignation. I do that if I have pieces. I usually don’t. I’ve fumbled
pieces and accidentally dropped them and earned all sorts of frowns… so I usually take my time
thinking first, then after deciding, pick up the piece to make my move.

... 

There’s also a bunch of really complicated stuff about strategies (most are even named, if you can
believe that), but basically, the game can be divided into the opening, middle game and endgame,
and each requires a different strategy. The opening consists of arranging one's defenses usually in a
castle, which is basically a formation protecting the king general or jeweled general, and positioning
for attack. The mid game consists of attempting to break through the opposing defenses while
maintaining one's own. The endgame starts when one side's defenses have been compromised.

Shōgi also has a handicap system (like go) in which games between players of disparate strengths
are adjusted so that the stronger player is put in a more disadvantageous position in order to
compensate for the difference in playing levels. In a handicap game, the only type of game I usually
play, one or more of the second player’s pieces are removed from the setup, and instead the second
player plays first.

Speaking of go … I mean, at least there aren’t piece names?

... 

...the problem is that you have to memorize maybe two dozen strategies before you’re even able to
play.

You see, go is an abstract strategy board game for two players, in which the aim is to surround more
territory, larger total area of the board, with one's stones than the opponent. The playing pieces are
called “stones”. One player uses the white stones and the other, black. The players take turns placing
the stones on the vacant intersections (“points”) of a board. The standard go board has a 19×19 grid
of lines, containing 361 points. Once placed on the board, stones may not be moved, but stones are
removed from the board if “captured”. Capture happens when a stone or group of stones is
surrounded by opposing stones on all orthogonally-adjacent points. The game proceeds until neither
player wishes to make another move. When a game concludes, the winner is determined by counting
each player's surrounded territory along with captured stones and komi (points added to the score of
the player with the white stones as compensation for playing second). Games may also be terminated
by resignation.

At its most simplistic… it's basically “you get to place your stone on any point on the board, but if
the other person surrounds that stone, the other person will remove it.”

As I said, most simplistic. It’s… a lot more complicated than that.

As the game progresses, the players position stones on the board to map out formations and potential
territories. Contests between opposing formations are often extremely complex and may result in the
expansion, reduction, or wholesale capture and loss of formation stones.

The four liberties (adjacent empty points) of a single black stone (A), as white reduces those liberties
by one (B, C, and D). When black has only one liberty left (D), that stone is “in atari”. White may
capture that stone (remove from board) with a play on its last liberty (at D-1).

A basic principle of go is that a group of stones must have at least one “liberty” to remain on the
A "liberty" is an open "point" (intersection) bordering the group. An enclosed liberty (or liberties) is called an "eye", and a group of stones with two or more eyes is said to be unconditionally "alive". Such groups cannot be captured, even if surrounded.

The general strategy is to expand one's territory, attack the opponent's weak groups (groups that can be killed), and always stay mindful of the "life status" of one's own groups. The liberties of groups are countable. Situations where mutually opposing groups must capture each other or die are called capturing races, or *semeai*. In a capturing race, the group with more liberties (and/or better "shape") will ultimately be able to capture the opponent's stones. Capturing races and the elements of life or death are the primary challenges of Go.

A player may pass on determining that the game offers no further opportunities for profitable play. The game ends when both players pass, and is then scored. For each player, the number of captured stones is subtracted from the number of controlled (surrounded) points in "liberties" or "eyes", and the player with the greater score wins the game. Games may also be won by resignation of the opponent.

In the opening stages of the game, players typically establish positions (or "bases") in the corners and around the sides of the board. These bases help to quickly develop strong shapes which have many options for life (self-viability for a group of stones that prevents capture) and establish formations for potential territory. Players usually start in the corners because establishing territory is easier with the aid of two edges of the board. Established corner opening sequences are called "joseki" and are often studied independently.

See what I told you? There's a reason I haven't even started playing this game, yet. I'm too busy trying to memorize stuff.

"*Dame*" are points that lie in between the boundary walls of black and white, and as such are considered to be of no value to either side. "*Sekī*" are mutually alive pairs of white and black groups where neither has two eyes. A "*ko*" (劫) is a repeated-position shape that may be contested by making forcing moves elsewhere. After the forcing move is played, the *ko* may be "taken back" and returned to its original position. Some *ko fights* may be important and decide the life of a large group, while others may be worth just one or two points. Some *ko* fights are referred to as "*hanami ko*" when only one side has a lot to lose.

Playing with others usually requires a knowledge of each player's strength. A difference in rank may be compensated by a handicap—black is allowed to place two or more stones on the board to compensate for white's greater strength, for example. There are different rule-sets, which are almost entirely equivalent, except for certain special-case positions.

Aside from the order of play (alternating moves, black moves first or takes a handicap) and scoring rules, there are essentially only two rules in *go*:

Rule 1 (the rule of liberty) states that every stone remaining on the board must have at least one open "point" (an intersection, called a "liberty") directly orthogonally adjacent (up, down, left, or right), or must be part of a connected group that has at least one such open point ("liberty") next to it. Stones or groups of stones which lose their last liberty are removed from the board.

Rule 2 (the "ko rule") states that the stones on the board must never repeat a previous position of stones. Moves which would do so are forbidden, and thus only moves elsewhere on the board are permitted that turn.

Almost all other information about how the game is played is... learned information about how the game is played, rather than a specific rule. Other rules are specialized, as they come about through
different rule-sets, but the above two rules cover almost all of any played game.

The scoring rules… are a different thing, entirely.

Vertically and horizontally adjacent stones of the same color form a chain (also called a string or group) that cannot subsequently be subdivided and, in effect, becomes a single larger stone. Only stones immediately connected to one another by the lines on the board create a chain; stones that are diagonally adjacent are not connected. Chains may be expanded by placing additional stones on adjacent intersections, and can be connected together by placing a stone on an intersection that is adjacent to two or more chains of the same color.

Players are not allowed to make a move that returns the game to the previous position. This rule, called the *ko* rule, prevents unending repetition.

While the various rule-sets agree on the *ko* rule prohibiting returning the board to an immediately previous position, they deal in different ways with the relatively uncommon situation in which a player might recreate a past position that is further removed.

Because black has the advantage of playing the first move, the idea of awarding white some compensation came into being… oh, sometime during the Warring States era. This is called *komi*, which gives white a set compensation, depending on which rules you’re playing by.

Two general types of scoring system are used, and players determine which to use before play. Both systems almost always give the same result. Territory scoring counts the number of empty points a player's stones surround, together with the number of stones the player captured. In the course of the game, each player retains the stones they capture, termed prisoners. Any dead stones removed at the end of the game become prisoners. The score is the number of empty points enclosed by a player's stones, plus the number of prisoners captured by that player. Area scoring counts the number of points a player's stones occupy and surround. In area scoring, a player's score is the number of stones that the player has on the board, plus the number of empty intersections surrounded by that player's stones.

After both players have passed consecutively, the stones that are still on the board but unable to avoid capture, called dead stones, are removed.

If there is disagreement about which stones are dead, then under area scoring rules, the players simply resume play to resolve the matter. The score is computed using the position after the next time the players pass consecutively. Under territory scoring, the rules are considerably more complex; however, in practice, players generally play on, and, once the status of each stone has been determined, return to the position at the time the first two consecutive passes occurred and remove the dead stones.

Given that the number of stones a player has on the board is directly related to the number of prisoners their opponent has taken, the resulting net score, that is the difference between black’s and white’s scores, is identical under both rulesets (unless the players have passed different numbers of times during the course of the game). Thus, the net result given by the two scoring systems rarely differs by more than a point.

And when you have dead groups of stones, you also have living groups of stones.

…Yup. Iwa must *love* this game. Aren’t they all about stones?

While not actually mentioned in the rules of *go*, the concept of a living group of stones is necessary for a practical understanding of the game.
When a group of stones is mostly surrounded and has no options to connect with friendly stones elsewhere, the status of the group is either alive, dead or unsettled. A group of stones is said to be alive if it cannot be captured, even if the opponent is allowed to move first. Conversely, a group of stones is said to be dead if it cannot avoid capture, even if the owner of the group is allowed the first move. Otherwise, the group is said to be unsettled: the defending player can make it alive or the opponent can kill it, depending on who gets to play first.

An “eye” is an empty point or group of points surrounded by one player's stones. If the eye is surrounded by black stones, white cannot play there unless such a play would take black's last liberty and capture the black stones. (Such a move is forbidden according to the “suicide rule” in most rule sets, but even if not forbidden, such a move would be a useless suicide of a white stone.)

If a black group has two eyes, white can never capture it because white cannot remove both liberties simultaneously. If black has only one eye, white can capture the black group by playing in the single eye, removing black's last liberty. Such a move is not suicide because the black stones are removed first.

There is an exception to the requirement that a group must have two eyes to be alive, a situation called seki (or mutual life). Where different colored groups are adjacent and share liberties, the situation may reach a position when neither player wants to move first, because doing so would allow the opponent to capture; in such situations therefore both players' stones remain on the board in mutual life or “seki”. Neither player receives any points for those groups, but at least those groups themselves remain living, as opposed to being captured. Seki (mutual life) can occur in many ways. The simplest are where each player has a group without eyes and they share two liberties, and each player has a group with one eye and they share two liberties.

In go, tactics deal with immediate fighting between stones, capturing and saving stones, life, death and other issues localized to a specific part of the board. Larger issues, not limited to only part of the board, are referred to as strategy, and are covered in their own section.

There are several tactical constructs aimed at capturing stones. These are among the first things a player learns after understanding the rules. Recognizing the possibility that stones can be captured using these techniques is an important step forward.

The most basic technique is the ladder. To capture stones in a ladder, a player uses a constant series of capture threats— called atari — to force the opponent into a zigzag pattern. Unless the pattern runs into friendly stones along the way, the stones in the ladder cannot avoid capture. Experienced players recognize the futility of continuing the pattern and play elsewhere. The presence of a ladder on the board does give a player the option to play a stone in the path of the ladder, thereby threatening to rescue their stones, forcing a response. Such a move is called a ladder breaker and may be a powerful strategic move.

Another technique to capture stones is geta . This refers to a move that loosely surrounds some stones, preventing their escape in all directions. An example is given in the adjacent diagram. It is generally better to capture stones in a net than in a ladder, because a net does not depend on the condition that there are no opposing stones in the way, nor does it allow the opponent to play a strategic ladder breaker.

A third technique to capture stones is the snapback. In a snapback, one player allows a single stone to be captured, then immediately plays on the point formerly occupied by that stone; by so doing, the player captures a larger group of their opponent’s stones, in effect snapping back at those stones. An example can be seen on the right. As with the ladder, an experienced player does not play out such a sequence, recognizing the futility of capturing only to be captured back immediately.
One of the most important skills required for strong tactical play, and the one I suck at the most, is the ability to read ahead. Reading ahead includes considering available moves to play, the possible responses to each move, and the subsequent possibilities after each of those responses. Some of the strongest players of the game can read up to 40 moves ahead even in complicated positions.

If I want to get the hang of that… I’m going to need a lot more time. I see maybe the branches up to ten moves ahead. And I usually miss some of the possibilities.

As explained in the scoring rules, some stone formations can never be captured and are said to be alive, while other stones may be in the position where they cannot avoid being captured and are said to be dead. Much of the practice material available to players of the game comes in the form of life and death problems, also known as *tsu*me*go*. In such problems, players are challenged to find the vital move sequence that kills a group of the opponent or saves a group of their own. Tsume*go* are considered an excellent way to train a player's ability at reading ahead, and are available for all skill levels, some posing a challenge even to top players.

They’re what I get to “have fun” with. They’re a headache and a half, and on a completely unrelated note, I’ve gotten pretty good at my method of making fire.

...I also have a new-found familiarity and equally new-found contempt with the emotion known as “guilt”.

In situations when the *ko* rule applies, a *ko* fight may occur. If the player who is prohibited from capture is of the opinion that the capture is important, because it prevents a large group of stones from being captured for instance, the player may play a *ko* threat. This is a move elsewhere on the board that threatens to make a large profit if the opponent does not respond. If the opponent does respond to the *ko* threat, the situation on the board has changed, and the prohibition on capturing the *ko* no longer applies. Thus the player who made the *ko* threat may now recapture the *ko*. Their opponent is then in the same situation and can either play a *ko* threat as well, or concede the *ko* by simply playing elsewhere. If a player concedes the *ko*, either because they do not think it important or because there are no moves left that could function as a *ko* threat, they have lost the *ko*, and their opponent may connect the *ko*.

Instead of responding to a *ko* threat, a player may also choose to ignore the threat and connect the *ko*. They thereby win the *ko*, but at a cost. The choice of when to respond to a threat and when to ignore it is a subtle one, which requires a player to consider many factors, including how much is gained by connecting, how much is lost by not responding, how many possible *ko* threats both players have remaining, what the optimal order of playing them is, and what the size—points lost or gained—of each of the remaining threats is.

Frequently, the winner of the *ko* fight does not connect the *ko* but instead captures one of the chains that constituted their opponent's side of the *ko*. In some cases, this leads to another *ko* fight at a neighboring location.

The not-really-opposite of tactics is strategy. They’re similar, but different, if that makes sense? Actually… no, no it doesn’t make sense. I never make sense. Moving on. Strategy deals with global influence, interaction between distant stones, keeping the whole board in mind during local fights, and other issues that involve the overall game. It is therefore possible to allow a tactical loss when it confers a strategic advantage.

Novices often start by randomly placing stones on the board, as if it were a game of chance. That’s why I’m *not* playing games. Technically. Not until I manage to actually get the hang of the game, which might seem counterintuitive (like, you normally get better by practicing), but… no. An
understanding of how stones connect for greater power develops, and then a few basic common opening sequences may be understood. Learning the ways of life and death helps in a fundamental way to develop one's strategic understanding of weak groups. A player who both plays aggressively and can handle adversity is said to display *kiai*, or fighting spirit, in the game.

Maybe that’ll be me one day.

...

One day.

First, I need to understand some of the basics of strategy.

Basic strategic aspects include the following:

**Connection**: Keeping one's own stones connected means that fewer groups need to make living shape, and one has fewer groups to defend.

**Cut**: Keeping opposing stones disconnected means that the opponent needs to defend and make living shape for more groups.

**Stay alive**: The simplest way to stay alive is to establish a foothold in the corner or along one of the sides. At a minimum, a group must have two eyes (separate open points) to be “alive”. An opponent cannot fill in either eye, as any such move is suicidal and prohibited in the rules.

**Mutual life (sekí)** is better than dying: A situation in which neither player can play on a particular point without then allowing the other player to play at another point to capture. The most common example is that of adjacent groups that share their last few liberties—if either player plays in the shared liberties, they can reduce their own group to a single liberty (putting themselves in *atari*), allowing their opponent to capture it on the next move.

**Death**: A group that lacks living shape is eventually removed from the board as captured.

**Invasion**: Set up a new living group inside an area where the opponent has greater influence, means one reduces the opponent's score in proportion to the area one occupies.

**Reduction**: Placing a stone far enough into the opponent's area of influence to reduce the amount of territory they eventually get, but not so far in that it can be cut off from friendly stones outside.

**Sente**: A play that forces one's opponent to respond (*gote*). A player who can regularly play sente has the initiative and can control the flow of the game.

**Sacrifice**: Allowing a group to die in order to carry out a play, or plan, in a more important area. The strategy involved can become very abstract and complex. High-level players spend years improving their understanding of strategy, and a novice may play many hundreds of games against opponents before being able to win regularly.

Me? I’m not even a novice. I’m like… if a novice is a middle-schooler or high-schooler, I’m in preschool.

In the opening of the game, players usually play in the corners of the board first, as the presence of two edges makes it easier for them to surround territory and establish their stones. After the corners, focus moves to the sides, where there is still one edge to support a player's stones. Opening moves are generally on the third and fourth line from the edge, with occasional moves on the second and fifth lines. In general, stones on the third line offer stability and are good defensive moves, whereas
stones on the fourth line influence more of the board and are good attacking moves. The opening is the most difficult part of the game for professional players and takes a disproportionate amount of the playing time.

In the opening, players often play established sequences called *joseki*, which are locally balanced exchanges. However, the *joseki* chosen should also produce a satisfactory result on a global scale. It is generally advisable to keep a balance between territory and influence. Which of these gets precedence is often a matter of individual taste.

The middle phase of the game is the most combative, and usually lasts for more than 100 moves. During the middlegame, the players invade each other's territories, and attack formations that lack the necessary two eyes for viability. Such groups may be saved or sacrificed for something more significant on the board. It is possible that one player may succeed in capturing a large weak group of the opponent's, which often proves decisive and ends the game by a resignation. However, matters may be more complex yet, with major trade-offs, apparently dead groups reviving, and skillful play to attack in such a way as to construct territories rather than kill.

The end of the middlegame and transition to the endgame is marked by a few features. The game breaks up into areas that do not affect each other (with a caveat about *ko* fights), where before the central area of the board related to all parts of it. No large weak groups are still in serious danger. Moves can reasonably be attributed some definite value, such as 20 points or fewer, rather than simply being necessary to compete. Both players set limited objectives in their plans, in making or destroying territory, capturing or saving stones. These changing aspects of the game usually occur at much the same time, for strong players. In brief, the middlegame switches into the endgame when the concepts of strategy and influence need reassessment in terms of concrete final results on the board.

So, suffice to say, I very much do not want to be productive. I just want to sleep for a week. I am presently having flashbacks to *Before*. This is why I was more than happy to leave.

...you’re still not getting me to regret this life, though. I just need to… stay positive. It’s not permanent. It’s just… just two games. Two strategy games. And fashion. Compared to everything else, it’s not bad.

…

And, worst comes to worst, I’ve rediscovered two very good motivators.

Spite and peer pressure.

I’ve long since realized the second part, which is one of the reasons I like to summon Kiyohime and keep her on me during the day.

…

I realized the first one after she laughed at me.

And funnily enough, the second thing still applies when she’s napping, which she does… most of the day. She finds a space, usually in the sunlight, and curls up, usually with a hissed warning to bother her on pain of getting bitten.

…

But when she’s awake?
She learns pretty quickly what I should (and shouldn’t) be doing, and she is a tough person…

snake… to please.

So after nine weeks of having my every posture and action picked on, after nine weeks of trying to get more than a pitiful soo - soo - soo out of a hollowed-out stick of wood, after nine weeks of blisters on my fingertips which mess with the only thing I’m somewhat-proud about, my calligraphy…

It’s time to meet my family and pray to Amaterasu that they don’t hate me.

And that’s already not going well. Because we’re traveling to Keishi with my father’s side of the family, and…

I think my cousin doesn’t like me.

So, he’s two years older than me, which means that he’s in the height of the “girls have cooties” stage…

...and, well, he thought I had cooties for an entire half day.

But well, according to him… I’m a weak, girly, clumsy idiot who is also a completely pathetic pushover.

I think he might be a bit jealous that I’m the heir and he isn’t? He is pretty competent. He’s very… how should I put it… not chubby, per say, but… big. He’s never actually picked on me, though. I think I’m kinda glad. He’s just a bit annoying. He has this verbal tic of sorts, and like most six-year-olds, he thinks he’s the awesomest person in the world, and that everything should revolve around him.

He’s surprisingly harmless, though, provided I make myself appear like… well, like a shy, weak, girly, clumsy pushover who’s in awe of his royal obnoxious-ness.

I have optimism that he’ll grow out of it, though. I’ve seen this before, just… not as the younger person. And I had optimism that my little brothers would grow up to be considerably less misogynistic (partly because I had no idea where they even got those ideas in the first place) and more… capable members of the world, so I have to have optimism here, as well.

Still… it’s really weird having a big family. And other cousins.

I wonder if this is what most people consider “normal”. It’s weird.
Sachiya-obasan is… also interesting. Her name basically means “also happy,” but she… doesn’t usually seem very happy. Not like, sunshine-and-rainbows happy, at least. She’s pretty happy, in other ways. She has pretty brown hair and brownish-orange eyes, and… like… I think Otou-san wasn’t very responsible for a lot of his childhood.

Just putting that out there.

She… has a very strong personality, and I think Otou-san lets her… kinda steamroll over him, I think. Sachiya-obasan seems very happy when everyone’s listening to her… or when she makes people uncomfortable… with… her… let’s just say I could very easily have been suffocated in a hug? And that I’m honestly wondering how she can be so active? And like, I’m worried she might have back problems a little later? Yeah. Hopefully, you get what I’m saying.

…

And horses exist. They’re really big. Like, one of their hooves might be bigger than my head. It’s scary.

…

They’re not actually that big, though. Apparently. Compared to the adults, at least. I’m just tiny.

…

I am not sure why Okaa-san decided that this would be the best opportunity to introduce me to horseback-riding. If so, why did she have me wear just fancier, more-expensive versions of my normal outfit?

…

Yes. Yes it is. I feel like I might actually die if I accidentally fall off. The horse seem smaller than a lot of the ones I’d seen Before, but I’m also a lot smaller. I’ve been horseback riding before, but… not like this? Like, they were on a lead and never… went…

…my horse is trotting! I think? It’s fast please don’t get spooked by anything I shouldn’t be so tense think about everything I’ve read pray there isn’t a small animal that runs across the road and just stop being so tense…

My knuckles are still very white around the leather reins.

…

This is going to be a long trip, isn’t it?

…

And Daiki (my cousin) just tried to prove that he was awesomer and stronger than the shinobi who are going to be accompanying us. The genin team.

Which does not include Itachi.
And one of the genin was laughing at Daiki and he kicked the genin in the balls (with a very impressive kick for a civilian his age), and the genin just tripped and fell in a puddle of dirt.

... 

And my horse is pooping.

...

This is going to be a very, very long trip.

吉野川きしの山吹ふく風にそこのかげさへうつろひにけり

By the river Yoshino

The globeflowers on the bank,

With the gusting wind

Make the shadows on the river bed

Pale away.

yoshinogawa kishi no yamabuki fukufū ni soko no kage sa eutsuro hi ni keri

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: ...so, that’s a lot of information. You’re welcome?

...

I’m sorry. In my defense, there will probably be times in the future when it seem like Makoto gets everything easily. These chapters help show that... no, the fact that Makoto seems to always know what to do isn’t... plot armor or something, necessarily. It’s because he did stuff like this— spend a ton of time and effort doing something that he really doesn’t want to do. Maybe the information will come in handy. Maybe it won’t. This isn’t exactly Chekhov's gun— it’s character development.

...the shōgi and go, though? That’s important, in and of itself.

Regarding my research— please correct me if you know better, and there’s actually misinformation here. I’m not an expert. At all. And the world-building cultural stuff... it’s a mix of many periods in Japanese history. It’s... really not that compliant with the timeline of this world’s history. If you can think of a better way to arrange things, just leave me a comment below.
This is important. Nothing I wrote is meant to offend. Playing with real-world stuff might offend people. Writing stuff I’m not actually that well-versed in might offend people. I don’t know. If it does, please let me know. I’ll see if I can fix it.

So… moving on. There’s an actual Itō clan that claims descent from a Fujiwara. I’m not sure how the orders for shōgi were created, and I don’t know much about the details, either, because I don’t play shōgi, but… I mean, it’s plausible?

And… okay, who else had no idea what Shikamaru and Asuma were playing/talking about?

ME! (¬▽¬) J

Okay, times for the works cited.

Stuff about the kimono came from the following blog, which translated the content from another page. I seriously recommend you go check it out. (She has pictures!)

In case that doesn't work, here's the link to both the general blog, and the easiest way to get to the information I used:

http://thekimonolady.blogspot.com

thekimonolady.blogspot.com/2013/09/kimono-seasonal-motifs-colors-and.html

The rest of the information probably came from Wikipedia.
In which Makoto meets his mother's side of the family, and finds that being the heir to a noble clan can be seriously cool. Yeah, there's some weird parts, but it's mostly cool.

Our journey is interesting at first, but eventually it gets a bit monotonous. It takes almost a week of slowly heading north, stopping at inns on the way, for us to arrive at the family… house? At least, I think it’s a house.

It's a pretty big house. I think it might be more like a castle. It’s very traditional and beautiful, it’s in the middle of a forest, it’s relatively inaccessible, it’s on a mountain, set on the bank of a shallow stream, … and… there are three stories. Of wood. Above what looks a bit like a stone wall. And the wood practically glows in the setting sun. All around the castle are small trees covered in purple/blue/pink flowers, hanging like bushels of grapes— blooming wisteria.

This basically screams, “I belong in a fantasy story.” Like, how is this even real? It seems ridiculously unfeasible. The nearest village is, like, an hour away on horseback. How is this even a thing? Like, food, logistics… you know what? I’ll leave that for the adults. If they’ve made it work so far… well, who am I to question it? Besides, it’s beautiful.

Okaa-san taps me on the shoulder. “Why don’t you go on inside, Makoto? The gardens are beautiful, especially with the wisteria on the arches over the walkways, and it will be a while until we manage to unpack everything.”

“Hai,” I nod, handing over the reins of the horse, before swinging a leg over the saddle and hopping down… then hesitantly shuffle over to the stone stairs.
The halls are dark, and the candle-light shines off the polished wood. It’s… it’s really. It’s quiet, though, which… I don’t like that. But then there’s a window, and a sliding-door, and… oh. There are people in the garden.

I blink as they whirl around, pointing, and… whispering to each other? Isn’t that kinda rude? I mean, I get that I’m a kid, but… still.

I hear snippets. There’s stuff about “the heir” and “young lord” and so on, and… I sigh.

“Hello?” I call. “I’m sorry, but… Is this the garden?”

They practically jump out of their skin, looking around.

“Young master… if this one might be so rude as to ask… are you talking to us?” one ventures.

I blink. Like, seriously, who else would I be talking to?

“Yes?” I ask, shrinking in on myself. “Sorry. Am I not supposed to, or…”

“Oh, no!” The one who spoke earlier gasps.

“It’s an honor,” another one reassures.

“Does the young master like the gardens?”

“I planted the peonies!”

“This one tends to the garden.”

“It’s an honor!”

“This one is honored that the young master would speak to us.”

“Please, would the young master like to come this way?”

“Is the young master cold?”

“Is it too dark?”

“Should this one light the lanterns?”

Sheesh, it’s like they appeared out of nowhere! One moment there were about… what, it was three? Four? And now… there… there are a lot of them. I assume they’re servants? They seem almost painfully polite, for the most part… and they’re all in pale yukata or kimono, and they’re all wearing that triangle headband-thing. So, maybe it’s a uniform?

“I’m sorry,” I stutter. Okay, never hurts to be polite… even too polite should be fine. I’m a kid. It’ll probably come off as precocious. “May… may this one know who he is… speaking with?”

“My name’s Chibana! Nice to meetcha!”

“I am Tsubasa.”

“Sōei.”

“I am called Asao.”
“I’m Nakaki.”

“I am Tōmaru.”

“My name is Fujiteru. It is a pleasure to meet the heir of this house.”

“I am Asafuji, young master.”

And so the list goes on. A lot of them are women… I think. Most of them have rather long hair. Some are pretty young. And are there even more of them right now? It definitely seems like it. And so many of them have names that have to do with wisteria! Like, there’s so many tō’s and fuji’s… When it seems like the flow of names is never-ending, I finally see an opportunity to chime in.

“I… I apologize, but I might forget. Your names, that is. I hope you will not mind if I continue to clarify, later?” My eyes widen, and I quickly bob into a small bow. “I… I understand that I should go by Fujiwara Hasuki?” Yeah, Okaa-san hasn’t been the clearest on that.

“As you wish, Hasuki-hiko,” one of the servants I think Asafuji, replies.

I smile awkwardly. Okay. I guess that’s an answer in its own right… but that name sounds so weird. Would Makoto-hiko… nope, that sounds just as bad. But seriously is that suffix embarrassing. It’s like the male equivalent of - hime, and sounds just as… well, formal. And it keeps reminding me that I’ll need to grow up and be responsible eventually.

…I’m practically breaking into a nervous sweat, just thinking about it.

“Makoto-kun!”

I turn, glancing back. Is that… that’s Okaa-san?

“I’m over here, Okaa-san,” I call, before turning back to the servants and bowing shallowly. Not too shallow, not too deep… gah, I spent practically a week drilling just bows. But now, I’m fairly confident I’ve got those down. For the most part, at least. “It was very nice meeting you all, but I’m think Okaa-san is calling for me. I hope to see you around?”

“Hai, Hasuki-hiko,” the servants chorus, before scattering.

Wow. They’re good. If servants are supposed to be anything like children… well, children are supposed to be seen and not heard. I’m guessing that servants are supposed to be neither seen nor heard? Seriously, it’s as if they disappeared into thin air.

...huh. It’s... somehow both bigger and smaller than I expected. The dinner, I mean.

It’s not really stuffy, though, which is nice.

...I mean, it’s also a serious relief that… almost everyone’s pretty nice to me. I don’t think Miyako-obasan likes me very much, but Hiroshi-ojisan and Kichirō-ojisan do. I think. And Obaa-sama doesn’t not like me, as far as I’m aware.

Dinner is delicious. And probably expensive. But... I honestly can’t bring myself to care that much, because everything’s absolutely delicious. And pretty to look. Even the vegetables taste amazing.

I’m not sure if the gentle prodding for me to tell more about my friends in Konoha is supposed to mean something or not, but after the third time I just started rambling about the food. And the trees. And random colors.
I mean, it’s probably not malicious, but some things just aren’t mine to tell. No one prods further, though, which is telling in its own right.

After dinner, Hiroshi-ojisan gives me a piggyback ride to my bedroom and helps me unpack the bags that already been put here. There are already clothes in so many of the cabinets, but it’s only after unpacking— and deliberately leaving a few pages out, and scattering pillows over the floor— that the room finally seems a little like mine.

The bathroom is enormous, and after reassuring Hiroshi-ojisan that no, I don’t need help, I know I’m four, and that’s more than old enough to take baths on my own… well, I’m quite thankful for the “newly” installed pipes. It’s really more convenient to turn a faucet than to fetch the water myself.

But after a nice bath, I change into my new pajamas and go out, heading through the open doorways and over to the stairs and down two levels to the… well, I guess it’s like a sitting room? Hiroshi-ojisan called it the “story room,” though.

…

I poke my head around the doorway.

…

Huh. Everyone’s here.

Except for Otō-san, though.

“Hi?” I squeak.

Kichirō-ojisan looks over. “Hey, Hasuki-kun! You made it. Here… catch!”

I blink, taken aback by the name… right, that’s my name here, and I quickly grab the flat pillow he throws at me.

“Oh, just pick somewhere to sit,” Hiroshi-ojisan smiles. “We’ll be starting with the origin story, since apparently, Kimi-chan’s has been trying to avoid it.”

Kimi-chan… ah. Okaa-san.

“It’s boring, though,” Okaa-san sighs, grabbing a hairbrush and pulling me over. “And I’m sorry your Otō-san’s not here… he went to make sure everything’s alright with his family. You know how he hates dealing with paper when he can speak face-to-face with someone. Besides…” she shrugs, looking up from where she’s gently untangling my hair. “You can’t say you enjoyed memorizing the family trees, Kichi-nii.”

Kichirō-ojisan groans, covering his face. “I already apologized for the frogs.”

“You will never make up for the frogs,” Miyako-obasan cuts in. “Never.”

“Hey!” Kichirō-ojisan protests. “Hiroshi, back me up! That was not my fault.”

Hiroshi-ojisan shrugs from where he stands, over by the bookcase, flipping through a book. “Hey, I was already with the samurai when this happened, Kichi-chan.”

“Fine!” Kichirō-ojisan scowls, crossing his arms. “See if I back you up next time these two demons want to show your beloved Benika-chan those embarrassing poems and love letters.”
“Joke’s on you,” Hiroshi-ojisan smiles. “She loves me the more for them. And you don’t really have a leg to stand on with that… *collection* … from your younger days.”

Kichirō-ojisan pales. “No! You can’t!” He looks around. “*Shh!* Seriously, zip it,” he hisses, leaning over. “I refuse to let you embarrass me in front of my cute oikko-kun!”

I sigh. Okay, my nerves are officially gone. Seriously. I can’t be intimidated of people when they remind me so much of Shisui. “Your ‘cute little nephew’ has ears, you know.”

Kichirō-ojisan sniffs dramatically, turning. “That’s it. You’re all being mean to me, and I’ll tell Haha.”

As if on cue, a cane whacks his hand, and Obaa-sama shuffles into the room. “Oh, stop being so immature, Kichirō,” she huffs. “Sit down. Hasuki-chan, come here.”

“Obaa-sama?” I ask, walking closer.

“Sit, child, and let me tell you of how our clan started…”

...okay, the coincidences are getting a bit freaky.

You know the Naka river, the Naka no Kawa, the one that passes through Konoha and used to mark a bit of a boundary between the Uchiha and the Senju and that the Uchiha named a shrine after?

…

Well, guess what? That’s also where the name for the Nakatomi clan came from.

You see, it used to be the “Middle River,” because it runs more or less through the middle of the Land of Fire. Now, it’s usually written as the River of Southern Joy or something, because of… reasons.

Probably a mistake that just stuck because it sounded cooler.

So, the Nakatomi-uchi was basically the central-clan-that-served-the-daimyō or something. We moved a bit south after the samurai split from the shinobi and formed the Land of Iron, but we still have somewhat close ties to the samurai up north.

We are descended from Ame no Koyane, the first in charge of divine affairs. Within the imperial palace, he was known as the one who had been commanded by Amaterasu herself to guard the divine mirror, with the result that he holds the status of *hennō hohitsu no kami*, “Imperial Aide,” with responsibility for presiding over divine affairs within the palace of the *kami*.

The clan’s lands are pretty big, and include a few mountains. The clan’s lands used to be bigger, but as a sign of “goodwill,” it gave much of its lands to the civilians that used to live nearby.

From what I can tell, it also had the side-effect of making the Nakatomi not responsible for protecting them from shinobi conflicts.

Shinobi have not always been a thing.

And then, during the *Sengoku Jidai*, the Warring States period, the Nakatomi clan grew to a position of prominence under the name, Fujiwara.

When it split into the four branches, the clan also greatly expanded its reaches within the Land of
Fire.

The branch that went west dispersed and helped with political negotiations with the smaller lands, and also started negotiations with Otō-san’s family that did a lot to improve relations, which led to Okaa-san and Otō-san falling in love and getting married and having me. They also organized many of the farmers to... essentially create a business chain? I think that’s the term for it? They basically made the Fujiwara better-known and wealthier.

The branch that went east expanded our other, more settled business prospects, and also helped to expand our wealth.

The branch that went south carved out a niche in the court, and did a lot of the political maneuvering. That remained in close contact with the northern branch because of the river— it was relatively quick and easy to take a boat up and down the river.

And the northern branch, the main branch, maintained close connections with the samurai and became the most militant of the branches. It also did the most to maintain the cultural heritage and preserve the clan’s original role—as the spiritual and ritual supervisors for the Land of Fire.

Then, during the Warring States era and the founding of the five great hidden villages and the three shinobi world wars... the family shrunk to what it is today. The northern branch, which sat in the mountains, away from everyone... was the one that made it through. And the four children took on the responsibilities of the four branches— Hiroshi with the north, Kichirō with the west, Kimiko with the south, and Miyako with the east.

And then, slowly they exchanged duties. Kimiko married Hiroya and created a home in Konoha. Hiroshi got injured and spent more time arranging diplomatic matters with Iwa and Suna and smaller nations. Kichirō spent more and more time in the capitol.

...

And that brings us to today.

Me.

It’ll be my job to learn as much as I can, about everything, in case anything happens to everyone else in the family.

...

That’s a very big responsibility, but luckily, I’ve still got time. And that’s the worst-case scenario. It's not like a test I need to take any time now. It’s more... like applying to college. It’s important, but it’s still at least a decade off. I can’t waste time, but it’s not like I can’t afford to take it easy at times.

And hey, it’s definitely better that it’s me, and not some normal four-year old.

It’s late, and I’ve started dozing off when two hands pick me up.

“Mm?” I mumble, blinking.

“It’s time for you to go to sleep, Hasuki-kun,” a voice comments.

“Wha... Kichirō-oji-san?” I yawn. “Izzit time already?”

“Yup.”
I drift off… then wake up a little as Kichirō-ojisan puts me on a *fūton* and tucks me in. It’s different from home, not as soft, a little heavier, and it smells faintly musty, like… I don’t know. But the pillows are nice, I latch onto one, and…

I wake up with a start, and for a moment, I’m disoriented. It’s… it’s dark. Why did I wake up?

...oh. I’m thirsty. And I also kinda need to pee.

...

After washing my hands, I finally work up the nerve to head out of my bedroom. I grab a jacket on my way out.

Okay. Time to see if my memory holds and I can remember where the kitchen is.

...

I don’t remember where the kitchen is. I don’t even remember where the stairs are. It’s really hard to navigate in the dark and without a breadcrumb trail of open doors.

...

Just *finding* the doors is hard.

...

It’s… kinda scary at night.

The floorboards creak, and I’m basically walking blind. I’m just thankful this isn’t outside…. but even so, the cold and the darkness seem to close around me. I’m not normally claustrophobic, but… well, it’s a tiny bit scary.

...

And this is entirely my fault because I should have been paying more attention instead of getting lost in my thoughts, because now I’m *lost outside* of my thoughts, too.

...

Is this a good time to panic? I’m pretty sure I’m not asleep… or dreaming…

...


...

Just… keep walking? And maybe knock and see if I can find someone, anyone. They should know where I should go.

...

Okay, why are all of these room… so *stale*? The window shutters are all closed, but moonlight seeps through the cracks. I can practically taste the dust in the air…

And… that’s not moonlight.
Through careful application of chakra, I manage to crawl up to a window and open the shutters. That light… it wasn’t pale and white, it was golden. Like… like fire, or…

Oh, it’s almost like Christmas lights!

Outside, it’s beautiful. There are what seem like strings of paper lanterns strung through the trees, and stone lanterns glowing merrily. There’s what seems like a lit trail through the forest, up the mountain, and… it’s like someone plucked this straight out of a fairytale. The air is crisp and clean and sweet and cold… and I think it might have rained earlier?

I stare at the lanterns, leaning on the windowsill.

It’s so pretty… it’s hard to be worried. Worst comes to worst, I wait a few hours, and then someone should find me.

I pull myself up and sit carefully on the windowsill, wrapping myself more tightly in my jacket and lean on the side. It’s pretty wide, especially for me, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be careful. I’m pretty high up, and a fall wouldn’t be ideal.

And the stars are so clear. I remember one field trip, Before, to this one… space-related place in the desert, or something. We’d walked out and looked up, and… it was amazing. I never knew there could be so much color in the sky, that the Milky Way could be seen without telescopes and… well, a bit of photoshop.

It’s here, too.

And I realize, that… there’s not much air pollution. None of that mess with the greenhouse gases. No smog, no smoke-stacks and factories and cars… no industrial revolution. I think.

The sky is clean.

And there… are so… many…

…colors…

…

...

...

…”Hiko-sama! Hiko-sama! Please, get down. Are you okay?”

I blink, suddenly awake again, to a hand on my sleeve that’s shaking me.

I carefully prop myself back up, yawning, and… oh, yeah. I should save the sleeping on tree branches for when I’m a little bigger and less fragile. I roll my neck, covering up another yawn, before looking over.

Oh. I know this person. It’s the one with the long brown hair and the pale pink patterns on her
kimono, and that triangle headband. Shoot. It’s right on the tip of my tongue… oh! “You’re… Asafuji, right?”

“I am honored that the young master remembered my name,” she smiles, bowing.

I hop down, grinning sheepishly. “I’m sorry, Asafuji-san. I was trying to find the kitchen, because I was thirsty, and….” I shrug. “I kinda got lost?” I laugh awkwardly. “The stars and lanterns are pretty, though, so I just to admire them while I waited for someone to find me.”

“The… the lanterns?” Asafuji-san asks hesitantly.

I blink. “Yeah, the ones over there? The stone lanterns and the paper ones in the trees?” I ask, pointing. “The one’s in the trees are super pretty, and I really want to know how they got up there and how they’re lit.”

Asafuji-san flushes faintly, bowing again. “Ah… I shall convey your compliments to Fujiteru and the others. And… if the young master would like… this one would be honored to show you how we light the candles at sunset.”

I gawk at her. “That’s so cool! How do you get up? Do you take the lanterns down during that day? Do you use chakra to climb the trees, like shinobi?”

Asafuji-san laughs, and I duck my head, a bit embarrassed by my flood of questions.

“If the young master wishes, I shall be outside your room, a little before sunset?” Asafuji-san asks. “I would be honored to answer any questions then. But…” She hesitates. “If the young master will forgive this one’s impertinence… it is still nighttime, and the young master will have a long day tomorrow. Shall this one escort you to your room? I will also bring water, if the young master doesn’t mind waiting a little.”

I rub at my neck awkwardly. “If… if it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” I mumble. “That would be… very much appreciated.”

Asafuji-san picks up a candle I hadn’t even noticed before and leads the way, looking back every now and then to make sure I’m following.

After a few moments, even as I keep an eye on the path we’re taking in an effort to hopefully memorize it, I start asking questions.

“Ne, Asafuji-san?”

“Yes, young master?” Asafuji-san replies.

I bite my lip for a moment. “I was just wondering… why were you awake? And how did you find me?”

After a moment, Asafuji-san answers. “I often find myself wandering these halls during the night. Many of us do the same. Many… many things are more active during the night, and it is important that we find any such… intrusions… before they spread.”

I nod slowly. The wording’s a bit confusing, but… “So, like… mice? Or insects? It’s a pretty old house, I think… so that makes sense…”

“I suppose you can say that,” Asafuji-san smiles.
...I feel like I’m missing an inside joke or something.

...okay, I regret getting up at night.

My eyes are sticky, my skin feels surprisingly gross for someone who’s arguably too young to have gross skin, my mouth tastes all sour for some reason (oh, no, did I forget to brush my teeth), and I think I slept in a weird position because my neck hurts. Mind you, it might all just be in my head, because I doubt four-year-olds are supposed to get cramped muscles in their neck.

Still, despite my desire to sink into warm fluffiness… I am very much awake.

I blame Shisui and Itachi and Oro-sensei and my training for this.

Okay. Time to see if there’s somewhere I can run and stretch. I’ve been neglecting my training for long enough… and I’m betting I lost a bit of flexibility after the journey. Plus, it wasn’t like I could run any kata with Daichi-baka around. That’d be like deliberately handing him free ammunition for annoyance.

...

Screw it, my arms are a bit jelly-ish, but I am so climbing down. It’s only, what, a few stories? I’m on the fourth floor. The first story is the really tall story (that’s probably about the size of a warehouse) with the really tiny windows by the ceiling, that’s surrounded by rock and basically just for storage… along with that smaller building on the side. The stairs led to the entrance on the second story, which also had the kitchen, the story room, and a couple others. The bedrooms are on the third and fourth, and the fifth floor is for Important Stuff. And the staircase is just in the center, around that central support thing.

...and, more importantly, the staircase is really, really scary to navigate. It’s big, it’s creaky, it seems to move, and… it’s surprisingly hard to find. Like, it’s really well hidden, and it’s in the middle of a room, which is deliberately hard to find or get into… probably to, like, make it extra difficult for any shinobi trying to kill anyone here. Seriously. This house is deliberately built like a labyrinth, down the the fact that the outside doesn’t match the inside.

Again, to make it hard for ninja to kill people.

...

But it’s definitely easy to navigate during the day. You don’t get turned around in rooms, and you don’t bump into walls and get disoriented and realize a few hours later how stupid you were to get lost like that.

...

I still have no idea how to get to the stairway, though. Plus, every room looks similar. The walls are all rice-paper-covered wood or… I guess there’s also stone on the lower levels.

...I just realized how easy it would be to burn this entire building to the ground. MOVING ON!

And the floors for each room are just tatami. On polished wood. Or just the wood.

There’s a little alcove, tokonoma, in each room, with a hanging scroll and an ikebana flower or a bonsai tree, and maybe incense…
And all the rooms are very, very empty. Pretty much everything, and I mean *everything*, from the *fūton* to any furniture to any supplies, is kept neatly shut away in closets... which are also concealed by those rice-paper-over-wood screens. The doors are wood. The tricky part is that some slide, and others hinge open. And the doors are also covered with panels of... you guessed... thinner wood covered with rice paper.

Normally, the sliding *shoji* screen doors are somewhat see-through, and usually lead to the outside. Not here. Rice paper’s too easy to toss a *kunai* through. Wood at least adds a bit of a barrier... and prevents a lot of accidental tearing.

The only things that are rice paper only are these screens that can slide over or hang over or get wedged into the windows. There are also removable glass window frames. I honestly don’t know. Don’t ask me. All I know is that they’re there, and it’s confusing for me.

And then there’s also the netting, for when summer and mosquitoes come... and the storm shutters outside... and the larger rice-paper-over-wood panel that sometimes goes over the window... because apparently hiding windows is also a thing because my family likes being confusing.

It probably helps prevent any assassins (cough, shinobi) from escaping easily, though. Because apparently, if you can’t prevent them from getting to their target, you keep them in one place long enough for other people to catch them and get revenge. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

...And then there are the movable walls.

You heard me. *Fusuma*. They can act as doors, walls... it’s a bit complicated, and they’re a bit different. But the point is that they exist, and they’re *confusing*, even if they make rearranging space a lot easier.

So, all of the rooms look the same, all of the walls look the same, some of the walls hide closets, other walls hide doors, and still other walls move.

It’s a bit easier, now... in the sense that I’m probably not going to end up forgetting which door I came out of.

...which helps, but... you know... also doesn’t really help.

It helps keep things safe, though, I’ll bet. Nobody who hasn’t spent... at least several years here... is going to know which sliding panel on which wall in which room to open to get to the bathroom. Or the rooms with any important stuff, because the personal stuff doesn’t always get put away.

It’s really hard to explain.

Honestly, at this point, I’m just amazed that I didn’t end up in anyone’s bedroom by accident last night.

...

And there are electric lights. Or, like... light-bulbs in lantern shades? Like the cubic paper ones? And like, *in* the ceiling. So there’s a layer of really thin rice paper in between.

...it’s complicated, okay?

Seriously, everything about this world is very complicated and confusing at times.
My point is that when this house is on labyrinth mode, which is thankfully isolated to just the third and fourth floors, I can successfully navigate inside my room... and only my room.

Hence, it’s actually easier to pull that fake-wall-thing to the side, pull the other screen-thing to the side, get the rice paper frame out of the window, pry the glass frame out, open the shutters, and... replace the big screen-thing, stick to the wall, replace the glass frame, close the shutters, and... carefully spider-crawl down.

And it’s not like a smooth wall, after all. It’s kinda like a pagoda... or, I guess, a squashed Eiffel Tower. So there are plenty of rest stops on the roofs, which are curved and a bit slippery from the dew, but not that annoying.

...at least, not at first. It’s getting over the roof, with that overhanging lip, that’s annoying. And if I’m being honest, kinda terrifying.

Yeah, I think I’d actually rather just get used to the house, instead. It’s pretty nerve-wracking to crawl over the lip, and I’ve already gotten my clothes a bit wet. Ick. See? Annoying.

Okay. This is the second floor. I think the kitchen’s on this level. Let’s just open the...

And... the windows are locked. Brilliant.

I guess I’ll get to the ground level and wait for someone to wonder where I am. Again.

Wonderful. I absolutely love waiting.

Wait. Ah, I’m an idiot. Wasn’t it my idea just to get to the ground and start warming up? I am seriously, officially, an idiot.

Whose brain takes direction from the stomach more often than not.

Ooh, and let’s summon Kiyohime! She basically ditched me during the trip after the second time Daichi was too loud for her, and I metaphorically expired of boredom afterwards. I mean, I love looking at the scenery... but there is such a thing as too much scenery, especially when the scenery doesn’t change quickly enough. And it’s not like I can fall asleep in the saddle that easily!

(Which didn’t stop me from figuring out a creative use of straps, blankets, and the dip in the saddlebags, and sneakily tying a lead for my horse onto Otō-san’s horse, but then people panicked, and... yeah. Objectively speaking, a sleeping four-year-old on a horse isn’t the ideal combination. But... still. At least, after that, Okaa-san plied me with the stuff to make kumihimo braids and temari balls. The first took me only a bit of time before I started remembering how everything went, and the second... well, I poked myself in the palm with the needle more times than I can count, but I think it went a bit better than when I was on the boat. ...marginally better, admittedly, but still better.)
Okay. Blood, chakra, vial, more blood, some more chakra, and…

POOF!

“Sss… it is cold, hatchling,” a raspy voice hisses grumpily. “Why have you summoned me? Is that annoyance gone?”

I grin happily. “Hey, Kiyohime. Sorry about the temperature. Want to curl around my neck? I’m about to start exercising again, since I’ve kinda been neglecting that on the road.”

Kiyohime-san makes this full-body shiver that’s her version of a shrug, and I carefully arrange her around my neck.

Because yup! She’s a little bit bigger now, just enough to curl around a small four-year-old’s neck. <(¬_¬)> Am I awesome, or am I awesome?

...okay, it’s still kinda pathetic, but… it’s improvement! And just wait, I’m determined to get her to at least the size of a chopstick by the end of the year.

...

Okay, it’s just a little after sunrise… so I should have time. Let’s go jogging along the river bed!

Onward! ᐅ(งʼ̀لʼ́ộc)₴

Oh, this feels so good.

I’m pleasantly sore, my muscles are warm and loose, and I feel very happily awake. And the run was very pleasant, especially with the sheer number of wisteria trees everywhere.

The grass is wet, but the large flat stone area at the front of the house isn’t, so it’s pretty good for stretching and kata .

And yeah. If you don’t focus on results, everything’s fine, but once you do …

A week of inactivity, along with the sporadic-at-best training during the earlier months…

...

It’s a bit frustrating, but… I really can’t be upset. I made a choice, stuck to it, and…

...

These are the results.

...

Okay. There’s no time to be sad and mopey. Exercise time! Push-ups, sit-ups, more sprints, those horrible jumping “suicides,” kata …

Shake the disappointment off. Moping doesn’t do anything for productivity.

It’s time for pain .
Good pain, that is. As in, the “no pain, no gain” type of pain. That’s a pretty important distinction.

Half-way through practicing my kicks (slowly, holding them out… kinda like in dance, so as to strengthen the legs), I hear footsteps and turn.

“Ha-Hasuki-hiko?” a voice asks, and I turn.

Oh. This is another one of those servants… dammit. Name. Name. Ah…


“…Genka-san, was it?” I force out in a voice that’s probably two octaves higher than normal. Please please please let that be the right…

She beams, clapping her hands together. “I’m so honored that Hasuki-hiko remembered me!”

...oh, the pressure. Because I’m pretty sure this isn’t her impression, but… if I don’t remember anyone’s name… gah.

“Did… did you want… to tell me something?” I warble out nervously. Was I doing something wrong? Was I…

...my gaze falls onto the broom she’s carrying. Ah.

“Sorry. Did you mean to sweep?” I laugh awkwardly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be in your way. I’ll just… move?”

“Oh! No, I wouldn’t dare bother Hasuki-hiko. But… if this one might be allowed to speak… there are rooms on the second floor, and in the outer buildings, meant for training. The masters often use it to practice with the sword…” Her eyes widen, and she squeaks in alarm. “Ah, I didn’t mean to offend Hasuki-hiko or anything! I simply… wished…”

“Thanks for letting me know!” I smile… which turns a bit embarrassed after a few moments. “Ah… this is a bit embarrassing… but… could you please show me where that is?” I ask. “I… this is rather new for me, and I get lost rather easily…”

“I would be honored to be of use to Hasuki-hiko!” Genka-san smiles, clapping her hands. “Please, if you would follow me?”

The training room is awesome. There are… essentially dummies, or targets, I guess, in the form of wood wrapped in straw and cloth, and they’ve got a solid enough base that they’re perfect to practice punches and kicks! And the floor’s nice and smooth, but not slippery, and the ceiling’s high enough, and…

It’s just awesome, okay?

I’m in the middle of metaphorically trying to beat the stuffing out of a target I dragged into the middle of the floor when Hiroshi-ojisan walks in.
I realize he’s there when he drops his sword.

“Ah, good morning, Hiroshi…-oji…” I go silent. He’s surprisingly shocked. I mean…

“Am I doing something wrong?” I ask anxiously. “Sorry. I was just told of this place by one of the servants, and… I decided…”

“Hm? Oh, no, it’s fine. I just… well, normally I’m the only one up so early,” Hiroshi-ojisan chuckles, bending over to pick up his sword.

I frown. “Really? But… it can’t even be a koku after sunrise! And at home, Okaa-san and Otō-san… I thought…”

“Well, asagohan, breakfast, is in half a koku, so…” his voice trails off, and he frowns. “Hasuki-kun? When did you get up? And… how did you get down here?”

I can practically feel nervous sweat forming on the back of my head, as I carefully pick up Kiyohime-san from my ear, pretending to just brush some hair behind my ear, hissing a hurried, “I think you might want to go nap now.”

Thankfully, when my hand goes back behind my back, I feel a soft poof of chakra-smoke.

I laugh awkwardly. “Eh… hehehe… uh… I think I woke up just a little after sunrise? But that’s, like, pretty normal for me? And…” I take a deep breath.

“Pleasedon’tbeangryIjustkeptgettinglostrsoIclimbeddownoutsideanddon’tworryIwon’tbedoingthatanytimeso…”

The silence hangs in the air for a few moments, before Hiroshi-ojisan raises a hand to his face and heaves a heavy sigh.

“I am going… to pretend I didn’t hear that. I don’t know how. I do not particularly want to know how, at this moment. I’ll find some time to show how everything’s laid out after breakfast. Don’tdo it again.” He fixes me with a heavy stare. “Do you understand me?”

“Yessorrywon’thappenagain!” I squeak.

An awkward silence forms, and I work up the nerve to ask a question. “That… that sword is really cool?”

As soon as the words exit my mouth, I want to bang my head against a wooden wall. That… was not a question.

…

More awkward silence.

…

Okay, I guess it’s up to me. “Ne, Oji-san? What exactly do I need to learn?” I ask. “I mean… Okaa-san’s already teaching me about stuff like shōgi and go and what’s normal and proper for, like, clothing and stuff. And also… like, musical instruments. I’m already somewhat good at calligraphy… I mean, I’m not good, but I’m not really that bad either.” I pause. “I think.”

I plop down on the floor, rubbing at the patterns. “And, like… I’m not sure if I need to learn it or not, but… ikebana and chadō are interesting. And I don’t know how, but I really want to learn how to
make the pretty paintings. And… I think Okaa-san mentioned stuff like archery, how to use a sword… and I think I’m going to learn more about poetry later, and I’m learning mathematics and how to calculate stuff.”

After a moment, Hiroshi-ojisan speaks up. “I am no longer fit to wield a sword in combat, after my accident, but I daresay I can help out with some of those. You will probably want to ask Kimiko-chan about the poetry and painting. The capital has better resources for learning than we do, here. But…” he smiles. “This is a castle. Let me show you around a bit, now, and explain some things.”

“I mean… as long as it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” I add hastily. “I know you were going to practice, and…”

“Oh, never mind that,” he grins. “This is more important. I can’t wait to rub it in Kichirō’s face that I got the jump on him for this— he wanted to be the first to influence the next generation.” Hiroshi-ojisan turns, chuckling darkly. “Hah! Forget flirting and lessons in acting… I’ve got dibs, now.”

I’m actually a bit worried at this point. “Hiroshi-ojisan? What… what do you mean by that?”

“Don’t worry, Hasuki-kun,” Hiroshi-ojisan replies, still chuckling. “You’re just going to help your Oji-san get a piece of blackmail that he’s going to be able to hold over Kichirō’s head for at least the next ten years.”

He walks off, waiting for me to follow, muttering plans. “We still have at least a quarter- koku before breakfast, and no one’s going to be downstairs for at least half a koku. Hasuki-kun’s smart. I can probably get through the important things to know about the bow before yumi before asagohan…”

Uh, oh. This… seems… alarmingly familiar.

I… have a bad feeling about this.

I walk into the room with the table, this one raised with chairs around, with a headache.

I. Hate. Vocabulary.

Actually, no, I’ll like it eventually… as soon as my headache dies down. Unfortunately… I still have my headache right now.

And I refuse to suffer alone.

And plus, it always helps to go over everything.

Teaching someone else the thing you learned is probably the best way of making sure you fully understand the thing.

Or in this case, it’s a good test. Can I explain it myself and have everything make sense?

Yumi ( 弓 ) is the term for a bow. It includes the longer daikyū ( 大弓 ) and the shorter hankyū ( 半弓 ) used in the practice of kyūdō and kyūjutsu, archery. The yumi is nowadays mostly an important weapon of the samurai. The arrows are called ya.

The yumi is exceptionally tall, standing over two meters, and typically surpasses the height of the archer ( ite, 射手 ). They are traditionally made by laminating bamboo, wood and leather, using techniques which have not changed for centuries.

The yumi is asymmetric, and the grip ( nigiri ) is positioned at about two thirds of the distance from
the upper tip. The upper and lower curves also differ, though people like to argue about whether it’s for use on horseback or to enable early people to shoot from a kneeling position… or because bows were once made from a single piece of wood, which thus affected how it bent… a characteristic that would be balanced by a lower grip. There’s also something about vibration… but that’s not too important.

The string of a *yumi* is traditionally made of hemp, and they’re usually not replaced until they break. This results in the yumi flexing in the direction opposite to the way it is drawn, and is considered beneficial to the health of the *yumi*. The nocking point on the string is built up through the application of hemp and glue to protect the string and to provide a thickness which helps hold the nock ( *hazu* ) of the arrow ( *ya* ) in place while drawing the *yumi*. But it can also be made of strands of waxed bamboo.

A bamboo *yumi* requires careful attention, and this was part of what Hiroshi-ojisan lectured me the most about. Left unattended, the *yumi* can become out-of-shape and may eventually become unusable. The shape of a *yumi* will change through normal use and can be re-formed when needed through manual application of pressure, through shaping blocks, or by leaving it strung or unstrung when not in use.

The shape of the curves of a *yumi* is greatly affected by whether it is left strung or unstrung when not in use. The decision to leave a *yumi* strung or unstrung depends upon the current shape of the *yumi*. A *yumi* that is relatively flat when unstrung will usually be left unstrung when not in use (a *yumi* in this state is sometimes referred to as being 'tired'). A *yumi* that has excessive curvature when unstrung is typically left strung for a period of time to ‘tame’ the *yumi*.

A well cared-for *yumi* can last many generations, while the usable life of a mistreated *yumi* can be very short.

...so, kinda like pets and people?

Then, there’s choosing a bow (and arrows), which depends on the height of the archer. Or more specifically, the suitable height for the bow depends on the archer's draw ( *yazuka* ) which is about half the archer's height. Kinda like skis and poles, just more deadly.

As as side note, there’s also a super-special kind of bow (musical bow?), known as an *azusayumi* (梓 弓), which is a sacred bow made from *azusa* wood (梓). Playing an *azusayumi* forms part of some rituals.

You see, there’s a story that a golden bird perched on the bow of this one dude who was the great grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu, and the first human ruler of the Land of Fire. This was seen as an extremely good omen, and his bow magically developed the power to dispel evil by the mere plucking of its string. His bow was made of *azusa*.

And… there are a bunch of bows kept at this special shrine in the Land of Fire, which become something called Great Treasures of the Gods, and then get replaced with other bows every twenty years or so, presumably so that the other bows can also become magical. I might be misinterpreting some things, but that’s what I got, basically. Oh, and apparently it’s also a long-standing tradition for the great lords and nobility to have a set of these sacred bows, either originals or replicas, in their homes (one red, one black).

Oh, but they’re meant to be plucked. Like… musical instruments or something. Which is confusing. And they’re also lacquered and fitted with gold, silk cords and brocade?

...confusing. Moving on, to actually *doing* the shooting.
In kyūdō there are three kinds of practice, or geiko. The first is mitori geiko – receiving with the eyes the style and technique of an advanced archer. Then, there’s kufū geiko – learning and keeping in mind the details of the technique and spiritual effort to realize it. Finally, there’s kazu geiko – repetition through which the technique is personified in one’s own shooting.

Beginners start with a practice bow and by practising the movements of hassetsu. The second step for a beginner is to do karabiki training with a bow without an arrow to learn handling of the bow and performing hassetsu until full draw. Handling and maintenance of the equipment is also part of the training. After given permission by the teacher, beginners start practicing with the glove and arrow. Next steps may vary from teacher to teacher, but include practising first yugamae, then the draw and last release and shooting at makiwara. A beginner starting to shoot at the mato may be asked to shoot from half or three-quarters of the usual distance. Advanced beginners and advanced shooters practise shooting at makiwara, mato and some with omato.

...time to explain what all of those words mean.

Makiwara is a specially designed straw target. The makiwara is shot at from a very close range (about the length of the archer’s strung yumi when held horizontally from the centerline of the archer’s body). Because the target is so close and the shot most certainly will hit, the archer can concentrate on refining technique rather than on the arrow’s arc.

Mato is the normal target for most kyūdō practitioners. Mato sizes and shooting distances vary, but most common is hoshi mato, 12 sun (about thirty-six centimeters or something) in diameter, shot at from a distance. I forgot the measurement. For competitions and examinations, kasumi mato is used. For ceremonies it is most common to use hoshi mato which is the same as kasumi mato, but with different markings.

Omato is the mato used for long distance enteki shooting. The diameter of omato is about 53 sun. There are separate competitions also for enteki shooting.

Now, what are the competitions for? Well, there are three levels of skill. There’s tōteki, the arrow hits the target, then kanteki, the arrow pierces the target. Finally, there’s zaiteki, where the arrow, figuratively speaking, exists in the target.

( Ya shafts are traditionally made of bamboo, with either eagle or hawk feathers. The length of an arrow is the archer’s yatsuka plus about another two to three sun. Every ya has a spinning direction being made from feathers from alternate sides of the bird, the haya spins clockwise upon release while the otoya spins counter-clockwise. Kyūdō archers usually shoot two ya per round, with the haya being shot first (haya means first arrow; otoya means second arrow). It is often said that the alternate spinning direction of the arrows would prevent two consecutive identically shot arrows from flying identically and thus colliding. Ya are normally kept in a cylindrical quiver, called a yazutsu, with ceremonial and traditional archers using the Yebira.)

The kyūdō archer wears a glove on the right hand called a yugake, usually made of deerskin, either hard or soft (with a hardened thumb or not). With a hard glove, the thumb area is not very flexible and has a pre-made groove used to pull the string (tsuru). With a soft glove, the thumb area is very flexible and is without a pre-made groove, allowing the practitioners to create their own, based on their own shooting habits.
Typically a *yugake* will be of the three-finger or four-finger variety. The three fingered version is called a *mitsugake*, and the four-fingered version is called a *yotsugake*. Typically the primary reason an archer may choose a stronger glove like the *yotsugake* is to make it easier to pull heavy bows. The three-fingered glove is generally used with bows with a lighter pull. Of course, personal choice also factors in.

The practical reasoning for the extra finger on the glove stems from having more surface area available to the archer for the heavier draws. During the draw, the thumb of the archer is typically placed on the last gloved finger of the drawing hand, with the first (or, in the case of a *yotsugake*, the first and index fingers) being placed gently on either the thumb or the arrow shaft itself. Sometimes a type of resin powder, called *giriko* is applied to the thumb and holding finger to assist in the grip during the pull. The extra finger allows for a stronger hold on the thumb, as it is then placed on the third finger of the hand instead of the second. Some schools only ever use the three-fingered glove, though.

The one-finger glove, called an *ippongake* is generally used for beginners and covers only the thumb. Some versions have a full wrist covering and others simply cover the thumb with a small strap and snap around the wrist. Because it has no glove over the fingers, it is typically uncomfortable for the archer to use *giriko* powder. *Ippongake* are generally not used by advanced archers, and cannot be used in most competitions.

The five-finger glove, called a *morogake*, is used almost exclusively by Ogasawara Ryū practitioners, and is not typically used in competition or by any other school.

And that name’s really important.

The *Ogasawara-ryū* (小笠原流, “Ogasawara school”) is a traditional system of martial arts and etiquette, formalised and handed down by the Ogasawara clan, a clan that formed after splitting from the Minamoto clan. It’s since kinda folded back in, I think, but… family issues are complicated, okay? The clan is basically in charge of maintaining, like, etiquette and ceremony.

The school specializes in horsemanship (*bajutsu*), archery (*kyujutsu*), mounted archery (*yabusame*) and etiquette, with an emphasis on ceremonial and ritual practice. It laid the foundations for etiquette. These rules and practices covered bowing (the school's teachings describe *nine different ways* of performing a bow), eating, marriage and other aspects of everyday life, down to the minutiae of correctly opening or closing a door.

So, it’s like the textbook for how to avoid offending anyone important.

Back to shooting.

A practitioner's nock and grip of the arrow can be dictated by the glove and bow being used. It is not uncommon for practitioners who have upgraded or downgraded bow weight to continue to use the same glove and not change.

With the exception of the *ippongake*, the *yugake* is worn with an underglove called a *shitagake* made of cotton or synthetic cloth, mainly to protect the *yugake* from sweat which would degrade the deerskin of the glove over time. The *shitagake* comes in two varieties, three-fingered and four-fingered, depending on whether it is used under the *mitsugake* or the *yotsugake*.

Because of the unique shooting technique of *kyūdō*, protection on the left (bow) arm is not generally required. The bow string, when properly released, will travel around the bow hand, coming to rest on the outside of the arm. However, on rare occasions a bow hand glove, called an *oshidegake*, is used, which serves to protect the left thumb from injury from the arrow and fletching. A forearm protector
can also be worn, primarily by beginners, to protect the left arm from being hit by the string.

Powder made of burnt rice husks called *fudeko* is applied to the hand that holds the bow to absorb sweat, allowing the bow to turn in the hand.

Female archers sometimes also wear a chest protector called a *muneate*, which is generally a piece of leather or plastic which is designed to protect the breasts from being struck by the bowstring during shooting.

Because repeated usage tends to weaken the bowstring, it is not uncommon for a bowstring to break during shooting. Hence, many archers carry spare strings in what is called a *tsurumaki* ("bow string roll"). Traditional *tsurumaki* are flat yoyo-shaped carriers made of woven bamboo, typically with a leather strap.

Many archers also have small containers of *fudeko* and *giriko* attached to the end of the *tsurumaki* strap; these containers are called *fudeko-ire* and *giriko-ire* and are traditionally made of horn or antler. And… all kyūdō archers hold the bow in their left hand and draw the string with their right, so that all archers face the higher position (*kamiza*) while shooting.

Kyūdō archers draw the bow so that the drawing hand is held behind the ear. If done improperly, upon release the string may strike the archer's ear or side of the face.

Resulting from the technique to release the shot, the bow will (for a practised archer) spin in the hand so that the string stops in front of the archer's outer forearm. This action of *yugaeri* is a combination of technique and the natural working of the bow. It is unique to kyūdō.

Kyūdō technique is meticulously prescribed. The *hassetsu* (or "eight stages of shooting") is pretty standard, even if some different styles have their own variations from the steps, most notable difference being between the vertical bow rising *shomen* and aslant bow rising *shamen*.

The *hassetsu* of *shomen*-style consists of the following steps:

*Ashibumi*, placing the footing. The archer steps onto the line from where arrows are shot (known as the *shai*) and turns to face the *kamiza*, so that the left side of the archer's body faces the target. The archer then sights from the target to the feet and with the feet set apart so that the distance between them is equal to the archer's *yazuka*, about half his body height, and equal to the length of an arrow.

A line drawn between the archer's toes should pass through the target after the completion of the *ashibumi*. During competition, an archer may have a second set of arrows sitting on the ground at the feet. To be correct in *ashibumi*, these arrows must not extend in front of or behind the archer's footing stance. The archer's feet are then placed outward at a 60 degree angle from each other, forming a "V", this ensures equal balance to both feet.

*Dozukuri*, forming the body. The archer verifies balance and that the pelvis and the line between the shoulders are parallel to the line set up during *ashibumi*. During *dozukuri*, the kyūdōka will straighten the back and posture, forming a straight line from shoulders to feet. Practically this is to prevent the bowstring from striking the archer's face when shooting.

*Yugamae*, readying the bow.

*Yugamae* consists of three phases:

( *Torikake*, gripping of the bowstring with the right hand.

*Tenouchi*, the left hand is positioned for shooting on the bow's grip.
**Monomi**, the archer turns the head to gaze at the target.

**Uchiokoshi**, raising the bow. The archer raises the bow above the head to prepare for the draw.

**Hikiwake**, drawing apart. The archer starts bringing down the bow while spreading his arms, simultaneously pushing the bow with the left hand and drawing the string with the right.

( **Daisan**, Big three. This forms the midway point in Hikiwake.)

**Kai**, the full draw. The archer continues the movement started in the previous phase, until full draw is achieved with the arrow placed slightly below the cheekbone or level with the mouth. The arrow points along the line set up during **ashibumi**.

(During this step, there’s **tsumeai**, constructing the vertical and horizontal lines of the body, and then **nobiai**, uniting the expansions of the body.

**Hanare**, the release. The technique results in the bowstring being released from the right hand and the right arm extending behind the archer.

**Zanshin**, "the remaining body or mind" or "the continuation of the shot". The archer remains in the position reached after **hanare** while returning from the state of concentration associated with the shot.

(This step includes **yudaoshi**, the lowering of the bow.)

...

And that’s basically it. Other schools might have some minor differences, but for the most part… well, you can’t exactly shoot the arrow before drawing the bow.

...

But the biggest miracle is that, somehow, it’s only been an hour or so of learning about **kyūdō**.

...

Yeah. For the sheer amount of basic information crammed into my head (which I’m trying desperately to repeatedly run through, so as to hopefully not forget anything), it’s really not been that much time. I’ve learned the vocabulary, learned to string, store, and care for all of the parts of a bow, found where everything’s kept in the closets along the outside of the **dōjō**, and gone over the process of drawing a small, kid-sized bow.

My shoulders hurt. This isn’t anything like the bows in the summer camps **Before**. Even just repeatedly lifting the bow…

Ouch.

I really need to actually try and build up my shoulders. This was also a thing **Before**, but… well, now it actually matters.

“*Ohayō, Hasuki-chan,*” a voice calls softly.

I look up. “*Ah, good morning, Obaa-sama! Sorry. I didn’t see you.*”

“You seem to have been very busy this morning,” she comments. “…as have you, Hiroshi.”

I bite my lip, looking over and saddling Oji-san with the responsibility of answering.
Oh, I was just showing Hasuki-kun some of the basics of kyūdō,” Hiroshi-san laughs awkwardly.

Obaa-sama purses her lips. “Hasuki-chan is far too young for regular practice of that,” she chides. “Be careful with the draw weight of the bows. Bad habits in kyūdō —"

“Take ten years to fix,” Hiroshi-ojisan sighs. “Yes. I know, Haha.”

“If you knew, you would know that it would have been better to start Hasuki-chan with swords, not bows, if you truly wished to snub your brother,” Obaa-sama sniffs.

Hiroshi-ojisan groans. “But… bows are his specialty! He keeps on getting selected for yabuseame, and…”

“No.” Obaa-sama holds up a hand. “No excuses, Hiroshi.”

“...hai, Haha-ue,” he sighs.

I decide to interrupt the drama. Because I feel like I’m missing something.

“Sorry, I don’t meant to interrupt, but… yabuseame?” I ask. “What’s that?”

“The practice of riding a horse down a track, shooting three arrows at these three targets along the way,” Hiroshi-ojisan offers, sighing again.

“Yabusame was designed as a way to please and entertain the kami, thus encouraging their blessings for the prosperity of the land, the people, and the harvest,” Obaa-sama frowns. “To be selected as a yabusame archer is a great honor.”

O-okay. Yeah. Probably a bit of a sore point to Hiroshi-ojisan… especially when you consider that he probably isn’t too fond of horses, after his accident. Moving on.

“Ah, Obaa-sama?” I ask again. “You mentioned… learning to use swords?”

“Yes.” Obaa-sama smiles. “Have Hiroshi start you on the basics when he has time. He is truly magnificent with the blades.”

“I owe my skill to my teacher,” Hiroshi-ojisan shrugs when I look at him. “Mifune-shishō was kind enough to take me under his wing and teach me what he knew of kenjutsu and iaijutsu. I still have much to learn.”

Wait. I think… that name’s familiar for some reason. I know that name.

...gah, where do I rememb— “You will always have room to learn, Hiroshi,” Obaa-sama concludes. “The pursuit of perfection is eternal. No human ever has enough time to learn all that there is to be learned.”

Holy… s#^t. We have… an entire armory.

...You know, when Okaa-san told me that the “first floor” was just for “storage,” I’d expected something like… food. Frankly, just food, really. Maybe some clothes and other things that aren’t
used. Maybe some furniture.

…

And admittedly, some weapons, possibly, but…

I think this is a bit too much.

…

There are *multiple* boxes with full sets of samurai-style metal and lacquer armor, for humans and horses.

Yes, there are also sets of saddles, reigns, leather… ceramics, silverware… and food. Lots and lots of food. As in, I think this might be enough to survive a siege. And there’s enough general stuff to probably refurbish this entire house.

…

But the weapons really take the cake. The armor, by itself, seems rather excessive. The fact that there are almost thirty sets of full armor, not including the ten or so sets for horses, is *very* excessive… and that’s just what I counted.

Then, there are the swords. An entire wall, with an entire cabinet full to the brim of swords of varying lengths.

Then… the *tekkan* and *hachiwari*, which don’t *look* impressive, admittedly. They’re dull and heavy, but that’s also exactly why these blades are absolutely terrifying. They’re meant to hit armor-clad enemies with maximum impact. According to Hiroshi-ojisan, the tekkan was specifically developed for use against opponents wearing armor and is meant to be used against the armor’s weak points. The hachiwari resemble the tekkan, but also has a short hook at the base, which can hook an opponent’s armor or to gain leverage to pry the armor apart. If a *katana* is deadly in its finesse… the tekkan and hachiwari aimed for heavy-handed disarmament.

Then there’s the *gunsen* and *tessen*, foldable fans reinforced by metal plating, which are apparently meant mainly as a last resort, or to beat people into submission without killing them. In war, battlefield commanders carried fans as symbols of rank, but large, solid *gunbai* also served as means of communication to deployed forces. Visible from long distances, motioning the fan directed actions on the battlefield. And in the hands of a skilled shinobi… it could be used with absolutely devastating results against armies.

There’s also a scythe-like thing, a *kama*, which gained popularity among low-ranking *bushi* and can be used for cutting and slashing.

There’s also the weighted chain, the *manriki-kusari*, which is also sometimes called *fundo-kusari*, which is a versatile weapon with many advantages. The collapsable chain can be rolled up, concealed and easily transported. It can be used for climbing, restraining an enemy, and can be wrapped around body parts for extra protection. In battle, a skilled user can shorten his grip and tailor the length to any situation. Once in motion, a manriki-kusari moves at speeds that render it… essentially invisible. An experienced practitioner can swing the chain around himself to keep opponents at bay. Thanks to its weighted end, the manriki-kusari doubles as a projectile— its metal weight can be thrown to strike opponents. Yet, unlike other throwing weapons like darts or knives which have to be retrieved to be used again, the manriki-kusari’s weight returns to the hand of its wielder via its attached chain. …terrifying, huh? And the manriki-kusari can also ensnare and
immobilize an opponent's weapon. It’s pretty hard for a blade to cut the chain, so more often than not, the chains will wrap around a blade, making it particularly effective against the katana. But manriki-kusari has disadvantages, too— it’s difficult to master, and it’s not the best in small spaces. It’s a mid-range or long-range weapon.

There’s kusarigama, which combine the manrikigusari and kama so that there’s basically a scythe attached to a weight by a long chain. Enemies can be kept at bay by the swinging weighted chain and then slashed with the blade in close combat.

One cabinet’s full of staffs, made of wood and metal, which have a weight attached to a chain at the top that can be used to trip, strike, or disarm an opponent. With the chain concealed, within the shaft, chigiriki can be disguised as an ordinary walking stick or staff.

...I really want to figure out how to use that.

Then there’s the massive cabinet of bows and arrows. Probably a hundred bows, and several thousand arrows. At least.

I don’t know what the blow-darts do, nor do I know how well they work, but… fukiya are, without a doubt, ninja weapons. Blow-darts make very little noise, are easy to transport and can double as flutes, pipes, or breathing straws. The tube can launch notes and messages to allies. They’re also handy for hunting. Apparently, in a pinch, bamboo or paper can be used as substitutes for the tube, too. Poisoning the darts makes the weapon extra effective.

I really, really want to figure out how to use one. Hiroshi-ojisan just handed me a tube, along with a small satchel of darts, and told me to have fun figuring them out.

You know those cool random skills that people only figure out when they have way too much time on their hands? I guess I’ve finally got too much time on my hands. So, first up… blow darts. Then, probably, I want to see if I can throw playing cards. Are there playing cards here?

Moving on.

Sometimes called kubotan, yawara are small grip weapons that fit in the palm of one's hand. Though they may be pointed, yawara usually have blunt ends at each side made for striking an opponent and proved especially effective on pressure points. Rounded or hexagonal, a yawara’s greatest advantage lies in gripping the weapon, which strengthens the user’s punch and helps to prevent hand breaks.

Then… there are one. Stone axes predate those of iron and steel and made ono a preferred weapon of the yamabushi, or warrior monks. You heard me right. Warrior monks. That’s like… a level of awesome I hadn’t realized was possible. The yamabushi used these pole-axes, some six feet tall, in the thick of battle, whirling them around at varying heights, or in individual encounters.

Tobiguchi are axe-like tools that act more like hooks, and were used to clear debris away from burning buildings. Apparently, “even during a fire it was important to be armed… and one had to be prepared for the possibility of someone taking advantage of the situation and attacking.” Therefore, as proof of their use as weaponry, some tobiguchi feature a hook to aid disarmament. The fire tool known as “kite beak” earned the nickname, kenkatobi, or “fighting kite” as it grew to popularity amongst commoners.

One of the most popular and also archaic weapons is the bō staff, which is basically just a big wooden stick. Bō come in many shapes and sizes. For example, the maru-bō is round, while the hakaku-bō hexagonal. The average bō is usually about the height of, or a little taller than, the user,
but there’s a shorter stick— the \textit{jō}. That stick’s length is dictated by the wielder's preference. Warriors usually take advantage of a \textit{bō}'s length, striking from afar or swinging it around to ward off enemies. The \textit{jō} can be used like a lot of other weapons— the striking stroke of the \textit{katana}, the thrusting reach of the spear, and the reversible striking power of the \textit{bō}.

Then… there’s the metal, studded stick. The most lethal-looking of the \textit{bo} family, the metal spiked \textit{kanabō} is shaped like a \textit{bō} or tapered like a bat and specializes in bludgeoning enemies. It’s usually shown in folklore as the preferred weapon of \textit{oni}, which are kind of like… ogres? Demons? In fact, the image of an \textit{oni} with \textit{kanabō} is so powerful that it was immortalized in a \textit{kotowaza}, which is like a proverb— “oni with an iron club” (\textit{oni ni kanabō})— which refers to… I think… invincibility.

\textit{Otsuchi} are giant battle hammers that are used as… mainly battering rams, whether against doors, gates, walls… or enemies.

The \textit{kyoketsu-shoge} consists of a hooked dagger attached to a rope with a ring-shaped weight at the end. The double edged dagger can be used for stabbing while the ring swings overhead and distracts or ensnares the enemy.

The \textit{jutte} is a versatile weapon that’s… basically a stick with a hook, that can deflect sword attacks and disarm a suspect with minimal injuries. \textit{Jutte} require close proximity to be useful, but once in range, the weapon can strike, entangle the clothes, restrain, and even throw enemies. The \textit{kagi} or hook of the \textit{jutte} can be used to entrap a sword blade… but also serves an equally functional purpose of keeping the \textit{jutte} attached to someone’s \textit{obi}, or to entangle the clothes/fingers of an opponent.

\textit{Sasumata} are long poles that can entrap perpetrators with the u-shaped fork at the end. The pole’s protruding spikes entangle clothes, aiding capture. They’re basically just really good at holding up stuff or restraining stuff. Not really the best at killing people, but still useful in their own right.

\textit{Naginata} are used by both men and women, but \textit{naginata} are now a… kinda standard weapon of females in nobility. And female warriors. Like, apparently Okaa-san’s really good with it. Although it resembles a spear, a \textit{naginata}’s curved blade allows for sword-like strikes instead of just simple stabbing motions.

\textit{Shukō} and \textit{ashikō} are short spikes worn over the hands or feet. Although meant for climbing, they also make pretty decent weapons.

Worn over the hands, the protruding metal class of the \textit{tekko-kagi} can be used for scraping and striking. The claw allowed users to slash and defend with natural hand motions. With proper technique, even \textit{katana} can be ensnared, disarmed or broken. These are also really cool, and I really want to see if I could work them into the leopard-style \textit{kata}.

Now… \textit{kakute}. Basically rings with spikes. Contrary to intuition, users are supposed to wear these rings with their spikes toward their palms, as the \textit{kakute}’s main advantage lies in its grip. One ring is usually worn on the middle finger while a second ring can be placed on the thumb. The main purpose of the weapon is to gain a firm hold on an opponent, with the teeth digging into pressure points to cause pain, and the teeth can be dipped in poison for added effectiveness.

\textit{Nekote} are sharp, claw-like weapons fit over the fingertips and can be dipped in poison for lethal results. Basically… cat claws. Nya. Cool, but… I’m not sure how practical they are. It’s like… those long, gel nails. But removable. It’s be hard to to fight with anything else with those on, and it probably takes a bit of time to get them on in the first place.

There are also shields, but… those are surprisingly not common.
And… *nunchaku*. One of the most famous, glorified and downright cool weapons, legend has it that *nunchaku* originated as a grain pounding tool. Constructed by connecting two sticks with a rope or chain, *nunchaku* can be swung around the body for defense or wiped outwards to strike an enemy. The short sticks and foldable chain mean *nunchaku* can be tucked away for secrecy and easy transport.

The heavy, three pronged *sai* can be used in pairs, and may be carried with a third to replace one that has been thrown. Similar to the *jutte*, and due to the widely spaced prongs, *sai* make effective defense against longer weapons like *bo* and *katana*. (Personally, I think the three-pronged *kunai* are kinda based on this.)

And *tonfa* are also very cool. This straight wooden rod with the short, perpendicular handle is usually used as a defensive guard and striking weapon. Masters can wield the weapon in a fluid spinning motion, relying on its “centripetal force,” similar to *nunchaku*.

...possibly the weirdest weapons is probably the *eku bō*, or fisherman's oar. It... looks like an oar, and the wide, heavy end makes the *eku bō* unbalanced and more difficult to master, so… I don’t know why we have it. To be honest, Hiroshi-ojisan’s also a bit confused. But apparently, it’s nice to have in handy to carry things with. I honestly don’t know. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Then there are... what look like brass knuckles, or knuckle-dusters, *tekki* and *tekko*. They’re either supposed to be based on horseshoes or stirrups. They made good striking weapons, but also offers defense against weapon strikes. The problem is... well, their small surface area and closeness to the hand means that users have to be precise (and probably more than a little brave) to rely on *tekki* for defensive techniques.

Then... there’s the hoe. As in, the farming implement, with an “e” on the end in English. The *kuwa* consists of two parts, the long handle and the blade. Ironically, you attack with both the handle and the blade. When holding a *kuwa* with the butt-end facing your opponent and the heavy metal end to the rear, the metal helps increase the speed and dynamics of the shaft. What results is a tool that can keep pace even with fast weapons, but can then follow up with punishing, heavy blows from the other end. The blade can also be used as a hook, to trip opponents.

Finally are the *tetsubishi/makibishi*, some… weapons… that are arguably the most annoying (and terrifying) things ever.

...they’re basically small bundles of spikes (usually with four, so that no matter how it’s thrown, one’s always facing up), and they slow opponents down and prevent chase, because they *pierce your f%^#ing feet*. The spikes are long and sharp enough to penetrate most soles, especially if you’re running and put your weight on the sole. The lesson is that you should wear geta. Not sandals. Definitely not *zori*. And they’re also troublesome, because the little spikes can become a disadvantage to the thrower as well.

...my personal opinion is to just stay away from these. Seriously. And they’re hard to find and hard to clean up and... I can just imagine a horse or an animal or some kid stepping on one, and...

...no. Just... no.

...

Then, there are fun things.

They’re the things that can go *BOOM*. 
As in, the explosives. This category of weapons includes small stuff… and not-so small stuff.

...like cannons.

But… also just small bomb-like things. Like… horokubiya, which is exploding stuff encased in iron, ceramics or paper, with a mixture of what I think is gunpowder and metal shards inside.

…

But as a side note, another fun, not very well-known weapon… slings. Like, the leaf-shaped piece of leather with long cords attached to holes punched in both sides, which are whirled around with a stone to be hurled at people. Tosekiki. It’s awesome, seems seriously fun, and actually seems to have a pretty long range. Hiroshi-ojisan shows me it, and it looks really, really dangerous, and thus cool.

…

Okay. That’s technically all off-topic. Swords. The main topic was swords.

…

First of all... there isn’t really a standard “sword.” There are many types of swords that differ by size, shape, field of application and method of manufacture. There are different terms to classify swords based on the blade itself, as well as how you wear the blade. There’s a lot of ritual formality.

An unsigned and shortened blade that was once made and intended for use as a tachi may be alternately mounted in tachi koshirae and katana koshirae. It is properly distinguished, then, by the style of mount it currently inhabits. A long tanto may be classified as a wakizashi due to its length… however, it may have originally been mounted and used as a tanto… making the length distinction somewhat arbitrary but necessary when referring to unmounted short blades.

When the mounts are taken out of the equation, a tanto and wakizashi will be determined by length unless their intended use can be absolutely determined or the speaker is rendering an opinion on the intended use of the blade.

But generally... it’s still their length.

Swords are measured in shaku. The three main divisions of blade length are one shaku or less for tantō, 1-2 shaku for sho-tō (wakizashi or kodachi), and two shaku or more for daitō (long swords, such as katana or tachi).

A blade shorter than one shaku is considered a tantō. A blade longer than one shaku but less than two is considered a sho-tō (short sword). The wakizashi and kodachi are in this category. The length is measured in a straight line across the back of the blade from tip to munemachi (where blade meets tang). Most blades that fall into the sho-tō size range are wakizashi. However, some daitō were designed with blades slightly shorter than 2 shaku. These were called kodachi and are somewhere in between a true daitō and a wakizashi. A sho-tō and a daitō together are called a daishō (literally, “big-little”). A blade longer than two shaku is considered a daitō, or long sword. To qualify as a daitō, the sword must have a blade longer than 2 shaku in a straight line. While there is a well-defined lower-limit to the length of a daitō, the upper limit is not well enforced, but usually swords that are over 3 shaku in blade length are usually referred to as or called ōdachi.

The term daitō is often used when explaining the related terms sho-tō (short sword) and daishō (the set of both large and small sword). Miyamoto Musashi refers to the long sword in The Book of Five Rings. He is referring to the katana in this, and refers to the nodachi and the odachi as “extra-long swords”.
So… here are some swords:

Chokutō (直刀, “straight sword”) — A straight single edged sword that was produced prior to the 10th century, and without differential hardening or folding.

Tsurugi/Ken (剣, “sword”) — A straight two edged sword that was produced prior to the 10th century, and may be without differential hardening or folding.

Tachi (太刀, “big sword”) — A sword that is generally longer and more curved than the katana, with curvature centered from the middle or towards the tang (the part of the blade that’s in the hilt), and often including the tang. Tachi are worn suspended, with the edge downward.

Kodachi (小太刀, “small big sword”) — A shorter version of the tachi, but with similar mounts and intended use.

Odachi (大太刀, “big big sword”) / Nodachi (野太刀, “big field sword”) — Very large tachi.

Uchigatana (打刀) — A development from the tachi that’s worn with the edge upwards in the obi.

Katate-uchi (片手打ち, “one handed”) — A short type of uchigatana with a short tang, intended for one handed use. It’s what eventually led to the development of the wakizashi.

Katana (刀, “sword”) — A general term for the traditional sword with a curved, relatively long blade, worn with the edge upwards in the obi. Developed from the uchigatana.

Wakizashi (脇差, “side inserted [sword]”) — A general term for a sword between one and two shaku long. Generally it is the short blade that accompanies a katana in the traditional samurai daisho pairing of swords, but may be worn by classes other than the samurai as a single blade, also worn edge up as the katana. The name derives from the way the sword would be stuck at one’s side through the obi.

As a side note… there are other bladed weapons made in the same traditional manner that are also considered to be swords… even though they are not swords.

...It’s complicated.

Nagamaki (長巻, “long wrapping”) — A polearm similar to a naginata, but with a straighter blade, more like that of a tachi or katana, and mounted with a wrapped handle similar to a highly exaggerated katana handle. The name refers to the style of mount as well as a blade type, which means that a naginata blade could be mounted in a nagamaki mount and be considered a nagamaki.

Naginata (なぎなた, 雑刀) — A polearm with a curved single-edged blade. Naginata mounts consist of a long wooden pole, different from a nagamaki mount, which is shorter and wrapped.

Yari (槍, “spear”) — A spear, or spear-like polearm. Yari have various blade forms, from a simple double edged and flat blade, to a triangular cross section double edged blade, to those with a symmetric cross-piece (jumonji-yari) or those with an asymmetric cross piece. The main blade is symmetric and straight unlike a naginata, and usually smaller but can be as large or bigger than some naginata blades.

Tantō (短刀, “short blade”) — A knife or dagger. Usually one-edged, but some were double-edged, though asymmetrical.
Ken (剣, “sword”) — Usually a tanto - or wakizashi -length religious or ceremonial blade, with a gentle leaf shape and point, but some may be larger and can also refer to old pre-curve types of swords… like the other sword swords. Symmetrical and double edged.

(Oh, and arrowheads for war, yajiri , also known as just ya , are also made using the same methods as swords. Cool, huh?)

... One of the important parts of the blade is the swordsmith's signature mei , which is carved on the tang. These are… really confusing and I don’t really understand them, because gimei , fake signatures, are also a thing… and some people are like Shakespeare and don’t have a set signature… and there’s all sorts of stuff having to do with the reign of the daimyō and seriously I give up. But… it’s a bit of status thing.

A lot of swords are worn suspended from cords on a belt, edge-down. This style is called jindachi-zukuri , and daitō worn in this fashion are called tachi . Of course, other ways of carrying swords are… well, worn through an obi , paired with a smaller blade, both worn edge-up, which is called buke-zukuri , and all daitō worn in this fashion are katana , averaging two shaku 3 sun to 2 shaku 4 sun 5 bu in blade length… but also up to 2 shaku 5 sun 5 bu .

...I really miss inches and centimeters.

Mind you, it’s not just a fashion statement— usually, you wear swords in a certain way because it’s the fastest way to get the sword out and kill someone.

Koshiate , sword hangers, have several varieties, especially of ryo-goshiate (double hangers), which is also something I’ll go into later, but all kinds which are attached with cords will be worn in the same way, but there are two kinds which have no cords and are therefore worn differently. Therefore, a good deal of practice is learning to draw and return the sword. (Though, never without cleaning the blade, first, usually through this really cool… and difficult… flicking motion.) Of course, swords may also be carried without hangers by putting them between the folds of the obi .

The different swords were often forged with different profiles, different blade thicknesses, etc. Wakizashi , for instance, are not simply scaled-down versions of katana — they’re often forged in hira-zukuri or other such forms, which are very rare on other swords.

The forging of a blade typically takes weeks or even months and is considered a sacred art. Usually, several artists are involved— there’s a smith to forge the rough shape, often a second smith (usually apprentice) to fold the metal, a specialist polisher (called a togi ), as well as various artisans, to make the koshirae , which are the various fittings used to decorate the finished blade and saya (sheath), namely the tsuka (hilt), fuchi (collar), kashira (pommel), and tsuba (hand guard). It is said that the sharpening and polishing process takes just as long as the forging of the blade itself.

Hiroshi-ojisan says that he’ll take me to the Land of Iron to watch a sword being forged, when I’m old enough to have one of my own. I’m… actually really excited.

The forging of the sword starts with tamahagane (玉鋼), a type of iron which is used to make swords, knives, and other kinds of tools.

Tamahagane is made of satetsu , which is kinda like… iron sand?

There are two main types of iron sands: akome satetsu (赤目砂鉄) and masa satetsu (真砂砂鉄). Akome is of lower quality, and masa is of better quality. The person who decides the amount of the
mixing parts is called the *murage*. Depending on the desired result, the *murage* mixes one or more types of sands.

The iron sand is put in a *tatara*, a clay tub furnace. The tub is then dried and heated. The clay tub is heated to a high temperature, then mixed with charcoal to add carbon to the steel so it can be hardened.

The process of making tamahagane continues for anywhere from a day-and-a-half to three days, depending on how many people work and how much metal is to be obtained. The iron sand is added and the mixture is frequently turned over. Like… they have this timer-thing that’s a bit like an hourglass, which is measured with… I think sand, though water’s also sometimes an option, and the swordsmiths Hiroshi-ojisan know from the Land of Iron used that.

When the *tamahagane* is finished, the clay tub is broken and the steel is removed. The best steel is on the edges of metal block, because this is where the oxidation process is stronger. The quality of *tamahagane* is determined by its color: bright silver pieces are very good for making blades.

The most common method to make the sword blade is to create a combination of two different types of metal: a harder outer jacket wrapped around a softer inner core of steel. This creates a blade which has a hard, razor sharp cutting edge with the ability to absorb shock in a way which reduces the possibility of the blade breaking when used in combat.

The *hadagane*, for the outer skin of the blade, is produced by heating a block of raw steel, which is then hammered out into a bar. This is then cooled and broken up into smaller blocks which are checked for further impurities and then reassembled and reforged. During this process the billet of steel is heated and hammered, split and folded back upon itself many times and re-welded to create a complex structure of many thousands of layers. Each different steel is folded differently, in order to provide the necessary strength and flexibility to the different steels.

The precise way in which the steel is folded, hammered and re-welded determines the distinctive grain pattern of the blade, the *jihada* (also called *jigane* when referring to the actual surface of the steel blade), a feature which is indicative of the period, place of manufacture and actual maker of the blade. The practice of folding also ensures a somewhat more homogeneous product, with the carbon in the steel being evenly distributed and the steel having no voids that could lead to fractures and failure of the blade in combat.

The *shingane* (for the inner core of the blade) is of a relatively softer steel with a lower carbon content than the *hadagane*. For this, the block is again hammered, folded and welded in a similar fashion to the hadagane, but with fewer folds. At this point, the *hadagane* block is once again heated, hammered out and folded into a ‘U’ shape, into which the shingane is inserted to a point just short of the tip.

The new composite steel is then heated and hammered out ensuring that no air or dirt is trapped between the two layers of steel. The bar increases in length during this process until it approximates the final size and shape of the finished sword blade. A triangular section is cut off from the tip of the bar and shaped to create what will be the *kissaki*. At this point in the process, the rough shape is referred to as a *sunobe*.

The *sunobe* is again heated, section by section and hammered to create a shape which has many of the recognisable characteristics of the finished blade. These are a thick back (*mune*), a thinner edge (*ha*), a curved tip (*kissaki*), notches on the edge (*hamachi*) and back (*munemachi*) which separate the blade from the tang (*nakago*). Details such as the ridge line (*shinogi*) are added at this stage of the process.
The smith's skill at this point comes into play as the hammering process causes the blade to naturally curve in an erratic way, the thicker back tending to curve towards the thinner edge, and the smith must skillfully control the shape to give it the required upward curvature.

The *sunobe* is finished by a process of filing and scraping which leaves the physical characteristics and shapes of the blade recognisable. The surface of the blade is left in a relatively rough state, ready for the hardening processes. The *sunobe* is then covered all over with a clay mixture which is applied more thickly along the back and sides of the blade than along the edge. The blade is left to dry while the smith prepares the forge for the final heat treatment of the blade, the *yaki-ire*, the hardening of the cutting edge.

This process takes place in a darkened smithy, traditionally at night, so that the smith can judge by eye the color, and therefore the temperature, of the sword as it is repeatedly passed through the glowing charcoal. When the time is deemed right (traditionally the blade should be the colour of the moon in February and August… which is confusing but also somehow makes sense to Hiroshi-ojisan), the blade is plunged edge down and point forward into a tank of water.

The precise time taken to heat the sword, the temperature of the blade, and the temperature of the water into which it is plunged are unique to each smith, and they’re closely guarded secrets.

Hiroshi-ojisan says that there’s a legend that tells of a particular smith who cut off his apprentice's hand for testing the temperature of the water he used for the hardening process.

...seems a bit like overkill, but… I mean, I get where that smith was coming from.

In the different schools of sword-makers there are many subtle variations in the materials used in the various processes and techniques outlined above, specifically in the form of clay applied to the blade prior to the *yaki-ire*, but all follow the same general procedures.

The application of the clay in different thicknesses to the blade allows the steel to cool more quickly along the thinner coated edge when plunged into the tank of water and thereby develop into a still harder form of steel, which can be ground to razor-like sharpness. The thickly coated back cools more slowly, and is therefore a bit softer and more flexibility. The precise way in which the clay is applied, and partially scraped off at the edge, is a determining factor in the formation of the shape and features of the crystalline structure known as the *hamon*.

This distinctive tempering line found near the edge is one of the main characteristics to be assessed when examining a blade.

The *hamon* is, therefore, basically the transition line between these two different forms of steel, and is where most of the shapes, colours, and beauty in the steel of the sword are to be found. The variations in the form and structure of the *hamon* are all indicative of the period, smith, school or place of manufacture of the sword.

As well as the aesthetic qualities of the *hamon*, there are, not unsurprisingly, practical functions. The hardened edge is where most of any potential damage to the blade will occur in battle. This hardened edge is capable of being reground and sharpened many times, although the process will alter the shape of the blade. Altering the shape will allow more resistance when fighting in hand-to-hand combat.

Almost all blades are decorated, although not all blades are decorated on the visible part of the blade. Once the blade is cool, and the mud is scraped off, grooves and markings (*hi* or *bo-hi*) may be cut into it. One of the most important markings on the sword is performed here: the file markings. These are cut into the tang or the hilt-section of the blade, where they will be covered by the hilt later. This
part of the sword, the tang, is never supposed to be cleaned; doing this can reduce the value of the sword by half or more. The purpose is to show how well the steel ages.

Some other marks on the blade are aesthetic: dedications written in kanji as well as engravings called horimono depicting gods, dragons, or other acceptable beings. Some are more practical. For example, the presence of a groove (the most basic type of which is called hi) reduces the weight of the sword yet keeps its structural integrity and strength.

…

It’s all so cool. It’s like… swords are art. Which I guess is a bit ironic when you consider that these will be used to kill people (probably), but… I really, really want a sword, now.

…and that will come after I actually learn how to use a sword… namely, kenjutsu.

Kenjutsu is the art of using a sword in combat. The sword is primarily a cutting weapon, or more specifically, a slicing one. Its moderate curve, however, allows for effective thrusting as well.

The hilt is usually held with two hands, though a fair amount of one-handed techniques exist… especially for using daishō, which is really interesting and something I’ll explain later.

The placement of the right hand is dictated by both the length of the handle and the length of the wielder’s arm. Two other martial arts were actually developed specifically for training to draw the sword and attack in one motion. They are battōjutsu and iaijutsu, which are superficially similar, but do generally differ in training theory and methods. They’re kinda important, but not right now.

For cutting, there’s a specific technique called ten-uchi. Ten-uchi refers to an organized motion made by arms and wrist, during a descending strike. As the sword is swung downwards… you kinda pop the sword into place. This motion causes the swordsman’s grip to twist slightly and if done correctly, is said to feel like wringing a towel. This motion itself caused the sword’s blade to impact its target with sharp force, and is used to break initial resistance. From there, fluidly continuing along the motion wrought by ten-uchi, the arms would follow through with the stroke, dragging the sword through its target. Because these swords slice rather than chop, it is this “dragging” which allows it to do maximum damage, and is thus incorporated into the cutting technique.

At full speed, the swing will appear to be full stroke, the sword passing through the targeted object. The segments of the swing are hardly visible, if at all. Assuming that the target is, for example, a human torso, ten-uchi will break the initial resistance supplied by shoulder muscles and the clavicle. The follow through would continue the slicing motion, through whatever else it would encounter, until the blade inherently exited the body, due to a combination of the motion and its curved shape.

…it looks cooler against the straw bundles Hiroshi-ojisan used to demonstrate. Thinking about that happening to me is… not quite as cool.

Nearly all styles of kenjutsu share the same five basic guard postures. They are as follows; chūdan-no-kamae (middle posture), jōdan-no-kamae (high posture), gedan-no-kamae (low posture), hassō-no-kamae (eight-sided posture), and waki-gamae (side posture).

In regards to learning kenjutsu… learning how to hold the bokuto, the practice sword, properly, the basic stances (kamae) and how to move and walk is the first step. These basics can take a long time, as in, a few years, to really settle in and become second nature.

…

That’s fair. I mean, you’re basically betting your life on the your ability to use the sword more
effectively than the person you’re trying to kill… or the person who’s trying to kill you.

…

The next step is to acquire the correct postures and grips and movements. The cuts and thrusts themselves are quite varied. Although there are many different ways to make the cut there are a pretty standard number of cuts and slices and thrusts. There are basic vertical and diagonal swings. There are lateral cuts. There are also thrusts.

Although it seems simple, performing these while you and a partner are moving is complicated. Though seemingly simple on paper, the various ways to perform a thrust are numerous. An important part of learning kenjutsu is learning to strike efficiently and on target.

...the thing is, shields aren’t really a thing. They’re heavy, for one. But… it makes defending against swords with other swords hard. Most swords’ razor-edge is so hard that upon hitting an equally hard or harder object… such as another sword's edge, chipping is a definite risk. As such, blocking an oncoming blow blade-to-blade is generally avoided. In fact, evasive body maneuvers are preferred over blade contact by most (can’t get cut if you’re not in the way), but, if such is not possible, the flat or the back of the blade is used for defense in many styles, rather than the precious edge.

Plus, constantly sanding down the edge to get rid of nicks is really not ideal.

According to Hiroshi-ojisan, any edge damage like this makes the sword fragile. The further down the blade the damage occurred, the more likely the blade is to… say… snap the next time it’s hit. A small chip on the kissaki for example, that triangular part on the very farthest part of the blade, is probably okay to temporarily ignore. A nick in any area below the monōchi? It’s only a matter of time before it breaks.

As long as the nick or ding is really, really time… then it can usually be polished out.

Mind you, the success rate of this sort of repair is directly proportional to the amount pressure you’ve put on the blade after damaging it. As soon as you’ve damaged the edge, you’ve also created another leverage point along the blade where different amounts of stresses are being applied directly to the metal that sits behind that damage, slowly increasing the severity of it. With the repeated stresses from cutting being applied here, the metal being affected can also harden up more than the surrounding metal, becoming more brittle. Eventually the sword splits at the chip, along the line of this hardened metal.

I don’t know if this is the best explanation, but it’s the one Hiroshi-ojisan gave me.

Severe damage to the edge of a katana can only really be effectively repaired in one way… and that is to take the entire edge back past the point that was damaged. As in, sanding down the entire edge of the blade. Yes, that means a large amount of the blade will have to be worked on. Just polishing out the small area surrounding the ding or dent will not work, mainly because you can’t expect the rest of the blade to be fine once a section of it is significantly thinner compared to everything else.

Be ready to spend at least an hour or two with the sharpening stones and make sure that the new edge of the blade doesn’t… wobble, or anything. (This is not the hamon. That’s usually fine to wobble. This is… like… the facet, or the edge itself.)

So… yeah. Don’t clang the cutting edge of two swords together. It’s generally a very, very bad idea.

A popular method for defeating descending slashes is to simply beat the sword aside. In some instances, positioning the blade overhead, diagonally (point towards the ground, pommel towards the
sky, cutting edge perpendicular to or pointed away from the other person), creates an effective shield against a descending strike. If the angle of the block is drastic enough, the curve of the blade will cause the attacker’s blade to slide along its counter and off to the side.

...the hard part is realizing that there’s a descending slash, making this kind of decision in that split-second, and getting the sword up in time to block that descending slash before you’re dead.

That’s where the practice time comes in.

Kenjutsu (剣術) is the umbrella term for all koryū, or schools of swordsmanship. The exact activities and conventions undertaken when practicing kenjutsu vary from school to school, yet commonly include practice of battlefield techniques without an opponent and techniques whereby two practitioners perform kata (featuring anything from full contact strikes to the body to absolutely no body contact strikes).

One of the more common training weapons is the wooden sword (bokuto or bokken). For various reasons, many schools make use of bokuto that are specially designed to the style’s specifications. For example, one school uses a bokuto without a handguard, and another school’s practitioners use a thicker-than-average bokuto with no curvature and with a rather large hilt.

Some schools also practice with fukuro shinai, bamboo swords covered with leather or cloth, under circumstances where the student lacks the ability to safely control a bokuto at full speed… or as a general safety precaution.

Usually, samurai (and probably shinobi, too) ignore that. I mean… especially shinobi. Like, if you can’t deal with danger, choose a different career path.

What I’m most interested in nitōjutsu. Remember that whole spiel about the daishō? So, a distinguishing feature of some styles is the use of a paired katana (or daitō) and wakizashi (or shōtō), commonly referred to as nitōjutsu (二刀術, two sword methods). Styles that teach it are called nitōryū (二刀流, two sword schools), as opposed to ittō-ryū (一刀流, one sword schools).

The most famous exponent of nitōjutsu was this one dude called Miyamoto Musashi, who was the founder of Hyōhō Niten Ichi-ryū, and advocates it in this super-important book he wrote, Go Rin no Sho, The Book of Five Rings. Niten Ichi-ryū (二天一流) can be loosely translated as “the school of the strategy of two heavens as one.” This is a pretty famous sword style, but nitōjutsu is not actually unique to Hyōhō Niten Ichi-ryū, nor was nitōjutsu the creation of Miyamoto Musashi.

And… he was also a Fujiwara. At least, his mother was a Fujiwara, according to Hiroshi-ojisan… I think.

He claimed the name of Shinmen Musashi-no-Kami Fujiwara no Harunobu (新免武蔵守藤原玄信). His father, Shinmen Munisai (新免無二斎) was an accomplished martial artist and master of the sword and jitte (or jitte … I’m honestly not sure). Munisai, in turn, was the son of Hirata Shōgen (平田将監), a vassal of Shinmen Iga no Kami, the lord of this one castle. Hirata was relied upon by Lord Shinmen and so was allowed to use the Shinmen name. As for “Musashi”… Musashi no Kami was a court title.

So, this dude originally studied Enmei Ryū and Tōri Ryū, which were ryūha founded by his grandfather, Miyamoto Musashi no Kami Yoshimoto, and his father, Miyamoto Muninosuke,
respectively. Musashi eventually focused in *kenjutsu* and *nitōken* and developed his own style.

After that, there's a bunch of succession issues (I mean, duh), and stuff happened.

That entire mess was because… well, succession isn’t hereditary pattern—it’s passed on by the bestowing of two artifacts: a scroll on which is written the name of the techniques and the approach to them that must be transmitted if the school is to be perpetuated truly, and a wooden sword that Musashi made himself, with which he trained and used as a walking stick during the last years of his life.

Cool. Artifact.

But anyways, we actually have a copy of the list of techniques, which is regularly updated and was the clan’s condition for… I forgot. Something.

*Tachi Seiho* (太刀勢法); Twelve techniques with long sword:

指先 — Sassen  
八相左 — Hasso Hidari  
八相右 — Hasso Migi  
受流左 — Uke Nagashi Hidari  
受流右 — Uke Nagashi Migi  
捩構 — Moji Gamae  
張付 — Haritsuke  
流打 — Nagashi Uchi  
虎振 — Tora Buri  
数喜 — Kazuki  
合先打留 — Aisen Uchidome  
余打 (アマシ打) — Amashi Uchi

*Kodachi Seiho* (小太刀勢法); Seven techniques with a short sword:

指先 — Sassen  
中段 — Chūdan  
受流 — Uke Nagashi  
捩構 — Moji Gamae  
張付 — Haritsuke  
流打 — Nagashi Uchi  
合先 — Aisen

…and so on. Those are the “basics,” along with the twenty techniques with a *bō* (including techniques for both *bō* against *bō* and *bō* against sword), some stuff about *jitte*, and so on.

…

So… yeah.

…

Oh. And I almost forgot. This entire… kinda lackadaisical, very informal approach to learning? Normally, it’s not like this.
...and normally, heirs to Very Important Families don’t insist on becoming shinobi out of the blue.

---

So, first of all, everything happened when Hiroshi-ojisan brought me back to the kitchen for a small snack after showing me all of the weapons, before explaining *kenjutsu*.

Everyone was there, somehow, even though it’d been almost a full *koku* since Hiroshi-ojisan and I had left.

Otō-san had come back, and he looked absolutely *exhausted*, but... Otō-san was back! Yay. Yeah. Hooray.

Okay. I’ll back up a bit.

Okaa-san had several scrolls, papers, and books spread around her and Otō-san while also fiddling with a half-made *kumihimo* braid on a small loom in her lap. Kichirō-ojisan looked on the verge of keeling over into his bowl, and the bags under his eyes made it look like he had slept even less than Otō-san.

Obaa-sama was contentedly sipping at a cup of tea while...

...tossing sticks.

She had two books in front of her, along with two small bags and a pretty lacquered to the side, and in front of her... well, is a bundle of sticks in what seems to be a can, along with two... red things.

Okay.

So, everything went pretty well, until... well...

Okay. I’ll back up a bit.

...I love this place. It’s only my second day, but I love this. I love my family, I love... pretty much everything.

But you will *never* get me to leave Konoha, to leave the tea shop and Shinko-chan and Hitomi-san and Neji and Hizashi-san Mikoto-obasama and Aburame-sama and Shino and Oro-sensei and Kagami-jiisan and Shisui and Itachi.

Yeah, I know one of them... probably isn’t in a position to care, and another’s not really in the state of mind to care, but...

I’m not leaving. Nope. I’m sorry, Okaa-san, Otō-san. I know I’m older, and I’m definitely mature enough to travel, and part of me *wants* this, wants to travel and try different foods and meet different people and explore this world and draw everything I find...
But I’m not running away.

I’m not four. Not really. And I’m not exactly fifteen, much less almost… nope. Not thinking about that. Not when that’s practically middle-age Here, not when fifteen is basically an adult, not when sixteen is old enough to lead armies and countries and… and… no. Nope. Think… think Itachi. Nine. He’s nine. And I don’t feel quite comfortable with that number, but… eight feels about right. Or seven. Or six.

I can’t say I’m more mature than Itachi. Hence, I can’t be older than him.

And… and I promised. I want to show Itachi that a world of peace is possible.

I’m not leaving him.

I’m not leaving any of my friends. They might leave me, but I won’t leave them. I have few enough friends as it is. There’s no logical reason to throw away what I have, for such an uncertain gamble.

And… it’s probably silly of me, but my outburst happens for one other reason— I feel comfortable, here.

I’m not soft-spoken. I’m blunt. Arguably blunt-to-the-point-of-being-rude, but… I don’t usually tiptoe around things. Not after I get to know people well. Not after I feel comfortable. It’s like when I feel at home somewhere, my mind-to-mouth filter just… disappears.

Plus, maybe I’m still a bit naive.

Regardless… yes, this probably wasn’t the best decision in the spur of the moment, but… given how everything turned out, I can’t really regret everything that much.

So, I won’t regret essentially blurring out everything was on my mind. Namely, that I refused to leave Konoha, the list of reasons I absolutely refused to leave (thankfully, filtered a bit), and the fact that I want to be a shinobi.

…

The last was probably the biggest explosive in that batch.

---

Suffice to say, after a surprisingly calm discussion with undertones that I both definitely know to have existed… and also definitely did not and still do not understand… we’re good. At least, I’m good. The adults are going to discuss… stuff… but from what I can tell, they’re not going to object to my becoming a shinobi.

And then, after probably about half a koku, during which I ran and exercised and worked on kata and spoke with a newly-resummoned Kiyohime, Hiroshi-ojisan came back, and Kiyohime un-summoned herself.

…which I’m actually kinda disappointed about, because we’d been discussing introducing her to everyone… and she wasn’t exactly against it, nor did she know if Oro-sensei had told Okaa-san or Otō-san, so I guess her answer was, “not now.”

That’s fair. I get it.

And thus continued the lessons, now focusing on swords.
I decide to stop repeating the exercises, having moved onto the kata after finishing the theoretical part of everything, when my shoulders ache and I realize that I’ve gotten lost in thought.

Practicing without thinking isn’t ideal.

…

I’m kinda tired. Okay, one last round of exercises, a nice long stretch, then I’ll take a nap… and then I really want to work on chakra control. I mean, meditating on a horse isn’t ideal, and I’m not quite good enough to do the leaf exercises without focusing… on…

That’s my next project. Next time I’m on a horse, I should be able to move… let’s say, three leaves, independently of one another.

I need to stop being unmotivated and starting being proactive. New start, remember?

But in that case… I’ll need to ask Okaa-san if there are any musical instruments. Abacuses. Calculation stuff. And… oh, there are definitely going to be books.

...probably going to be books. But that’ll be useful, too. It’s not like Before. Information doesn’t becomes useless or outdated that quickly. Not this type of information.

Okay.

Gameplan, set.

List of priorities? Check.

Let’s get started.

It’s sometime later, while I’m trying to work my way through some rather dry, very fancy handwritten historical memoir of sorts (gah, how I miss computers and printers and fonts), that Okaa-san finds me with a plate of assorted fruits, namely mikan (kinda like tangerines), kaki (also unique and kinda citrusy), and strawberries.

“Come with me, Hasuki-kun,” Obaa-sama smiles. “It is much too nice of a day to stay indoors with a book. Come. The gardens are lovely.”

And… that’s tempting. I’ve got a notebook open next to me, with English and kanji and hiragana and katakana mixed indiscriminately, because this house is safe in a way so many places in Konoha aren’t, and I’d figured that there’d be no better place to practice English again. Here, in this place with ghosts of years long past, with people who call me ‘young master’ and Hasuki-hiko, with the sort of unconditional love given for the simple matter of fact that you are family… here, in this little labyrinth in the middle of nowhere, I feel free.

And so, why not? Why not explore this fantastical castle? Even if it’s just the backyard?

…

Oh, yeah. There’s a lot of time and care put into this garden. And maybe it’s just because it’s not the parched, cracked earth of southern California, but… the air is fresh and sweet and I’ve said that before but it’s so nice here.

There are benches of stone, with warm wooden plates that can be set as seats, and walkways of stone and garden of raked sand and a koi pond and more gardens still of sweet flowers and grasses and
trees and herbs, and...

I lean on the bench, closing my eyes against the warm sun. Ah, that feels so nice...

After a moment, I decide to take the initiative to break the comfortable silence.

“Ne, Obaa-sama?” I ask. “I was wondering… you know those extra buildings around the… the main house? What are those for?”

Indeed, those extra buildings, while not as tall as the main castle, still take up a lot of space. And I know Genka-san mentioned that there were training rooms there… and logically, there might be storage spaces, but… still. It doesn’t really make sense. What are they for?

“Ah. Don’t worry about those, Hasuki-chan,” Obaa-sama says, a little sadly, running a hand over my hair. “Those are… remnants from a time when our clan was much, much larger. Now… the rooms are mostly left empty.”

Something still… “So… there’s nothing to put there?”

“It also requires too much time to take care of them, Hasuki,” Obaa-sama sighs. “Once… once our clan was grand, and there were multiple families that lived here, and over a hundred servants. Now… the space stores what we can no longer care for, and much of our material wealth.”

I frown. “But… that doesn’t make sense,” I insist, swinging my feet down and sitting up.

I look over at Obaa-sama. “You have, like, a hundred people here still, all with that uniform thing. I mean, not everyone wears those white triangular-shaped headbands, so I don’t know if it actually a uniform, but… a lot of them do. I don’t know if it means anything.” I flap a hand at that. Now is so not the time to get off track.

“But seriously. It’s got to be at least a hundred people. I don’t think I’d have this much trouble remembering names if it were much less.” I shrug. “And I see them around all the time, and stuff, you know? So, like, I know they’re busy, even in those extra buildings.” And I do know. Genka-san told me when I asked her questions on the way to the training rooms and she helped me set up, and I don’t think she lied.

“Oh?” Obaa-sama asks.

“Yeah.” I nod firmly. “Like… Genka-san and Asafuji-san and Asao and Nakaki and Fujiteru and… and everyone. They’re nice. I think. I know Genka-san and Asafuji-san are nice. Genka-san showed me the practice rooms, and Asafuji-san found me when I was lost last night.”

“…ah. I know of them. I had…” Obaa-sama pauses, thinking. “Hasuki-chan?”

“Hai?” I ask. I’m a bit confused right now.

“When you look at the door and gates of the house, what do you see?” Obaa-sama asks, pointing behind us.

“Huh?” I blink. Yup. Nothing’s changed from when I first arrived. The banners, the small streamers, those small paper talismans, the lanterns that always seem to be glowing for some reason, the inked characters… everything’s still there. I’m really confused. “What do you mean? Does the writing and paper and stuff mean something? Or, like… are you asking about something else? Like the lights?”

Obaa-sama takes a while to answer. “…yes. And the lanterns high in the trees… and the stone
Oh! I know those. “You mean the ones that Asafuji and the others light every evening?” I ask eagerly. “Yeah, they’re so cool! I don’t know how they get that high up, but Asafuji-san promised to show me this afternoon!”

“...yes.” She nods slowly. “Those. I didn’t realize… that you… would see them.”

I duck my head. Oh. I didn’t realize… ah, I guess it makes sense for kids to have a curfew. Did I forget? I don’t remember. Maybe I just didn’t hear it? Eh, regardless… “Sorry,” I murmur. “I didn’t mean to be up that late, but I woke up and got thirsty… and then I got lost… but Asafuji-san found me, so everything’s okay now,” I smile, perking up.

Okaa-san stares at me for a moment, before nodding decisively, dropping her… what seems like knitting … and standing up, looking back at me.


But…

“Come, Hasuki-chan.” She flaps a hand at me. “There is something I feel I should show you.”

And… I’ve got that I-think-this-will-be-good-for-me-in-the-long-run-but-will-cause-headaches-along-the-way feeling again.

She takes me over to the forest, up the path lined with stone lanterns that are actually taller than me. It’s beautiful. It’s a long walk, though, and I’m worried for Obaa-sama—I’ve had worse with Shisui and Oro-sensei—but she waves my concerns off.

At the end of the path… there’s a shrine in the forest, near the top of the mountain.

In front of it is torii gate, a beautiful shiny red-painted wood… doorway, essentially. The gate marks the entrance to a sacred space.

There are many different types of torii, but we have ryōbu torii, because they’ve got those extra supports on the sides.

Torii may be unpainted or painted vermilion and black. The color black is limited to the kasagi and the nemaki. Very rarely, torii can be found also in other colors, like… say, white and red.

The kasagi, which is kinda like the roof piece (or just the thing at the very top), may be reinforced underneath by a second horizontal lintel called shimaki or shimagi (島木).

Kasagi and the shimaki may have an upward curve called sorimashi (反り増し).

The nuki is often held in place by wedges (kusabi,楔). The kusabi in many cases are purely ornamental.

At the center of the nuki there may be a supporting strut called gakuzuka (額束), sometimes covered by a tablet carrying the name of the shrine.

The pillars often rest on a white stone ring called kamebara (亀腹, turtle belly) or daiishi (台石, base stone). The stone is sometimes replaced by a decorative black sleeve called nemaki (根巻, root
sleeve).

At the top of the pillars there may be a decorative ring called *daiwa* (台輪, big ring).

Okay. Now, *torii* styles:

The *shime torii* is just two posts and a connecting *shimenawa*.

*Shimenawa* which are lengths of laid rice straw or hemp rope used for ritual purification. They can vary in diameter from a few centimetres to several metres, and are often seen festooned with *shide*, zigzag-shaped paper streamers often used in rituals. A space bound by *shimenawa* often indicates a sacred or pure space, such as that of a shrine. *Shimenawa* are believed to act as a ward against evil spirits and are often set up at a ground-breaking ceremony before construction begins on a new building. They are often found at shrines and sacred landmarks. They are also used around *yorishiro* (objects capable of attracting spirits, hence inhabited by spirits). These notably include certain trees, in which case the inhabiting spirits are called *kodama*, and cutting down these trees is thought to bring misfortune. In cases of stones, the stones are known as *iwakura*.

On a really random, not related note… there’s a… really small tree, on top of what looks like a half-burnt tree right in the courtyard beyond the *torii* gate, surrounded by a *shimenawa*. According to Obaa-sama, this is… well… my tree. Apparently, every member of Otō-san’s family has a tree planted for them, when they’re born. When Okaa-san was pregnant with me, they were debating what tree to get for me. After the Kyūbi attack, they weren’t sure whether or not I would make it. After Obaa-sama had gotten Okaa-san’s message, she came up here to pray. And… she found a sin from the *kami*. There had been a storm the night before, and when she came, she found that lightning had struck the massive *sugi* tree that was the shrine’s *shinboku*, or… I guess, holy tree. That’s lucky in its own right—lightning is believed to come from the *kami*. But here’s the cool part… the tree had been split, but in the seared stump, Okaa-san had found a small *ichō* seed, caught in the split wood of the stump, with a tendril of green poking out. She decided that it had been a message from the *kami*.

And that’s the story of how I have a tree. Seriously, I know Otō-san’s last name is Kobayashi, as in, “small forest,” but this seems a bit too literal. If everyone has a tree planted when they’re born… yeah, we probably have a small forest’s worth of trees at this point.

Anyways, back to types of *torii*.

The *shinmei torii* (神明鳥居), which gives the name to the family, is constituted solely by this horizontal beam (*nuki*) between two pillars (*hashira*), with a larger horizontal beam (*kasagi*) on the top. In its simplest form, all four elements are rounded and the pillars have no inclination. It is believed to be the oldest *torii* style.

*Kashima torii* — a *shinmei torii* with *kusabi* and a *nuki* protruding from the sides.

*Kasuga torii* — a *torii* gate with *kasagi* and *shimakiare*, which are straight and cut at a square angle.

*Hachiman torii* — a *kasuga torii*, but the two *kasagi* have a downwards slant.

The *kuroki torii* (黒木鳥居) is a *shinmei torii* built with unbarked wood. Because this type of *torii* requires replacement at three years intervals, it’s kinda rare.

The *shiromaruta torii* (白丸太鳥居) or *shiroki torii* (白木鳥居) is a *shinmei torii* made with logs from which bark has been removed. This type of *torii* is present at some tombs.

The *Myōjin torii* and its variants are characterized by curved *kasagi*. 
Myōjin torii — kasagi and shimakare curved upwards.

Nakayama torii — a myōjin torii, but the nuki does not protrude from the pillars.

Daiwa or Inari torii — a myōjin torii with rings at the top of the pillars.

Ryōbu torii — a daiwa torii with pillars supported on both sides by… like smaller pillars.

Miwa torii — a triple myōjin torii.

Usa torii — a myōjin torii with no gakuzuka.

Nune torii — a daiwa torii with a small gable above the gakuzuka.

Sannō torii — a myōjin torii with a gable above the kasagi.

Hizen torii — an unusual style with a rounded kasagi and thick, flared pillars.

There's a pretty set etiquette for visiting shrines, which Obaa-sama explains to me during the walk up the path.

First of all, traditionally, you are not supposed to visit a shrine if you are sick, have an open wound or are mourning because these are considered causes of impurity. Kegare. And… the kami usually don't like kegare.

To pay your respects, bow at the gate before you enter underneath. As you do walk through the gates, be sure to not walk through the direct centre of the gate, as the main approach to the main shrine is called sei-chû and is considered the passageway for the gods, so to be respectful to enter and approach the main shrine from the side.

At some temples, you can burn incense (osenko) in large incense burners. Light a bundle, light them, let the incense burn for a few seconds and then extinguish the flame by waving your hand rather than by blowing it out. Finally, put the incense into the incense burner and fan some smoke towards yourself, as the smoke is believed to have healing powers.

Before you get to the main shrine, you’ll come across a large communal water pavilion known as a temizuya – this is where you purify your body and mind (a ritual known as misogi) before coming face to face with the deity. To purify yourself, pick up one of the ladles resting on the temizuya, fill it with water using your right hand, and pour that water over your left hand, then repeat the process with your left hand. Finally, this last step is a little more optional, but you should rinse your mouth with the water, too. To rinse your mouth, fill your left hand with some water and use it to rinse your mouth, but don’t let the ladle touch your lips and don’t swallow the water.

At the purification fountain near the shrine’s entrance, take one of the ladles provided, fill it with fresh water and rinse both hands. Then transfer some water into your cupped hand, rinse your mouth and spit the water beside the fountain. You are not supposed to transfer the water directly from the ladle into your mouth or swallow the water. Do not return any water from the ladle into the fountain, but dispose of it next of the mountain. You will notice that quite a few visitors skip the mouth rinsing part or the purification ritual altogether.

The haiden, the offering hall, is where you pay your respects to the kami-sama. Inside the hall, more complicated ceremonies can be conducted by priests, but you can pray from the outside. In front of the haiden is an offertory box called a saisen-bako. Approach the box, but avoid standing dead-
center in front of it, since this space is also sei-chū, the passageway that the gods walk through.

At the offering hall, throw a coin into the offering box, bow deeply twice, clap your hands twice, bow deeply once more and pray for a few seconds. If there is some type of bell or gong in front of the haiden, take hold of the rope with both hands and give it a firm shake before praying to get the kami's attention. Traditionally, the ringing of the bell was believed to ward off evil spirits, so it also helps to purify the space for the kami-sama’s arrival.

First, greet the kami by bowing deeply two times. Bend slowly and deliberately from the waist at a 90-degree angle, keeping your back straight.

Next, clap two times to express your appreciation to the kami-sama. Your hands should be raised about chest high and should open to about shoulder-width apart as you clap. When your palms come together, your right hand should be positioned just slightly below your left, as the left hand is said to represent the kami-sama, while the right hand represents the one praying… basically, you.

Clapping, like ringing bells, can also help to ward off evil spirits.

Then, offer your silent prayer to the kami-sama. If it’s your first visit to the shrine, you should tell the kami-sama your name and where you live, and give thanks before proceeding with any special requests.

Although it may sound silly, the reason for this is that the kami-sama sometimes leaves its shrine in a special palanquin called a mikoshi. As worshippers carry the mikoshi through the neighborhood, the kami-sama recalls the people who have visited it at the shrine and sees who lives where.

Another reason is that the kami gather in the tenth month. So, it means that the kami can talk about you to other kami.

At the end of your prayer, excuse yourself with a final bow. Like before, it should be a deep 90-degree bow.

…

Obaa-san tells me that I have been presented to Takeminazuchi, Ame-no-Koyane, and Amaterasu-no-mikoto.

I decide to pray to Amaterasu. ‘Amaterasu-no-mikoto. I am Kobayashi Makoto… and Fujiwara no Hasuki… and I was once…’ I sigh. Don’t think about Before right now, Makoto. Focus. ‘I want to say… thank you. It might not have been you… it might not have been any of the kami… but thank you, whoever helped us. Thank you for making sure that Itachi and I stayed safe and got home safely.’

I take a deep breath. “And… to whichever kami looks over Mizu-no-Kuni and Kirigakure no Sato.” I mentally list my names again. “I live in… Konohagakure, I think, but I also lived at the orphanage by the wall in Kirigakure. Please… keep everyone there safe? Please look over Utakata-san and Harusame-san and Minori… you probably know her as Miwa, and Yuzu and… and everyone. I tried to help, but I’m not there now, and it might not be enough. So… I don’t know if you’re even there, but I’m here. Somehow. And there’s chakra and bijū and… and at this point, I think anything can be possible. So. If you’re out there… thank you, and… please.”

Another thought strikes me. “And… Amaterasu-no-mikoto-sama? Please… I’m not sure if you’re in charge of this, but… please take care of Hizashi-san. Hizashi of the Hyūga clan. And… and I’m asking a lot, huh? But… please also watch over Okaa-san and Otō-san and… and everyone in my
family. And Itachi. And Shisui. And Kagami-jiisan. And… and Mikoto-obasama and everyone. They’re all from the Uchiha clan. I don’t know if what I know will come true, but… please.”

My vision blurs a little as I remember what I knew Before.

“Please. If it’s not too much to ask… I just want everyone to live a happy life. Please.”

…

I swallow hard as I open my eyes again, bow once more, and walk out.

Please. If there’s anyone out there… let their stories have a happy ending.

On the way down, it’s like I’ve jumped back into life, running. All of those lazy habits that snuck up on me during the trip, when I basically had nothing to do all day? It’s as if they had formed a cloud, which hovered over me. Now, I’m energized and ready to start working hard again.

Sure enough, when I ask Obaa-san if she knows of anything else that I’m supposed to learn, she hums thoughtfully… and then drags me to a storage closet, in one of the rooms on the third floor.

No, I’m not procrastinating those dusty, hand-written books. Why?

Unfortunately, she dumps more dusty, handwritten books on me. “I have seen those books you keep by your bed,” she says, and I’m not as panicked as I probably should be. I’ve made the decision to trust my family… at least in not hiding anything. I’m not going to volunteer information, but I’m not deliberately trying to keep my intelligence under wraps. “Here. Books, on yōkai and yūrei and others of the kakuriyo that our family has dealt with in the past.”

O-okay. So, like… stories? Tall tales? They’re bound to be interesting and fun to read, at least.

But I still have a small question… “The… the kakuriyo?” I ask.

“The hidden realm. We live in the utsushiyo. The kakuriyo is the realm of the kami and all those not of this world.”

...cool.

But that’s not all. “And… I have seen your calligraphy. It is… passable, at least for you to start learning what to write for ofuda.” Obaa-san fixes with me with a stern look. “Do not take them lightly. Despite being little more than ink on paper, they can offer significant protection.” She pauses. “Of course, ignore the ofuda you see at other places. Most are created through rote memorization, by those who do not possess the gift.”

For anyone who doesn’t know, o-fuda (御札 or お札) are a type of household amulet or talisman, issued by a Shinto shrine, hung in the house for protection, a gofu (護符). It may also be called shinpu (神符).

According to Obaa-sama, it is made by inscribing the name of a kami and the name of the shrine or of a representative of the kami on a strip of paper, wood, cloth, or metal. We use the name of a kami and the clan name, Nakatomi-uchi.

The ofuda is customarily renewed annually before the end of a year, and then attached to a door,
pillar, or ceiling, or placed inside a private shrine (kamidana). It protects the family or location or individual from harm... or whatever the writer had in mind. A more specific o-fuda may be placed near particular objects, such as one for kitchen to protect from accidental fire. They’re usually made from hemp cloth or washi paper or... yeah.

*Omamori* are basically *ofuda* inside small cloth bags.

The weird thing is that Obaa-sama drew out traditional patterns of how to set *ofuda*, but told me not to come to her for questions. She also shows me how to braid rice rope, and gives me a book on... I think *fūinjutsu*. I’m really confused at this point. Are *ofuda* just a specific way to use *fūinjutsu* or something? Most seals I’ve seen shinobi use don’t invoke specific gods, just... well, *kanji*.

And *fūinjutsu* as a concept is really interesting, but is this really how to learn it?

I am really, really lost. And confused.

...  

So I guess it’s time to follow my personal saying— if you don’t know what to do, just do something. Anything. Eventually, you’ll figure it out.

Of course, there are exceptions, but generally... if you get something done, you can probably use it, in some way, later. Otherwise, you’ll just stagnate in that one spot, waiting for someone to find you and show you what to do. That’s not productive at all. Start moving. Be the one to find someone, to reach out to them, and get them to teach you.

Basically, be proactive.

So, in this case... I guess I’ll start working on *ofuda*. I’m honestly not sure what they’re supposed to do, beyond sit there and look pretty, since I’m still on the fence about the *yōkai* thing... and I guess even the *kami* thing, to a certain extent... but Obaa-sama seems convinced that it will be important for me to learn how to... make *ofuda*. And read the book... sorry, “compile journals” on *yōkai*.

The thing is, I still have no clue why Obaa-sama seems so insistent that I should go to the servants, instead of her, if I have questions. Or even if I just need to know if I’m doing them correctly. She didn’t even tell me how they would know if I’m making *ofuda* correctly, just that they would!

Seriously, I’m confused. And I thought that all-knowing, confusingly-cryptic-old-person thing was a made-up stereotype.

...

Yup. I’ve got a headache. At least after this, I’ll be able to go watch as Asafuji and the other lights the lanterns. Dinner should come after that... and hopefully I’ll be able to avoid Miyako-obasan, because even though I know I shouldn’t pick favorites, I think I like Hiroshi-ojisan and Kichirō-ojisan more than her. And then, I probably have some time to plan out what I want to do in my free time this week, and then... sleepy-time.

...

Yeah. I’ve still got a few newly-formed bad habits left over from the journey here.

---

Dinner is delicious, I’d made a list of priorities, I’ve got a hesitant schedule/plan for the next few days compiled, and I’ve decided to start making lesson plans after remembering my promise to teach
Itachi and Shisui (to a more limited extent) English.

I’ll probably make a… dictionary, of sorts. Words with words and phrases, and probably drawings, too, for the things that don’t really exist in this world. And the more complex words that I don’t know an equivalent to can probably just have a definition.

It’ll be pretty effort-intensive, but… Itachi basically did the same for me.

And I should probably also include pronunciation guides, via kana, which will take… some time.

At least it should be pretty easy for them to memorize everything quickly, thanks to the Sharingan.

…

It’ll be a waste to get rid of it, though. Still, I’m not leaving something as important as this lying around.

…

And for that matter, I need to remember to keep a very close eye on this after we leave here.

…

Luckily, I’ve found a way I think will work. You know the bracelet that Oro-sensei gave me? It turns out… there’s more than one storage seal. I think. And they’re reusable, which is really awesome. The seals are scattered all over the bracelet, and there’s three of them. So, in total, my bracelet has five seals.

…Kiyohime’s more disappointed that I took this long to figure it out, though. And… yeah, that’s fair. Though, technically, I had noticed them… but I just thought the patterns were decorative.

No. They’re reusable storage seals, for the most part, and I can store… basically whatever I want in them. I can’t channel too much chakra at once, or store a lot of stuff consecutively, because that would possibly overload the material of the bracelet and cause it to break, which would mean that I basically lose everything I stored in it. Also, I can’t pick and choose at what I take out of a seal— it’s an all-or-nothing type of deal. That also means that I can’t store stuff in a seal, then use that same seal to store even more stuff. I need to take everything out of the seal, then surround what I want to seal in with my chakra, then poke at the seal to seal everything in there.

Other than that… it’s mine to play with as I wish. And seriously, that’s awesome. I already decide to store a kunai in one, and a spare change of clothes in another. The last free seal is for the very important book(let).

I plan to add sealing and unsealing stuff to what I want to practice— the kunai thing would be a cool trick in combat, and I really want to see if I can make more bracelets like this— but… a few circumstances change. Despite my efforts… my schedules are rendered kinda useless the next day by an announcement at breakfast.

The morning was nice and productive.

I woke up, ran through my exercises and some kata, got some hits in with the wooden practice sword, took a quick shower, and colored in some of the drawings of the lanterns— which Asafuji-san had shown me, and I’d actually gotten to put some up on my own and seriously it’s a bit scary that high up when there’s no Itachi or Shisui to catch me if I fall, but it was also so cool — that I’d sketched the night before, all before I headed down the breakfast…
Where Okaa-san announces that we will be going on a day trip. Miyako-obasan… gracefully bows out, murmuring excuses of having to catch up on paperwork, and refused to cave to anyone’s pleas or wheedling, which I was secretly grateful for.

After breakfast, Kichirō-ojisan brings me to the stables and helps me saddle up a horse, and then… I’m patted on the head and told to go play while everyone else finishes preparations.

I decide to go grab my water bottle and stretch some more.

I don’t have that much time, though— Hiroshi-ojisan finds me in the practice rooms when it’s time to go, and I scramble outside.

I’m not sure what to expect.

There’s a small mountain trail that we follow, and I have a suspicion that we’re heading somewhere. However, when I ask, Okaa-san just smiles and tells me that it’s a surprise. Otō-san’s more awkward about it, but sadly, he also doesn’t tell me anything.

…

I can’t be upset, though. It’s a very, very cool surprise.

On the other side of the mountain, there’s a small… farm, I think. The mountainside here’s a lot less steep compared to the mountain above the river bed, the mountain that you see from the house. Here, on terraces carved into the mountain, there’s an enormous garden, and even small houses. I didn’t know it was here. I don’t think anyone would know it is here unless they’re told, to be honest. None of the mountains that you see from the garden have roads or buildings or any signs of human habitation on them.

I guess that’s the point, though.

There are pigs and chickens and ducks and geese, and even a few cows, but they’re pretty big, to me, and I stay away. I’m more interested in what Okaa-san tells me is the bed of sansai, which are technically wild plants. Okaa-san says that she made it, when she was younger. Apparently, all of the siblings got a plot of land, to teach them to be diligent, but she couldn’t think of what to plant, so she just stopped after tilling soil and adding compost. When she returned after a vacation, she found both weeds and sansai growing in it, and she had an idea. She pulled out the inedible weeks, and let the sansai grow on their own. That process of just occasionally weeding out undesirables continued, and the patch of land grew into a sansai garden.

So now, whoever has time just drops by to harvest and weed and add compost semi-regularly, and the delicious sansai continue to grow.

…I guess Okaa-san didn’t really learn the intended lesson.

Okaa-san shows me her garden for a reason, though. We’re going to go hunting for sansai in the forest today, so it’s important that I know what I’m looking for.

You see, people eat wild plants, or sansai, in a variety of ways. Roots are typically popular, although leaves, stems, buds, seeds, flowers and, of course, fruit, also provide nutrition. With some plants — the lotus, for example — all parts can be consumed.

Knowing the wild plants can be really useful.

In the past, the Fujiwara have relied on sansai especially in times of drought or natural disaster or
conflict… like during the Second and Third Shinobi World War. It was deemed too dangerous to stray from the mountain, and so the clan and the people who lived with the clan took to the mountains to find nutrients in sansai staples such as *warabi*, *tara-no-me*, and *kogomi*, among other edibles.

Wild plants are also harvested for uses aside from consumption. Wax is extracted from the nuts of *haze-no-ki*, and is used to make handmade candles that are said to create less smoke and provide a softer light. The fruit of *nurude* helps provide the body with salt; many athletes still sometimes chew the fruit for that reason. *Yama-urushi* turns a beautiful crimson and is popular in ikebana. *Akebi* canes can be used to make baskets or handles for teapots.

Then, there are plants that help preserve food dishes. *Hoba-miso* contains miso and leeks sauteed on a huge magnolia leaf. Both kinds of persimmon tree — the one with fruit that is dried because it’s so bitter that it cannot be eaten raw, and the regular one — are found in the wild. In some places, people use the leaf to wrap *sushi* (*kaki-no-ha sushi*) because the leaf contains a preservative. *Masu-no sushi* is wrapped in bamboo leaves for the same reason.

While some *sansai* can be found in abundance, others are limited in supply and should be harvested prudently. As a result, *sansai* affectionados can get pretty secretive about their harvesting spots.

Secrecy is especially important for a delicacy like *tara no me*, which are so prized they have been given the moniker "king of sansai." The buds are delicious in soups or as tempura. As with all trees, however, the buds for each season are limited, and harvesting too many can kill a tree. Of course, the "queen of sansai," *koshiabura*, a flowering plant, is highly recommended as well.

*Kuzu* is another plant that grow ridiculously easily. Despite its aggressive nature, the root of the plant can be soaked in water for several days to extract the starch, and then can be dried and turned into a powder that eases an assortment of stomach ailments.

There’s also *yabu-kanzō*, which looks a lot like *kanzō*. Plentiful in grassy patches and fields in early spring, *yabu-kanzō* can be cooked in soup or made into *tempura*, two common ways of handling *sansai*. It typically a little like onion when fried in butter.

*Fuki*, butterbur, is a bitter but versatile *sansai* that can be concentrated into a miso paste (*fuki-miso*), cooked with *miso* and rice, or enjoyed with a cup of *sake*. It has edible leaves, and the stems get fat and soft.

*Zenmai* can also be delicious. Sometimes called *zeni-maki* for resembling a rolled up coin, *zenmai* is best picked when about five *sun*, or half a *shaku*, long. It is typically sautéed and served as a side dish with *egoma*. However, only the female plant is edible. With most plants, the male and female parts can be found on the same plant. With *zenmai* and a few other varieties, however, the fertile male and female parts are separated into entirely different plants. The male *zenmai* leaves are too tough to eat.

Hiroshi-ojisan tells me that it’s a shame I can’t stay longer— late spring and early summer is wonderful for hunting for *sansai*. In *rokugatsu*, when bamboo sprouts are about three *sun* off the ground, *takenoko* (literally, “baby” bamboo) become the object of many *sansai* expeditions. To harvest, you just need to snap it at or below ground level, peel away the outer leaves, and boil them later in the day. Eating *takenoko* without condiments, cooking it with rice or combining it with *sumiso* (vinegar miso), *wasabi* or soy sauce are all delicious dishes.

Pandas, be jealous.

...or, to be honest, it’s more Otō-san who’s jealous. He actually likes bamboo.
Hiroshi-ojisan shows me where to find moso (giant bamboo), the most popular bamboo sprouts for sansai gatherers. Moso are best picked in late winter, though, even though the sprouts are barely visible then. The very tip of the sprouts can be eaten raw, but, due to a strong bitter taste, they are usually boiled and prepared in a variety of ways. A more common variety, madake (literally, “straight,” or true bamboo), is even more popular. The bamboo shoots (machiku) for the menma in ramen is usually harvested in summer.

…

The thing is… I don’t like bamboo, but I find it remarkably hard to tell Hiroshi-ojisan that. He’s just so excited, and…

…

Mind you, sansai-hunting can be pretty dangerous, too… mainly if you eat something you’re not supposed to. Of particular concern are other edible plants that strongly resemble poisonous ones.

Serī, for example, is a very popular sansai in spring but its evil twin, doku zeri, is poisonous. While Hiroshi-ojisan says it’s extremely poisonous, Kichirō-ojisan just winks and tells me that you can usually figure out if a plant’s edible or poisonous by nibbling the plant—poisonous plants are usually bitter and hot.

The so-called three poisonous plants in Japan are doku zeri, torikabuto, and doku utsugi. Doku utsugi’s famous red berries can easily be mistaken for edible ones.

Otō-san just tells me to use common sense. Namely, don’t haphazardly eat everything in sight. If you pay attention to what your body is telling you, your chances of being in any real danger are pretty slim. In the majority of cases, sansai poisoning will cause nothing worse than a rash or stomachache, which are uncomfortable, but not fatal.

However, I’m supposed to basically avoid mushrooms at all costs. Those can be pretty bad. And I’m also supposed to avoid plants in areas with a lot of chakra. Those plants… can be a lot more dangerous.

…

Lunch is basically a picnic of what the adults had packed, in the middle of gathering sansai, and as the sun starts getting a bit lower, we pack up and start heading back around the mountain.

Dinner is deep-fried, lightly-battered sansai—tempura. I really like tempura.

Everyone who went out helps cook. We peel off the dark skin of the takenoko until we get down to the pale beige part, then dunk it in a pot of boiling water with the nuka (rice bran), and leave it to simmer for about a quarter-koku, before turning the heat off and letting the takenoko rest in the water until cooled. Then, after a quick rinse, Hiroshi-ojisan cut it up for the tempura.

Fuki no tō are the sprouts of the fuki plant, and they’re prepared by peeling off the outside stem-end parts, which are called the hakama, or "pants", along with any discolored bits. The sprouts are then split into two parts—one is stewed in a mix of dashi stock, soy sauce, mirin and sugar, and the other’s turned into tempura.

The stems of the grown fuki plant are also eaten, after peeling off the stringy outer parts, and stewed with the sprouts. Some of the others, though, are quickly blanched in boiling water and left to marinate in a miso, mirin and sugar base, with a little chili pepper added for spice.
Tara no me have the hakama removed, and are cleaned and fried, but some are also blanched and served with soy sauce and bonito flakes.

Yama udo, the offshoots of the udo tree that are grown in the dark or with the earth mounded around them to blanch them, have the tough, hairy outer skin peeled off and discarded, the hard outer part of the white stem is peeled and set aside, and what’s left is the tender core. Both parts of the stem are soaked in water, with a little vinegar, for about a quarter- koku to reduce the bitterness, and then the outer part is super-thinly-sliced and pan-fried, while the core is sliced and left as is.

Warabi is prepared by pouring boiling hot water over them and adding a pinch of wood ash, before being left to soak until the water is cool. Then, after a rinse, they’re added to the miso soup.

Wasabina or hawasabi are the young leaves of the wasabi plant, some of which we were lucky enough to find in a stream-bed. The stems, the parts ground up and served with sushi, weren’t quite big enough yet, so we marked where they were and left them. The leaves apparently have a mild wasabi taste and only need to be blanched for a few seconds, cooled, and served with dashi stock and soy sauce... or sautéed briefly in butter or olive oil, with a little chopped garlic.

Ki no me (which literally means, "tree buds") are the tender young leaves of the sanshō pepper tree. They’re just ground up as a condiment, and some small springs work as garnish.

When I come back, I look through the encyclopedia that Itachi got me, and sure enough, a lot of them are in there. I add some notes about how to cook them, though, then work on some of my other personal projects, and yet again, I fall asleep during the stories.

We’re only supposed to stay a week or so, and I’m determined to make the most of them.

During the rest of the week, I keep working slowly at the massive tasks I’ve assigned myself. I run through exercises and kata every morning and afternoon. The rest of the time, I study and work indoors. Whenever I get tired, I go explore the forest. Sometimes, I go grab a horse, usually the small grey one named Kawa, or river, to head further out.

The forest is beautiful, and I start bringing materials to draw with. I especially enjoy being able to indulge the habits I formed in Konoha— namely, climbing up a tree and drawing from there. It’s also fun to practice the chakra-control exercises.

There are enough dry areas that I start bringing up books and the marudai (丸台) and tama that Obaa-sama gave me, and working on making kumihimo braids, or braiding rice rope. The marudai is the most common of the traditional frames used for making kumihimo, and it is generally made of a close-grained wood with a round disk with a hole in the center, supported by four legs set in a base. The warp threads that form the braid are wound around weighted bobbins called tama, usually made of clay, which is heavy enough to maintain even tension on the warp threads, and is balanced by a bag of counterweights called omori, which is attached to the base of the braid.

... It’s during one of those times that I hear what sounds like a scream. It cuts off quickly, and I’m almost wondering if I imagined it, but then it sounds again, and I head over to where the scream comes from.

As I get closer, I hear yelps and barks, and then...

Oh.
It’s a fox.

More specifically, it’s a white fox, by a fallen tree across a rocky stream, and…

Oh, no, poor thing… I think the fox’s leg is trapped. And… injured?

Did it fall of the log? That might make sense…

The fox yelps again, and I sigh. I have no idea what to do, but I’m in long-sleeved clothing, and I’ve got an older jacket on… and do I really want to…

Okay, yup. The fox is hurt, and it’s not too a cub, and it’s cute and fluffy. Mostly. Time to brave the claws and teeth and try to tie it down long enough to figure out how to apply some of those first aid techniques from the books I’ve read.

...oh, this is going to hurt. Well, don’t be hesitant. Don’t worry about hurting the fox more right now. Just…

NOW!

I lunge, jacket in my hands, and land on the fox right after it collapses in the middle of another escape attempt. My knees lock the jacket around the fox’s body, even as a sleeve catches in the fox’s mouth, and I quickly tie a serviceable knot, bundling the fox’s front paws and part of the head in a wrapped-up cloth.

Okay.

Here’s to praying I didn’t damage anything…

I practically sit on the fox as I take a look at the hind leg, using one of my legs to prevent the fox from kicking me.

Seriously, this was a bad idea. The fox is almost as big as I am!

But… ah, okay. Hind leg, caught in space between rocks and… really, really heavy log. That log might have rolled a little, based on the upturned earth on that side.

This is going to take a bit of effort.
I sigh. “I’m trying to help you,” I grumble at the fox. “Now, I’m not sure if you can understand me or not, but please don’t bite or scratch me. And… I’m sorry. I’m probably going to screw things up a bit before I fix them.”

I use rocks to weigh down the sleeves of the jacket and any loose fabric and pray that it keeps the fox in place long enough, then scrabble at the rocks (also praying that nothing lives in those tiny crevices that’s going to take a nip at my fingers.

After barely being able to shift anything enough, and having the fox yelp…

...okay, I’m getting help.

A little bit of fumbling and pain later, I pour as much chakra as possible into summoning Kiyohime…

...and now I’m exhausted, but I have a Kiyohime who might actually be big enough to help.

“...sssss… Hatchling. It is cold and damp. And…” Kiyohime seems to startle at seeing the fox.

“Yes, there’s a fox. I found… I think he’s a him, but I’m not sure… stuck here. Help me get him out?” I ask, panting. I want to try some stuff, but… I’ve read about animals hurting themselves, and I don’t want that to happen. “Kiyohime-san… I’m trying to shift the log a bit. Can you try and squeeze large rocks in here, next to the fox’s paw? Or make sure he doesn’t try to scratch or bite me? Or hurt himself more, struggling? I tried talking to him, but I don’t think he’s a summon,” I frown. “He didn’t talk back.”


I look back, realization dawning. “Oh. Right. Bit hard to speak…” I frown, looking back at Kiyohime. That’s true. He couldn’t exactly reply while muzzles. “But… can I actually risk it? I don’t know about you, but I’m a bit fragile and easy to get damaged.”

Kiyohime-san shakes her head, hissing softly. “Here. Let me. I will hold him down.”

Okay. Yes. That helps.

Now… removing rocks isn’t the safest method. The next best version… trying to squeeze rock in. Yeah. I’d already decided that. So… squeezing rocks in is hard. Therefore, the logical thing to do is to clamber over to the other side of the log and remove rocks from there in an effort to get the log to roll over again.

I’ll just have to be careful not to have the log roll over me .

...

This is not going to be fun. That log is heavy .

After what seems like half an eternity of straining at the wood, pushing and pulling and getting covered in damp dirt and scraping my nails to the quick, I finally manage to shift the log enough to gently tug the injured paw out.

...it’s not pretty. The skin’s been rubbed kinda raw in certain places, and it’s pretty swollen, but…

Damnit.
“Kiyohime? Do you know... will just s-listing the leg and wrapping it up be enough?” I ask.

“...I do not know, regretfully,” Kiyohime hisses. “But from what I have seen, I doubt it can hurt,”

“Should I bring him to Okaa-san and Otō-san?” I fret. “Ah, I really should have spent more time on
this instead of history... and I really need to learn some medical-ninjutsu... no, no, no. Worry about
that later. Gah! I should have brought my kunai. I need a stick. Two sticks. Straight, I think?
Definitely no splinters. And... oh, how am I supposed to get bandages? I should be able to use my
sleeves... but tearing them could be hard... oh, tearing the seams with the small blade in my bracelet
will have to be enough... why does everything go wrong in a forest? Is two sticks even enough? I
know I need to tie the bandages tightly, but not that tightly, right? It's not supposed to be a
tourniquet, after all, and cutting off the blood is dangerous... oh, what about typing everything, I'll
need to cut off something...”

...

...

After a bit of finagling with a surprisingly-cooperative fox (though that might just be because of
Kiyohime), I finally manage to sort things out.

“With any luck, I have done more or less what I am supposed to do, and this will heal quickly,” I
groan. “Well, with a lot of luck, if I'm being honest. But, you know, gotta be positive and all that.”

I straighten, groaning.

“Can’t hurt to send up a prayer. Wasn’t... wasn’t Inari the one with the foxes?” I ask Kiyohime. She
hisses, in what... is either agreement or amusement. I'll take that as a yes. I was more double-
checking than asking, anyways. I roll my neck. “I’ll do that at the shrine. Later. And... thanks for
everything, Kiyohime. Just... give me enough time to get clear, and then you can reverse-summon
yourself? Worst comes to worst, I’m pretty sure I can outrun an angry fox.” I think for a moment.
“Just... just checking, but... can foxes climb trees?”

“Yessss...” Kiyohime-san hisses in amusement.

I sigh. “You know what? I’ll just sit down and try and be as unthreatening as possible. You can un-
summon yourself if you want, Kiyohime-san.”

Kiyohime-san hisses, nodding slightly. “Yes... I feel that would be best... take care, hatchling.”

“You, too!” I call, as with a puff of smoke, the thin coil of black scales on the fox disappears. I sigh
from my spot on the log, looking at the fox.

Now... just... limp away, get better, and please... don’t...

I freeze, debating running, as the fox gingerly hops up onto the three branch next to me.

He limps closer, and I’m debating throwing myself off... but he whines softly and yips, and I decide
to temporarily take leave of my higher mental facilities, because I didn’t know foxes could use
puppy-dog eyes deliberately, and the fox is so fluffy and maybe it can be like that one scene in How
to Train Your Dragon by Dreamworks, and...

I hesitantly reach out a hand, palm-up...
...okay. The fox is adorable.

A fluffy white head sniffs at, then comes to rest on my head... and rolls around slightly, as if encouraging me to scratch.

I do.

I love animals. I never had pets Before, and even now... well, Hizashi-chan’s a goldfish. And Hitomi-sama’s taking care of— I think the fish the male— him right now. You can’t exactly pet a goldfish.

...

“Aww... you’re so fluffy,” I coo, gently scratching behind ears and across a soft underbelly when the fox lies down and rolls over onto his side. “And your fur’s so clean, and...”

A thought strikes me, and I frown at the fox.

“Are you a summon who just can’t speak? Maybe you’ve interacted with humans before? Because... I mean, I don’t know much... but wild animals generally aren’t this friendly.” I tilt my head, staring accusingly at the fox. “I might be wrong, but...”

We have a staring contest for a moment... and then the fox yips again, happily rolling on his back... and off the log, with a yelp of pain.

I blink, worried.

“Oh, who was I kidding?” I groan, hopping off as well. “Fox summons? Yeah. Probably not. Maybe just a smarter-than-usual fox, or a... well, low-in-survival-instincts fox. It’s not normal for people to just... run into summons out of nowhere, right?”

I gently help the fox up, running hands over the leg in an effort to figure out if anything shifted or broke in the fall... “Okay.” I stare at the fox. “I’m going to assume I’m not going insane. I don’t know if this is normal or not. I don’t interact with normal animals that much, and chickens aren’t the smartest animals, from what I know. And foxes are smart. I think. So either you’re playing dumb, or you’re actually a normal animal and I’m basically talking to myself right now.”

I sigh.

“It’s getting late. I’m not sure I should take you back with me, since from what I know, foxes eat chickens and I don’t think anyone would appreciate a wild animal getting lost in the house... and you’re probably better off in the forest, anyways.” I stand up, brushing myself off... and grumbling as I find fine white hair all over me. “Ah, sheesh. Springtime. Shedding.”

I fix the fox with as stern a look as I’m able. “I’m not sure if you can understand me or not, but stay here. From what I know, feeding wild animals is bad. But... if you’re good... I’ll bring my kunai tomorrow and see if I’m any good at hitting animals with them. I do the hunting, you do the eating. Rabbits and birds should be fine, right?”

I grab at my now-basically-ruined jacket, sighing. “You know what? I’ll stop talking to myself and just go, okay? I’ll try and come by again, but you’ll probably be gone by now. Take care, okay?”

And with that, I walk off.

...
Unfortunately, it seems like the fox is following me.

I want to rub at my face, but my hands are absolutely filthy, so that’s a no. I sigh, turning back. “I thought this only happens when you feed strays. I hurt you. Logically, you should be lashing out at me. I have no idea what’s going on, but…”

I melt as the fox yips softly and gently nudges my hand with his head.

“...You’re really good at playing the cute card, you know?”

I sigh, giving the fox one more scratch.

“But… I can’t stay. I’m sorry. If it helps, I promise I’ll come back?”

The fox gently headbutts me in the chest until I trip over a tree root and land on my rear, then rubs all over me, whining… then yips, one more time, before standing up and limping away.

I sigh, ruefully, looking at the mass of white hair liberally covering me and probably blending in with my hair, then wave at the fox.

To my surprise, the fox turns, yips, and then wobbles off into the forest.

...

Already, I feel like I imagined the entire thing. Seriously. What is this place. It seems like something straight out of a Disney—or Studio Ghibli—movie.

I stretch, before standing back up and heading home, taking note of landmarks along the way.

There’s probably no point in coming tomorrow, but...

I mean, it can’t hurt, right?

The next day, I return, and I am prepared. My clothes are grey, light enough to make sure any fox hair doesn’t really stand out, and I have two layers on for everything. That way, upon returning, I can just take off the outer layer, dump them both in the laundry room, and can then stop worrying about the hairs getting everywhere.

Because seriously. They got everywhere.

And I was covered in so much fur that the servants I bumped into were kinda shocked. Nakaki and Fujiteru and Sōei… everyone.

And since I changed in my room, the fox hair got everywhere. It’s staticky and annoying and… just...

...

Today, I’m prepared. I have a bag with clean bandages, several smoothed pieces of wood to replace the sticks as splints, hot water… and a sketchbook, and my weapons-pouch with kunai. And strips of boiled chicken. Because… I actually don’t remember why. Just because.

Let’s see. This tree, I think, the one with the funny curve and the moss...

Aha! I see my footsteps, and there are the rocks…
There’s the stream bed, I think…

And after a bit of searching, I arrive at the fallen log across the steam bed.

Huh. To my surprise, right on the log, there’s a fluffy white mass.

Seriously, this is basically a Disney and/or Ghibli movie at this point.

I go over to the log, plopping down and opening my bag. “Here. I brought some chicken… and some stuff to fix what I did on your leg.”

I frown.

Thinking about it now… “I should probably try to summon Kiyohime… -san?”

I tilt my head. The fox bumps his head against my chest, and curls up next to me… with the injured leg in my lap.

I frown.

“You know, you’re really bad at pretending to be a normal animal,” I mutter, sighing. But… until the fox speaks, I can happily live in denial. Anyways, worst comes to worst, I just repeat what I did yesterday.

“Mochi-kun!” I call. “Did you find the stick?”

It’s only the second day of having met the white fox, and I’ve already given the fox a name.

Hey, in my defense, I asked first if the fox had a name.

Surprise, surprise, the fox didn’t talk. But when I asked if I could give him a name, I think he nodded.

Yeah, I’m probably hallucinating, but I ran through a bunch of names, and he seemed happy with Mochi. It’s definitely more creative— and nicer— than the other names. Like, Shiro is just so uncreative. It’s, like, the most basic dog name. The white fox deserved better than that.

And now, I’m playing catch. Because I just failed at throwing kunai, and I already set up some basic snares for rabbits.

I almost feel guilty about the baby rabbits (I mean, it’s spring) that might be abandoned as a result, but… it’s late spring, and it’s not like they wouldn’t have had another carnivore hunting after them,
I have weird moral hang-ups.

...but hey, Mochi-kun seems happy with the fish. I’m not quite as sure about the frogs, but he seemed so proud after catching it, and…

On a separate note, apparently kiwi grow in the wild here. And more importantly, *kiwi grow on vines*. Did you know that? I didn’t know that. But following Mochi-kun, I find kiwi and strawberry, and they’re sweet and delicious.


I’m just having a lot of trouble getting over that, okay?

And so the next few days pass. I spend the mornings exercising, running through *kata*, eating breakfast with my family, following various people around the house as I explore the grounds and floors, sketching the grounds, practicing my calligraphy, reading through the books, then eat lunch—usually in a picnic-style, out amidst the blooming wisteria, and then leave to romp around the forest with an energetic Mochi-kun. When I return, I usually spend a lot of time trying (and usually failing) to draw people and study.

It’s after an overheard discussion between some of the servants and a flurry of questions and a lot of excitement that I run to Obaa-sama.

“Obaa-sama, Obaa-sama!” I call, almost skidding over the polished wooden floors.

“Hai, Hasuki-chan?” Obaa-sama asks, looking up from her loom.

“Can I go to the festival tomorrow night please please please?” I blurt out, practically hopping in place.

Obaa-sama shakes her head slightly and turns, as if to hear me better. “The… festival?”

I blink. I thought I was clear? “Yeah, the festival! At the shrine?” I ask, still bouncing. “It’s for the beginning of summer, it’s supposed to start at sundown, and Nakaki’s making me a mask!”

Obaa-sama nods slowly. “... *Tango no Sekku*. Also known as the Iris festival…”

...Obaa-sama sighs, setting down the *tama* bobbins. “You said that Nakaki’s making you a mask?”

“Hai!” I nod.
Obaa-sama rubs at her forehead. “Will your other… friends… be going as well?”

“Hai!” I chant, nodding ahead.

“…bring them all here,” Obaa-sama finally decides. “The ones going with you. I wish to speak to them.”

“Okay!” I grin, bouncing away. I’m going to a festival! A festival!

…Obaa-sama is not as excited as I am. For one, she doesn’t look up from her weaving when I open the door and hop in.

“You will be responsible for Hasuki-kun,” Obaa-sama orders, because really, there’s no other way to describe her tone right now. “If he comes to harm… well, suffice to say, you shall not enjoy the consequences.”

“Obaa-san,” I whine. “You don’t need to be so scary. I’m sure Asafuji-san and Nakaki-san and Genka-chan and Sōei-san and Fujiteru-san and everyone will take care of me! Right?” I ask, looking around.

“Most certainly, Hasuki-hiko.”

“This humble one would be horrified if the young master came to harm!”

“Of course!”

“Hai.”

“The young master’s well-being is, of course, of utmost priority to all of us.”

I let out a dramatic sigh. “See? I’ll be fine. Plus, Okaa-san and Otō-san and everyone are going, right? I’ll be fine.”

Obaa-sama sighs. “Actually… you probably should avoid speaking of… the festival… to Kimiko-chan or Hiroya-kun. They will be… busy… packing for the trip… and… I fear… they would not necessarily be the most comfortable with you attending the festival. Especially… after Miyako-chan… took a tumble down the shrine steps when she and Kimiko-chan were younger. I fear they will be especially worried with… with the darkness and everything.”

After a pause, she adds on. “And Kichirō and Hiroshi and Miyako are actually leaving very soon, though you will be seeing Kichirō and Hiroshi again very soon, so you might want to say goodbye to them.”

I nod, hesitantly. Okay. Other than that. I mean, yeah, I’ll do that, but… not now. I know it’s a bit cruel, but I actually don’t care about Miyako-obasan that much, and if I’m going to see Kichirō-ojisan and Hiroshi-ojisan again, very soon… that’s not really a priority. First… well, it feels a bit weird. Because… “I mean… I want to go, but I don’t want Okaa-san and Otō-san to be worried about me… and I’m not sure if I should go if they might not approve…”

“What they do not know should not harm them,” Obaa-sama grumbles. “They will be fine with it. I shall let them know, a little later. Happy?”

“Very,” I grin, a bit relieved. “Thank you so much, Obaa-sama!”

“Just… stay safe, okay?” Obaa-sama looks up at me and sighs. “Stay safe.”
She looks around the room quickly, before directing her attention back to her loom. “And alright, that should be enough. I wish to focus on my weaving.”

“Okay, we’ll go!” I chirp. “Ooh, and Nakaki-san? Can I see the mask? Or is it a surprise? I mean, I really don’t know what to expect so I’m pretty excited. What colors will it be? Oh, what kimono should I wear? I don’t want to accidentally fall, so geta might not be best… but at the same time, they look best, and…”

When the sun sets, I’m beyond excited. I’ve been looking forward to this all day. I even talked at Mochi-kun (because it’s not really talking to or speaking with if you’re the only one talking) at length about my curiosity over the decorations, who would even come (because seriously, it’s at the top of a mountain), what food there would be, what I would wear, and so on.

I’ve got a pretty pale-purple-and-pink flowery yukata, and geta, and a soft cloth mask, with delicate brush strokes in front… that form look a bit like a heart, but are actually just a simplified version of the Fujiwara mon. Somehow, I can see through it, but when I ask Nakaki-san, she just laughs and bops me on the nose, saying it’s a secret.

There’s a list of rules, but they’re pretty straightforward… even if they’re also weird. Namely, I’m to keep the mask on at all times, never tell anyone my name, and advised strongly to avoid ask any other people for their name, either, if I can help it.

…

Weird, but… not hard. It seems almost like a really strict masquerade ball or something.

I don’t pay it much attention. There’ll be lanterns! And food! Oh, and I’m supposed to find them and let them know if I ever get dizzy or tired or just feel off, but that’s basically common sense.

The walk up to the shrine is steep and dark and slightly damp and slippery, but it’s brightly-lit by the lanterns, and I can grab onto Asafuji-san. Along the way, more people join, and I almost want to ask… but everything’s so quiet and solemn and… and magical that I don’t want to break the soft more-or-less silence.

As we get closer to the top, I hear drums and people talking and flutes and laughter and… oh.

It’s so pretty up here in the night, with the stars and the lanterns and everything brightly lit, and it’s like the normally solemn shrine, and the grounds around it, have been turned into a lively… almost village?

There are stalls with food, and people laughing and talking everywhere, and it feels almost as if I’ve crossed into a different world. The shrine and the grounds seem so different, with the festival-light and the night sky and the almost ethereal glows everywhere.

Everyone’s dressed differently, but often in bright colors, and a lot of them have masks on. The clothing ranges from… well, simple, plain kimono to… I remember this one woman. I only saw her for a moment, and I think she was… in the shrine? Like, maybe she arrived early and decided to pray? I don’t know. But she had this beautiful jūnihitoe on. Basically, like, multiple layers of kimono. I don’t think it was twelve layers— I mean, it didn’t look as bulky as the jūnihitoe you see on the hina-ningyō on Hinamatsuri. And… it was beautiful, with layers in shades of white and gold and yellow and orange and red.

I strain to catch another glimpse, but she disappears, and I pout, slumping slightly.
Asafuji-san nudges me softly, smiles and waves me off, gently prodding me over to the nearest stall with a gentle, “Have fun!”

I shake the curiosity out of my mind and decide to heed Asafuji-san’s advice.

And so, with a laugh, I run off.

There’s only so far I can wander, but I jump from stall to stall. There are sweets with kiwi and strawberry and this one thing, chimaki, a kind of mochi with sweet rice paste, wrapped in iris flowers, sometimes, but usually bamboo leaves, and it’s so familiar. It’s like the… the… oh, shoot, I never learned to write it, but it’s something like zongzi… or maybe zhong zi… I really don’t know. It’s like that.

There are sweet chimaki and savory chimaki and they’re all so good!

The sweet chimaki are basically sticky, glutinous rice, with yokan, a sweet red bean gelatin-thing, or… I think kuzu powder. Savory chimaki is the sticky glutinous rice, but with meat, like chicken or pork, and vegetables, like takenoko, shiitake mushrooms, carrots, gobo (a type of root), kuri (chestnuts), and ichō nuts.

I can’t be upset at missing dinner with how delicious everything is, and the little tokens that Fujiteru-san and Sōei-san gave me to pay for the games and food and everything are spent… well, relatively wisely. I still have a lot left, and they’d made it clear that they wanted me to have fun… but I’m still going to be careful with it. And yeah, apparently Obaa-sama’s compensating them… but still.

It’s while I’m single-mindedly focused on finding a trash bin while also getting distracted by not dropping any of food… that I realize, of a sudden, that I have no idea where I am. And that somehow, I have no idea where the main shrine is, or the torii gates… no. That’s wrong. Somehow, there’s a gate that I’ve found, but it seems wrong, somehow. Like, the path doesn’t go down, but out… which should be impossible. I mean, we’re on top of a mountain. And the gate itself seems too big, and I don’t know what’s going on, and something almost knocks my mask off, but I manage to grab it in time, and I stumble out of the way of one person passing and why are there so many people why was the shrine so big and oops, sorry, excuse me, I-I didn’t mean to bump into you… sorry! Or you!

I manage to escape to the side of the gate, away from the incoming flood of people, and I practically grab onto the red post, and logically, I’m not lost but at the same time I feel like I am and I think I’m panicking because I don’t know where I am and there are so many people and…

A hand rests on my shoulder, and I practically jump out of my geta.

“SORRY,” the other person shouts over the noise, and I somehow take not of the fact that there’s a porcelain mask at the side of his head, and that he also has white hair. I’ve seen a few people like that tonight, but it’s always kinda cool to find others with pale hair. It’s not that common. “I COULDN’T HELP BUT NOTICE… ARE YOU LOST?”

I let out a sigh of relief, nodding frantically. “Yes! Thank you. I came here with… with some friends, but I got separated, and… and I can’t find them now!”

The slightly older kid— probably early-to-mid-teens— makes a confused face, and I try repeating myself, but he sighs, and leads me over a quieter area, walking slowly enough that I can follow. I repeat myself again, then.

He sighs. “…you should be careful, you know. It’s not that safe, and really, your… friends… should
be more careful. Are your parents around?”

I shake my head. “No, they’re… they’re at home. But they let me come with some family friends!”

“Where are your friends?” the other kid asks.

I wince. “I think… I think they’ll be by… by that tree, right in the middle of the sandō, the approach to the shrine? But… what time is it?” I ask.

“Hmm… about a koku past sunset,” he offers.

I stifle a groan. “Nope. Never mind then. They’ll wait for me there around a koku and a half after sunset. Probably not before then,” I sigh, frustrated. Oh, how I wish I had a phone, complete with Google maps and that Messaging app.

The other kid nods slowly, before tapping me on the shoulder. “Hey, why don’t I show you where that tree is, then show you around the festival? You’re new, right?”

I nod hesitantly.

“Yeah, figures.” He shakes his head, sighing, and I almost laugh because of how much he reminds me of Shisui. “You probably have no clue where the cooler parts are. Like, there’s this inarizushi stand, and it’s amazing.” He stands up too quickly, and then practically yelps as he trips over a tree root.

I hiss in sympathy, but when I ask if he’s okay, he just waves my concern off, muttering something about clumsiness and landing on his foot wrong and getting injured enough to know that it hurt but wasn’t serious.

…

I mean, I knew a friend Before who broke her ankle on a regular basis, involving one memorable occasion by falling off a bench, so… ＼(♀)／. Fair enough. Plus, I’ve done that before, and while I know it can hurt and cause a bit of a limp, I never sustained any doctor-worthy damage by landing on the side of my foot. Still… I frown a little, at the earlier offer. “What’s in it for you?” I wince as soon as that comes out of my mouth. “Sorry, I mean… like… why?”

“The goodness of my heart isn’t enough?”

I shake my head. “It… it wouldn’t really be fair.”

He sighs dramatically again. “Buy me a plate of inarizushi and we’ll be even? I mean, I’m kinda bored already, and it’s not like I have anything better to do.”

I frown, scrunching up my face for a moment, before deciding, why not? I mean… what’s the worst that can happen? Yeah, I feel like I’m signing my soul over via a contract with fine print I don’t have the time to go through, but… you know what? Stop the indecisiveness, and just go with it. And best not to jinx anything. “Sure. Thanks.”

But seriously, I’m starting to think that this feeling of imminent, not-quite-fatal doom is going to appear a lot in my future.

…
I wake up the next day surrounded by paper and very, very tired.

That means… several things.

For one, I ate way too much sugar the night before, I definitely shouldn’t have requested to play longer with that kid with the really kinda-cool ceramic half-face mask, and I should really thank Sōei-san for carrying me down.

For another… apparently I actually have a circadian rhythm, now. Yay?

I’m starting to feel like last night was a figment of my imagination, or maybe a rather nice dream. All I know is that there were many, many weird parts to it.

It’s when I find several pieces of kashiwa-mochi that I acknowledge that at least part of the temporary insanity was not quite imagined. They’re mochi filled with sweet red bean paste, anko, and wrapped in kashiwa leaves. Apparently, they’re kinda associated with this festival, and the older kid was very insistent that I try them.

…

Yeah. That’s probably where the familiarity comes from— the older kid reminds me a lot of Shisui.

Okay. Don’t be lazy. Time to pack up, go exercise, and maybe find Mochi. You promised to at least look, even if you’re 90% sure that fox isn’t going to be on the tree branch.

…

…I really don’t want to go. I don’t know… I’ve only been here for a little while, but… I love it already. It’s nice here. Relaxed, friendly… with the possible exception of Miyako-obasan, who might kinda not like me… but also just might be bad with little kids and/or people in general… and far away from the person who is, currently, basically my personal boogeyman.

Namely, Danzō.

…though, now, thinking about it…


…

Okay, clean up the sketches, convince Okaa-san to get out that really expensive camera that prints the photos ready-made, and figure out how many photos I’m allowed to take. One of the garden, one of the mountains, one of that log in the forest, one of the shrine, one of the garden… and one of the house in it’s entirely, I think. Maybe one of those can also include the servants… and maybe I can put that in my notebook, and label everyone, by name, so I don’t forget. Because that would be pretty embarrassing.

…

Okay. I’m the saddest about leaving Mochi-kun behind, but… I finally kinda caved and introduced
Asafuji-san and Fujiteru-san and Nakaki-san and Sōei-san and Genka-san and everyone to Mochi-kun, and tried to make sure they would try and watch out for him. Based on their surprise and… well… everything else, I don’t think they like foxes very much. And yeah, they’re wild animals with sharp teeth and claws who can be pests to livestock, like chickens, and again, they’re wild animals so they’re probably not good for anything indoors… but I’ve spent a lot of time with Mochi-kun and I think he’s special because I’m still not sure whether or not he’s a summon. I’m on the fence, okay? And firmly in denial, too. So there wasn’t much of a point in being so… tense about the entire thing.

Really, I miss everyone. Because Daiki’s really annoying, and not even the cool new swords and stuff they got from the Land of Iron can really make that kid and that constant “- kora!” bearable.

…and if I get whacked one more tim —

…

Oh, thanks. I really like the set of sharpening stones!

…wait, what do you mean, I only get them if I “play nice” with Daiki?

…

…I really want those sharpening stones. They are very, very nice. Otō-san’s good with picking bribes.

…

…I definitely won’t miss Daiki too much after we part. Parting is such sweet sorrow? Hah! More like a sweet relief, at this point!

ふるさととなりにしならのみやこにも色はかはらず花はさきげり

At my home

On the pond wisteria waves

Are breaking;

Mountain cuckoo,

When might you come and sing?

waga ya dono ike no fujinami saki ni keri yama kakkō itsukakinaka mu

Chapter End Notes

Authors Note: *beams happily* Comment below with your best guesses for everything that Makoto’s missing!

There’s a lot of stuff… or more specifically, stuff that doesn’t quite add up well,
that’s… well, clearer in words. Go on. Guess!

...

Okay. Other than that, what do you think of the family?

Seriously. And feel free to give me your best guesses about what I’ve foreshadowed. The most accurate comments get to request… a spoiler or an omake. (And I have one hint: read the story tags.)

And on a separate note… IF YOU HAVE ANY CHARACTERS YOU WANT TO BE FEATURED IN THIS STORY, COMMENT BELOW!!!

I’ve already had three of them in this story. Please, feel free to give more. Civilians, shinobi, anything goes. Same for age. It doesn’t matter which village they belong to, either.

Now, I might not use some characters exactly. But I will give credit if I based any characters off of what I’m given.

I think I’ve mentioned this before, but… here’s a basic template. Feel free to copy-and-paste and just fill in.

Name:

Age:

Physical Description:

Categorization: (Civilian/Nobility/Genin/Chūnin/Jōnin/ANBU)

Country/Hidden Village:

Personality:

Other Important details: (e.g. preferred weapon, preferred fighting style, specialization, chakra natures, etc.)

...

But seriously. Let me know what you think.

This chapter is almost 80 pages long, and has over 30,000 words.

It's also one of my favorites so far.

...

Please, leave a comment.
Of Snake Bites and Socializing

Chapter by ShadowAccio6181, UncertainAngel

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto gets bitten by a snake and is forced to socialize.

...Also, in which Makoto really puts too much stuff on his plate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

みわたせば柳桜をこぎまぜて宮こそ春の錦なりける

Looking out across

The willows and the cherries

All intermingled in the capital,

This spring

They are a fine brocade.

The capitol is in the south of Konoha. Hence… after a bit of traveling via horse, we transition to traveling via boat. Yay?

So, first impressions.

...

It’s big. Like, really big. And it’s ostentatious as hell, in a good way.

But I’m not joking.

Like, really. It’s a busy mess, that street from the docks to the city is just too much, that wall is just screaming “snobby,” and… it actually probably looks a bit the Forbidden City, if I’m remembering the images from my textbooks correctly.

But like, you know, less forbidden. And bigger. And with a lot more common people.

...

...eh, not common. Not for this world, since that’s, like, farmers and peasants… but like, normal people Before. So, I guess that would be middle class here? It’s like, the not-quite-nobility, but not farmers… but wait. Is this like feudal Japan, where farmers were considered to be a higher social class than the artisans and merchants?
I’m actually not sure. I’d go with no, though. And merchants aren’t like merchants in… really old, Confucian China, either—they’re… they’re not that looked-down upon.

Anyway’s, back to the city.

Inside the gates, there’s also a big kinda-city. There’s not much of a market, and honestly, it’s like one of those gated communities, just… bigger. So, a small gated city… I guess.

It’s amazing how many people there are, and of so many ages. Young children here actually act like children, and there are plenty of people with greying hair… and even some with walking sticks and glasses.

There are various places to learn, to practice, to do stuff… basically, everything educational that doesn’t involve working. This is a place for scholars and nobility… and yeah, there are kinda-restaurants, but they’re, like, upscale ones. And usually they’re placed with a noble clan.

The Fujiwara, like various other clans/upscale families have a “small” compound in here.

...just a bit of a heads-up. It’s not small.

I mean, I personally don’t really think of it as a compound, so I’m more measuring it with the stick that I’d use for family homes, so… I guess it’s a small compound?

I don’t know.

It’s not much of a compound, in my opinion. Mind you, I’m comparing it to the Uchiha Compound, and that might not not be the best measuring stick for compounds, so… yeah.

It’s more like a bigger version of the Uchiha main house— that traditional square-like house with the garden inside, with everything just one story tall.

Honestly, most of the buildings are about one story tall.

…

Note my use of the word, “most.”

Because… there’s a castle, and I’m pretty sure that thing is eight stories tall or something.

---

We go to the “main castle” pretty much right after dropping everything off at the Fujiwara compound.

There’s a few servants, and… there’s the rest of the Fujiwara clan, apparently.

Okaa-san greets them all by name, with a smile and excited chattering. There’s uncle so-and-so, who’s this-and-this part of the kuge, and there’s aunt something-or-another who’s really good at blah-and-blah, and there’s cousin insert-name-here, who’s really fun at parties and is quickly climbing up the ranks of insert-something-here, and ooh, there’s someone your age! Only, they’re not, because they’re probably a teen or preteen, and relatively older at best.

There’s probably about twenty of them or so, all together, and I can’t remember anyone’s name.

It’s a whirlwind, and I distinctly remember dragging Okaa-san aside, and asking her, “Wait, if there’s
so many members of the clan… then why am I still first in line to be the heir unless Kichirō-ojisan has kids?”

...oh, because they’re not in the line of succession.

...

And because apparently, they’re all so far removed from the line of succession that if Kichirō-ojisan somehow can’t have a kid, there’d probably be in-fighting so severe that it would tear the clan apart, the various factions would lose all respect, power, and legitimacy, and the reign of the Fujiwara clan would come to an end.

...

Or, alternatively, no one would honestly care, and the Fujiwara clan would simply fade from prominence.

...

Maybe this is just me, but…

...

BOTH OF THOSE OPTIONS SOUND VERY, VERY BAD!!!

Good job, Okaa-san, way to absolutely not put pressure on your kid! You’re doing an absolutely swell job!

...

...

...Okay. I think I’m calm, now. Back to the castle.

So, I’m not sure if this is how castles normally work, but it’s basically… a place to socialize. And get things done, but a lot of it is to socialize.

The first floor is basically just this giant area with various places to eat, and a bunch of areas for the tiny ants that make up most of the government/bureaucracy. (They’re doing pretty well for themselves, though. Like… there’s a kinda merit-based system? Any families who can afford to do so can send a city to the capital, where they can stay and study, and if they do well enough, they can get some pretty nice jobs. Of course… if they don’t, they end up… doing something else to pay the city back for their education in a not-so-nice job. If they’re average… then they get average jobs. It’s not that bad, as far as things go.)

The second floor is… well, more of that. The third floor is this massive library, and also, more of that. The fourth floor is more of that, but a lot nicer, and there are some living areas for ambassadors and other people. The fifth floor is still nicer living quarters for bureaucrats. The sixth floor… same. It’s also got a lot of the larger, fancier meeting areas. The seventh and eighth floors are for the daimyō and the daimyō’s close family. (Think: penthouse. With attached bodyguards, of course, in the form of the Twelve Guardian Ninja… whose rooms are, according to… various stories by Kichirō-ojisan, nice, but not that nice. I… have a very good idea about how he would know that, but I really don’t want to know the details. I’m perfectly happy to take him at his word.)

It reminds me a lot of the Hokage tower… but also Before. And… and home, as in, the Fujiwara
castle. Just… busier. It’s nice.

Apparently, Okaa-san, Otō-san, and I have a… luncheon with the Daimyō and his family, or something. I’ve already changed and everything, so Okaa-san dropped me off with at the library in the castle, at my request, and made me promise to wait for her there.

I don’t want to really risk exploring the library… this one’s big enough to take up almost an entire floor of a truly massive castle, nad.. I still remember, all too well, what happened the last time I tried to explore a library for the first time.

Hence, I find a table near the entrance, one that’s close in proximity but relatively well-shielded by bookcases, and set up my calligraphy set, grabbing one of the books that Oro-sensei had given me.

I’m trying to make a list of all the techniques used, as well as various strategies, and categorize them so that I can learn from what the Sannin did.

…

Plus, I really want to figure out how to read people this well. I mean, I’ve already learned a lot from Emigiku-neechan, but… I’ve got Oro-sensei’s notes, and I’m honestly trying to figure out how on earth Jiraiya-sama figured out that this one Suna missing-nin has a hidden child with a secret mistress from Kiri. Like… that seems like something out of a Spanish telenovela.

And a soon as I don’t have an upcoming thing, I really want to look into what happened after the Sannin’s mission in this one village. There was an implied upcoming threat involving bandits, and… I want to know, okay? Especially since it’s apparently 100% non-fiction.

...I really wish there was a sequel.

Turns out, Jiraiya-sama is actually pretty good at writing… and unfortunately, now I’m really curious about the writing of those Icha-Icha novels.

...I mean, I found of a lot of the onii-san and onee-san reading the books, and… I kinda just thought it was, you know, explicit stuff, but… if there’s an actual storyline… I’m kinda curious how the series is so popular.

But I’m somewhere in the middle of looking through my notes to see which jutsu I’ve already categorized— when I get back, I’m going to see if I can get Shisui to show me all of them— when I realize that someone’s awkwardly shifting from foot-to-foot next to me.

“Um… hi?” I try, hesitant. It’s a small kid, probably about my age… no, maybe a bit older, with thick-framed glasses and brown… no, reddish -brown hair. I think. He’s got his arms wrapped around a small stack of books.

“Y-your calligraphy is very pretty!” he blurts out, nervously.

…

I’m not really sure what to say. “Thanks?” I try.

…

Okay. Don’t be a chicken. “My name’s… Hasuki. Who are you?”

“Ah! I’m so sorry! I’m Minamoto Shido!” He laughs awkwardly.
...there’s another awkward silence.

“I’m sorry I was on my way to a class but I saw you and most of the time I don’t see people my age here, and I saw you writing and I just wanted to say that I thought your calligraphy was very pretty!” He mumbles, before bowing quickly and running off. “Sorry I have to go.”

...

...huh. So… that happened.

...

I am so confused. What just happened.

About half a koku later, Okaa-san finds me in the library and brings me to… a room.

It’s a very fancy room, yes, but it’s basically just a room, albeit admittedly a room near the middle of the seventh story, and thus, a Very Important Room. There’s… several shinobi in the room, which surprises me.

I stumble to a stop, tilting my head curiously. One… two, three… four, five… and there, six.

One’s tall, with brown eyes… I guess an olive complexion, and long, spiky black hair that hangs over his eyes. He’s wearing a simple long sleeved shirt with bandages on the arms, pants, that sash with the kanji for “fire” that shows him to a member of the Twelve Guardian Ninja, and a jacket with a fur collar.

There’s… someone who looks and dresses rather like a monk, with a bald head and dark eyes… and very thick eyebrows. The weird thing is that he’s barefoot. And there’s that sash.

There’s another guy, with short, light-brown hair and three scars— on the right side of his forehead and one on each lower cheek. The one on his right cheek is in the shape of an “x”. He wore a purple long sleeved shirt and green pants, with the Twelve Guardian Ninja waistcloth being around his waist.

There’s a girl— or technically, woman— with spiky black hair cut rather short and yellowish eyes. She’s wearing a pair of pants, with something tying them up a bit at the knee, and a red short-sleeved shirt, with bandages wrapped around each lower arm. She has the Twelve Guardian Ninja waistcloth around her waist.

There’s another girl… I think… with what looks like goggles, long dark hair, and loose dark clothing. It honestly looks a bit like a nun’s habit. She wears the Twelve Guardian Ninja symbol around her shoulders… kinda like a bib, but more intimidating and stylish.

Lastly, there’s another tall, tanned guy, with dark clothing that matches his brown hair, long pants and a short-sleeved shirt with black shoes. He also has a red sweatband on his head, bandages around his forearms, and the Twelve Guardian Ninja symbol around his waist.

“Konnichiwa, shinobi-san,” I murmur, bowing. “Please excuse my rudeness… but you are members of the Shugonin Jūnishi, right?”

“Aw, you’re cute,” one of the shinobi coos. She’s the one with the spiky black hair and yellowish eyes. “What’s your name?”
“I’m Hasuki of the Fujiwara clan,” I grin, giving a slight wave.

“I’m Tōu,” she smiles, before looking around. “Come on, introduce yourselves to the kid!”

“My name is Nauma,” says the one with the light brown hair and scars.

“Nice to meet you, Hasuki. I’m Kazuma,” smiles the one with the red sweatband.

...huh. That’s just like Asuma-san’s older brother. That’s… interesting, I guess? It must have been a bit awkward… or maybe not. It’s probably not that uncommon of a name.

“Chiriku,” replies the monk.

“I am Kaoru,” murmurs the one with the goggles.

“Asuma,” grunts Sarutobi Asuma.

...

An awkward silence forms.

“So, kid, I haven’t seen you around here, I think?” Kazuma-san prods gently.

I rub at my neck, grinning awkwardly. “Sorry! Yeah… I’m kinda new to Keishi. I probably won’t be staying long, though— I usually live with Okaa-san and Otō-san a bit further north, in Konohagakure.” I pause for a moment. “I like it here, though. It’s really pretty!”

“Konohagakure, huh?” Sarutobi-san grimaces.


Sarutobi-san looks at Okaa-san for a moment, but she just smiles. “I’ll leave you here with the nice shinobi-san, okay, Makoto? I think your Otō-san might be having trouble finding something. I’ll just run back quickly and check.”

“Hai, Okaa-san,” I nod obediently, giving her a hug, and I wave as she leaves.

“Uh… well…” Sarutobi-san grimaces.

“We normally have twelve shinobi here,” Chiriku-san replies. “Two of us are still… recovering… from a mission… involving Konohagakure.”

“The eldest son of the Daimyō was killed,” Kazuma-san growls, glaring at the ground. “The delegation was attacked by a shinobi. And somehow, the ninja from Konohagakure turned out fine, the shinobi was gone by the time ANBU came, and we still have no evidence about who attacked the delegation other than the fact that the attacker was one ninja, with a sharingan, but the Hokage insists that it had nothing to do with Konoha.” He scoffs. “Hah! A likely story.”

The shinobi with the goggles rests a hand on his shoulder, and he takes a shuddering breath, calming down slightly.

“The Uchiha are the only ones with the sharingan. There are no Uchiha missing-nin. How does the Hokage expect us to believe that it wasn’t the actions of Konohagakure?” the shinobi with the goggles murmurs. “How ridiculous. Especially considering that thanks to the very existence and nature of the hidden village, they invite conflict. Before they existed, we never saw such widespread conflict or such numbers of casualties.”
Tōu-san laughs awkwardly, setting a hand on Kazuma-san and Kaoru-san’s shoulders, and steering them at the door. “Alright, I think we get it… why don’t you two check in on the Daimyō… and maybe on the food?”

“Don’t act like you don’t agree with us!” Kazuma-san snarls. “We were all better-off before those oh-so-mighty Senju and Uchiha got it into their heads that they weren’t happy with how things were. Bah! They should have just stopped being shinobi, if they didn’t like that life! What gave them the right to tell all of us what to do? Their oh-so-special kekkei genkai? Tch.”

He storms out of the room, followed by Kaoru-san.

The room’s silent for a little while after they leave.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Tōu-san sighs. “He… shouldn’t have said it that way. He’s… rather sensitive about this issue.”

I nod slowly. “Do… does everyone think that way?” I ask. “Or, at least, do a lot of people?”

Tōu-san grimaces.

“Out of those who do not conduct regular business with Konohagakure… and for the shinobi clans who chose to stay independent of Konohagakure no Sato… many do not appreciate the Shinobi World Wars,” Nauma-san offers carefully.

“…oh.” I shuffle my feet. That’s… really not good. I look up again. “Do you… do you think you could tell me more about the mission? I don’t know much… but I’m pretty confident in saying that it wasn’t anyone who is currently a shinobi of Konohagakure, or who is currently part of the Uchiha clan. Or who was at that time, either.”

“…what makes you say that, kid?”

“…I knew the genie team that was assigned to that mission. I had a friend on it.” I hesitate. “They weren’t unaffected. One of the genin… he was killed by the enemy shinobi when he tried to confront him. The other genin quit as a result of that mission. And my friend… well, he’s the reason I can say what I do with such certainty. He activated his Sharingan after he watched his teammate be slaughtered in front of him while he was helpless to do anything.”

I stare stubbornly at the shinobi.

“No loyal Konoha shinobi would kill a new genin who’d just graduated from the Academy barely a year ago. And the Uchiha… no Uchiha would want to cause their clan’s heir to fail such an important mission. It was an honor. Everyone was so proud of… of my friend. And no. We’ve talked about it. Even if the Uchiha clan wanted the heir to activate the Sharingan, they would have chosen a different approach. My friend, the clan heir, legitimately believed that he was about to die. I know I’m just a kid… but please listen to me when I say that neither Konohagakure nor the Uchiha clan is directly responsible for… for the tragedy that happened.”

I blink furiously, trying to keep the burning sensation back. I am not crying here.

“If it helps… I don’t think the ANBU team came deliberately late or anything. I… my friend… he said… well, based on what the enemy shinobi said, we believe that he fled because he sensed the approach of Hatake Kakashi.”

I stare at the shinobi. “I’m not sure if you know, and I know it’s kinda crazy to ask you to believe a kid… but the Uchiha really want to just regain their status… in Konohagakure. They’re a bit upset
that… well, all of the Hokage have been associated with the Senju. I also know that you have no reason to listen to me… but please don’t tell other people. Many people in Konohagakure think that… the Kyūbi attack so many years ago was the work of the Uchiha clan. It wasn’t. But… because of what Uchiha Madara did, and because the Military Police Force in Konohagakure is only composed of Uchiha shinobi… the village doesn’t really like the Uchiha very much.” I crack a smile.

“If only one person kept telling me I did something wrong, I wouldn’t like them very much, either.”

I get serious again. “Please. Trust me. They just… they just want to feel like they’re an important, valued part of Konohagakure again. I’m telling you this because… because Itachi’s my friend, and because… I can tell you care for your comrades. And that you cared for the eldest son, and are sad about… what happened. But… please think about who you blame. It’s not Konohagakure, and it’s not the Uchiha.”

There’s complete silence after my impromptu speech, and I’m… kind terrified.

I’m absolutely petrified. My palms are clammy with cold sweat, and my hands feel like they’re shaking. And I’m also kinda wishing I could take back everything I just said. I’m risking so much right now…

…but Itachi’s my friend. I have to defend him, at the very least. And… well… I just… I just think this was the right thing to do. They’d have just let their bitterness and resentment towards Konohagakure or the Uchiha grow, and then they might try to take revenge or something… and if that happens, someone’s going to end up hurt.

Sarutobi-san is the first one to break the silence, with a harsh bark of laughter. “Ha! I can actually buy that. Hatake Kakashi… that brat.” He laughs helplessly, swiping at his face with one hand. “My old man always compared me to him. Oh, Asuma-kun, if you just tried a little harder in the Academy… Kakashi-kun graduated from the Academy when he was only five. He’s just six, and he’s already a chūnin. Why don’t you just try a little harder? Oh, you should congratulate him, he’s already a jōnin, and he’s only twelve!”

Asuma-san hits the wall with a fist. “Figures. I leave Konohagakure and my old man. And then a mysterious, enemy shinobi kills the eldest son of the Daimyō and basically defeats two of the Shugonin Jūnishi like it’s easy, and that mysterious, enemy shinobi is still terrified of Hatake Kakashi.” He throws his hands up in the air. “Even half a country away, I still can’t get away from him.”

Asuma-san rubs at his forehead with one hand. “I need a drink.”

“It’s barely midday, Asuma,” Chiriku-san says disapprovingly.

“I… have a question,” Nauma-san interrupts. “Sorry, but… are child geniuses normal in Konohagakure? Like… I mean… sorry, Hasuki-kun, but if you’re the Hasuki-kun I think you are… you’re supposed to be four.”

I frown at him. “How do you know?”

“Ah… uh…” Nauma-san stutters, flushing a faint red.

“He… is good friends with one of… your cousins, I think?” Tōu-san taps her cheek with a finger.

“Yeah, I think that’s it, right?”

I shrug. “I mean, Shisui says it’s probably something in the water.”

“…Shūshin no Shisui,” Asuma-san grumbles flatly. “Of course. Come on, Chiriku. He’s like,
fourteen, and he’s already a jōnin or something. Seriously. And he’s been a jōnin since he was, like, what, ten? Eleven? Seriously. Come on. I really, really want a drink.”

...

We all watch, somewhat bemused, as Asuma-san drags Chiriku-san out the door.

...

Tōu-san raises an eyebrow when barely a moment later, Asuma-san drags Chiriku-san back through the door.

“Never mind.” He looks at me, tilting his head to the door. “Kid, I’m pretty sure your parents are here. Shoo.”

Nauma-san sighs, and holds out a hand. “Come on, Hasuki-kun. Let’s go introduce you to the Daimyō, shall we?”

I grin. “Hai!”

...I’ll just say this. Madoka Ikkyū is… possibly the most irritating ten-year-old I have ever encountered.

The Daimyō is very nice, Shijimi-dono is… a bit… boisterous, but also quite kind, and their kid is… a pain. To say the least.

The lunch is very nice.

There’s a low table with zabuton pillows all around it, and a veritable feast brought in by various servants. And there’s the members of the Shugonin Jūnishi, the Twelve Guardian Ninja, guarding both the room and the entrances to the room.

Lovely. Absolutely not nerve-wracking or vaguely terrifying.

Please note my use of sarcasm.

Anyways, the nice thing is… that I’m a kid. You know that phrase, “children should be seen and not heard”? Yeah, it’s a pretty big thing. But it makes things very easy for me.

I just… sit there. Smile. Straight back, seiza, knees slightly apart, pass and receive everything with both hands… just a bunch of rules. A lot of them are stuff I had to know Before, though, so it’s really not that stressful. Honestly, the worst part is having to sit opposite the table from… Madoka Ikkyū.

For one, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to call him. He’s a kid. Logically speaking, I should use… Madoka-dono? Ikkyū-dono? It’s… really weird. Thus, I have decided to risk things… and call him Ikkyū-san.

...

Okaa-san seems fine with it, and Shijime-dono doesn’t seem to mind at all… and neither does the Daimyō… so I think I’ll still to Ikkyū-san.

But… the thing is… his etiquette is absolutely horrendous.
He slouches. He constantly shifts positions. He talks. Rudely. Often interrupting others’ conversations. And with his mouth full. He doesn’t use the communal chopsticks and picks stuff from the main dishes with his own personal chopsticks. He’s a horribly messy eater. He has no sense of courtesy regarding maybe… *not* grabbing *everything* that he wants to eat, and like, *letting other people have a turn*. And I’m almost certain I’ve seen him chew something, make a face, and put it back on the communal plate.

Hence why, part-way through the meal, when Ikkyū-san’s stopped eating and started whining and Shijimi-dono suggests that since I’m new, Ikkyū-san should show me around the city… well, I’m not the most enthused.

…

To be fair, neither is Ikkyū-san.

---

The tour is… surprisingly boring. Ikkyū-san isn’t dumb. I’m fairly certain he’s deliberately trying to bore me… or is at least getting some petty revenge. Kind of like a, ‘if I have to do this and be bored, I’m going to make it as boring for you as possible.’

But really, he’s actually pretty clever. Like, I’m fairly certain there was one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja following us, but… there isn’t now. Hence, I think Ikkyū-san’s used to shaking them off.

…

Huh. Maybe he’s actually pretty decent. If you consider that the boring part was simply to bore the shinobi, too… maybe he’s not that bad? Or just, he doesn’t intend to be as abrasive as he is, and it just comes naturally. Mind you, that’s possible.

I’m kind of excited now, actually. Madoka-san… *Ikkyū-san*, isn’t actually that bad of a tour guide. I mean, he’s terrible at explaining stuff, but he’s pretty good at just… leading me around interesting parts of the city.

Because, seriously. The city is amazing.

It’s enormous, for one, and it’s kinda admirable how Ikkyū-san can just wander around so confidently.

…At this point, I’m almost wondering if… maybe he just doesn’t get a lot of attention from Shijimi-dono and the Daimyō? I honestly don’t know.

…

My opinion changes rather quickly, when we take a… an arguably wrong turn.

That’s not to say that is is necessarily his fault, alone. The teenagers probably shouldn’t have been drunk, for one. Based on what I learned about people-watching with Emi-nee-chan… the cut of their robes indicates that they’re well-off. Also, they’re living here, but their clothes… that’s a relatively new cut, I think. Their shoes are new, but poorly-treated. The same goes for their clothes. The colors are too bright and the fabric too stiff to be well-worn. Plus, it’s really flashy.

They don’t have family crests displayed prominently, though, and based on some of the ink stains that I saw… they’re probably lesser nobility or scholars. Born to wealthy families, possibly bright, but capable of making really bad judgement calls.
...and intoxicated enough to not recognize the four-clawed dragon embroidered in gold thread— with accents of bright kurenai red and deep purple— on his clothing.

Because yeah, dragons are important. Like, they’re mostly a thing in the Lands of Fire, Lightning, and Water, just because, but… they’re only allowed to be worn by nobility, and they’re kind of a sign of the Daimyō’s direct favor. It’s a really severe fashion faux-pas and insult to the throne, otherwise. Usually, the Land of Water Daimyō goes with three-clawed dragons, the Land of Fire has a dragon with four claws on each foot— that total to sixteen, as the symbolic number of rays depicted with the sun on the Daimyō’s personal seal, and the Land of Lightning’s Daimyō wears clothing with dragons with five claws per foot.

Cool, huh?

And then there’s this kinda confusing thing with the phoenix, or rather, hō-ō , but that’s really not used that often.

So… yeah, they ran into each other when they turned around that corner. Arguably, neither party was to blame— it was an accident. But with Ikkyū-san and his injured pride, and with the easily injured pride of stupid drunken teenagers… things escalate. Quickly.

The problem is that Ikkyū-san is all bark and no bite, and he’s a bit out-numbered… and the teenagers are a lot bigger than he is. That in and of itself wouldn’t be catastrophic. But, like I said, I’m pretty sure they’re drunk.

...and now, one of the teenagers is grabbing him by the wrist and… based on the fact that Ikkyū-san looks ready to cry and that those knuckles seem to be a bit white…

...

I need to be the adult here, don’t I?

Okay. Time to get Ikkyū-san out of there and make sure the teenagers don’t do anything that will ruin their lives permanently.

...I officially give up.

I tried, okay? I tried.

So, I quickly… temporarily put down the teenagers, via careful targeting of pressure points and sensitive areas. Namely, pinching the Achilles tendon, jabbing fingers into the soft area right behind the knee, using a hand to… kinda chop at where the big muscle of the leg connects to the bone in the front of the leg, right above the knee, and punching people in the groin. Also, digging fingers into the sides of the waist— ticklish spots are great to target, and “tasing” people is decently effective in combat. And digging fingers into that bundle of tendons on the inside of the wrist, into the soft part on the inside of the elbow, and pinching at the meaty part of the hand between the thumb and forefinger.

...so, they’re a bit bruised, kinda humiliated, and probably in very temporary pain, and I think I diffused the situation well enough.
So, that’s good, right?

No. No, it’s not.

Because then, I turned around… to find Ikkyū-san running off… probably while crying.

And let me just say this— he is fast.

Especially when you consider the fact that I’m wearing geta sandals, which are… inconvenient at best to run in, and he’s… not. He’s wearing… silk slippers or something, I don’t know.

So, I chase after him, but I’m kinda slow— I refuse to lose the geta, especially since the ground’s rough and… yeah, nope— and he obviously knows the city better than me, even while half-blind…

…except he doesn’t. Because somehow, along the way, we end up in a forest, and at that point, I’m tracking him by sound, and I’ve finally close enough that I can manage to grab him…

And then he manages to dodge, because I was kinda telegraphing my movements because you need to be gentle when grabbing people by their clothing, and I trip over some tree root or something— I don’t know, I really wasn’t paying attention— and I fall, arms reaching out… except for one goes through the ground, into a pit or something, and I feel scales and there’s a snake and the snake lunges at me and I bring my arms up and manage to swat it aside… but when I try to dodge, the hem of my kimono gets caught on something and I trip again, and the snake bites me on the leg and it really, really hurts but I manage to grab the snake— obviously a mamushi, a pretty common snake, now that I can see it— by the head, from where it’s attached to my leg, because it isn’t letting go and shoot, that means it’s injecting me with venom and then I see Ikkyū-san panicking over the fact that yeah, he ran into a forest with poisonous snakes… and he trips on slippery pebbles and falls with a splash … and that means that there’s water… and oh, sweet Amaterasu, does he not know how to swim or something? Or did he hit his head?

And so, I jump in after him, keeping a hand fisted around the snake’s head— which is still attached to me and doesn’t seem to be letting go anytime soon — but thankfully, my half-formed plan that I wasn’t even consciously aware of works, and the snake, which evidently doesn’t like being underwater, lets go and I toss it as far away as possible.

I do my best to stop panicking, drag Ikkyū to the edge, turn him on his side… and slow my heart rate, while trying to see if he’s breathing or not.

…and because today is arguably now one of the worst days of my life, he’s not. But luckily, before I start trying to remember how CPR works, I decide to try patting his back… and when that doesn’t work, punching him in the stomach… which thankfully, somehow, works.

So, he’s breathing, he’s alive, he’s probably concussed based on that wound in his head…

And I’m poisoned. And I don’t remember how quickly mamushi venom works. Okay. Don’t worry about that. First… okay, this is awkward. And seriously unlucky. The bite is on the outer back part of my lower leg, and it’s right below the knee. That means that I can’t really reach the wound, and therefore can’t try and… like, suck the venom out.

…

Okay. That’s fine.

I quickly sort out the layers of my kimono, grab at the innermost layer, the nagajuban… and tear that into bandages. I quickly wrap it… almost all of the way up my thigh, since I am an idiot and
don’t know how quickly venom spreads in the bloodstream, and tighten it as much as I am able into
a makeshift tourniquet. Then, I try and… push out the venom.

I’m not sure if it works, but hopefully I can bleed it out enough.

Because *mamushi* venom is seriously nasty. Now that I remember… Oro-sensei had some books
about this. There’s something in it that, like, causes red blood cells to… just kinda explode in the
bloodstream? Like, they rupture, and spill their guts everywhere… and that’s bad. I don’t remember
why, but it’s bad. Then, there’s the two things that both try and destroy the nervous system.
Neurotoxins. Those are also probably not very good. And there’s the anticoagulant or something,
which actually sounds pretty good in this scenario, because I kinda want my leg to keep bleeding so I
get as much of the venom out as possible.

…

Wait. Oh, seriously? The pond we fell into… it’s *stagnant* water. Blergh. Gross. There’s a layer of
algae, even, and… oh, that means it’s probably teeming with all sorts of stuff and… okay, I need a
qualified medic-nin or something, as soon as possible.

…

I flare my chakra, as hard as I can. That’s what Shisui taught me to do, if I ever really needed help
while in Konohagakure. The military police or a shinobi or maybe even ANBU… just *someone*
would be sure to come. So, now I need to wait.

…

You know what? Maybe Kiyohime can help. She’s the most help I can get access to right now, at
least.

Just… I don’t know if I can use the blood from my wound or not, since it’s probably kinda
contaminated… so let’s just *not*.

I spit on my thumb and try to clean it as well as possible, before I puncture the skin with the sharp
edge in my bracelet… get the vial of blood, splash *that* on the seal…

…

… let’s try that again.

Splash some of the blood out, spread it over the seal, push in chakra…

…

…

…okay, Kiyohime’s evidently not coming. Because… life. I don’t know. Yeah, this is just… just
*great*.

…

Okay. Let’s just… sit tight and wait for someone to come? Like… how long will that take? I kinda
need *urgent* help.

…
Come on, Ikkyū-san. Wake up. You got me in this mess… and now, you’re probably my best chance of getting out of it.

…

Okay, so… good news, Ikkyū-san’s woken up.

…

Bad news, no one’s showed up yet, and it’s been… probably a quarter- koku? I don’t know. Suffice to say, it’s been longer than I want it to be.

I’ve been flaring my chakra pretty consistently, but… yeah. Nothing.

“Okay. Don’t panic,” I tell him, pulling him up into a sitting position. Right. Remember, Makoto, be nice. “I… kinda need your help. So, I don’t know where we are. I’m new to this city. Please, go get adults. I’ve been bitten by a snake.”

…and the kid panics. It’s not even that much blood! And the snake isn’t even here, from what I can tell.

“Don’t worry. The snake isn’t here. Come on, calm down. I need your help.”

I keep talking to him calmly, hoping to maybe calm him via osmosis or something. It… kinda works.

…

Except it’s not much use, because he’s lost. And he doesn’t know where we are.

…

And so, I have to hobble with him (which raises my heartbeat which is bad in cases of poison, but… hopefully I won’t die? I don’t know), which basically means grabbing a stick and making do, since he sucks as a guide, or as a support, and… I manage to get us back where we came from.

…kinda.

Except, now, the drunken kids are still there, with more teenagers, and… now they’re picking on a dog?

…

Okay. Makoto, breathe. They’re probably still drunk, and it takes time to learn from one’s mistakes. But… I seriously am not in the mood for any of this.

And seriously, where did the dog come from? It’s all dirty and dusty and it’s fur’s a mess and it looks like an underfed stray…

…

…and… that’s probably a broken front paw. Or something. The dog’s definitely limping.

Today just has not been my day.
I hobble over, whack at everyone as hard as I can with my stick, step in front of the dog, let myself fall to the ground, grab the dog, and state, calmly, “Look, I’m tired, dirty, at the end of my tether, and I have been bitten by a mamushi. So, can one of you be a decent human being or something and GET ME TO THE CASTLE OR THE NEAREST DOCTOR OR SOMETHING BECAUSE MY PARENTS ARE THERE AND WE ARE LOST AND I HAVE BEEN BITTEN BY A SNAKE AND I HAVE NO CLUE WHAT TO DO!!!”

…

And, of course, they just run away.

…except the dog. I mean, it comes back, nosing at my fingers, which is more than I can say of the teenagers.

“Aw… you poor doggy,” I coo, scratching at the dog, stubbornly pushing the issue of the dirt and grim and possibly insects and/or parasites off to the side. “Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?”

I tear another strip from my nagajuban, wrapping it around the dog’s neck and torso like a makeshift collar… but, like, one of those harness-things that you’re supposed to use for small dogs. Because this dog really isn’t that big. I mean, it’s big compared to me, but that’s more because I’m… kinda small.

And… it’s just been a really bad day, and I really don’t want to leave the dog alone.

So, then Ikkyū-san, the dog, and I all hobble back to… the busier streets, even as I— having by now lost all sense of shame— just keep screaming, “HELLO? CAN ANYONE HELP US?!”

…yes, actually. Because not all teenagers are jerks, and we almost literally run into one… who looks scary and almost causes Ikkyū-san to scamper off, which he would have done if I hadn’t lashed out a hand and grabbed his collar.

...yes, actually. Because not all teenagers are jerks, and we almost literally run into one… who looks scary and almost causes Ikkyū-san to scamper off, which he would have done if I hadn’t lashed out a hand and grabbed his collar.

“This is Madoka Ikkyū. I am Hasuki of the Fujiwara clan. I was bitten by a snake. A mamushi, to be specific. Our parents are currently probably having lunch on the seventh floor of that really tall castle past the gates. I found several people trying to hurt this dog even more. He’s got a hurt front paw or something. Can you help us get back to our parents?” I ask bluntly.

The… rather intimidating teenager with the maybe-permanent scowl frowns more, but crouches down in front of me. “If you were bitten… we should hurry. I’ll carry you. I can also carry the dog.”

I grin in relief. “Oh, thank Amaterasu. Thank you so much.”

Finally. With any luck, this day will end… very soon. And, hopefully, this won’t set a pattern for my stay here.

We scare the wits out of quite a few people when we head into the palace.

Yeah, maybe it would have been better to head to the clan compound… but I don’t really remember where it is, and at this point, I just really want Okaa-san and Otō-san. It’s been a long day, okay?

But apparently, the most disturbing thing is that I’m not crying or anything. My leg is leaking blood,
I am a dirty, bedraggled mess perched atop the back of a rather intimidating-looking teenager, who’s also carrying a similarly dirty and bedraggled dog, and I just look like someone who’s completely done with… like, everything.

But… my day isn’t over, yet. Because on the second floor, when we’re taking a circuitous route so as to avoid angering any librarians… we run into a fallen Minamoto-kun with a bunch of scrolls and spilled ink and a bunch of older kids around him… and I’m tired and injured and poisoned, and I do not have time for this right now.

In practically just seconds, I wriggle down, hop over, and punch the biggest kid there in the crotch.

…and then one tries to grab me— by the hair— and I literally bite him, even as I elbow another one in the thigh.

“I hope you’re not hurt, Minamoto-kun?” I ask, plopping down next to him and trying to quickly help him reorganize the mess. “Here. I’m sorry to leave so quickly, but I’m kinda hurt, and I want to find Okaa-san and Otō-san. I hope I’ll see you around.”

Intimidating-Teenager-san sighs deeply, before coming forward and quickly helping Minamoto-san gather everything, and then letting me clamber back onto his back.

And so our very weird procession continues, up past various people who— rudely enough— simply gawk, and through a few of the Shugonin, the Guardian Ninja, who I shoot a dirty glare at and are thankfully smart enough to not get in our way.

Ikkyū-san opens the door, I thank him, slither down, and hop in.

“Good evening, Okaa-san, Otō-san, Shijimi-dono, Daimyō-dono,” I greet monotonically. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but… please help? I kind of got bitten by a mamushi and Ikkyū-san over there needs to get his head checked for a concussion and his lungs, because he hit his head falling into a pool after the snake scared him. I also think I might have inhaled some water pulling him out of that thing, so… yeah. And, I’m pretty sure the water had all sorts of icky stuff in it, which probably really doesn’t help things. Oh, and I ran into the dog on the way, and this is less urgent, but I think there’s something wrong with that front leg.”

I raise my eyebrows when no one moves.

“So… help? Please? Like, now? My leg’s actually basically numb right now, and I don’t think that’s good.” I pause for a second, vision swaying. “And… I think I am very close to passing out from blood loss.”

I think I should consider myself very lucky.

Now that I’m not longer in pain or covered in blood, dirt, and various other uncomfortable substances… I can’t really bring myself to hate that day. Yeah, it wasn’t fun, but… there were no fatal consequences, and now everyone knows me as that one kid who trailed dirt everywhere.
...kinda. I’m either exaggerating or understating the rumors flying around.

All I know that the “hospital room” I’m currently stuck in is very comfortable… possibly because it’s not a hospital room. No. The Fujiwara family’s important— and wealthy— enough to afford to pay medic-nin and various other people to make house calls. And Okaa-san’s surprisingly well-versed in treating snake venom.

...apparently, after she realized that I was spending a lot of my time playing in the forest, she immediately went to Orochimaru-san to get a very well-stocked… first-aid kit, essentially. Complete with antivenom and various things to sterilize wounds and kill the tiny stuff that you don’t want in the human body.

But, yeah. When you’re on mandatory bed rest, it’s kinda nice to be babied.

Now, the pain in my leg is kinda uncomfortable, but… meh. It really could be a lot worse.

But really. It’s pretty nice! Okaa-san’s told me so many stories about how she knew Orochimaru-san — it started with various D-ranked babysitting missions when he was a genin, then moved onto body-guarding missions, and developed into friendship along the way.

And I get to cuddle a cute puppy sometimes! Because the dog I’d found? He… well, apparently, he wasn’t actually a stray. Technically. But the truth is arguably sadder— he’d belonged to one of those teenagers, and the teenager had… not been the best owner.

But there’s good news— the dog’s mine, now. He’s a young *akita inu*, and… well, I’m not that creative at naming things. Plus, I like homonyms and how words that are spelling the same with *kana* can have different meanings in *kanji*. So, Aki-chan is now… technically mine, even though I’m probably not going to bring him back to Konohagakure with me. According to Okaa-san, the members of the clan here would be more than happy to take care of Aki-chan.

I’m glad. I… really don’t want the responsibility of taking care of a pet. I’m not really ready for it, and I already need to have Hitomi-sama babysit my pet *fish* on a semi-regular basis. If I don’t even have the time to take adequate care of a fish, how can I take care of a dog? But at the same time… it could be nice. I mean, from what I can tell, Aki-chan’s already potty-trained and knows some basic commands… like “sit”, “stay”, “follow.” Maybe if Shinko-chan would be willing to occasionally dog-sit?

...I don’t know. That’s something to get back to later.

On a separate note, Hiroshi-ojisan and Kichirō-ojisan also arrived, on my… probably third day of mandatory bedrest.

Kichirō-ojisan apparently thought the entire thing was kind of hilarious, and poor Hiroshi-ojisan looks like he’s got a very painful headache that won’t go. (I’ll give you a clue as to what’s causing him the pain— it’s name starts with Kichi- and ends with -rō.)

It’s really hard to be upset when mandatory bedrest just means I have more time to study… and practice my musical instruments. *Fue* flute, the *koto* (ignoring the fact that my posture kind of sucks because sitting in *seiza* puts pressure on my injury), *shamisen*… basically everything.

(No, I’m not happy that I can’t move… or exercise or stretch, really, or anything physical, because this is going to set me back *so much*, but… there’s no point dwelling on that. Stay positive, Makoto. Just be happy that you get to sleep this much.)

Kichirō-ojisan and Hiroshi-ojisan are very nice, though. They don’t mind helping me find the books
I want, and are... usually more than happy to stay a while and explain some of the intricacies of how
the government works... as well as some of the details of how to deal with the rest of the court and
nobles.

It’s really useful, in the sense I get... basically, a comprehensive summary of all the gossip within the
last decade. Or two, of its important enough.

Like, so-and-so had a daughter that ran off with a visiting samurai, this one lady who always wears
pink absolutely hates dogs, what’s-his-name does this-and-this, this other person’s favorite food is
sushi, and there’s been multiple times when he got sick because he ate bad seafood, and so on.

I’m... somewhere between impressed and terrified. Or possibly envious? Because, like, Kichirō-
ojisan knows everything about everyone.

I’m not even exaggerating... that much. As in, in the middle of the first day he started telling me
everything, I grabbed an empty notebook and started recording everything. In English. I’m not sure
what I’ll use this information for, but by now, I know all too well that any and all information is
precious.

I mean, it’s not exactly like I have Google here.

So... I guess this is my version of Facebook? A list of people, with everything embarrassing.

...I’ve started a... little book of faces. And names. I put then in the same seal as my other Very
Important Book. It’s got a sketch of their face with their name... and some important information,
like who they’re related to, their friends, how old they are, and their birthday. And some stuff, like
their hobbies, favorite foods, etcetera. Also, whatever gossip’s going around about them, as relayed
to me via Kichirō-ojisan.

I’ve already put most members of the Fujiwara clan in there, and I’ve got plenty of pages for other
people.

One of the things I’m certain of is that I don’t want anyone to get their hands on this book. Like... I
mean, Itachi’s fine... and probably Shisui, too, but... if they don’t already know this stuff, I’m not
going to volunteer this information. I can already think of multiple ways to arrange to... well,
assassinate someone, just based on the information in this book.

If Danzō got his hands on this... I don’t even want to think about what could happen.

I’ll need to be really careful with it. Luckily, thanks to Oro-sensei, it’s already... relatively secure.

But on a separate note... can I just say that Kichirō-ojisan’s really unconventionally cool? Like, he
doesn’t seem that cool at first, but... he’s surprisingly awesome. Kinda like Shisui, actually, if I think
about it... and if I squint.

So, I discovered this when I watched Kichirō-ojisan scribbles out a note to himself about which
books I asked him to try and find in the library. And... it didn’t look like typical kana, or kanji, so... I asked.

It turns out, it’s something called sōsho. Well... technically, kyōsō.

Based on Hiroshi-ojisan’s explanation, I think it’s something like... cursive, for kanji.

It’s basically faster ways to write characters developed through... about four mechanisms: omitting
part of a word, merging strokes together, replacing portions with abbreviated forms (such as one
stroke to replace four dots), or modifying stroke styles.

Apparently, these are actually the origins of hiragana. The sōgana cursive script was considered to be suitable for women’s writing, and thus came to be referred to as women’s script (女手 onnade). This term was later applied to hiragana, as well. In contrast, kanji themselves were referred to as men’s script (男手 otokode).

...cool.

So, sōsho’s the basic one. Kyōsō is kinda like sōsho, taken to an extreme—it’s even more difficult to read. At that point, it’s more about looking cool that being legible. There’s also different substyles, I think? Like, there’s dokusō, where each character is separate, and renmentai, where each character is connected to the previous one.

The thing is… what’s super cool is that it’s not easy to learn. And Kichirō-ojisan… kinda learned it on a whim.

When I ask him to clarify, he nods. “Yeah. I mean, I learned it because it looked cool.” He shrugs, grinning. “Plus, I was kinda lazy.”

“You still are lazy, Kichirō,” Hiroshi-ojisan sighs, hand pinching his nose. “And… anyone else would probably tell you that learning kyōsō well is… very difficult.”

“Oh. Yeah, you told me that but…” Kichirō-ojisan shrugs, pretending to flip his hair over his shoulder. “I don’t know.”

I barely resist the urge to laugh.

“You are quite possible the most arrogant, egotistical individual in the Land of Fire,” Hiroshi groans. “At this point, your head shall become so inflated from compliments that you will simply… float off into the sky.” He pauses for a moment, pensive. “Or perhaps you shall simply explode. That, too, would be an interesting sight to see.”

“You wound me, Hiro-niichan!” Kichirō-ojisan gasps dramatically, clutching at his chest, before collapsing onto the bed. “I thought you loved me!” He sniffs theatrically. “Makoto, you’re the only one who loves me…”

Hiroshi-ojisan rolls his eyes. “Well, that’s only if you discount your hordes of screaming admirers.”

...okay. I can’t hold it in any more. I burst into a fit of laughter, clutching at my stomach. I try to stifle it with a hand, but… yeah, no.

“Kichirō-ojisan, you’re so… absolutely ridiculous!” I gasp, trying to calm myself down. After a few deep breaths, I think… “Okay. I think I’m good.”

I’m not. I take one look at Kichirō-ojisan’s disgruntled pout and burst into giggles again.
After a week and a half of forced bedrest, I’m finally allowed up. My wound is still a bit sore, but I’m very determined to not stay in bed any longer than I absolutely have to.

...and guess what’s first?

If you guessed yet another lunch with the Daimyō and his family… congratulations! You’re right.

I was honestly quite apprehensive about the entire thing. I mean, I remembered very clearly what happened the last time.

Honesty, at this point, I need to keep up a tally of how many time I’ve gotten into trouble in a forest. But… it’s not like it’s completely weird. The Land of Fire has a lot of forests, after all, and Konohagakure… it’s the village hidden in the leaves for a reason.

But… it actually turned out… pretty well. Surprisingly well. Shijimi-dono seems to like me, and even Daimyō-dono seems at least somewhat fond of me. And… Ikkyū-san seems to have a mild case of hero-worship for me, now. He keeps chattering about how cool I was… and I mean, I’m not upset?

It… means a lot. Like… I’m allowed to wear kurenai, now. It’s not quite as strictly regulated as it once was, but it’s still pretty nice. It means that I have her favor. Also… I’m pretty sure Ikkyū-san’s the one responsible for the other things, but… he gave me a really pretty, dark purple haori with a subtle pattern of chrysanthemums dyed into the fabric and a four-clawed dragon, embroidered in gold and silver and kurenai red. He also gave me a hiōgi fan, which is one of the folding ones, of embroidered silk on a hinoki frame. The pattern is wisteria, and it matches the colors of my new haori.

It seems… really too much for… basically just going along with a kid. Also, it’s really fast. None of this would make sense… except for one rather important detail. Ikkyū-san gave me the gifts when the adults shooed the kids out of the room.

I don’t know anything for certain, and I’m relying heavily on my first gut feeling… but I think this is Ikkyū-san trying to apologize, and also… trying to make a friend.

I decided to use tact, and thus, I didn’t ask the question directly. But when I thanked him and asked plainly if he wanted to be friends… his face practically lit up.

...yeah, I’m a bit of a bleeding-heart. I’m not really nice by most people’s definition of “nice”, but… I’m not deliberately mean or cruel, either. And… I kind of have a responsibility, when you think about it. And so… I guess I’m now friends with the surprisingly lonely ten-year-old brat who’s next in line to be the daimyō of the Land of Fire.

...

...

And in the few days that followed, I reconnected with the nice teenager that carried me to the castle — his name’s Taira Norito. He is very nice. It also turns out that he has a younger sister, who’s six. Her name’s Norika, Taira Norika.

...she doesn’t like me. But… at the same time… she’s adorable. Like, she’s blonde, somehow, and her hair’s kinda spiky but also soft, and she’s just… like an angry kitten, or something. She’s only
two years older than me. I just… can’t take that seriously. And it’s not like she’s deliberately trying to be cruel to me or something. She just… doesn’t like me. And that’s fair.

I think she might be seeing me as a bit of a threat or something. From what I can tell, their parents died when Norika was young—the father during the Third Shinobi World War, as a casualty, and the mother in childbirth. She was basically raised by Norito-san. Maybe she thinks I’m trying to replace her or something? I don’t know. But she’s also kind of fun to annoy. It’s really nice to be able to be childishly petty, sometimes.

I also reconnect with Minamoto-kun.

...And I get another puzzle piece for why Ikkyū-kun got away with what he did—I personally suspect that Shijimi-dono helped him. Because… well, Minamoto-kun’s her nephew. He was born of her younger sister, who died from illness relatively recently. I… didn’t get any information from Minamoto-kun about what happened to his father. She was Minamoto Shijimi before she was Madoka Shijimi.

...seriously, I kinda wish I could be a bit meaner sometimes. But… I have a responsibility to be a decent human being, and thus… I can’t exactly say no. And, I mean, it’s not exactly like he’s annoying to be around. He’s pretty smart for a five-year-old, and he’s already good with math. Plus, he also knows shōgi, and it’s nice to play against a younger opponent. It’s less stressful. I can’t take it easy, but… the games are longer. I win more consistently. And that’s… that’s nice.

Plus, he’s taught me some easier strategy games. Like, there’s gomoku, which is short for gomokunarabe. It’s kind of like connect-five. It’s usually played with go pieces on a goban, a go board, but not with all of the squares—just a 15 × 15 square. You can play it with just paper and something to write with, because pieces are not moved or removed from the board during the board. Players alternate turns placing a stone of their color on an empty intersection. The winner is the first player to form an unbroken chain of five stones horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

There’s also renju, which is like a more complex version of gomoku, and ninuki-renju, yet another variant of gomoku.

The most… arguably childish of the games we play, though, is sugoroku, which is a lot like a typical board game from Before. It involves rolling dice and moving pieces. Of that, there’s ban-sugoroku(盤双六), which literally means ‘board-sugoroku’, and and e-sugoroku(絵双六), which more-or-less translates to ‘picture-sugoroku’.

I spend quite a bit of time socializing, admittedly.

I don’t want to. I like talking, yes, and I’m decent at conversation, but I more prefer… talking at people, if that makes sense? I’m not really good at… inter-human relationships. IOr at least, that was the case Before. Plus, most of the kids I end up hanging out with are… to put it plainly, boring. They’re normal kids, and that’s not bad, but… it’s just kind of weird. And it feels more like babysitting sometimes than anything else.

...

So, I’ve made an approximate daily plan, because I refuse to spend all of my time on human beings and social interaction. I’m already behind enough regarding my training, I don’t really want to fall behind more.

And, for the most part, I follow it.
I wake up early, then go running around the city. I usually change up my route regularly, because… well, I want to know the city well. I’m in the process of memorizing the general layout of the city, and I’m building up a mental map.

The thing is… four-year-old kids running around by themselves looks… kind of weird. Plus, I really don’t want that much extra attention. Thus, I put some effort into disguising my exercise as just… playing. So I don’t just run, I cartwheel, skip, hop, mime hopscotching… and so on. The easiest way that I’ve found, other than jump-roping (which is actually my favorite option), is to grab a ball and just… kick it around. Or to play a game by myself.

There are many games that I take elements from, and they’re good for control and body-eye coordination, which can’t hurt.

…plus, they’re kind of fun.

One game is kemari, where the objective is to keep one ball in the air, with all players cooperating to do so. Players may use any body part with the exception of arms and hands – their head, feet, knees, back, and depending on the rules, elbows to keep the ball aloft. The ball, known as a mari, is traditionally made of deerskin with the hair facing inside and the hide on the outside. The ball is stuffed with barley grains to give it shape, and then when the hide has set in this shape, the grains are removed from the ball, and it is then sewn together using the skin of a horse. The one who kicks the ball is called a mariashi. A good mariashi makes it easy for the receiver to control the mari, and serves it with a soft touch to make it easy to keep the mari in the air.

Other than that, there’s a bunch of rules, but… it’s not as fun to play with a group continuously. I play, occasionally, simply because trying to save other people’s bad throws is good exercise, and it helps me be ‘more popular’, but… it gets a bit tedious after a while.

But seriously, being popular is exhausting. I was never this good with sports, or with societally ‘cool’ things Before, and… it’s really quite… interesting… how different things are.

There’s also… a slightly different version of a ball-bouncing game, where you sing a song. The song’s called “antagata dokosa”, and there are some variations for the lyrics, but you bounce a ball, and then at the “sa” at the end of each phrase, you pass your leg through between your hand and the falling ball. On the last word of the song, you’re supposed to crouch and cover the ball with your skirt or kimono hem.

…I just like singing the song sometimes, while running with the ball. It’s reminds me a bit dribbling, like in basketball.

Of course, other times, I just treat the ball as a soccer ball. That’s probably not very good for the ball, but… \(\_git\(\_\)\)

The point is to run.

And honestly, it’s why I still prefer just grabbing a jump-robe. That is an exercise, in and of itself.

But other than that, there’s kendama, which I was actually really surprised to discover in this world. It’s the wooden handle-thing in the approximate shape of a cross, with a spike at the top and two cups, kinda, on either side, and another cup at the base. And there’s a wooden ball, attached with a string. You just… do stuff. It’s also pretty good for hand-eye coordination, and it’s kind of fun to find a quiet indoor place, hang upside-down from the ceiling, and try to catch the ball on the spike or a cup that way.
The difference in perspective—and gravity—is really cool. And it helps with chakra control, so… it’s fun!

Sometimes, for a change of pace when I’m a bit tired, I try walking as quietly as I can through the castle, memorizing where everything is.

Speaking of interesting places, though… there’s a shrine in the city, dedicated to Amaterasu. I go every morning, at the beginning of my run. I’ve found that… I just always feel awkward there when there’s too many other people, you know? Around sunrise, there’s usually only one lady who stops by.

She’s very nice, even though she kinda scared me one day when I was in front of the shrine.

She’s old, but she has this… very dignified air. Despite her age, which has turned her hair white and made her a bit forgetful—she keeps calling me hime-chan, and I’ve given up on trying to correct her, her back isn’t bowed. Her face is lined, with prominent smile lines around her eyes, but not as much as would be suggested by her hair. She wears this full kimono, usually with a set color scheme of a yellowy-orange outer layer, darker reddish-orange obi, and several inner kimono layers of red and white. It’s beautiful, although kinda weirdly colorful for someone so old.

It seems to suit her, though, and I’m not rude enough to critique an old woman.

She hasn’t given me her name, so I just call her obaa-san, which yes, means grandmother, but it’s also used to refer to old people in general when you don’t know their name. It’s like how you’d call someone a little older onii-san or onee-san, someone about your parents’ age ojisan or obasan, and… well, someone really old obaa-san or ojii-san.

The first time we met, she told me that she was there to pray for her daughter’s health, and when we spoke some more, she told me that she hadn’t seen her daughter in quite some time. She was also looking for this friend of her daughter, but when I offered to help, she told me it wasn’t necessary.

…I immediately apologized, worrying that I was too forward, or that my offer might have come across as rude, but the lady simply laughed and waved it off, telling me not to worry. She’s really nice, and she knows a lot about the meaning of various decorations in the shrine, so I sometimes just stop and chat.

But then, after my run, I usually head to one of the dōjō in the Fujiwara quarters, and run through my kata, both for tajutsu and for kenjutsu, and go through various exercises. At the end, I stretch, and usually head back to my rooms to shower.

Then, in the afternoon, I usually try and go horseback-riding, or do some more exercises. If no one’s there, I find it really fun—and arguably very dangerous—to see if I can… well, hold various acrobatic positions on the horse. I’ve gotten pretty good with handstands and transitioning from a standing position into a backbend, and I’ve even taught myself how to do stuff like walkovers, and… the added challenge of a moving horse makes everything more complicated, and it’s just more fun!

After that, I just usually make time for reading and studying and practicing my calligraphy.

In the free time around my activities and during breaks, I practice chakra-control exercises, usually in my room in the compound or in one of the dōjō. I tend to do that a lot—I have regressed, thanks to my week-and-a-half long bedrest, and it’s ridiculously frustrating, so I just… avoid it. Sometimes.

The good news is that I’ve gotten my flexibility back—and then some—and thanks to the time of basically non-stop meditation and chakra-control exercises, the only way I could have dealt with the
bedrest when I got tired of books and calligraphy and started feeling a bit stir-crazy, my chakra
control isn’t bad.

I’m pretty sure I have more chakra, now, but I can’t test that out with Kiyohime. For some reason,
she’s just… not available right now, I guess.

On the plus side, I’ve gotten pretty good with most of my exercises. I can make chakra strings now!

…kinda. I’m not sure if it’s actually how things are supposed to work, but I think I managed to
reverse-engineer it. Early on, I’d woken up in the middle of the night, and I was thirsty, and there
was a water-bottle… but I couldn’t get out of bed. Hence, my attempt to make the water come to me.

It took probably about two \textit{koku}, which is a ridiculously long amount of time, but I managed to
make this really thick sorta-chakra-string, connect it to the water-bottle, fail at pulling it over, and
later succeed at imbuing the water with my chakra and making a complete mockery of a chakra
control exercise to carry the bottle via the water.

It might have been easier to just move the water \textit{out} of the bottle, but I didn’t want to try breaking the
bottle. And I didn’t want to risk accidentally dropping the water, which is something that happens a
lot to me when whatever I’m playing with is too far away.

I’m about as good with water as I am with fire, but… I’m not that good at anything, yet, to be honest.

Like, I dropped the water-bottle over \textit{ten times}. And that’s after the time it took me to figure out the
chakra strings.

The good news is that at that point I was exhausted, with the beginnings of a small headache, so I
just drank the water and went right back to sleep.

Also, I’ve found that being frustrated is a very good time to work with fire. Plus, this is probably just
a bit of… psychological crutch, but I’ve found that applying principles of singing to generating fire
works wonders. At least, classical singing.

Like, breath support, tightening the core muscles, and so on. Keeping the voice round and focusing
the voice is like keeping the stream of fire concentrated and hot. Maintaining a continuous stream of
fire is just like maintaining a continuous note. And just like singing, it’s easiest to… just kind of let it
go. Trying to make the fire hotter is kind of hard, but it’s easy to… kind of dilute it to the point where
I can wave a hand through it and just barely char the hairs on my hand and forearm. Also, it’s really
hard to make the stream of fire smaller.

Maybe it’s just a memory association thing, and it’s probably not that necessary, but it’s useful as a
crutch. I want to figure out how to get rid of it, later on, but… for now, I’m just happy I got it to
work.

If I hadn’t started with the \textit{gōkakyū}, maybe I wouldn’t have thought to associate it with singing, and
those breathing techniques. But… I did, and it works, so frankly, I don’t care. And I’ve
experimented with… well, the best term would probably be ‘expelling fire from all parts of my body.
Doing it over parts that are clothed is… a bit risky, but doable. It’s easiest from my hands or feet
though, and I’ve had fun trying to integrate it into some of my kata and exercises.

Those, with the regular… uh… shouts, already have the breathing thing worked in. (Newsflash: you
do the shout while punching or kicking or blocking or anything because it helps you tighten your
core muscles. It’s also basically a memory crutch, and also probably a good way to teach kids how to
tighten their core muscles if they’re not that… body-aware.)
I’ve grown into the habit of practicing barefoot, with… sleeves and pants that only go three-quarters of the way, as a result. And I’m also more diligent about tying my hair back.

The problem is… well, currently still chakra expenditure, response time (the time between me thinking about expelling the fire and the time I actually shoot out fire), and the temperature and distance of the fire itself. It’s currently not bad as a mid-range kinda thing, and it would be really good if the person’s just out of striking distance… but I want to get it both more up-close and more distant.

My aim’s horrible, and I need to apologize to Okaa-san about the wall, though, so I’ll probably leave practicing the distance thing for later.

I’ve also tried to practice singing, again, from what I remember… but it’s awkward. Singing (European) classically really causes the voice to project… and that’s not good when you’re singing really differently from… like, the way most people— even professional singers here— sing.

Still, eventually, I want to not need the crutch. I tested a hypothesis, that it might be easier for me to focus on controlling the fire if I didn’t also have to worry about generating it, by just playing around with lit candles and lantern-fire.

It’s… it’s working. Slowly. Which is good. Before… it was more like I was splashing around gasoline, or some flammable gas, tossing in a match, and hoping for the best. It was still guided… vaguely… but for the most part, after tossing in the match, it was out of my control. I could toss in more fuel, but… that was basically it. So, this is already a lot better, and I’m ecstatic that I figured it out.

…

Mostly.

… so… that’s good?

I still think I’m kind of avoiding the problem, namely, my breathing-crutch, but… it’s getting there! And that’s good enough for me.

…

On the other hand… for water, I’m currently just focused on getting the feel of it, and playing around with it. (That’s actually what gave me the inspiration for what I tried with the candle-fires and lantern-fires.) In Konohagakure, I’d find a pond or a lake or some other body of still water, and just try to… play around with the water.

I kinda got inspiration from that first Tinkerbell movie, and first just… stuck my hands in the water and tried to form and hold a ball of it. After that, I tried putting some distance between me and the water, and manipulating larger quantities of water. And then I put even more distance between me and the water and tried really large quantities of water… and also tried manipulating previous quantities of water in gradually more intricate shapes.

The problem with distance and quantity is that… well, it’s easy to just drop the water. And it gets exponentially more difficult, after you get to a certain size. It’s hard to get the hang of in the first place, too. It took me almost a month to get… somewhat comfortable with moving a water-bottle’s worth of water without moving my hands, and even that was only really limited to a certain distance from my body. The closer, the easier, and if it got to about an arm’s length away… splash!

Now, I can move around enough water to more-or-less drown an adult, but I can’t do much with it. I
can make it into something that’s a bit like a hula-hoop, but… I can’t do a lot of fine-manipulation. The moment the surface area gets too big… splash!

So here, it’s simpler to just fill a bowl or cup with water— a bowl’s better for if I accidentally drop the water— and… just try and form the water into thin tendrils. It’s also kinda helpful for my chakra-string practice, that way.

I’ve also managed to heat up water, and… kinda cool it slightly, though the second is in the context of… getting water from boiling to more-or-less lukewarm, and probably has more to do with simple physics.

The first came from… actually, my early mistakes. I could generate heat — kind of. Also, I picked up on the raising-the-body-temperature thing that Shisui and Itachi like doing pretty quickly. But before, when I didn’t add that flick-thing that’s like striking a match— there wasn’t that ignition spark. And if you’ve ever had a gas-powered stove and tried turning it on during a blackout… it’s like that. I was just expelling a bunch of kinda-warm chakra out.

But I wondered, hey, can I do that with more heat and less chakra and use it to heat up water… and it worked. It’s slow and not that even, usually, but a bit of chakra manipulation to stir around the water solves that problem. Plus, it’s usually just if the amount of water I’m heating up is too big.

…I found that out when I was taking a bath and the bathwater got cold. I refined it by practicing with my tea when my tea gets cold. I more-or-less figured the second out after scalding my tongue on hot tea for the fifth time in three days. I just… kinda… scoop out the heat? And then I pull the water out, shape it into the approximate form of a disk, and just… spin it.

Everything I can do is small and pretty simple, and… it’s just really cool, when you think about how useful chakra can be.

That’s actually why I’ve actually grown more confused about the point of jutsu. Like, Itachi and Shisui never thought about heating up a bath or warming their tea that way. When I asked… Itachi didn’t really have a response, beyond a hesitant… “It’s kind of… disrespectful?” But I could tell he was grasping at straws, because he was genuinely frowning, and it wasn’t a firm answer.

All I could conclude was that people could be very un-sensible about things. From what I can tell, most people just… use chakra in jutsu to try and kill people. Usually clumsily. Sometimes, if they’re really good… or just don’t have much chakra, they use it for smaller things— like lighting a campfire.

I was really happy when I brought stuff for a tea ceremony… and did most of it with chakra. I just set everything up, held out a cup set a cup in front of Itachi and Shisui… and used chakra manipulation to get the water in the cup and heat up the water. Then, I scooped in the matcha powder, and then— again— used chakra manipulation to froth the green tea into the water.

It was so cool.

I just wish I were good enough to do the entire thing, from a distance, with chakra manipulation. Now that I’ve kinda managed to figure out some form of… what might be chakra strings… that’s actually possible.

I’ve tried to move the matcha powder with just chakra before… and it doesn’t really work well. You know what happens when people try and eat cinnamon or spill flour? Think that, with very
expensive matcha powder. Yeah… I’m still hesitant about repeating that.

And speaking of moving other stuff… I’ve looked at some of the basics for wind and lightning and earth.

…I fail at earth. Literally. I can’t… I just can’t. I’ve managed to do stuff with mud… and dry dust…
but earth? Nope. Pretty much nothing happens. And it feels heavy and… I just fail at it, okay?

Wind? …it’s very subtle, but I can kinda managed to brute-force the… blunt impact one. It takes way
too much chakra to make just a small, barely perceptible breeze, but… I think I did it? Regarding the
cutting power… I did manage to make cuts, but according to Shisui, it wasn’t with wind chakra. I
used sharpened my normal chakra to cut stuff, and it was more like… what he’d seen of Jūken, or
probably chakra scalpels, than wind ninjutsu.

I tried that again, and tried to bug Asuma-san for details… he just brushed me off. Seriously. Rude,
much? I don’t think I like him that much. Though, looking back on it, that was a safe response, and I
was probably better-off for it. I didn’t have a really valid reason for asking him. I can’t say that I
knew he had a wind affinity from… watching a story about him. Maybe I could brush it off as
something I learned from Itachi and Shisui… but I’m not sure if they would know, either. Though,
maybe it would make sense for Fugaku-sama to know… but regardless, it’s messy. I’m just glad I
learned that lesson now, instead of… sometime later, where it would probably be a bigger deal.

…and that’s why the next day, I scoured the library for tehaisho , which basically translates to
“wanted person book(s)” that were also known as bingo books in the stories, turned up kinda empty-
handed, and went and asked Tōu-san and Nauma-san if they had any extras that I could have.

Nauma-san did, and so did another shinobi, Seito-san, who’s a bit older than the rest of shugonin —
he seems like he’s in his thirties, or maybe even early forties— and is tall, kinda broad, a bit like a
brick wall, with medium-length brown hair brushed out of his face completely… and a kinda square
jaw. Also, he doesn’t really have any distinctive facial hair or scars. He just always looks like he’s
kinda frowning, but he’s also pretty nice.

They gave me their old copies of their tehaisho , and I offered to pay them for it, but they just ruffled
my hair and told me that they were just collecting dust, anyways.

…I like Tōu-san and Nauma-san and Seito-san. Mostly Tōu-san and Nauma-san, though. The rest…
don’t seem to like little kids that much, are kinda scary or they’re just… kinda jerks.

But yeah. So… the last element is lightning. I… so… first of all, it’s really confusing. I don’t know
how it works. I tried asking Tōu-san about it, since she’s really good at raiton jutsu , but she didn’t
really explain it clearly enough for me to understand. Hence, I have no idea how to move past my
own reverse-engineered, rather clumsy version.

…I do it with electrons. Kinda. So, the thing is, you can create electrical imbalances by… friction.
Like, rubbing a balloon against your hair. So, I tried doing that with chakra. I just… rubbed chakra
against… stuff.

…

It works. Kind of. It’s really clumsy, really effort-intensive, and the results aren’t worth the chakra
expenditure, concentration, or time.

…I can give static shocks. If I concentrate, I can do it well enough to give people shocks that just
border on painful.
Yeah. It’s… pretty pathetic.

But it’s still interesting seeing what I can do.

Other than that… I’ve tried to make a shadow clone. There's a pull and a twist, and then… an outside pull, like having a small black hole for chakra just a little bit away from you, and then you push and wind up the chakra again, so much chakra, almost another human being’s worth of chakra, until until it's dense enough and the right shape and you push just a little bit more, to shift the chakra and harden the outside, then kinda snap your control of the extra chakra, letting it dissipate like a puff of smoke… and voila! Clones.

The way Shisui made them, it seemed easy. Even Itachi. Even though he could only make one… it seemed simply.

…it’s not. The small… center of chakra I make never seems just right, and when I try and wind up the chakra it’s not even or dense enough, and it always ends up lopsided… and by the time I reach the step that’s the little push and shift… it’s been almost a quarter- koku, or sometimes even almost a full half- koku, and I’m tired and my concentration is slipping… and that link just snaps. And then, I lose all that chakra. And then, I’m basically done practicing for the day— that’s enough chakra to make me pretty tired.

But, no matter how much I want to just keep playing with chakra… I can’t. There’s a more important reason, namely socializing with people in scheduled times, which is basically a lot of politely showing off, but… the other thing that eats into my time is socializing with people on… well, my own time. Socialization is important. And thus, when I have free time, usually around noon (since that’s when most children are outside), I make sure to play with them. It’s not unlike… normal networking.

I want to make sure I’m well-known and well-liked. I’m still more than a little nervous about Danzō, and based on the fact that he was already interested in me, probably for his super-secret personal army of brainwashed child soldiers… I really, really want insurance. And having a bunch of people who know me is good for that. Plus, the kids are eventually going to be adults. Also, the kids talk… and if they like me, the chances that their family members might like me, too, are pretty high.

It’s like with Ikkyū-kun and Minamoto-kun and Shijimi-dono.

And then, there’s the fact that I have a responsibility to maintain friendships. Telling someone that you’re their friend isn’t the end of making friends— it’s just the beginning. It would be really rude and inconsiderate of me to not make time for my new friends.

…plus, Minamoto-kun’s basically a bully magnet. I’ve had to… intervene … at least five times, already. Please don’t harass my friend. I don’t have the patience— or enough free time— to not get upset about wasting time picking stuff up or cleaning things. And I just really hate wrinkling paper. Luckily, it seems like awareness is spreading. And even before that…

To be honest, it’s not that hard. It’s just… more like a chore. Or, I suppose you could compare it to keeping a pet… but that’s kind of demeaning. But basically, spending time with friends is important and needs to be worked into my schedule.
And it’s not like it’s *that* hard, usually. Even when it’s trying to make friends, or maintain newly-formed friendships with the normal kids. There’s plenty of games to play.

Some games are just like games from *Before*. Like, hide-and-seek is pretty universal. The same goes for tag… freeze tag… hide-and-seek tag… the whole shebang. The biggest difference is that instead of being “it”, the person who’s “it” is called the *oni*, which is… basically this humanoid demon/ogre-thing from folklore.

Other than that, there’s also *daruma-san ga koronda*, which is… kind of like ‘red light, green light’. Only, the one person who is “it”, and says, “*daruma-san ga koronda*” instead of counting to ten. It’s not much of a difference, mind you— there are 10 syllables in the sentence, which basically means “the *daruma* doll fell over.” For everyone who’s not “it”, the object of the game is to get close to whoever is “it” without the person seeing them move.

If the person who is “it” sees a player moving, that player must hold hands with “it”. If a player successfully reaches the person who is “it” without getting caught, he or she slaps the person on the back, then everyone except the person who is “it” runs away. However, if the person who is “it” is holding hands with one or more captured players, the attacker tries to break their hands apart with the side of his hand. Then everyone except the one who is “it” runs away. Also, when the person who is “it” shouts “tomare!” which basically translates to “stop!”, everybody must freeze. Then, if the person tags one of them by taking no more than three steps, the two switch places.

...there’s also *hana ichi monme*. Everyone divides into two groups of more-or-less equal numbers. Players in each group hold hands in a line, facing their opponents. One player in one group plays *jan-ken-pon*, which is basically rock-paper-scissors, against a player in the other group. One group steps toward the other in the rhythm of a song that is used only for the game, and the other steps back so that the team lines remain parallel. In each phrase of the song, the team that is stepping back changes, and the team creates a move that associates a swing. The two teams alternate. The team that goes forward first is determined by *jan-ken-pon*, and the teams also alternate who sings what line.

The song that is sung has the following lines:

*Katte ureshii hana ichi monme*

(We’re so happy we won hana ichi monme)

*Makete kuyashii hana ichi monme*

(We’re so upset we lost hana ichi monme)

*Ano ko ga hoshii*

(We want that kid)

*Ano ko ja wakaran*

(We don’t understand which kid you mean)

*Sōdan shiyō*

(Let’s talk about it)

*Sō shiyō*
After the song… well, there’s two ways to play. In one, the team leaders step forward and play janken. The winner goes back to his team, and they discuss who the team wants to add from the other team. After they have decided, they sing another song doing the same movement and announce the person they want. The game ends when one team loses all of its members.

Alternatively, players in both groups discuss which player they want from the other group, and the two players so chosen play janken. The loser joins the other group. In this case, the game and singing continue until only one person is left in one of the groups, and that person loses in janken.

There’s also kemari, the group version of the game that I kinda adapted for my own purposes. And there’s also hanetsuki, which is usually played mainly during the New Year celebrations, in which you hit something like a shuttlecock, which called a hane, with wooden paddles called hagoita, in an effort to keep the hane off the ground as long as possible. When it’s played during the new year’s celebrations, the loser ungraciously gets their face smudged with black ink, and it’s believed that the longer all the players can keep the hane in the air, the more luck they will have in the coming year.

There’s another game called oshikura manju, which is basically a bunch of people, standing back-to-back, trying to shove each other out of a circle as they chant “oshikura manju osarete nakuna”, which basically means “Oshikura Manju don’t cry when shoved.” According to Hiroshi-ojisan, it was originally meant to be played on cold days to warm each other up, which explains why the win/lose conditions can be so vague.

According to Kichirō-ojisan, there’s another part to the chant, which goes “nakuko wa dare yowamushi kemushi hasannde sutero,” which kind of translates to “Who is crying? Pinch the coward and caterpillar, and throw them away.”

...I think this, more than anything else, reflects the character of both of them.

Also, I think it’s telling about human nature that there’s a game, called kancho, which basically revolves… around poking people in the but.

...

In case there is any ambiguity, I will make my stance clear.

I do not like this game.

...

Then, there’s this other game (which I also don’t like very much) called beigoma, named after the beigoma, which is like a spinning top that is often decorated with kanji. When spun correctly, the beigoma makes a humming sound. Players wrap their tops in thin cords, which they use to launch the tops onto the playing surface. The winner is the player whose top spins the longest or successfully knocks the opponent’s top out of the playing area. The toy was originally made by filling spiral seashells with sand and sealing them with molten wax, but now there are also beigoma made of metal.

This is generally considered a boys’ game. Boys compete with each other by refining their tops and making them stronger — sanding off part of the bottom to make them lower, carving zigzagged shapes around them, or making them heavier by coating them with wax. And so on.
I don’t like this game that much, yes, but… unlike with *kancho*, I don’t have any specific objections. It’s just… not that fun for me.

My absolute favorite game, though, is probably *Kagome, Kagome*. Basically, a bunch of kids form a circle. There’s a kid in the middle of the circle, who closes their eyes and can’t peek. The kids walk around, in a circle, singing a song, and when they stop, the person in the middle is supposed to guess who’s behind them.

The song… it’s hard to translate, mainly because it’s mostly guessing and there are so many homonyms that nothing’s for sure… but… it’s probably something like this:

*Kagome kagome*

*Kagome, kagome*

*Kago no naka no tori wa*

The bird in the basket/cage

*Itsu itsu deyaru*

When, oh when will it come out

*Yoake no ban ni*

In the night of dawn

*Tsuru to kame ga subetta.*

The crane and turtle slipped

*Ushiro no shōmen daare*

Who is behind you now?

...

Seriously, it’s a bit confusing, partially because I have no clue which parts describe what, but it’s a pretty song.

It’s tricky for me in a different sense— for me, it’s a test of memory. I need to match chakra signatures to faces to names. And I also need to be very good at distinguishing between chakra signatures. They’re all so subtle and faint, and many are *so similar* that it’s actually tricky.

I also can’t get too many right, though.

But… this game is actually my favorite, because it’s how I realized I could do… *that*. I think it’s probably a form of what most shinobi refer to as “sensing”. I kind of just… stretch out my chakra, letting it diffuse (while still keeping a connection to it) into a sorta-cloud-like-thing, and just… let it brush against other people’s chakra. If I have an idea about where they are, like in this game, I just extend a thin tendril of chakra, almost like a chakra string, and brush it against the person behind me.

It’s different than chakra strings because… these are really faint. Chakra strings are really dense, and they’re also really strong— they need to be capable of interacting with the physical world.
These… don’t.

I don’t really know how it works, but… it does.

Regarding the “politely showing off.”

Well… it’s usually when so-and-so invited us over for lunch or dinner or just to come over during the afternoon, or when we’re inviting such-and-such for similar reasons.

There is a lot of polite-talk. I don’t really mind it, and even kinda like it, though. The food is usually good. And it’s pretty easy— I just shut up and look pretty. I also keep my ears open, though. It’s when I’m left to play with other kids, on my own, that I’m get a bit annoyed.

Also… I am very thankful that somehow, no one asks me to perform anything musically. I don’t know why and I don’t know how, but it’s never gotten to the point where Okaa-san has me grab anything. (And thank Amaterasu for that small mercy.)

But even apart from the food, there are indoor games I can use to entertain myself during the forced socialization time, some of which… I actually enjoy.

Like… daruma otophi, where there’s a wooden cylindrical daruma head at the top of a stack of other cylindrical wooden pieces, and players take turns using a hammer to hit at the bottom piece quickly enough that the pieces above don’t fall. The aim is to get the daruma without toppling the stack. So… teamwork. It’s kind of like Jenga, but with hitting stuff.

A slightly more physical game is otedama, which is… basically tossing small bean bags. I practice alone, sometimes. It’s a popular game with girls, and it’s good for hand-eye coordination. Plus… now that I have the time, I just really want to learn to juggle, okay? Yeah, that’s a more advanced form of the game, and most of the time it’s more like hot-potato, but… I don’t really mind it.

There’s also ohajiki, which is also generally considered a girls’ game. Players take turns flicking small, coin-shaped pieces called ohajiki with their fingers, to hit other pieces. Sometimes, pebbles are used, or go pieces. Fancier sets have the ohajiki made of glass. It’s… not that hard. You just make a circle with your thumb and index finger (or middle finger), then flick a piece with your thumb.

Usually, you scatter a number of ohajiki pieces on a flat surface, use something like janken to determine the order that people go in, and during a turn, a person indicates which piece they’ll try to use to hit which other piece, and if they succeed, they keep the piece. At the end of the game, the person with the most pieces is the winner.

This game is… also sometimes fun. Sometimes.

There’s also ayatori, which is basically cat’s cradle… and which I’m good at, but gets boring really quickly.

Braiding kumihimo and trying to embroider temari balls are very useful activities for simultaneously avoiding human interaction and impressing adults, as well as origami.

I usually enjoy folding origami in the corner, on my own. Otō-san has a… cousin or something, who supplies the family with a lot of its paper. Apparently, she lives in a place where mitsumata grows well, even if it’s too rainy and isn’t sunny enough for the other plants that are good for making paper, like kōzo and gampi. Sealing paper, origami paper, notebooks… it’s all very nice. There’s a book on origami patterns, as well as an entire stack of thin washi paper in many different sizes.
I make a lot of cranes, stringing them together in long chains. I get very good, very quickly. Lots of adults admire how small I can make them, but I don’t pay them much heed outside of smiling and thanking them. Many times, whenever I’m just fed-up and frustrated and completely done with socializing… I sit in a corner, by the adults, with a small pile of washi paper in a rainbow of colors, folding cranes. It’s nice to be able to resort to something that doesn’t seem like a waste of time—Itachi’s birthday’s coming up soon, and I want to have a thousand paper cranes by then.

My personal favorite game is also a way to show off. Namely, karuta. It’s kind of like a matching game, with various sets of cards.

Uta-garuta, literally “poetry karuta”, is a card game in which 100 waka poems are written on two sets of 100 cards: one set is yomifuda (reading card), which have the complete poem taken from the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu, and the other is torifuda (grabbing cards), which each correspond to a yomifuda and have only the last few lines of the corresponding poem on them. One person is chosen to be the reader. As the reader reads a yomifuda, the players race to find its associated torifuda before anybody else does. It is often possible to identify a poem by its first one or two syllables. This game is usually played most on New Year’s Day.

...not to toot my own horn… but I am amazing at this game. After learning about it, I immediately found a collection of the poems and memorized all of them. Part of it is pride. The Hyakunin Isshu is a well-known collection of poems compiled by poet Fujiwara no Teika. The rest of it… is also pride. I played a similar game once, Before, and… it’s basically like trivia. I dislike losing to other people in trivia, especially given… well, the thing about my actual age.

There’s also ita-karuta, where the torifuda are made of wood and the yomifuda remain the same or lack illustrations of the poets. They are used to play a competitive partnership game called shimo-no ku karuta in which the last half of the poem is read.

Then, what’s arguably the most important—for me to learn—is Iroha Karuta, which is an easier-to-understand matching game for children, similar to uta-garuta but with 96 cards. Instead of poems, the cards represent the 47 syllables of the hiragana syllabary and adds kyō (京, “capital”) for the 48th (since the syllable -n, は, can never start any word or phrase). It uses the old iroha ordering for the syllables which includes two obsolete syllables, wi (ゐ) and we (ゑ).

A typical torifuda features a drawing with a kana at one corner of the card. Its corresponding yomifuda features a proverb connected to the picture with the first syllable being the kana displayed on the torifuda. There are five main Iroha Karuta variants, one for each of the elemental nations, with its own set of proverbs based on the local dialect and culture. I basically forced myself to memorize all of these, not just the ones based in the Land of Fire—this could be pretty important someday.

I remember learning foreign languages. The biggest way to tell if you were a native speaker or not… was which proverbs you used. They rarely translate directly.

Then, there’s… probably my favorite, which is also, unfortunately, the rarest. Obaa-sama taught me it. It’s obake karuta, a version of karuta where each card in the deck features a hiragana syllable and a creature from traditional folklore/mythology. The name translates more-or-less to “ghost cards”, or “monster cards.” Success requires knowledge of mythology and folklore as players attempt to collect cards that match clues read by a referee. The player who accumulates the most cards by the end of the game wins.

Another thing that starts to eat into my time is… well, fūinjutsu.
One day, during my morning run, I found a book on basic fūinjutsu left by one of the legs on the torii gate. It’s really fancy and bound in nondescript leather, and it seems read-through, from how loose the binding is. There’s no name on it, though, or even a title on the cover. There’s simply “Fūinjutsu: Part One” written on the first paper page.

I tried asking the obaa-san, but that day was one of the days she didn’t show up.

I tried bringing it to the library, but apparently it didn’t belong to the library. The librarian, who had a pretty burnt-orange kimono, offered to ask around.

And so, I left a note at the torii gate, right where the book was, with words etched with fire into a small wooden tablet—which was a fun chakra-control exercise—and prayed I wasn’t being too rude to the kami. I explained I couldn’t exactly leave the book there—there’s always a chance of rain, and water isn’t good for books—and that I’d left the book with a librarian.

I guess the person got my note, though. The next day, the librarian, with a different kimono, passed me the book, along with a note, which was written on the back of my original note. The note thanked me…and told me that I could keep the book.

...Yeah. It was pretty weird.

But… I’m me. I’m the kid who practically drags home boxes of books when the library was remodeling and getting rid of old books. I’m the kid who had a bedroom with multiple small piles of old books that would reach past my knees.

...I’m not turning down a free book.

Besides, it’s amazing. The book seems… almost printed, but I’m pretty sure it’s handwritten. The writing’s so pretty, though, that it’s no trouble, at all. It reads like a fascinating novel, with carefully inked seals and explanations that break everything down, and… it’s not like a textbook. It’s a story. It’s a novel, meant to be read from beginning to end, and to be ingrained on your memory like a story, in that order.

I can go back to reference individual details, to re-clarify certain parts, and there’s even a detailed explanation of some terms at the end, because it’s a story—you figure words out through context clues, not through meticulously explained definitions.

I like it, I think. It’s a fascinating book. I ask the same librarian as before if there’s any chance I can borrow the next book, from the mysterious owner, since I didn’t know who it was and she probably did if the owner gave her the note.

Two days later, the librarian gave me a smile…and two more small, leather-bound books.

---

So, when I’m not playing with chakra, mingling with people in a… admittedly not-so-subtle attempt to fill out more pages in my little book-of-faces, playing with chakra, training, playing with chakra, or… well, attending to basic necessities of life and hygiene… I’m studying. Namely, attempting to read my way through the library.

(I am very proud of the fact that, through extensive practice, I am—again—a very fast reader.)

...these books aren’t on chakra. Or folklore. Or mythology. Or the traditions and celebrations and fun stuff of other countries. Or even the interesting parts of history.
The books I devour mainly cover laws. Past treaties. Details about the other countries’ governments works. And so on.

The problem here is that… well, shinobi society is very young. Some of these books go back over a thousand years. And… based on what I learned on my first day, from that Kazuma guy… there are tensions between shinobi, especially the hidden villages, and civilians.

If I want there to be peace… I need to know as much as possible. I need to convince as many people as possible that peace is not only possible, but should be worked towards. You can’t start… well, a revolution on your own. And red tape can seriously mess up your life. And so, I start trying to… well, basically talk about shinobi, when speaking with other kids. I make sure to be considerate, and I don’t speak over anyone… but I bring it up.

“Shinobi are human, too.”

“They’re not just cool, they also go through a lot of pain. Being a shinobi… it isn’t that fun.”

“Yeah, civilians tend to get the short stick during shinobi wars… but shinobi aren’t much better-off.”

“Chakra can do really cool things, and it’s not just… shinobi-related stuff.”

I start bringing a small tea set with me almost constantly, and one of my favorite “party tricks” during the adult-organized socialization periods is now to… well, make tea, with chakra. It’s not that hard. I just need to carry around a nice ceramic cup, a small box of matcha powder, and a bottle of water.

Chakra isn’t scary. It should never have been scary. I… just want to show people that.

...And I really need to make friends, impress people, and eventually completely reform everything, because I also really want to preserve the culture. Innovation… is probably inevitable, but… surely, it can be managed? I like what’s currently going on, and… I don’t want for this world to just end up with technology crudely shoved into it. Plus, environmental issues. I like the fact that the water’s clean and clear, and that the air is sweet and more-or-less free of smog.

...I want to keep that.

I only watched maybe an episode or two of Boruto, and it might have just been the movie… and what I remember sucked. I’ll admit it. I’m kind of terrified of change. But that’s more because I know what problems will come, and how hard fixing them can be. Plus… I remember Before. I really don’t want… terror groups, or the kind of biological/chemical war, or the entire thing with bombs. Yes, as it is, war is costly (both monetarily and in reference to human lives) and impractical… and… it would be “better” if we could… say, just carpet-bomb Iwa.

...the worrying thing is that such a tactic is probably already possible. When you consider Konan’s sea of explosions in canon, and all of those flying summons, like Sasuke’s… it would be easy. And that’s the absolutely terrifying part.

It’s probably really unconventional… but what if Danzō did that? Traditionally, in war, if one person attacked someone with new technology… it spurred a bit of an arms race.

I really, really don’t want to see what an Elemental-Nations-style Cold War would look like.

And also… if you can distance the average person from what war entails… if you indiscriminately target people… that’s a problem in its own right. Wars are fought with lives and blood. If you reduce it to commanders just pointing weapons of mass destruction against a blurry concept of “enemy”...
...everything comes back to Danzō.

So, we’ll need a governing body, maybe like that Five-Kage-thing, but with everyone.

There will need to be something like the Geneva Convention, but I can’t have a League of Nations repeat. That was basically useless, and too many shinobi already see treaties as barely worth the paper they’re written on.

And… there really needs to be a… constitution, or Bill of Rights, or something. Not just… general decency. What is the bare minimum that people should be guaranteed? What rights do they have? Or example, is anything that Orochimaru or Danzō did… technically wrong? Does Konoha have anything written down about what’s permissible or not?

...is there even a judicial system?

I don’t know. And it’s terrifying.

And then we get into what freedoms people should be guaranteed. Like… freedom of speech is important… but it also has problems. There’s the entire thing with it not extending to shouting “fire!” in a crowded theatre. But… there should also be something against… like, spreading false information. There was the entire anti-vaccine movement, for one. There has to be limits.

The problem is that… there’s just so much to do. I don’t know where to start. And… what if I mess up?

Personally… I think, in war, there should be something about not killing non-combatants. Noncombatants would be… civilians who don’t initiate violence, aka civilians who don’t fight. Shinobi who surrender, with specific emphasis on medical-nin. In general, don’t kill someone unless they’re trying to kill you first.

...I think that’s fair. That’s a good starting point, right?

But then, there’s issues with spies. What if someone surrenders, but then kills someone. What to do if someone breaks this rule.

So much is based on trust in common human decency… and that’s dangerous. Nothing’s perfect.

...

There also needs to be schools. Reading, writing, history, math basics… education’s important. Maybe? I don’t know.

Think… bare minimum. What should a functioning adult in this world know?

Reading and math basics from… let’s say, six to twelve. History and just general cross-cultural competency from six to… sixteen. Critical thinking is important. Starting from twelve, students can choose stuff to specialize in. Currently, everything works in a method that’s… basically apprenticeship. Maybe I can find a way to make that easier? More standardized? For example… students who want to be doctors or something like that learn biology, and then are given opportunities to study with someone… I think that would work.

...but there also needs to be stuff like… I don’t know if it’s even a thing in this world, but, like, birth control? How to avoid having children if you don’t want kids? Issues with consent? Like, the tea metaphor is great, but… maybe have that as a mandatory thing every year from the age of ten?
But that brings us back to the issue of teachers. There needs to be accountability, and a way to prevent bad teachers from teaching. There needs to be a way to… accredit teachers, I think that’s the term?

...

I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. I’ll just… set this to the side or something. I’ll focus on what I do know.

...it’s easy to put it off. It’s too easy to just… shove it aside. Procrastinate. It’s not my job. There’s no due date, no glory in completing it. It’s tiresome and a bit pointless… and I’m just four. It’s so much more fun to play with chakra, to think about what I could make with fūinjutsu, to impress grown-ups with just a straight back and smile and good manners and polite “thank-you”s and easy victories at karuta. It’s so much fun to flip through the pages of my little book-of-faces, to pencil in details on my rough map of the city— so-and-so lives here, the fisherman here gives good deals on shellfish if you go early, the vendor here has the best cherries, I can get free samples from the sweet stall here, the bookstore here sometimes has really interesting jutsu scrolls and will let me copy them down if I demonstrate where I’ve gotten with chakra and likes peanut brittle…

And sometimes, I can’t help but wonder… why am I even bothering with this?

But then I remember. This? it’s all familiar. Almost nostalgic, in a really bad way, of my life… Before.

And that’s really, really bad.

You see… in my life Before … I wasn’t…

...

It’s a long story. And with all stories… it makes the most sense to start at the beginning. Or at least, at the beginning of the story.

...

I was born in California, but thanks to my dad’s job, my family moved to the Netherlands. It was me, my father, and my mother… along with, occasionally, my grandma and grampa. Maternal, that is.

At first, we all lived in this beautiful old house that was basically situated in a forest.

...

I don’t remember it. Not really. I have pictures, though… and from the pictures, I kinda wish I remembered it better. My memories were always sunny… and they seemed to blend fantasy with reality. They weren’t accurate, but from what I can tell… I loved that house.

My memories are seriously frustrating, though— they were like half-forgotten snapshots of a different life… and I never seemed to be able to place them in their proper timeline. Or place. Or even perspective.

But then, when I was to go to school, we moved to a different house, a smaller house, so that I could go to this international school.

It was nice there, too. I liked the dangerously narrow staircase, the stream— that seemed to a
younger me an enormous river—with tadpoles, the tram that left from the station just a small walk away, the park and the small shopping market and... everything.

It was like... a home. For me.

...I hated that when I went there again, so many years later, it no longer felt familiar. When I went back... I'd forgotten. Everything. Forgotten how to ride the tram by myself, forgotten how to get to the park...

...it was like I'd lost everything, and only realized it then.

But that's a story for a different time.

Everything here... well, it's an important prologue. The official story starts in first grade, after I'd moved back to the good old USA. More specifically, California.

...where to start. First grade? That was... more or less fine. I made friends. Yeah, I had a really serious moment of confusion on the first day when someone asked to go to the “rest room,” and I'd thought it was a room for resting— did America have specific room for kids when they were tired of being in the classroom or something? — but that was fixed pretty quickly.

And yeah, the teacher bugged me about working better in groups and actually finishing stuff on time, but the most interesting part is that I was placed in the... well, the most “advanced” rotation for English. Reading. Literature. You know how little kids get separated into groups? Yeah. That.

...but that’s not interesting in its own right. What was interesting is that I was... quite frankly, illiterate. I could not read anything word-for-word.

...bit embarrassing.

This sets a bit of a precedent that I'll explain later.

So, then Mom bought all these books and I grew to love reading and... well, to be honest, I'm actually pretty sure this is why I became friends with... well, my friends. We bonded over reading. More specifically... I’m pretty sure it was the Harry Potter series.

But that’s relatively unimportant.

What is important is that I basically considered them my best friends. Me, the other three girls, and then the other girl that joined a little later on. It was awesome.

...and then, sometime in third grade, they decided that... yeah, the friendship thing wasn’t working out. They’d been their own three-person friend group for... a very long time, from when they first met in Montessori, that one super-popular preschool-thingy, and... well, it’s the three musketeers, not the five... whatevers.

I’m still not sure if it was my fault for... something I honestly forgot, or... what.

I’d thought we were friends. We’d had playdates and everything... and yeah, I liked certain people in that group more than some of the others, but... I thought we were friends.

...we weren’t.

So, then it was basically me, trying to play social butterfly. Hah. I was more like... the planet Pluto. Just kinda orbiting around, but I never really got close to anyone.
Mainly because that was also the year that the APAS program-thing became… well, a thing.

I was already in a bunch of these “advanced” things at the public school, and I also took the… was it a practice exam? I don’t even know. I think I remember writing something… but really, my memory’s shaky.

So, I got into a pretty good place. Not the best, but definitely not bad. (Didn’t change the fact that I still remember my parents were… a bit disappointed. Oh, they tried to play it off… but constantly talking about how cool it was that some of my friends got into the best APAS program around? Not cool.)

Only… I didn’t. My parents decided that they were going to send me to a private school, instead.

Yay? Apparently, I wasn’t the best at social interaction. Gee, what a surprise… not.

I’m not kidding. I kinda sucked at working in groups. Or with other people. It was about as obvious to me as the nose on my face— I remember a teacher told me, and then my parents just kept bringing it up.

Okay. Now moves onto the fourth-grade-to-middle-school part of my narrative, which took place in this… actually very nice private school. I liked it there, at least.

...but I guess there wasn’t much to compare it to. The thing was… most of the people had known each other for… a really long time. They had established friend circles. I was the newbie. Had I come in sixth grade, it would have been very different. But… I didn’t.

So, again, I was the social equivalent of Pluto.

Also… either in fourth or fifth grade, I remember one particular instance in which people teased me about the way I said the word “ridiculous.” I don’t remember why, I don’t remember hearing a difference in how I pronounced it.

Add that to a bunch of issues socially, my inability to work in groups, and… oh, I almost forgot. Newsflash. I’m smart. I actually remember getting tested. My IQ basically maxed out that test. I think… I got a 154, but that was actually inaccurate, because I’d maxed-out enough categories that the number wasn’t the most accurate, and that specific edition of the test, unlike the earlier editions, did not (yet) have… the specific stuff to deal with it.

Oh, and the scale basically stopped at 160.

So, the person testing me just told me that, yeah, I probably (had) an IQ of 160+.

...translation: I am quantifiably very smart. And I think the only sections of the test I was bad at was memory? I don’t know. It’s been… a while.

So… here’s the thing. Being smart just means that you have the potential to learn things quickly. Only for me… it was more about understanding things. I sucked at memorizing stuff.

This brings me back to that reading thing. In third grade, we all took a test to determine our Lexile score. I think it has to do with reading ability? Or maybe it was comprehension ability? Suffice to say, I got a score of 1400+.

To give a point of comparison, that’s the score for… like, a graduating high school senior or something.
...yeah. Sounds peachy, right?

Noope. Hard nope. All it meant for me is that in order to “challenge” myself, I’d have to read a bunch of boring books. And… I didn’t know how to do that. My mom tried.

...she kinda failed. I wasn’t interested in books with mature themes. I wasn’t interested in books about… well, what I classified as boring stuff. I wanted… fiction. Fantasy.

Mind you, my mom and my dad were… relatively new immigrants, with English as their second language. They didn’t know much about reading material that’s both interesting and difficult.

Looking back, it could have been easy. Just… the unabridged Sherlock Holmes stories. Anything about mythology. The Beekeeper’s Apprentice and the rest of that Mary Russell series.

Yeah, there weren’t that many, but… I’d gotten the impression that the Hobbit was a book about rabbits. Rabbits. And boring, to boot. Yeah, it’s kinda my fault… but would it have been hard for my mom to just bring up the fact that, ‘hey, there’s a dragon! And wizards!’?

I guarantee you, I would have jumped on that.

Instead, I devoured the more… popular books. And I loved books. I also read very quickly— it think it barely took, like, three hours for my to finish the fourth Harry Potter book.

Therefore, I blew off the other students and teachers in favor of reading stuff under my desk, they were slow and boring and found it annoying when I got all excited about anything, because I kinda hogged the attention and discussion. And sometimes forgot to raise my hand.

By sixth grade, I’d basically read the entire fiction half of the library. And more-or-less quit sports.

And… before that, I’d pretty firmly placed my trust in books and books only. Any friends I made? Was because of a shared love for books.

...it was also the start of my very… interesting position.

So, to begin, there was a thing called Battle of the Books, or BoB. You read twenty books, memorized their titles and authors, and got tested on random trivia from the books. It was an inter-school thing.

On fourth grade, I’d made it to the school’s team, and I was a not-insignificant reason that our team placed first. The next year, my team won second… and I still remember the question we lost. It was something along the lines of, “in which book did a character live by the Boy Scout motto?” The answer was The Name of this Book is Secret, but I’d answered with the book in which the character was a Boy Scout. Minor distinction, but an important one. It might have mattered that much… but that was the question I remember.

Also, in fifth grade, I was given the offer to skip a grade a math, because based on how much I read during class… well, I seemed bored.

I was actually also given the offer to just skip a grade entirely, but… I didn’t want to leave the few friends I’d made behind.

I still can’t tell if my choice was the right one or not.

...so, I was this pseudo-big shot. The parents all knew me, and among the students, I’d someone gained a reputation for being “smart.”
I didn’t consider myself smart. I just considered a lot of stuff… kinda pathetic. Like, I’d hated the geometry teacher. Because of the teacher, I hated the class. And somehow, despite not paying attention during, like, any of the classes and barely doing the homework, and not actually recognizing anything on the final exam… I got a 92% on the final exam. I still don’t know how that happened.

...add that to the fact that I placed second, first, and first in the school for the spelling bee in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, the fact that I often played… maybe not leading, but still very important roles in the school plays… and the fact that my face ended up plastered across a lot of the photos/posters/stuff around the school… a lot of people knew me.

But the thing was, that wasn’t extraordinary. I almost got a B in a class. None of my grades were that high. I basically didn’t study— I lost myself in stories, because they were just so much more interesting.

There were plenty of people smarter than me.

And more than that… it was lonely, for me. I finally realized in middle school that… hey, I felt… kinda lonely. It didn’t matter that everyone knew me. I was still… pretty lonely. Everyone knew just… a version of me. And I didn’t know how to change that.

Normally, for most people, high school would have been a new start.

Not for me. About half my middle-school class came with me to high school. And yeah, there were new people… but it kinda just meant I’d be equally alone. Because you only get good with practice… and I’d never really had a chance to practice being a friend. Or even just someone up-to-date on popular culture. Or social media.

No one talked to me about stuff like that. Why would they, when I was the fourth grader who thought Justin Bieber was… like Mickey Mouse? I thought his name was Justin Beaver, and I was so confused for so long. Then came One Direction, and that entire craze… and I didn’t know them. How could I, when I didn’t know how to google anything? When my access to the Internet was guided by my parents? When the most is used my computer for was internet courses that were pre-bookmarked and the Microsoft Word app?

I didn’t even know what YouTube was. In fifth grade.

...and I’d asked my parents everything. And ironically, the first time my dad got fed up with me and literally brought me to my computer and watched me type out my question… and left me to scroll through the sites.

...that was how I found fanfiction.

Which would end up a major reason behind my soon-to-kinda-tank grades, a new way to hide from life, a new refuge from… everything. It would end up tearing apart my relationship with my parents. At one point, I almost compared it to an addiction.

...and despite my parents’ best efforts to cut me off from it, with restrictions and parental controls and everything… I always found a way through. Always.

...

That’s another reason why this second chance has been… such a blessing.

I mean, it’s not like there’s Internet here. And… history took the place of… stories. Chakra,
something that’s practically magic, took the place of fantasy.

It’s like… no. It is a second chance.

Before … it wasn’t my fault. Not completely. It was a combination of circumstance, a lack of the blinders children normally get, and just… probably bad parenting. My enthusiasm was curtailed… and… I guess I grew up too late.

That’s the reason why I had basically sworn off children… at least, until I had sufficient time to take multiple courses in psychology and basically inhale a dozen books on parenting.

And fixed myself, first. Children imitate people, and I really hate the phrase, “do what I say, not as I do,” or however it went. Like… there’s nothing more annoying to a kid than when your parents scold you… and you can see your exact flaws mirrored in your parents. And when they don’t listen. And just… a host of other issues.

I’m not blind to my issues.

And one of the things I hate most about people… well, willful ignorance. Be it about themselves… or just anything,

I know that thanks to all those circumstances, I’m horrible with people. I’m rather pessimistic… but also optimistic, which is a weird combination. I don’t experience emotions the way a lot of people do. I’m also painfully logical in some aspects… which also remarkably moody in others. I can be lazy as hell, disorganized, and just an all-around slob. I don’t use enough care in phrasing some things, which can come across as rude. I’m blunt, and I probably don’t care as much as I should about some people’s feelings.

I can be ridiculously stubborn, and more than a bit argumentative. I’m bad at motivating myself, and I don’t have a consistent learning slope. Or curve. It’s more… like a series of steps. I usually pick up the beginning really quickly, then stagnate… then jump a bit more… then stagnate… and that just continues, I almost never enjoy delving deep into subjects, and I’m really bad at challenging myself… or pushing myself through my plateaus. I can get frustrated easily. When so much comes easily, it’s hard to see a point in pursuing things that don’t. (Those are usually the things that require constant practice.) I can be crazily indecisive, and more than a bit fickle. I probably have a mix of both inferiority and superiority issues. I tend to retreat into myself, and just shut everyone off.

I get it!

I… wasn’t in the best physical shape, my academic achievements were mediocre at best… and I was disappointingly average. I didn’t put as much time as I should have into anything I did, and I was basically an all-around disappointment, especially to myself.

Newsflash! Being “smart” isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Maybe it’s just a “the grass is always greener” thing, but…

I remember this one line, from a… I think a Scooby Doo movie— “The higher the pedestal, the harder the fall.”

…oh yeah, I was falling. Fast.

And then there’s that whole thing about hard work beating genius, and people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and… and everything.

I remember whining about it once— no one cares if a smart person stays smart. There aren’t stories
about smart, privileged people achieving stuff. No one cares. It’s always the story of the underdog, the story of someone who’s not smart but worked hard and achieved everything.

...when you never had to work hard, when it was never hard to surpass a ridiculously-low bar… when you’ve never had to practice working hard, practicing consistently… well, where do you start?

When it’s always about how well you can work with people, not your abilities… and you’ve never been good with people… how do you learn?

You know, my own father once described me… as a computer. A great computer, with good hardware… but with gaps, with bugs in the software. With so much junk on the servers that it slows everything down. A good computer that never used all of its processing power.

...that was me. A broken computer. Fitting, too— laziness is the mother of all bad habits, and I was nothing if not lazy. And for me… I just wasn’t “smart” enough where it was just an “endearing character trait” or something.

Even your mind needs constant use to stay at its best.

...

But that’s all in the past. There's no point in whining. I bet plenty of people would have loved to trade spots with me. I also know that complaining about that makes me sound whiny as hell. And I don’t want to be that person. I can’t dwell on it.

Learn from it? Yes.

So, Makoto. You’ve gotten everyone you wanted. You used to wish that you could just take everything you learned and go back in time. Well, it’s not quite that, but you’re a kid again. You can parent yourself. And yeah, you don’t have the internet. You don’t have a dozen parenting courses. But no one can have everything.

Suck it up, deal with it, and never forget. You can’t change the past. But now that you have enough time, now that you finally have enough time to fix things… you can fix things. Now, you have the time to devote to this. It’s not Before, where there was the stress of school and trying to balance a flawed family and the nerve-wracking terror that it doesn’t matter that you’ve realized your flaws early, it doesn’t matter that you want to change, you’re just don’t have enough time …

But now, you do. People say that it takes twice as long to fix a bad habit as it did to gain it in the first place.

...

In that case… well, I’ve got twelve years. Let’s see how far I can go.

みわたせば柳櫻をこぎまぜて宮こそ春の錦なりける

Looking out across
The willows and the cherries
All intermingled in
The capital: this spring
They are a fine brocade.

miwataseba yanagi sakura o kogimazete miya kozo haruno nishiki narikeru

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Okay. Everyone got my first question right, basically. That’s good. Someone maybe-kinda figured out one of the long-running mysteries. That’s also… kinda good. If you want to make a guess about specifics, be my guest. At this point, I should really include a warning that there might end up being spoilers in the comments. Just… be careful if you’re really DON’T want spoilers.

...The thing is, no one has actually scored the spoiler or omake, yet.

*cracks knuckles*

Okay. Let’s go into the hints. Again, check my tags. It’s not obvious, but I’ve got an upcoming story arc that’s Makoto-centric and very far removed from canon. I’ve got some more hints about it in this chapter. One of the comments was kinda close. I’ll give another hint: succession.

You can find the Kagome, Kagome song here, as well as the ball-bouncing song. They’re in the same YouTube video. This is a Chekhov’s gun. Anyone who successfully guesses where it becomes important to the plot gets the free spoiler/possible omake.

Apart from that… Makoto has Issues. He’s generally well-adjusted, but… also… not really. He’s aware of that… sometimes.

Generally… I think this is a pretty straight-forward chapter? Civilians aren’t shinobi. In canon, we see a lot of shinobi and only shinobi. Based on the whole thing with the wars… well, three wars, in less than sixty years, and all because of shinobi? It’s probably going to be very easy to blame them for everything wrong with the world. Plus, based on canon, there are a lot of… more-traditional shinobi who didn’t join the hidden villages. When you account for groups like the Twelve Guardian Shinobi…

...yeah.

...

Plus, there’s this awesome series called A How To Guide To Shinobi Life. It’s a pretty cool time-travel-fix-it-type story, and… well, I strongly recommend reading the third part, How To Stop The End Of The World (Maybe). Everyone’s pretty OP here. It’s awesome.

...

Also, please just ignore if there’s a weird space between any italicized word and the following punctuation. Somehow, this weird thing happens when I copy-and-paste from Google Docs to ao3, and… well, I’ve tried fixing some of it, but… there’s a lot, and
there are 56 pages worth of these, and... well, hopefully, it’s not too annoying.

...

With any luck, I'll be able to devote more time to fixing some of the formatting issues after... probably May. Sorry I can't do it sooner.
Of Revelations and Changing Things

Chapter by ShadowAccio6181, UncertainAngel

Chapter Summary

In which Makoto learns stuff, gets sentimentally mopey about his Not-Tragic Backstory, and may or may not be plotting to take over the world. (Shisui's got a running bet on the last one with himself.)

Also, everyone's a Good Friend, and there are cute, fluffy feels.

(Also also, Makoto hates responsibility, but that's directly linked to why he's actually pretty good at it.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

花ちれる水のまにまにとめくれば山には春もなくなりにけり

The scattered petals

Carried on the waters

Answer but one question.

In the mountains, spring

Has passed completely.

...my resolve is cracked pretty quickly, though, by an… almost alarmingly large puff of smoke no even half a koku later.

“Kiyohime!” I blurt, kinda shocked by the familiar dark scales. “Wha-what are you doing here? I tried calling you earlier, is something wrong? Was there a mission?” I babble. “And… you’re big.”

Kiyohime coils herself into a small pile in front of me, seemingly shrinking into herself.

“I shall be permanently under your care from now on, hatchling,” Kiyohime hisses, almost… sadly. She shakes it off quickly, though, and raises her head proudly. “I can hunt for myself, but I expect a warm place to sleep, and… a duck egg, every other month or so.” She almost seems to pout. “They taste good, but my species does not normally consume eggs, and therefore they tend to be more trouble than they are worth to eat on a regular basis.”

I gape at her in shock.

“W-What do you mean?” I whisper, trying to wrap my mind around what Kiyohime just said.

Staying with me? Permanently? What…
“You have been injured, hatchling,” Kiyohime announces, tongue flicking at the air almost in alarm. She brings her head closer to the bandage I have on my leg and hisses, angry. “Mamushi. Those fat, cold-scaled pit-dwellers… they dare…”

“Really not the problem right now,” I laugh nervously, shuffling back. “It’s fine, they had anti-venom, they said I should be fine…”

“No.” Kiyohime hisses furiously, getting up in my face. “You are my hatchling, my warm-person, and you will wait for a healing yamakagashi, and I shall start you on the regiment that all members of the Rochi clan have undergone, the one that Yoruko gave to Yasha and that Yasha improved in leaps and bounds.”

“Whoa, hold you. First… okay, ignoring the people I’m not sure I know… something happened to Orochimaru-ojisan?” I ask, slightly terrified. I’m pretty sure I made several leaps in logic… but the words make sense. It’s as if they just… click. I shake my head, trying to dislodge my worry, before I turn back to Kiyohime-san, frantic. “Kiyohime? What… what happened to Orochimaru-san?”

She hisses in annoyance, twisting a bit… and lowers her head.

“Hatchlings make their own decisions,” she hisses firmly. “My decision is to stay. He is too cold.” She twitches, tongue flicking at the air for a moment in exasperation. “He would have been better off had he been born with scales,” she grumbles. “Humans…”

Kiyohime winds up my arm until she’s coiled around my torso, and it’s like a comforting hug, especially when she rests her head on my shoulder. She’s considerably bigger than she normally is when I summon her.

“I am not well-liked by many at my home, because I have become too… human. Mammalian. But I like it. So I stay.” She opens her jaw as she prods me to hold out my hands, practically dislodging it… and an egg rolls into my hand. I panic and freeze up. It’s not a bird egg. The shell is too leathery and not… brittle enough for that. The egg’s also warm. Something tells me that there’s something alive in there.

Kiyohime coils around the egg. “I found this. Its nestmates had already hatched, but this egg did not. Not yet. It might, though.” She pauses. “I should have eaten it. Many others would have. But they will be more useful earning their keep with you.” She hits her head lightly against mine. “You are too soft for a hatching, too warm, too fleshy, and too fragile. You are not cold or hard, nor do you have scales or venomous fangs. That is not bad, not for a human. But your claws and teeth are small, and you do not have a proper mother.”

I protest. I have a perfectly suitable mother! “Okaa-sa—”

“Has no claws, teeth, fangs, venom, or poison.” Kiyohime hisses, interrupting me. “I, along with the one in the egg, shall be your fangs until you find fangs of your own.” She turns her nose up, leaning down to look at the egg. “Silly humans. You cannot smell, cannot feel… this is why you need us.”

I sigh, stroking a few fingers down her neck. “Thanks, Kiyohime.”

Kiyohime hisses in pleasure, before looking back at the egg. “Fetch a box, with loose sand or soil,” she orders. “Gently bury the egg in the mix, make sure to cover it, and keep it on your person to keep it warm… and feed chakra into it, occasionally.”

She bumps the egg gently with her head, nodding a little. “Yes… hurry up and hatch,” she orders the egg. “If you do not, I shall eat you.” Satisfied, she nods slightly, before she gently takes the egg back
The thing is, I’m not. And I don’t want to tell them about that, either.

I don’t know what to think about Oro-sensei. Because… maybe it’s wrong of me, but I don’t think I care. I know what it means, that he’s been driven out of Konoha. But… I can’t bring myself to condemn him. I know it’s disturbing, but… is it wrong to say I don’t care about those children he probably experimented on? Who probably died in agonizing ways?

I just… can’t empathize with them. I would be terrified if that happened to me. And I don’t want that to happen to me. But… Oro-sensei’s not a monster. No more than any human, no more than any shinobi.

But… I have to be careful. It means I was wrong. But… not completely. Oro-jichan hurt people. Yes. But he didn’t hurt me.

…

And that’s all I care about. I know it’s probably not the best comparison… because it’s different, and my opinions are probably very controversial, but… does it matter if you hurt someone with intention or not? If you hurt someone directly or indirectly? I mean, I know there’s a difference… but they’re still hurt. I can no more blame Konoha shinobi for what they did during the shinobi wars than I can blame Orochimaru for what he did.

Because…
As long as he doesn’t hurt me, as long as they don’t hurt me… I can ignore it. I can set it aside.

I know it’s messed up, but at this point…

Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime, would be condemned as a monster by the people Before. If he had not been on the side of Konohagakure, Konoha would condemn what he did. Every hero of Konoha… every famous shinobi earned that title because they killed people. Because of how good they were at killing people.

Morality is confusing. I think I’ll choose to ignore it. Maybe killing people is wrong. Maybe child soldiers are unethical. I don’t know. There isn’t a Geneva Convention here. And… yeah, maybe as a citizen of the Land of Fire, of Konohagakure, I shouldn’t feel guilty for the shinobi on the other side of the wars. I shouldn’t feel distaste at Konoha shinobi, sometimes.

But you know what? I don’t care. By that means, I shouldn’t have helped the children in Kiri, because they’re going to grow up and probably kill Konoha shinobi. I don’t know. Quite frankly… I’ve said this before, but I don’t care.

I’ll care for my friends. I’ll care for my people, the people I have a responsibility for.

I’ve said this before, many times— I don’t understand love.

I definitely didn’t know what it felt like Before. It was as indescribably fantastical as… everything else that belonged in fairy tales, like magic and princesses and princes with shining armor on white stallions and happily-ever-afters. Suffice to say, to me, love was not something I was lucky enough to understand. I never got crushes. I never experienced that overwhelming bond of friendship that you read about, where your friends would literally die for you. Or the ties of family.

I’d believed in it, to a certain extent, and I definitely hoped to understand it, eventually, but I never did.

Not until now. Because now? It’s possible.

And maybe I still can’t pin down what love is. Maybe the closest I can get to feeling love is feeling happiness in conjunction with various people, places, or things.

I don’t know.

All I know… is responsibility.

Even Before, I didn’t love my family. But I felt responsibility for them. Had nothing else changed in my life, I wouldn’t have cared that much if they died.

…that’s a tough pill to swallow.

I didn’t want to spend time with them. It was a chore. They, sometimes oftentimes, brought out the worst in me.

…
But I felt responsibility for them.

And I might not love them, but I, sure as anything, was determined to be a good family member, a *decent, responsible* family member.

So that meant smiling in family outings. That meant intervening when Mom or Dad was frustrated with my little brothers. That meant taking the time to teach them, to make sure they learned. That meant that, if they needed anything, *I would be there*. Because maybe I didn’t love them. Maybe I would have been happier without my little brothers. Maybe I recognized and was fed up with the multitude of flaws I saw in my parents that they refused to recognize… except for when it reflected in me.

They “loved” me in their own way. They were pretty bad at emotional support, or really anything that you’d probably associate with “good” parents… but they supported me. They wanted the best for me. And so, they fulfilled their obligations as parents.

…

I don’t get love. I can’t describe love. I buried my emotions below a layer of logic as thick as the Antarctic ice cap when I can. Because emotions? They weren’t good— not for me. Being excited or passionate about something meant teachers getting annoyed with me. Because I forgot to raise my hand. Because I was over-eager. Because I tended to steamroll over other, quieter students.

…

Now… I’m getting better at emotions. At being with people. I can finally let it out— Itachi and Shisui won’t judge. And when I talk too fast… Shino and Neji aren’t shy to speak up when they want to. And when they’re upset, it’s easy to tell. They don’t get passive-aggressive, or hide disdain behind smiles, or *complain about me behind my back instead of to my face* .

It’s nice.

And maybe it’s easier, being patient with them when I see them as… precocious children. I don’t see them as *equals*, per say. They’re good companionship. I like spending time with them. But I still see them as fragile— and that’s definitely for the better.

I’m only really somewhat-consistently “nice” for… probably two types of people— significantly younger children, and people I respect. The first are people who are learning. They’re not grown-up yet, and I’m supposed to encourage them and be gentle with them. Kinda like with dogs or puppies. Yeah, they might be stupid and obnoxious sometimes, but… well, first off, that’s not my problem. That’s for their parents and teachers and other people to deal with. Second off, that’s not really their fault. They’re tiny and cute.

The people I respect… well, I respect them. It’s usually pretty easy to fall into this group. I usually try and stick people in here by default… until they screw up. Then, they either end up in the puppy-category… or a third category. Not my problem.

That’s for… everyone I don’t respect, everyone who has outgrown their little-kid/puppy-allowance. They don’t get leeway. But I can still play nice with them, whether they’re my age, barely younger, or older. I’ll be polite and smile and make conversation. I’m generally at least passable at making conversation.

...the problem comes when I need to work with category-three people to do something.

…
The thing is, I’m more likely to be nice when nothing needs to get done. If something needs to get done, category-three people usually don’t want to do that. They don’t want to be productive. Sometimes, it’s because they’re just really relaxed about it. Sometimes, it’s because they want to waste some time with “fun” conversation.

… let’s just say I was horrible at group projects for a long time for that reason. There are just some people I can’t stand, and unfortunately for me… they were usually the “nice” kids, the “well-liked” kids who were “emotionally intelligent” and got along well with people.

Sometimes, there were people I respected, but still put in category three. Usually for this reason.

Like… when they don’t listen to me. Or my ideas. Or when they present bad ideas that, somehow, everyone likes. Or when I try to include their ideas, and they still complain, because I’m “too bossy and taking over everything” and it’s like they’re not “getting a say in anything.” Usually, this is when they start being passive-aggressive. Or when the teacher automatically blames me if the team doesn’t work well.

I’m not saying I’m perfect. I’m not saying it’s all their fault— it’s almost certainly mine to some extent.

Don’t get me wrong— I tried to be nice and friendly. I never started gossip about people, and I pretty much never gossiped about people, period. If I had a problem with people, I would tell them to their face, usually in the hopes that they would take note of my observations and either explain, or fix any flaws. I gave people second, third, fourth, fifth… I basically always gave people a second chance. Yes, I judged people pretty early on, but I was never against changing my opinion of people.

I was just… blunt. And sometimes overly-enthusiastic. Which usually came off as rude.

But… my point is… I like this world. I am a kid. I get more leeway for being blunt. I am appreciated for the message I try to get across (usually), and not judged too harshly for the way the message is delivered. More importantly, I haven’t had to deal extensively with category-three people in a non-casual, productive setting.

And my point is… I don’t love Konohagakure for Konohagakure. I like the trees, I like the climate, I like the fact that it’s a decent, relatively friendly village that doesn’t… well, force Academy students to kill each other to graduate. (That’s just Danzō, and for the most part, he’s on his own in that regard.)

I like Konohagakure because Itachi likes Konohagakure. I like Konohagakure because Okaa-san and Otō-san like it, because they live here and because of how kind they have been to me. I like Konohagakure because of Shino and Neji and Shisui and Kagami-jiisan and Mikoto-obasama and Hizashi-san and Hitomi-sama and… and Shinko-chan and Aburame-sama and everyone I know and like and… well, respect.

I am determined to become a shinobi, to fight and kill, because Itachi loves Konohagakure and Sasuke and because Itachi is my best friend. And I am determined to be a good friend. Not just to Itachi, of course, but… to everyone.

Plus, I fiercely hoard what is mine, especially friend-wise. I’ve lost too many friends to lightly throw away the favor of anyone who likes me. I pretty firmly refuse to let go of anyone I enjoy spending time with, anyone who’s also willing to spend time on me, who enjoys speaking with me and who I enjoy speaking with as well… anyone who likes me for who I am behind that polite, conversational, mask that I show to category-three people— and the world— as a general rule of thumb.
And apparently, even what Orochimaru did is not enough to get me to leave him. I have Kiyohime-san, and that’s all I need.

Yes, I am sad. No, I am not sad because Oro-sensei “betrayed my trust” or anything like that. That would be a logical, sensible, normal reaction.

...I am not that logical or sensible about friendships. And I am most certainly not normal.

I know it’s selfish, but... I’m sad because Oro-sensei’s not here. He left. And he didn’t want to leave, but...

...neither did Hizashi-san... or, I hope, Neji.

It’s too much like “sayonara.” I hate that word. I like “see you later” and “until next times” and... temporary farewells. “Sayonara” is so... so... so final.

...

At least Kiyohime’s still here.

She’s hidden during the day, of course, though she stays on me when she can. She curls up with me during the night. I don’t want to summon her into her small form... so if she needs to hide, she simply curls up in a high place in my closet.

When I leave Keishi, she’ll un-summon herself, and then I’ll summon her again for the road, in her smaller form.

And then we’ll do the same in Konoha.

I’m hesitant to trust Kiyohime to not mention anything to Orochimaru-san, but... she has assured me that she has more-or-less cut off their relationship, even if she is willing to... indirectly deliver any messages I want to send by bringing them to the summoning realm and passing them off to another snake, who can in turn bring it to Oro-sensei.

...I mean, I want to trust Kiyohime-san. But... Orochimaru’s got a decent chance of staging an invasion of Konohagakure and killing the Hokage, so... ソヴgetDrawable

I think I’ll just try to be careful in what I tell him.

Besides, it’s not like he doesn’t have spies in Konohagakure. At the very least, he can probably send other snakes to scout places out. I’ll just be careful with where I take Kiyohime, what I tell Kiyohime, and what I write to Oro-sensei.

...

It’s really a shame, though. I would have loved to have Oro-sensei as a jōnin-sensei. I don’t want to just get lumped with a random jōnin— see how well that turned out for Itachi. (hint: not at all.)

Ah, well, I can still get Shisui. Or maybe even Itachi.

...on second thought, maybe better not... unless, like, apprenticeships are a thing...
The journey home… was basically just me. Moping. A lot.

I just wasn’t in the mood to actually… be productive. Whatever you call it— ennui, lassitude, lethargy, listlessness, tedium, boredom, languor, enervation…

...that.

Yeah, I know. I don’t have much time, I should try to maximize productivity, blah blah yada yada. I get it.

I just don’t care. I am four. I have the right to be a petulant brat if I wish. And I’m not even that… whiny, just… pouty? I think that’s the word?

...and it doesn’t help that my mind is veritably buzzing with questions about who this ‘Yoruko’ and ‘Yasha’ are.

When I get back, though, I can’t dwell on what happened with Oro-sensei. For one, Kiyohime, in her smallest ear-jewelry form again, very determinedly hisses at me to “act normal.”

...seriously? I don’t know why that includes not getting Hizashi-chan— the fish— back from Hitomi-sama. But Kiyohime’s insistent, and as thus, I force myself to start being productive. Normally productive. First of all, I quickly go find Itachi and Shisui. Shisui’s on a mission, which is unfortunate, but Itachi has enough time to memorize the pamphlets I’d spent so long compiling.

...seriously, I wish I had the Sharingan, sometimes. I’m dreadfully slow at memorizing stuff.

It’s almost like a birthday present, for him. I’ve spent so long in Keishi, and it took so long to get back, that Itachi’s birthday takes place barely a few days after we return. It’s… a rather small affair, like most are. I fold even more cranes, keeping count almost obsessively… until I finally hit 1000.

Shisui and I… somewhat-carelessly plot Itachi’s birthday party, which ends up this mess of glitter, paper decorations, and food. Like, seriously. There’s everything from delicate sweets to enormous savory plates of seafood and a surprisingly large array of tomato dishes, courtesy of me.

...I remembered a lot of ways to prepare tomatoes from Before. Many of them were my mother’s dishes— chopped tomatoes with granulated sugar, tomatoes stir-fried with scrambled eggs— and some were… my best attempt at recreating other dishes. Like, I tried recreating pizza, spaghetti, my somewhat-signature tomato-cabbage-shrimp-potato-everything soup, sliced tomatoes layered with mozzarella cheese and basil and olive oil and balsamic vinegar, and small halved cherry tomatoes with those small sour things and balsamic vinegar.

They were all my favorites, Before. I loved tomatoes… with the small exception of sun-dried tomatoes.

Mind you, they don’t all quite turn out exactly as planned. The cheese was a bit hard to match, the balsamic vinegar was… actually obtainable, but a bit hard to find, those small sour things had to be replaced with chopped ame, and… well… sour pickled plums don’t quite taste the same as capers. I liked capers. I only wish I knew what they were, so I could try and find them.

Plus… I don’t remember exact measurements, so… I kinda eyeball everything. As a result, there’s probably too much sugar, the eggs are a bit overcooked, the soup is a bit too salty, the cheese doesn’t taste quite right, and the spaghetti doesn’t taste anything like spaghetti… but we’re all laughing and having fun, and that’s what matters.
At the end of the day, we all drag futon over to Shisui’s house, where we have a… well, the best term would probably be “sleep-over.” “Puppy-pile” would probably be more accurate, though, along with perhaps, “pillow-fort.”

Shisui’s at the bottom of the pile, of course.

Lying on his stomach, he flips through the book, eyes sharingan-red, while I go over the pronunciation with Itachi, laughing when Shisui grumbles playfully about how heavy we are— and seriously, it’s a bit weird hearing yourself speak in a language you haven’t allowed yourself to vocalize in years.

The next day, Shisui needs to leave on another mission… but Itachi has free time, and we bring thermoses of genmaicha and sweets and bento far into the forest, and have a picnic. I teach him more about English, tracing out sentences with a stick in a patch of dirt… and tell him about everything that happened in Keishi, while in turn, he tells me about everything that’s happened in Konoha while I was gone.

...Orochimaru is a rather sensitive topic, but thankfully, Itachi doesn’t pry… and he doesn’t question me beyond asking if I’m sure I’m alright, after I tell him about Kiyohime and the egg and how… I might still want to send him a letter or something. He warns me to be careful, asks me to be safe, and makes sure I know that I should tell him if I have any worries… but that’s the end of it, and I’m thankful to Itachi for that.

During his stories, though, an interesting fact comes up.

The Hokage had spoken privately with Fugaku-sama… about signing Itachi up for the chūnin exams.

I’m… kinda stumped. Because I really did not think that his team, much less his sensei, would be… well. Hence my gesture to elaborate.

"On the recommendation of village officials, Sandaime-sama wants me to take the coming chūnin exams. And instead of taking it with my genin team… I will be taking part alone.” Itachi pauses. “They debated simply promoting me to chūnin through an official decision, but decided that it would be better for the village to have me take the exams. Otō-sama has already told Sandaime-sama that I will take part."

“Huh.” I frown.

“T...or...” Itachi blurs out. “I tried to make myself accept the situation, and I was secretly grateful, but… I don’t like being a genin. I couldn’t be satisfied.” He looks at me. “It’s as if… the team was… this cover of heavy clouds, and now… they’re starting to clear away. It’s a relief.”

I nod, slowly. Okay. That makes sense… “considering how smart you are… and what you want to do… and when you add that to the fact that Shisui… probably made chūnin about this time…” I murmur, before shrugging. “I mean, I can’t blame you.” It’s not like Itachi’s this zen, enlightened monk or something.

Itachi nods. “I had asked Yūki-sensei… and he insisted that I was not ready. Yet, I am worried, about what Otō-san and Danzō each seem to have planned for me. Plus, there is more pressure on me, for the simple reason that the village officials recommended me directly, instead of my supervising jōnin.”
Wait… oh, shoot. “Danzō?” I whine, dropping my head into my hands. “Oh, come on… what’s he got to do with this?” Did this happen in the original series?

“He was the one to suggest to Sandaime-sama that I be recommended for the chūnin exams,” Itachi sighs, leaning against a tree trunk.

There’s a pensive pause.

“Well…” I draw out slowly. “I don’t remember this happening in the… original. I think. But my memory is faulty, and I already know that… some things aren’t the most accurate. Plus, I think it makes sense? From what I know of him… he wants to protect Konoha,” I murmur softly.

“and…you’re a genius. If he really thinks of shinobi as no more than weapons… he would have a vested interest in making sure you become as strong a weapon as possible.”

Itachi sighs softly. “I… had simply wanted to become the best ninja ever, and eliminate war from this world.”

I nudge him in the ribs, grinning. “Simply? I’m not sure if you’ve realized… but nothing about your dreams was simple.”

Itachi smiles softly. “…no. I suppose not.” He looks up at the sky. “However… as you so often tell me… it may not have been simple, or easy, but my ambitions were relatively straightforward.”

I sigh, flopping over onto the ground. “Yeah… and you were good at breaking it up into pieces, too.” I exaggerate my pout-frown and aim it at him. “Training. Every. Single. Day.”

I sigh dramatically, placing an arm over my eyes. Itachi laughs softly.

“You are the one who told me… pu-ra-cu-ti-su makusu perufecto.”

I beam at him. “Yeah, practice makes perfect!” I flop against Itachi, now. “But seriously… you know that what you do is super cool, right?” I wriggle so I’m looking up. “You’re amazing, Itachi. I don’t… most people probably wouldn’t be able to do what you do. Even me,” I sigh, sadly, turning onto my side.

Itachi grabs at a piece of my hair and starts braiding it… and I can’t help but smile, slightly. “You enjoy improving your use of chakra, and your flexibility, both of which you do consistently, even without Shisui’s or my prompting. And sometimes, that applies for your kata, as well.”

He smiles a bit, patting me on the head, and I laugh, feigning a swat at his hand,

“And even for what you do not enjoy, you continue to practice and improve.” Itachi grabs another piece of hair, and I obligingly roll over slightly. “You have improved significantly, Makoto. If you were in the Academy, I have no doubts that anyone of your skill level would be pushed to graduate early.”

I hum noncommittally, pushing down my urge to mope, or to deny. It’s Itachi. I should trust his judgement, even if he’s just being nice. He wouldn’t falsify facts just to comfort me.

I close my eyes, letting the rustle of leaves and chirping of birds wash over me.

“I know that… you want to be strong, so you can step in between people fighting to stop them. But, Itachi… your reasoning is that if you are a shinobi more powerful than the ninja at war to the extent that no other shinobi would stand a chance… then everyone would listen to you, right?”
“Yes,” Itachi replies.

“...there will always be people who might not listen,” I sigh. “And Itachi... you know, you’re not always going to be there, right? I told you before... and you agreed... that a peace brought about through fear would not last. And to break the cycle that causes wars... you need to convince people to forgive.”

Itachi’s silent for a little while, before he speaks up again. “Tell me again of what you had planned?”

I let out a huff of amusement. “You know, it’s our plan, not just mine, right?” I pause for a moment. “And it’s not finalized, yet, either. I just... don’t know enough. But... one of the things to start with is to find ways to use chakra to... help fix stuff.” I grin. “That sounds ridiculous, but... find ways to grow food in places like Suna, to help them so that... for example, they wouldn’t be encouraged to invade Konohagakure... which is entirely theoretical... just because of problems with missions and money.”

I sigh. “That’s the big thing. Helping people. Teaching people, that people from other countries and hidden villages aren’t necessarily enemies, showing them that it’s alright to forgive, that it might be hard, but it’s important. Teaching people to be kind. Teaching people... that shinobi aren’t enemies. That chakra can be an amazing thing.”

I pluck at strands of grass, pensive. “I’ve... I’ve already started trying.”

Itachi sighs. “On my end... I have tried, with Sasuke. Shisui and Kagami-san agree. I think Okaa-san agrees, but Oto-san... he tells me that... I do not think he agrees. And the Uchiha are... angry with Konohagakure. They simply do not care. Even Izumi-san... I do not think she understands.”

“Mm,” I hum. “Shino... I think I’ve convinced him, and Aburame-sama... well, I think he partially sees me as just a cute kid, but he tells me to be careful. Hitomi-sama said something similar, and... she’s upset with Kumo. Very upset. But I think she understands that the Kumo isn’t the entirety of the Land of Lightning, that there are probably people in the country, and maybe the village, who either did not know or disapprove what happened, and that we don’t know enough of who planned the kidnapping and who insisted on... the death of... well, technically Hiashi-san, and that as such, we cannot just senselessly condemn everyone who lives in Kumogakure or just the Land of Lightning... because otherwise, we, too, would be held responsible for a lot of things we weren’t responsible for.”

I pull myself into a criss-crossed sitting position, pointing a leaf of grass at Itachi. “You get three guesses as to who I’m mainly talking about, and the first two don’t count.”

Itachi grimaces slightly. “Speaking of that individual... I wanted to ask you something. I believe... he had come up to me on the day of my graduation.”

I blink. “Wait, what?”

“He... he said that I was ‘the bearer of bad luck,’ and that... these lines on my face indicated that bad luck and chaos will follow me throughout my life. Then, he offered me a question, a question ‘for the most talented genius ever to grade the halls of the academy,’ in his own words.” Itachi pauses. “He asked me... ‘Ten of our brethren have been shipwrecked. One of them has caught a nasty, infectious disease. If he is allowed to live, the other nine will also get sick and die. If you were the captain of that ship, what judgment would you hand down?’"

...okay, that’s heavy.
Itachi sighs, looking at me. “Makoto… what would you do?”

And… I should have expected this. “Well… I remember a question from Before. It was… oh, that could be a problem.” Railroads aren’t a thing here. I don’t even know if there’s a word that translates to ‘train’. Okay. “This sounds like what happened to us in Mizu. So… first, I would ask everyone. Or rather, more importantly, ask the person with the disease. I would send everyone else away from the person, first, then give the person some options, and ask the person what they wanted to happen. For example, maybe that person wants to try and recover, and everyone else agrees to give them that chance. I would give them what supplies we could spare, spend some time trying to figure out if there’s anyone who knows what the disease is and if they know a cure… and so on. Fundamentally, if I were the captain of the ship, I have a responsibility for all of the people who work for me. That means making sure that everyone else is safe, first, but I think I would also want to talk to the person with the disease.”

I look at Itachi. “It’s like what happened with the children. Separate the healthy people and the sick people, and if possible, try and heal the sick person. It also depends if we’re on a mission or something. But… chances are, the ten people are friends. If you were the sick person, and I was one of the ten members of the crew… I’d try to heal you, Itachi. Even if it meant that I might die. Because you’re my friend.”

I rub my head, before flopping onto my back. “But yeah, just… giving the sick person a mercy kill is definitely a possibility. Even so, I think I’d want to know, like, if we went back… did the person have something he or she wanted to tell anyone? Did he or she want me to make sure a friend or family member got something that he or she owned? It all depends. And also… is there any way that person wants to be buried? Just stuff like that. I’d have to be really careful, and there’s a risk I would also get sick… but I think if I cared enough for that person, I’d want to risk it.”

Itachi is silent for a long time.

“I had said… that no matter what happens, the one who is sick is destined to die. If I were the captain, I would think that my first priority would be to save the lives of the other nine. I would choose to kill the one and save the nine.” Itachi pauses. “Makoto… was my decision… rash? When I told him my answer, he… smiled. Then, he told me that it was ‘a very unambiguous response,’ and… that he looked forward to the day we would meet again.”

I shrug. “Nah, your decision makes sense. But… it’s like what happened with me… and Neji and Hinata-hime and Hizashi-san. You can only be expected to act based on what you know. That’s one of the reasons I read as much as I can. If I know what the sickness is… and if I can judge whether or not it can be cured… that affects my decision. And then, it also has to do with where we were shipwrecked and everything, but… as far as things go, this is a very clear decision.”

I grin ruefully. “I’m not completely foolish, Itachi. But neither do I think that everything’s black-and-white. If there aren’t enough options… I try and make my own. If I am walking along a path that splits into two paths… well, I would first want to see what would happen if I took either path, and then, if I don’t like either outcome, I’d make my own path.”

I pat Itachi on the head, then flop forward in a loose hug.

“Don’t be sad, Itachi,” I murmur. “I told you. I read. A lot. I know these things. I just… don’t know a lot about other important.”

Itachi takes a deep breathe… and exhales, squeezing me slightly. “Thanks, Makoto.”

I draw back slightly, smiling. “You’re my friend, Itachi. You’ve helped me so much that… I’m just
I stretch, rolling my neck, and yawn. “...okay. From what I know, the chūnin exams are a place where officials from all the countries come together. And... it also serves as... a stand-in for war.” I hop to my feet. “So, you said that you wanted to be scary enough that people would think twice before starting a war against Konohagakure? Unless I’m wrong... I think Danzō thinks something similar. He wants to keep Konoha safe. So, that’s why he recommended you—he wants you to scare the other countries.” I grin, stretching my arms out and trying to get my blood pumping again. “Am I wrong?”

Itachi shakes his head, reaching out a hand, and I pull him up. “Indeed. It is an opportunity to display the future fighting potential of each land. If I demonstrate my abilities there, it will enhance the threat our village poses to other countries.”

“And just make you seem like more of a threat,” I grin. “As long as you’re careful not to be the one to start fighting people, that is. Countries might attack you if they think you’ll end up attacking first, so you have to be really careful about showing people that you’ll only attack if they attack you first.”

I laugh at Itachi’s long-suffering expression. “Hey, you’re the one who wanted all this. I’m just letting you know, that scaring people’s all good and fine... until their fear turns to anger. So...” I bounce forward to give Itachi another hug. “Just... be careful, okay?” I murmur. “And... we’ll need to train. A lot. Because a good way to accomplish what you want would be to avoid severely injuring anyone you encounter. Keep them scared of what you could have done, not scared of what you did. Okay?”

“The only people who attack with the intent to kill either really like killing, or are simply desperate. If you want to establish peace, make sure that you are never desperate,” Itachi quotes, before pulling back. “You told me that, did you not?” He grins mischievously. “Okay, Makoto. You need to improve your shurikenjutsu. Pinning someone to something by their clothing is a very useful intimidation tool, and it is all too easy to accidentally kill someone with a misthrown kunai.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumble. “I got an entire lecture from Hiroshi-ojisan when I was first learning to use a bow. I’m not sure if the story is right or not, but... I think it went like this. There were three people who were competing in archery. They all shot at a fish. They all hit the eye of the fish. So, the judge asked each archer what they were aiming at. One person said that he was just aiming at the fish. The other person said that he was aiming at the head of the fish. The last person said he was aiming at the eye of the fish.” I shrug. “Can you guess who won?”

“The last contestant,” Itachi offers.

“Yup!” I nod, before slumping. “And... this just means I need to get better, right?”

Itachi grins unabashedly. “Exactly.”

We regress into... semi-normality. Hyper-charged semi-normality, but... normality nonetheless.

I spend mornings in the training grounds with Shisui and/or Itachi, and if neither of them are there, then Kiyohime.

We all train very hard. Shisui, just because. Itachi, for the chūnin exams. And me? Because my time in the capital reminded of who I used to be... and I absolutely refuse to relive my personal nightmares. Especially when I, unlike so many others, can actually fix my problems.

I put a lot more focus into shurikenjutsu... or basically, throwing stuff. Kunai. Shuriken. Shisui even
tossed me a set of *senbon*, the harp, pointy, throwy-needles, of various sizes, and had me practice with *those*.

I end up with more calluses on my hands and fingers, and all sorts of cuts on my fingers from when the shuriken I practice with aren’t dulled enough. Kagami-jiisan gives me a roll of bandages— and teaches me how to wrap my hands with the white cloth bandages without restricting my range of motion— after the fourth time he finds me carefully applying the balm that Oro-sensei gave me to my hands.

Practicing is hard. Many times, I just don’t *want* to walk over to the post after another series of clumsy, off-center attempts and get everything out... because what’s the point? It’s frustrating, I can’t seem to improve, every step forward seems to be accompanied by several back and to the side… and there’s always so far for me to go. My hands cramp and get clammy, and… I just want to *scream*.

I stifle my urges to whine through sheer stubbornness, and thankfully, Itachi and Shisui don’t look down on my frustration. Itachi gives me a hug or lets me come over to play genjutsu, and Shisui tries to make it fun for me, reminding me to take productive breaks from the mind-numbing monotony of chucking sharp things at wooden posts.

Shisui teaches me bird calls— which, although frustrating in their own right, are still fun— and sleight-of-hand with kunai. I’m still good at imitating crows, though, and I’m kinda proud of how sulky Shisui looks when he can’t imitate me. I taught myself how to do it *Before*, and it’s fun… albeit seriously hard on my throat. I’m also still decent at making cat noises and imitating small dogs, which is also nice. I can’t whistle that well. However, I’m a little better than *Before*. And I’m optimistic that I’ll improve. I can’t raise just one eyebrow anymore, though. Maybe that will change, but… I’m not particularly disappointed.

I don’t let that distract me, though— it’s important, for me, that I can force myself to practice things I don’t enjoy.

It’s the frustrating stuff, like running through *kata* I already know for the simple reason that they’re not perfect, that it takes valuable seconds to transition from some positions to the next.

Like gritting my teeth through pushups and resisting the urge to throw up after too many sit-ups— or planks— and pushing myself to go faster, to just keep running for longer, to make the transitions and turns just *a little bit faster* every time.

Like sparring with Shisui, or even Itachi, who are so good that I’m left bruised and panting in mere moments, and my muscles are exhausted and I’m heavy and clumsy on my feet and my attacks are slow and easily seen and weak, *flimsy* at best, and I’m struggling to even see the attacks, much less respond in time, and it’s still not *enough*. I know they’re holding back, and I can’t help but worry that they’re holding back too much.

Like *trying* to train my reflexes and hand-eye coordination by *attempting* to deflect or block various projectiles— kinda like an extreme form of dodgeball, but not as fun after so many repetitions, when the projectiles aren’t large balls of soft foam, but small, metal, thankfully-blunted kunai, and I only have so much room to run.

Sometimes, it seems like I’ve stalled. Sometimes, my scores get worse throughout the day. It’s like I’m regressing, not improving, and it *grates* at me. I’m frustrated at myself. Why am I slowing down? Why is it that I slow down and get fatigued so quickly while sparring? Why is it that, after a few run-throughs, I don’t dodge as well and even dodge *towards* the projectile, as opposed to away?

I just take a deep breath… and go stretch. Go meditate. Go rest and relax with Itachi and Shisui and
drink some tea and try to let all that frustration go. Eat. Sleep. Keep the days where you play with chakra and only chakra to no more than twice a week, and make sure to keep those still fun, still relaxing. Don’t push yourself too far, don’t train in bad habits, don’t lose focus.

Make sure you don’t ever associate working with chakra with frustration. It’s playtime, not a chore. The moment it becomes frustrating… that’s the moment you lose it. Forever. And you can’t let that happen just because everything else is frustrating. So when that happens… do whatever it takes to stop that feeling of frustration. Take a break. Don’t exhaust your chakra. It’s… it’s probably like a muscle. Exercise it, but also rest it. Don’t damage it. Don’t get frustrated.

That’s something I need to remember, to keep constantly in mind. Frustration is bad. I need to be patient with myself. Practice is only useful when you’re focused, when you’re thinking. If you’re careless, you run the risk of forming bad habits. And bad habits take twice as long, take twice the frustration to fix.

…

But no matter what, I can’t give up. I can’t quit, can’t throw in the towel. I can’t just… stop.

I need to get good at this.

I need to have as many skills as possible under my belt, as many cards up my sleeve as possible. I need to try and prevent what happened with Hizashi-san from happening again. I want to try and make sure that no one has to go through what Neji is going through.

But also… I want to do this. Because Itachi’s my friend, and I need to figure out a way to peacefully take over the Elemental Nations and… convince everyone that peace is preferable to war. Currently, it means speaking softly and carrying a bigger stick than everyone else.

...and sometimes, it means biting your tongue, even when all you want to do is scream and rage and cry.

In the week after Tanabata, which was a fun experience, even if it brought up memories of last year’s Tanabata, and… okay. Side story time.

...I miss Neji, okay? And yeah, he’s not really my friend, any more… but I still took the time to give him a birthday present, via Hitomi-sama. I wasn’t sure what to get, so… I just got him the same thing as last year— lavender honey. I didn’t want to risk giving anything too thoughtful and/or expensive… because that could be awkward if he really doesn’t want to be friends anymore… but I also didn’t want to be the one to push him away by giving a present that’s too cheap or impersonal.

Hence, the lavender honey. It’s thoughtful enough, but also not that special— especially since it’s a repeat present. But at the same time, it’s food, so it’s not like giving… say, an identical toy, which would just pile up.

The festival was still really fun, though! I enjoyed gorging myself on the food— grilled squid is awesome. And this time, I didn’t have any worries about getting lost! \(^_^) /

...on a separate note, though, I’m still worried about Hizashi-chan. I couldn’t help but worry about the fish… and by default, that meant that I started to worry over all of the fish.

**DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY GOLDFISH ARE AT FESTIVALS?**

The answer: a lot. The point is, I am ridiculously attached to that goldfish. Like, is this normal? It’s a
fish. More importantly, it’s a festival fish. How isn’t it dead, yet? How haven’t I accidentally killed it me? Why am I so emotionally invested in this fish’s continued existence?

All good questions, and all answers that should not be directed at me. Maybe at whatever kami watches over goldfish?

The point is, I don’t know! And I basically had a mini-not-tantrum in front of a goldfish-scooping booth. What is going to happen to the goldfish there? Should I rescued the goldfish? Should I just buy all of the goldfish? I’m pretty sure Otō-san and Okaa-san won’t mind? What would I do with the goldfish after buying all of them?

…

Itachi dragged me away when I started acting too weird, thankfully.

But that’s relatively unimportant. The point is, the week after Tanabata, the Sandaime stops by the shop to talk to Okaa-san and Otō-san and me… about Orochimaru. There’s an explanation of what he did, and… well, everything that’s been going on regarding him.

It’s been almost a month since I got back to Konohagakure, and I guess they’ve finally finished cleaning up after him? I don’t know. But apparently, now’s the best time to tell people about him.

Also, I get the entire spiel about Anko-san, and how Orochimaru-san had taken her with him, and how she had been held captive as one of his experiments, but how Konoha shinobi had found her, along with her two teammates— one of whom is still alive. The other, who was a Hyūga, was dead.

…I’m not sure if the entire story was for me or Okaa-san. I’m also a bit confused about why he felt the necessity to give us the entire story. I have hypotheses, but… they don’t prevent me from being rather confused, and more than a bit annoyed.

I’m grumpy, okay? I know, I’m not happy about it, and I would really appreciate if everyone would just… let it go, and I know that sounds childish because, duh, he’s an S-ranked missing-nin, and they can’t just let it go, and…

…okay, I understand their reasoning, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it or be happy about it.

…

That becomes even more true, as over the next week, it seems like everyone now know that Orochimaru’s been officially added to the Bingo Books as an S-ranked Konohagakure missing-nin.

…and pretty much everyone who knows someone who knows someone who knows that I knew Oro-sensei… well, they all come to subtly gawk at me and offer their condolences and stuff and… well, I now regret having Oro-sensei carry me through the village to get sweets on a semi-regular basis that month.

But I can’t exactly explain my feelings or scream at everyone to just stop bothering me.

And so, I also become very good at BS-ing and restraining my urge to scream and/or maim arguably-not-well-meaning civilians. And shinobi. I’m actually quite proud of myself, if I treat the entire experience as a learning one. Practice makes perfect, and regular practice of maintaining civility and patience and the nice, kind, cute, kinda shy, sweet little kid persona means that I’ve gotten very good at dealing with people. Plus, I’ve gotten more than a little good at leading grown-ups in circles until I manage to stage a polite tactical retreat.
The people who know me and genuinely care about me are… more interesting in their responses. Itachi was nice about it. So was Shisui. Kagami-jiisan doesn’t even bother to bring the subject up, and that’s nice. Aburame-sama and Shino… actually don’t talk to me about it. They invite me over more often, though, and while I don’t fully understand the reasoning behind it… it’s nice?

No, seriously. It’s pretty nice. Mainly because Shino and I are old enough to stay up late to see the fireflies… and that’s amazing. Like… fireflies are real. They exist!

...no, seriously. I’ve never, ever seen them Before… and they look like magic. Like, I think this is how Tinker Bell and other fairies would look like in real life. The view of fireflies dancing in the air over long, damp grass in the night-time is absolutely stunning.

...

Also, Hitomi-sama’s also pretty nice about it, even if she now invites me over every day. Also, on a slightly different note… she’s pregnant! You really can’t tell, but she says the baby should be born sometime in March, next year! I’m really excited. I immediately decide that I was going to get her an omamori. Having kids can be really dangerous, and with the status quo… well, at the very least, it can’t hurt.

Inoichi-ojisama stops by with… well, practically everyone in that little circle of friends, and doesn’t stop apologizing to Okaa-san and me about how sorry he is that he didn’t find out about what was going on with Orochimaru until Shikaku-sama literally drags him out, with an brief apology for Inoichi-sama, and an explanation about how, because of his position as both a friend of the family and the Head of the Konohagakure Intelligence Division, he had felt personally responsible for not finding about about Orochimaru’s actions sooner.

...I rushed after him, of course, to reassure him that, really, it was fine, and that he shouldn’t feel guilty… and I’m still not sure how, but somewhere along the way, I had received and accepted an invitation to come over and play.

Somehow, that turned into me serving as Ino-chan’s personal dress-up doll… and taking a nap with Shikamaru-kun.

I personally agree. Cloud-watching is very relaxing.

On a side note, I now have semi-regular weekly playdates with Ino-chan, which usually includes some time with the other two. I’m still not sure how, but I’m not complaining— it’s really no hardship to play the part of what is essentially dress-up doll, and I actually like it when Ino-chan plays with my hair. Plus, I don’t mind the makeup, and it’s fun to give Ino-chan ideas about what to do.

It’s not gotten to the point where we’re close friends, but I think I can comfortably say that we’re friendly acquaintances, and I might even consider Ino-chan as a friend, even if we’re not that close.

...

It’s one afternoon, after playing with Shino, that Kiyohime stops me from returning home straight away.

“Hatchling, wait. There is… something that I wish to show to you,” Kiyohime hisses softly, slithering down to rest in my hand.

I frown, raising her up a bit. “Something to show me?” I parrot. “Is there any chance I can get a clue about what it is?”
Kiyohime coils and uncoils her tail somewhat nervously, tongue flickering out to taste the air. “It will not harm you… any more than any other place in Konohagakure, at least. I can guarantee that. However… it is difficult to explain,” she grumbles, slithering closer. “It is a place that should stay secret, and it is a place that will offer you sanctuary should you need it. It… could grow to be another nest for you, should you choose to make it as such.”

I rock back and form slowly on my feet, mentally reviewing what she said. “So… a building?” I murmur quietly. “If it should stay secret… it has to do with Orochimaru-san. Is it a… hideout?” I immediately shake my head. “No, no, that wouldn’t make sense. You said, ‘nest.’ So… like a home. Normally… I wouldn’t class hideouts or secret science-y laboratories as home-y.” I bite my cheek, staring at Kiyohime, thinking. It seems crazy, but at the same time… “Orochimaru-san has someplace, maybe a building, that pretty much no one knows about, and he wants to… let me use it? Give me access to it?”

Kiyohime’s scales ripple in her version of a shrug, even as she stretches to slither back to her perch around my neck. I can now get her to approximately the length of my arm, and that means that her favorite perch has now changed to my neck… and she sometimes hides by coiling around my arm. “It is yours.”


Kiyohime hisses thoughtfully. “…no. You are… somewhat close. Should you run, it will take no more than… half of one koku to reach it. There is still plenty of time before sundown, should you hurry.”

I take a deep breath, stomping down mentally on the nerves in my stomach. “I’ll trust you,” I decide. Okay, here’s to praying this… isn’t some elaborate kidnapping scheme or something. “Where do I go?”

...Kiyohime really needs to go into more detail, sometimes. This isn’t just any building, it’s the remaining grounds and properties of Orochimaru-san’s clan.

And honestly, I probably should be more curious as to why it hasn’t been confiscated or anything… and Kiyohime explains that the Hokage actually can’t do that. Clans may have joined Konohagakure in the beginning, but many times, they had land and properties that still remained their own. Konohagakure had no right to any of it— ownership of land outside the area given to Konohagakure is only decided by the Daimyō of the land of fire, and Konohagakure simply cannot confiscate property of or dictate matters that only affect those a shinobi clan.

It’s still confusing, but not much more than anything else.

The grounds turn out to be located on the northern side of Konogakakure, the older side, the side that was settled first. That’s only technically, though— everything’s well past the river, and you can’t even see the Hokage faces from here. That’s why the Hokage didn’t know much about it— it’s not technically within the original area allotted to Konohagakure by the Daimyō at the time of its founding.

Plus, it has crazy strong protective seals. The originals were apparently designed and crafted by who I assume is Uzumaki Mito, but I think Uzumaki Kushina, and even the Yondaiime, later added their own additions. According to Kiyohime, Orochimaru-san also saw value in… borrowing some ideas from “the white-haired one that smells of yamakagashi prey”... which probably means Jiraiya.
The result is… probably overkill, but it’s essentially impossible for people to get into the property if they’re not allowed.

...they probably also have a ridiculously hard time even finding the place at all. It’s basically in the middle of nowhere. If I didn’t have Kiyohime, I’d probably have run right past it. Plus, there’s a semi-permanent multi-layered genjutsu on it… and… yeah.

But once you get in … it’s absolutely beautiful. The architectural style is pretty traditional, I think, and… it actually reminds me a lot of the Fujiwara castle. The house is basically U-shaped, and there’s a gate across the inner garden, and there’s a small… a small plot of land that probably used to be a farm behind that. There’s what probably used to be patches of vegetables, and there’s this one area that couldn’t have been anything other than a set of rice paddies. There are also quite a few buildings made of… pretty solid wood. If you walk a bit further, you go into… what looks like a grove of fruit trees, that blend into the forest behind them… and within walking distance from the house is a small… probably tributary… of the river that flows by Konohagakure.

And in the yard, there’s a really big pond that’s full of fish. It’s full of koi fish… and there’s a section, cordoned off with wire gates that still allow the water to pass through… is Hizashi-chan. And he’s big . I mean, he’s not actually that big— his body is only about the size of my palm. But… that’s still really big. Last time I saw him, both his body and his fins could have fit in my palm.

Kiyohime guides me to a room in the house that’s full… empty shelves, stacked with small wooden and ceramic tablets. Each one has a seal on it, and Kiyohime has me swipe my blood across— and push chakra into— one specific tablet. Out comes… a notebook, filled to the brim, detailing fish care. And not just for goldfish— different types of koi, various freshwater fish that are meant to be eaten, and even some ideas for saltwater fish.

…Oro-jichan’s amazing .

“Is this… all for me?” I ask Kiyohime incredulously. Because, seriously. Why.

“A gift,” Kiyohime hisses sadly, slithering back out the door. She instructs me to reseal the building, then coiling herself on a sun-warm rock by the pond. “He did not come here often, if at all. It is… too far from the village. He lived here only as a very young child. To travel from here to the Academy every day… is inconvenient.”

Kiyohime raises herself up a little, looking around, before she buries her head back in her coils. “It contains… many memories for him,” she hisses in a muffled voice. “He did not wish to stay here alone. It is… empty.”

“Lonely,” I suggest.

“Yes…” Kiyohime nods. “He wishes for you to make use of it,” she hisses softly. “But he also leaves a message. This… is more a memory of his mother, of his clan, than of him alone. I honor one request of his for her sake— I understand if you are… upset… with him. However, I will not stand for damage to her legacy.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Hurt it? Hurt this? I… even if I was upset… I wouldn’t do that.” I pause, looking around at this little compound that seems to have been kept safe from even time. “It’s… it’s beautiful here. If I could…” I sigh, sadly. “Do you think… do you think Orochimaru-san would be sad… or disappointed… if I can’t stay here? Or visit that often?” I grimace. “I want to. I really do. But…” I flap a hand at the farm. “I don’t have the time. And maybe it’s a bit selfish… but I don’t want to show this to anyone else. I mean… Orochimaru-san gave it to me . If he’d wanted for other people to see it… he would have given it to them, right?”
Kiyohime nods, coiling herself onto my hand. “He would not be upset. He would have no grounds to be, not when he himself chose to seal up this last remnant of the Rochi clan, not when he, too, chose Konohamaru over… this.”

Kiyohime winds up until she’s settled around my neck. “He even left behind his name,” she hisses sadly.

…

I’m confused. And so, I ask.

…and so, Kiyohime explains.

It turns out that Orochimaru was actually born as Yasha of the Rochi clan, son of Gorōmaru and Yoruko. Yoruko was, in turn, one of the great Snake Sages of the later Warring States Era, and the last of her clan.

When they died, Orochimaru chose to use the name he now bears as a challenge to himself… and as a way to remember his parents.

...I mean, that makes sense. His name literally has the kanji for “big-snake” -maru. And - maru ‘s just a common suffix for male names, kind of like -ko for female names. I’m not judging anyone… but I actually kind am.

I’m mainly judging the first part. Shikamaru’s name is ridiculous, technically speaking, but I’m pretty sure it’s a pun. I don’t know what kanji are used, but I’m fairly certain it’s not the character for “deer,” shika. Same with Itachi’s name. I give him all sort of griefs over the fact that the same combination of kana can mean “weasel,” but that’s not actually his name.

You don’t see people walking around with “Weasel” or… or “Ferret” or “Snake” as their given names. Yeah, there was that entire thing in the Harry Potter series with the Weasley-weasel pun, but… it’s not spelled the same.

(I’m not going into occupational names, though. Like… apparently, George meant farmer or something? There was a prince named George! Did his mother know that she was basically calling her son, a prince, “farmer”? I don’t know! I am very confused, and I am still confused, only now, I don’t have the means to check the legitimacy of my information!)

On the way back, after a sad goodbye to the house and a promise to visit again soon, there’s one thing I ask Kiyohime. She loved Yoruko, and probably still does. Orochimaru definitely still cares, at least for his mother’s memory. So… I have a rather pressing question. “Do you think Yoruko-san would have liked me?”

“…she would have adored you, little nestling,” Kiyohime answers, butting her head gently against mine.

I smile. That’s… that’s a relief.

Back in Konohagakure, life’s basically a mix of relaxed fun, training fun, and not-fun training. Oh, and worrying. Lots and lots of worrying and stress. Thanks to Otō-san’s side of the family, I’ve basically got a more-or-less somewhat-secure way to deliver messages. That’s good. I’m not just… abandoning everyone in Keishi. The bad news? It is very, very easy to stress out over what to write.

So, there’s that.
But also, with Orochimaru-san’s gift, I’m no longer moping as much. Yeah, I still have the urge to give half the village the middle finger… but they wouldn’t know what that means, and I need to be polite.

Hence, I’m throwing myself back into training— and life in general— with newfound vigor and productivity.

…which takes the form of finally unpacking everything I brought back from Keishi and organizing it into my room, because... yeah. I’d kind of left everything… in the trunks… and… well, I’m being productive *now*, so that’s good. End of story.

I finally go take the initiative to visit Emigiku-neechan, and I give her the pretty *netsuke* I’d gotten for her as a present-souvenir-thing. I also more-or-less resume my lessons… or rather, my shadowing of Emigiku-neechan when possible, during the afternoons. Also, my instrumental training continues. It’s… a work in a progress, and that’s all I plan to say about *that* particular subject. Honestly, the less said about my progress, the better.

I’ve already given the small tokens I’d gotten for Kagami-jiisan and Shinko-chan and Shino and Aburame-sama (that one was a bit awkward) and Hitomi-sama (also a bit awkward) and Mikoto-obasama (see previous) and Itachi and Shisui. A lot of them were *netsuke*. The rest were… mainly frivolities. Small, cool trinkets.

The stuff I got for myself is… pretty much the same, just with a touch of seriousness. Like, there was the *hanko*, or name seal, I’d gotten for myself while with Okaa-san (one with Fujiwara Hasuki, one with Kobayashi Makoto), and one with the 12-petaled chrysanthemum motif I’d given to my friends back in Kirigakure. A few sets of *kimono*, *kimono* accessories… new *geta* … and, admittedly, a lot of them had Okaa-san’s influence. Shopping was exhausting, but I like the results.

The scissors were all my doing, though. Yes, I didn’t need this many pairs of super-sharp, rather expensive scissors. But… at the same time… I couldn’t resist. Seriously, the guy who made them used to make swords! And they’re *cool*, and there was that show that reminded me of *Before*, and my grandmother, who I’d absolutely adored, and how I was actually somewhat good at cutting paper *Before* … and now I want to put that skill back in my arsenal. I’ll find time for it, somehow.

(Though, speaking of scissors… there are U-shaped scissors. They’re often used for stuff like… forming small petals on *wagashi* flowers. Like, how cool is that?)

And now, I’ve also got actual lessons in how to grow and maintain *bonsai*. And *ikebana*. Yamanaka-ojisama can be pretty cool when he wants to be.

Okaa-san’s also promised to take some time to teach me *sumi-e*, that ink-painting thing that you see on wall scrolls!

Honestly, life’s pretty good for me right now.

…”

And yeah, that’s even with my newfound resolve to create another book-of-faces (actually, technically two) for the civilians and shinobi in Konohagakure.

…I feel like it’s rather audacious and more than a bit risky, but… ¡\_\(ツ\)_/¡

You live only once, after all!

…”
I mean, if you want to go into technicalities for me… but regardless, it’s the spirit of the saying.

I think that might be my new life moto? It’s one of the only things that can explain why I decided it was a good idea to drag Itachi into pranks.

Revenge-pranks, mind you. Like, when Shisui stole our dango that one time… well, we’d switched Shisui’s ANBU mask with one of those festival ones.

…

Only, we’d glued glitter over the entire thing as revenge.

…

Okay, it’s kinda pathetic as a revenge thing, but… it was fun.

…

And, on a separate note, my new… rather reckless approach to life has led to some… interesting results. Like for Sasuke’s birthday, when I decided to recreate my attempted recreation of spaghetti and pizza with more toppings, and slightly more care put into attempting to make a good tomato purée… and spaghetti, too, for that matter.

I still maintain that my attempt was more successful than last name, even if it was still a few degrees off… but the birthday celebration itself was a bit of a mess.

Let’s just say that after what happened… I am not sure I will be getting an invitation for the event next year.

...and I have discovered that Sasuke can have very good aim, with food, and that cleaning up after food fights is not fun.

Though, it is interesting how many of my misadventures involve food. And originally good intentions.

Like, there was that time Shisui and I have volunteered to go shopping for Uruchi-obaasan and Teyaki-ojiisan— as they insist on being called— when they ran out of their ingredients for senbei as a result of… them trying and somewhat-failing to teach me to make senbei. They’re very nice that way.

…the problem is that while shopping, we accidentally misread the packaging label and got glutinous rice flour, instead of normal rice flour… and we ended up making make senbei-flavored dango. And mochi.

…

They tasted good, at least? And I’d paid for the ingredients, so there wasn’t much lasting harm.

Also, during the summer, the egg hatched— and… well… they’re twins? I don’t know what else I can say. They’re both probably albino, they’re both white-scaled with red eyes, they’re both newly-hatched baby snakes, much, and I am ridiculously thankful for Kiyohime and the fact that snakes are more-or-less self-sufficient from birth.

According to Kiyohime, I had to name them.
I don’t know if it’s somehow not obvious, but I am very bad at naming things. One’s Yū, the other’s Rei. It’s a bit of a play on words— together, their names basically sound like “ghost.” I’m still debating a bit on which kanji to use, but… I think I’ve decided. One is 玲, which translates… approximately to “sound of jewels”, and whose most common use— the one of thinking of, anyways — is 玲玲 (reirei).

The other… well, it’s 鯈, which basically means “fish”.

okay, I know what you’re probably thinking— one name is a lot more… beautiful, than the other. Yeah, I’ll give that. There’s a reason why they’re kind of out of order. But there’s sentimental value to Yū’s name. I’m not even sure I’m remembering this correctly— my mother Before probably told me this when I was… what, in early grade school? So she might have been over-simplifying, I might have misunderstood, and… my memory’s probably faulty. But… apparently, that was the maiden name of my maternal grandmother, who I absolutely adored and died, when I was… about seven, I think?

And it’s probably still mostly in my imagination, but I have had very interesting luck. For most of my life. I still kind of believe that it’s my grandmother, watching over me. My mother used to say that she loved me so much that… well, she would be willing to go to those lengths for me.

So, maybe it’s her, maybe it’s something else, but… what other kid just randomly wakes up in a different world? What kid is this lucky?

okay, now I actually miss my teddy bear from Before. It was this massive white, fluffy monstrosity that my grandma had gotten me at this supermarket or something in the Netherlands. It used to be larger than I was. Right before I ended up here, it was about half my height. It was a complete spur-of-the-moment thing, I ended up choosing it over either this black bear or brown bear that I was stuck between for the simple— and arguably kinda poorly-reasoned— reason that it was the only one like that in pile of teddy bears, and thus was “special” somehow. Yeah, kid logic. Gotta love kid logic. And then, when we came back, I’m pretty sure I remember my mother telling my grandmother that she shouldn’t spoil me like that.

Fun times.

But hence, I think it kinda balances out. Super-pretty-and-awesome name, super-sentimental name. Plus, don’t some people think that both fish and snakes are related to dragons? I’m pretty sure there’s some connection between all of them, at least mythologically. So there’s also that.

I don’t even know. I’m not good at parenting. I’m really don’t want to be responsible for anyone. And yes, that even includes myself at times.

But, I think we’re doing pretty well. They seem happy with it. They’re a bit hard to tell apart, but Yū is a lot calmer than her sister.

I’ve built them a very, very large— approximately building-sized— habitat on the Rochi clan grounds, and I try to come visit at least twice a week. The problem is… I don’t usually have random chunks of free time in my schedule, where no one will question my absence for about two koku or so.

As a result, I usually just… leave Kiyohime with them. I pour as much chakra into her summoning as I can afford— and even a bit that I can’t— so that she’s as big as I can get her, and then just… leave her with them.

She doesn’t mind, usually. According to her, it’s boring, but there are warm places to nap and tasty
prey to chase, and old… acquaintances… that she once knew to catch up with, so she quite likes it.

...

I’m glad.

Obon is… both more cheerful and more depressing than last year, so… it was about the same.

The daffodils are still alive— though admittedly probably more thanks to Inoichi-ojisama’s efforts than mine, but… I’m not in the mood to celebrate much. I sit out on the festivities, choosing to sit in front of the Memorial Stone instead, and to my surprise, Itachi sits with me. It’s nothing fancy, but… the gesture is nice.

...

I carry two different lanterns, this year.

Orochimaru-san’s not around, and… when I asked Kiyohime, she offered to deliver a message. Just a simple one, asking if he wanted me to carry any lanterns for him. The week before Obon, Kiyohime disappeared… and reappeared, next to two lanterns, and a slip of paper with simply, “thank you,” written on it.

The lanterns had a name written on each: 千手繩樹, Senju Nawaki, and 加藤ダン, Katō Dan.

...

I recognize those names. What else can I say?

...

At the edge of the river, I linger longer than I did last year. I see Hiashi-sama, and also Neji. There’s a lantern for Hizashi-san, too, this year.

Hachigatsu turns to kugatsu, and the days get shorter and colder. This year, I notice something I’m not sure I noticed last year— the red spider-lilies that blanket some of the clearings in the forest.

I ask Inoichi-ojisama about them… and according to him, they’re closely associated with death, and also with the O-higan celebrations, which…. aren’t really that popular. For some, O-higan is a day to visit family graves and to pray for the well-being of the departed souls. But, most people do that during Obon. For my family, we stay aware of O-higan mainly because it is the day of the autumn equinox, and it’s the day where the daytime koku are closest in length to the night-time koku. From this day on, night koku will be longer than daytime koku, which means that vengeful ghosts can get more active, so it’s a reminder to double-check protections. It’s said that higanbana flowers cover the shore on the other side of the Sanzu River, the river that divides the land of the living and the land of the dead.

Many old graveyards will be densely covered with the crimson flowers brightly glistening in the autumn sun. Obaa-sama said that, sometimes, it looks like a lake of blood. Of course, the flowers aren’t just found around graves. Rice farmers often plant the flowers along their fields, because the bulbs are poisonous. The flowers are supposed to keep moles, mice and other pests away. According to Obaa-sama, the flowers grow in graveyards for the same reason— in older days, before cremation, they served to keep wild animals from feasting on the corpses.
…kinda gory, huh?

Another peculiarity of the flowers is that the blossoms and the leaves never meet. The blossoms unfold on the end of a long shaft sticking out straight from the ground. Once the blossoms wilt away and the shaft rots, the leaves turn up. So, there is no way to see the plant as a “complete set”— one part will always be missing.

...also, rather depressing.

On a slightly brighter note, though, there’s an old belief that if you bring higanbana into your house, your house will catch fire.

...
Even so… he’s got a Sharingan, and his teammate was an Uchiha, and I’m pretty sure he is nice.”

I pause.

Shisui decides to take the opportunity to clarify. “So… what’s the problem? Well, other than the entire thing with Fugaku-sama and the other grumpy guys.”

I bit back a groan. “The problem… is… old. Like, Sandaime-level-old. You know who I’m talking about. The good news is that he shouldn’t get the hat. Like… unless I’m mistaken, the Daimyō and other important people in the Land of Fire get a say… and, well… you’re welcome?” I grin mischievously. “So, I think we’re currently… somewhat-safe on that front.”

“Go, Makoto!” Shisui whisper-cheers, laughing, and Itachi smiles.

I grin, returning Shisui’s high-five, before getting serious again. “So, the important thing is… to figure out what type of a person you want people to see you as. This isn’t about showing that you’re qualified… it’s getting people to like you. I’ve already started on it, but… there’s still time to change things if you want to.”

Itachi nods slowly. “What do you have in mind, Makoto?”

“I was thinking of branding you as… something similar to the Yondaime,” I offer, hesitantly. “You’re smart. You’re a genius. And… sorry, Itachi, but you’re not… energetic enough to come across as something like the Shodaime. But… there’s the Nidaime. And the Yondaime. And if anyone wants to complain about your age… well, if we need to, we can counter with what happened with the Sandaime.”

I hesitate slightly. What I’m going to say next… well, it’s going to be a bit iffy if Itachi will like it or not.

“You… what you should aim for is being cool. Don’t focus on being a good shinobi, like… like the ones who hide in shadows and are scary. No. You don’t want to seem scary, not to the civilians. From what I can tell… jutsu are cool. Ninjutsu, at least. Genjutsu is more scary, but it can also do a lot for making you seem cool.” I pause. “If you use genjutsu… it will take a lot more chakra, but try and make sure you show it to everyone.” I fix Itachi with a firm stare. “This isn’t about being a good shinobi. It’s about putting on a good show. It’s about using way too much chakra and energy to deal with small opponents. It’s about defeating someone with an enormous dragon of fire instead of a single, carefully-placed kunai.”

“That sounds… impractical,” Itachi argues.

“Yeah,” I admit. “I know. It’s stupid and doesn’t make sense, but… people don’t make sense. Neither do emotions. And this is about getting people to like you. Yes, you shouldn’t lose. In fact, please don’t. But… don’t be afraid to surrender. You want to make it seem cool. Dress cool. Act cool.” I sigh. “Please, Itachi. Just… trust me when I say it’s important.”

“...I trust you,” Itachi decides. I smile, but the smile drops quickly.

Right. That might still be a bit vague, though. Just to clear things up… I take a deep breath. “Itachi… look. I know what I’m telling you now. But remember, your first priority is to live. To stay in one piece. I’m not entirely sure about how good you are compared to the other people who will be in the exam. I don’t know who is going to end up in this exam. But I do know that you’re going to be alone, and at least in some parts of the exam… that’s a pretty big disadvantage.”

I swallow against the knot that seems to form in my throat.
“Just… be careful, okay? Don’t… don’t die. You’re not allowed to. So… don’t focus on engaging. Try not to get into a straight fight, even if you’re certain you can win. Stay at a distance, okay? Just… be careful. Please.”

“I promise,” Itachi agrees.

“Okay.” I sigh, relieved. “Now… let’s focus on choreographing everything. I’ll need to get an idea for what you’ll wear, what jutsu you can use, how often you can use them… stocking you with weapons… expanding some of the limits of your genjutsu… and… I’ll see what I can do with fūinjutsu.”

I nod decisively, but then I remember something important.

“Aw, that’s not going to work out well. That’s going to be good for the final found, but…”

I shake my head. “That’s going to have to wait. So. This is what I know— from the chūnin exams I’ve seen and… uh,” I grimace, “remember, there are… technically four parts. First is a paper test that tests more than your competency. Basically, it also tests your commitment to being a shinobi, and also your loyalty to your team. It’s a mind-game. In what I read, there was a trick question given at the end, and even if you didn’t get anything else, if you passed that, you’d pass the round.” I sigh, rubbing at my head. “That was the mind-game I mentioned. And, I’m pretty sure it also tests your ability to cheat. Regardless, you shouldn’t have any problem with that.”

I take a deep breath. “So. The second part is a survival game. Unless something changes… well, I know one version of it takes place in the Forest of Death, where participants are given one of two scrolls and told to bring one of each to the tower in the middle. There’s a bunch of rules… but suffice to say, I doubt you’ll have problems here, either.” I think for a moment, then amend my statement. “Unless an S-ranked missing-nin attacks you for the sake of kekkei genkai theft, at least.”

Shisui snorts. “Yeah, and try to avoid getting any cursed hickeys, okay, Itachi?”

I snicker momentarily, but I get serious again. I look at Itachi. I need to make sure he gets my next point. “You know what I just said? Forget it here. For these two rounds of the test, don’t worry about looking good. Be quick, be sneaky, be scary. Emphasis on the scary part. This is the stage with arguably the least supervision… and that means that if anyone wants to kill you, this is their best shot. Don’t get killed.” Seriously. I can’t stress that enough. “But also, remember what I said a while before?”

Itachi nods. “Don’t seem more hostile than necessary. Avoid initiating conflict when conflict is avoidable,” he paraphrases.

“Exactly!” I grin. “It’s nice you remember! And also, just like for the actual final round… give them plenty of opportunities to surrender. But if they pretend to surrender and then attack you again or something… still avoid permanent damage, but don’t be a pushover.”

I pause dramatically.

“And that brings us to the final round. That’s pretty consistent, I think. That’s where you have a tournament-style series of match-ups in front of a bunch of spectators.” I pause. “This is where we’ll need to put the most work in. Luckily, there should be a some time, probably about a month, after the second round and before that round starts. We’ll spend a lot of time during that going over specific tactics.” I pause again. “But, if two many people pass the second round, there can be preliminary matches. Just think of that as an extension of the second round. Again, don’t worry about being showy. Make it short and fast. Be scary, and don’t give anyone more information about your fighting
"style than you have to."

I nod slowly, going over everything I said. I… think I covered everything?

…

I mean, that’s only assuming all my information is correct. Okay, time to default to the oldest person here. I turn to Shisui. “Shisui, do I have everything?”

“I think you do. I didn’t take the exam myself, I mean. I was promoted in the middle of the Third Shinobi World War. I’ve been hearing stuff, though, and… I don’t think there’s much of a mind-game in the first stage. It’s just the cheat-without-getting-caught stuff. Also, there’s a trick, because you don’t get your scores until after the second part, so there’s a lot of people who make it past the second round, only to retroactively fail.” Shisui grins, a bit sheepishly. “I know what you told us about what you read, Makoto, but… currently, at least, we actually need shinobi to be a bit book-smart. Other than that… yeah, it’s in the forest of death, and seriously, be careful. Because of that retroactive thing, there’s going to be a lot of people trying to kill each other. If you add in village conflicts…” Shisui trails off ominously.

“I think we get it,” I decide, hoping to curb Shisui’s melodramatics. Seriously, he should consider learning a bit of kabuki acting. He’d made a great one, and it’d probably not even take that much time, with the sharingan. “I’ll keep my eyes and ears open. You’ve already helped me make my sensing-thread-thing as imperceptible as possible. I’ll avoid using the sensing-cloud-thing if possible, I know that’s a bit more obvious. I’ll spend what time I can just wandering around. Any information I get probably won’t be useful until the third round, but I’ll see if there’s anyone you should definitely try to avoid, if possible. But honestly… other than that…” I bite my lip. “Well, the only thing I can think of is to work on your non-visual genjutsu. In the forest, you probably want to use the stuff around you, so try to avoid the genjutsu where you need someone to be looking back at you. I don’t know if you’ve tried other genjutsu, or how it actually works for other people… but you’ve seen how my genjutsu work. Also, the location-based genjutsu I’ve been working on since getting a bit more familiar with those chakra-string-things. I’ve tried bits of area-wide genjutsu, too, and I know you’ve seen my attempts at those.”

“The haloes of light and sparkles and what appeared like stylistic flowers were quite memorable,” Itachi agrees. “I believe so, however, my use of chakra is not nearly as… intuitive… as yours. To learn your style of chakra control…”

“Would take literal years ,” Shisui states, simply. “And that’s just to get it to your current level— to get it combat-ready… well, it might be easier for us, since we’re used to using ninjutsu, but for some reason… I don’t think so.”

Shisui holds up a hand before I’ve even managed to open my mouth to protest. “Nuh uh uh! No. Makoto, you basically spent… the equivalent of… uh… well, at least 4,000 koku , approximately, over the course of the last almost-five years, building up your potentially-very-scary-and-already-rather-scary chakra control to the point where it’s this natural for you. That’s based on what you told us. And you’re only getting better. I know we’re good, but… even if I think you’re either underestimating yourself, overestimating us, or both.” Shisui tilts his head at Itachi, who nods. “Trust us on this.”

I sigh. Seriously… “It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I think you’re the ones who are overestimating me.”

Shisui raises his eyebrows, sharing a look with Itachi. Then, in unison, they both look at me.
“Uh… no. We’re really not,” Shisui sighs.

Itachi nods. “The sharingan is incapable of copying your techniques. We have somewhat succeeding in partially replicating many of them…”

“Well,” Shisui interrupts, “Itachi’s going to end up with the better track record. But really, most Uchiha? As they are right now? They wouldn’t stand a chance.” Shisui claps a hand on my shoulder. “Makoto… what you’re doing? It’s like… harder even than shortening the hand-seal sequence to just one hand-seal. And what you’re doing with everything… well, I wouldn’t be surprised if—”

“Shisui, you’re a genius,” I interrupt, staring at him with wide eyes, before I blink. “Ah! Sorry for interrupting. It’s just… oh, never mind.” I shake my head, gesturing for Shisui to go on.

Shisui raises his eyebrows, shaking his head slowly. “Nah… I was just going to say that you’re probably going to surpass the Nidaime at one point, but… go on. I’m more interested in hearing this breakthrough.”

“It’s like… like what I remember, with… performing, with singing,” I grin widely. “I’m going about some of this wrong! I need to build the muscle-memory— though that’s probably not the right word— for these techniques, and if I can just abbreviate some… like, so many steps are the same! And if I can get used to doing some things together, like… like… shooting out fire if I… do something, I don’t know, or… or… gah!” I run my hands through my hair, frustrated. “I’m sorry, it’s hard to explain, and I’m actually kinda confusing myself right now, but you just gave me an idea!”

Shisui laughs, waving a hand at me. “Go on, find somewhere to get your thoughts straight and experiment. I’ll help Itachi plan out a rough schedule, and maybe we’ll see if there’s any way to get into the forest of death for some actual training… or maybe not,” he revises, hastily. “That might not be the best idea. But you, you’ve been there, right? It would help if you could see if you can plan some genjutsu, to simulate what you remember.”

I nod, eyes bright. “Definitely!” I lift a hand in a facsimile of a wave. “Sorry to run off!”

“Don’t worry, Makoto,” Itachi reassures.

“Show us what you come up with when you’re done!” Shisui calls, excitedly.

I grin. “Will do!”

About four days later, I arrive to the morning training session with Itachi and Shisui in the forested hills well away from the Uchiha compound practically skipping with glee.

My attendance to these now-daily training sessions has been… nonexistent, the past few days. I’ve found that it’s easiest to train with chakra when there’s no distractions around, so I’ve been training in one of the dojō on the Rochi clan grounds. I usually even dismiss Kiyohime for a while, or send her far enough away— her chakra, if too close or too bright, really can get a bit distracting. I’m not sure if it’s the chakra cloud or something… but it’s almost like my hearing’s keener, or something? Or maybe it’s just me perceiving stuff in a way I somewhat-understand. Because… somethings just really annoy me now, when I’m trying to… metaphorically delve deeper into my chakra. It takes a lot of concentration, which is easily broken.

But… at long last, I’ve finally succeeded, and I can’t wait to show Shisui and Itachi.

With the chūnin exams later this month and more than enough missions under his belt, Itachi’s decided that wasting any time that could be used for training on missions would be a waste. Shisui’s
decided to step in for his… not very good sensei, and he’s got Itachi in what could be considered an absolutely hellish bootcamp. He’s planning to run a few C-ranks and short D-ranks during the day when he’s got time, but with Itachi and I not-very-subtly going grocery shopping for him and Kagami-jiisan behind his back a few days ago, and a short discussion with Mikoto-obasama, Shisui’s a lot less stressed about being the primary source of income for him and Kagami-jiisan. So, he’s not going anywhere during the next two months.

Yeah, he’d tried protesting about it, but Itachi and I feigned temporary deafness— and selective blindness— and held curiously loud discussions about the possibility of perhaps… hiring someone… like, maybe a jōnin, for a well-paid C-ranked mission dedicated to training us… and soon, Shisui came to terms with the fact that nothing was going to change our minds.

...I still might try and get Okaa-san and Mikoto-obasama to actually implement that C-rank thing. Maybe. If I ever think Itachi and/or Shisui need a break…

Well, it’s going to be in my pocket.

…

But that’s not really important right now.

“Shisui!” I call, excited. “Itachi, guess what I’ve managed to do?”

Itachi turns when he hears me, and brightens. “I haven’t seen you in a few days,” he comments.

There’s a flare of chakra behind me, and I sigh. “Yeah, and that means that I haven’t been able to make you run! Or dance,” Shisui grumbles. “You said that you wanted to work on your hand-eye coordination. And you also said that you wanted to see if you could do something similar to a short-range Byakugan, minus the chakra thing, with a dense sensing sphere of chakra. You can’t exactly improve on that by yourself.”

I laugh awkwardly.

Yeah. The hand-eye coordination thing is important… and Shisui’s gotten annoyed at my lack of stamina by altering the exercise so that he mainly aims everything at my feet. I’m still not sure why he calls it “dancing,” but according to Itachi, I look like I’m doing a very spirited dance.

…

He’s nicer than Shisui, who overheard, and commented that I resemble this dancing monkey he’d once saw on a mission. Yeah, I love the support, Shisui.

The chakra sphere is an altered version of the original dodgeball-esque thing, where I’m blindfolded and have to maintain a sphere of chakra to try and dodge stuff.

...that one really hurts, and I currently rather regret musing out loud about trying to use chakra to mimic more elements of the byakugan than just sensing things at a distance.

I snap out of my thoughts when Shisui waves a hand across my face.

“Oh, whoops,” I grimace. “Sorry. I was… lost in thought.”

“Show us your cool new sparkly techniques?” Shisui asks, with an exaggerated pout.

I nod, grinning. “I’ve managed to cut down the time by almost half! I know that’s not much, but…
I shuffle a bit closer to the small stream that we practice by, and take a deep breath. Okay, Makoto, remember what you practice.

I hold up a hand with two fingers up in a parody of the *hitsuji*, or ram, hand-seal, concentrating my chakra, before holding it out to point at the water.

It might just be a helpful memory-device, but I really do think it makes it easier to feed chakra into the water this way.

After I’ve gotten enough water into the chakra, I raise my hand up, over my head, and a stream of water follows. I start moving, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and soon I’m practically dancing around the clearing, surrounded by a stream of water.

“See? I think it’s actually easier to move when I’m also moving! It took *so much concentration* when I was just sitting still and trying to avoid moving, and it got a bit frustrating at times, too, but… I was so silly!” I laugh, delighted, skidding to a halt, water still churning around me and refracting the light. “It might just be a memory-thing, like when I told you that I treated fire a bit like I treated singing before, with the breath thing, but…” I cartwheel and bounce off into several flips (thanks, Shisui), giggling the entire time as the water flows around me. “It seems so natural like this!”

And really, it is. The best metaphor I can probably come up with… is maybe rhythmic gymnastics? I didn’t do it before, but from how my friend described working with the ribbon… this is probably somewhat close. Hula-hooping is a bit similar, I guess, but hula-hoops aren’t quite as fluid as water. You don’t need to keep it on a constant, tight leash. Before, it was… like I was trying to control every aspect of the movement of the water. Now? I’m just giving it a bit of a direction, keeping it more-or-less together, and adding a bit of a push whenever it slows down.

The thing is… if I slow down, now, the water usually ends up bursting, too.

Also, it’s a bit hard to multitask using chakra— while I’m focused on directing this much water this quickly, I can’t really do other stuff with chakra.

A sharp twist of my hand, accompanied by a grabbing motion, and the water consolidates in a more-or-less spherical bundle of churning water. A breath, a two-fingered jab, accompanied by a lunge and a sharp exhale, and a dense stream of water, rotating a bit like a drill, carves its way through a tree trunk. A slight twitch of my fingers, and I manage to lessen the stream enough to reorient the stream. Another slight inhale and exhale, accompanied by a slight gesture of my fingers, and the water cuts off a tree branch. Another twist-and-grab, and the rest of the water reforms that sphere above my head.

Now almost panting with the effort, I carefully, awkwardly, guide the sphere over to the stream… slow the rotation… and let it slip, little by little, to rejoin the rest of the water.

I turn to face Itachi and Shisui, the exhaustion falling off like water off a duck’s feathers. I bounce over. “Did you see? Did you see?”

“…that was very pretty,” Itachi comments. “It seemed as if you were dancing.”

“Yeah!” I grin. “That was the coolest part, but… also, check this out!”

I jump back a safe distance, then turn to face the stream. I inhale and exhale, slowly, smoothly, carefully pushing out chakra to form a similar sphere as the water had before. It gets denser… and denser… and when I judge that it’s dense enough to create an impressive show, but not cause too
much damage, I take a deep breath… and clap my hands softly.

**BOOM!!!**

The chakra ignites into fire with an almost concussive burst, and I can’t help but laugh, delighted, whirling around to look at Itachi and Shisui.

“See? Wasn’t that so much faster than before?”

“…are you scared, Itachi?” Shisui asks, after a long pause. “Because I’m currently kinda terrified for the future of Konohagakure’s enemies. With you and Makoto…” He leans closer, whispering. “I mean, you two accidentally infiltrated Kirigakure without even trying. If you two wanted, I’d bet that you two could even take over the world.”

I grin mischievously at Shisui. “What do you think we’re doing right now?” I quickly shake off the slightly giddy rush of adrenaline in favor of explaining, though. “I found that some of my biggest problems with water was that I wasn’t letting it move. Water is fluid, it flows, it’s not meant to stay still. But that was more of an accident. I was thinking about what you said, Shisui, and I remembered those paintings of the Shodai Hokage… so, my first hypothesis didn’t work, but I managed to figure this out! Isn’t it cool?” I gush.

“Definitely,” Shisui nods, eyebrows raised still at the fallen tree branch. “And also frankly terrified, because I kinda thinking that you just invented a new jutsu, but… yeah. Definitely cool, too.”

I laugh, walking back over. “Also, Itachi, I think I managed to figure out some *genjutsu* to simulate the area. I can’t say anything about you feeling everything, but if Shisui and I coordinate… I think it’ll be pretty similar.” I pause, tilting my head. “Just a bit of a warning, though—I’m not sure how sharingan-accurate it’ll be, though. I’ve tried to simulate what you might see, chakra-wise, with the sharingan, but…” I shrug. “I can’t guarantee anything. And… it might cause a bit of a headache,” I grimace. “To be honest, if you don’t think it’s necessary, it’s probably best to not use the genjutsu training method. I can use genjutsu to quiz you on the types of plants and animals, but… yeah. I don’t think I’m good enough to maintain a genjutsu that realistic in a combat-oriented setting. I’m just not fast enough.”

“That is more than enough,” Itachi reassures me. “I plan on heading straight for the tower, with the symbol on my scroll in plain sight. That should be the fastest and easiest way to acquire both scrolls.”

I nod, slowly. “Well… that should be fine. As long as you avoid getting attacked or bitten and don’t need to worry about the poisonous plants or medicinal plants or the edible plants…” I scrunch up my nose. “Give me a little bit of time, and I should have some reusable storage seals created.” I frown. “Those aren’t hard to make, but they’re surprisingly hard to get right,” I grumble. “Drawing perfect circles? Blergh.”

“I think the full moon’s in a few days,” Shisui comments. “Are you going to do anything for Tsukimi?”

I hesitate, grimacing. “…well… after what happened last year… I’m not sure.” The entire *Hyūga no Ken*, or Hyūga Affair, as the mess with Kumo tends to be called nowadays, was really unpleasant. I don’t think I’d associate it that heavily with the full moon, and the Tsukimi festival, but… “Still, I think it’d be good for me to avoid moping on that day,” I sigh. “The problem is… I feel like I should feel more.. sad… that I actually do, you know? Or maybe guilty? Is that… wrong?”

Shisui shrugs. “Probably not. I didn’t know Hyūga no Hizashi that well, but I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t *want* you to be all sad and stuff. And… you’re still a kid, Makoto. A *civilian* kid. I think
he’d just be happy you saved his kid from getting killed by Kumo accidentally setting off that anti-
kekkei-genkai-theft seal they’re supposed to have.”

I wince. Okay, yeah. I usually try to avoid thinking about the consequences… but, yeah, I’d actually
kinda forgotten about that small fact. “You know, Shisui,” I comment. “You’re probably the first
person to remind me that what happened is arguably better than the alternative.” And then there’s
also that thing with what bloodline theft entails, and… yeah. Getting eyes gouged out is actually one
of the better possible results.

...

Wow. I’m actually kinda stupid, when I think about things like that. And it looks like even
Orochimaru-san was trying to be very considerate and avoid traumatizing me. I mean, a short
explanation of what could result in bloodline theft…

...Oro-sensei was very nice to me.

“Makoto? Makoto… Makoto…”

I blink, yanked out of my thoughts by a hand poking at my shoulder.

“Sheesh, Makoto,” Shisui sighs. “What were you thinking about this time?”

“Huh?” I tilt my head, before the question registers. “Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about bloodline
theft, how Kumo planned on acquiring the Byakugan, and about the time I’d talked to Orochimaru-
san, about a year ago, and how he’d been very nice to me by simply analyzing what I’d asked and
reassuring me, instead of presenting me with the alternative consequences about what terrible fates
could have befallen all of us.”

...

There’s a slightly awkward silence after that, before Itachi interrupts. “I believe Shisui has
information regarding the teams that will be arriving in Konohagakure very soon for the chūnin
exams.”

Shisui jumps on the lifeline. “Oh, yeah! So… there should be quite a few teams from Kumo and
Kiri. Quick life lesson, kids. In any chūnin exam, the hidden villages who send the most teams tend
to be allies… and enemies. The exams are a great way to get information on hidden villages. They’re
also useful in getting missions. But… they’re also dangerous. Iwa probably might send one team, at
maximum, but it should be pretty strong— they want to prove that they’re still strong, despite their
humiliating defeat during the Third Shinobi World War. Kumo and Kiri will send a lot. Suna might
send some. The smaller villages might, too, since… out of all the major shinobi villages,
Konohagakure’s arguably the friendliest. It’s the most open to other contestants, and it’s one of the
biggest stages if you want people to think about giving missions to you.”

I decide to take the easier way out, and grab my jacket spreading it on the grass, then let myself flop
to the ground, belly-first.

it’s my duty as a friend to share in your pain with Shisui’s training sessions… but I am exhausted.” I
manage to prop myself up enough to toss Itachi a scroll, before I slump back down. “There’s
information on most of the plants and animals, and as detailed a map as I remember in regards to the
forest.”

“What? No, Makoto, I’ve got an entire schedule and training plan for you,” Shisui whines. “And
I’ve already had to push it back four-and-a-half days!”

“Go jump in the lake, Shisui,” I grumble, face-down. “I pretty much slept about a total of just ten *koku* in the past four days, and if you don’t know, that’s really not enough time for a kid. I’ve literally just showed up at home to eat and sleep, and sometimes not even the first thing.” I look up, propping my head on my hands. “Even the time I spent with Shino has been mostly me not-so-subtly quizzing him on supposedly *theoretical* giant insects, and how it would be easiest to avoid getting eaten by them.”

I groan, letting my head thud back down.

“And I’m almost certain Hitomi-sama knows exactly what I’m doing, but she was nice enough to still tell me a lot about the Hyūga genin that are going to be taking the chūnin exam while it’s in Konohagakure… and their teams. And the people they know on other teams.” I toss another scroll blindly. “And help me figure out more-or-less what some of them look like. And after this, if you’ll just *let me nap*, I’m going to how tiny I can make seals. Because Itachi… I’m sorry, I have no idea how people buy scrolls or other stuff. And my seals probably aren’t the most reliable. But honestly, they should stay more-or-less intact for at least the duration of the second part. And Itachi?” I look at Itachi sideways. “You’re going in with enough food, water, supplies, and explosives to endure a small siege… and probably blow up a large portion of the forest. And no, that’s not negotiable. Unless you want to negotiate for more. That’s okay.”

I feel a light *thud* next to me, and then a hand combing through my hair. A little further away, there’s a heavier thud.

“It’s at time like this that I remember you’re actually, physically, a bit *younger* than Sasuke,” Shisui sighs. “Okay, then. You get one *koku* while Itachi and I look through everything you found. And figure out where to put all those storage seals you’re planning on drawing up.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself so much, Makoto,” Itachi comments.

I just grumble in response.

“I am very thankful that you wish to contribute so much, but it is really quite unnecessary, especially if it is at the cost of your health. You should take care of yourself, too,” Itachi chastises. You really should make sure to get enough sleep.”

“Too excited to sleep,” I mumble. “And… it’ll just a late birthday present. And early Rinne-matsuri present.”

There’s a small pause, and then I hear Itachi moving. Then, there’s something draped over me, the hand goes back on my head, and I hear a soft, “You really shouldn’t take a nap without a jacket. It’s getting colder, and you might get sick.”

“Nngh,” I grumble, but I wiggle closer, anyways.

I hear the sound of flipping pages, rustling paper, and soon, soft conversation.

“This team’s full of recent graduates. They’ll probably be an easy target if you need one.”

“From Makoto’s notes, this member of the team graduated at the bottom of his class. I think I’ve seen him before in the Academy.”

“You should help Makoto add pictures, in that case. I might be able to dig into some of their information, on the shinobi registry.” Shisui pauses. “Do you think his performance in the Academy
was an act, or that maybe there were extenuating circumstances?"

“I highly doubt it. Do you believe this team will pass the first round?”

“Hm… it’s possible, I mean.”

...

“What about this team?”

“I mean…”

“…other jōnin…”

“…unsuited… survival… jōnin-sensei…”

“…watch out… rather skilled…”

During the next three weeks or so, my days are filled with time spent training. Yeah, I mean, I don’t have to, but… training is more fun with lots of people, and it’s not like this is a typical occurrence. It is very rare that Shisui and Itachi spend so much time in Konohagakure, and such an occasion ought to be treasured. I’m not going to be so ridiculous as to avoid spending time with them.

I allot less time for everyone else. Yeah, I know that’s not very nice, but… they’ll be there, after these two months. Hitomi-sama’s probably not going anywhere, especially with how her stomach slowly swells. Abrame-sama’s not going anywhere— he’s too busy managing the clan. Shino’s not going anywhere, either. Even Otō-san and Okaa-san… I mean, I feel a bit guilty for not spending much time with them, but… at the same time, I don’t really feel guilty at all. To be honest, I think I feel the guiltiest for not feeling guilty.

In the mornings, I run over to the training grounds almost immediately after waking up. Some days, I don’t have to go far, and soon, the convenience of those days wins out— I sleep over at Kagami-jiisan’s house with Shisui and Itachi more and more.

Oftentimes, I’m the one who runs to grab breakfast and lunch. It’s a chore I quite enjoy— it’s not like my training is as skill-focused as theirs, and running through the city is more entertaining than running through the forest. Breakfast is usually okayu, rice porridge, with whatever side dishes we find— often leftovers from dinner, or extras from Mikoto-obasama or Okaa-san and Otō-san. Shisui usually sets out a pot with rice and plenty of water when he first wakes up, and it’s ready by the time I come to grab the pot for breakfast. Oftentimes, I dump in chopped shellfish or meat for some extra flavor. Mind you, I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that this entire arrangement is at least partly because of me— I’ve never made a secret of how much I love okayu.

But Shisui and Itachi don’t seem to dislike it… and I do really love okayu, so I don’t bother bringing it up.

I usually set aside a large bowl for Kagami-jiisan, then wrap the pot with a few thick towels, and pack a small bag with spoons and bowls and the side dishes and extra cloth napkins (because paper napkins are a ridiculously expensive use of resources), and a large blanket for us to sit on, then run back to where we were training.

Eventually, after breakfast, I run the dishes back and leave everything to soak in water. The cloth napkins are tossed with the rest of the laundry, or left to soak in a different bucket of water.
For lunch, I usually first go back to Kagami-jiisan’s house to quickly scrub everything down with soap and water, then set them to dry— it’s pretty easy, as far as things go. Three bowls, three spoons, a pair of chopsticks, one large spoon/ladle-thing, one pot. Oftentimes, Kagami-jiisan’s even already helped wash up, even if I’ve insisted that he doesn’t need to. He always washes his own stuff, though.

After that, lunch is… well, variable. Sometimes, I get something from the village. Other times, Mikoto-obasama has something, or Kagami-jiisan does, or maybe Okaa-san and Otō-san do. Usually, it’s an simply a bento.

I’ve managed to squeeze pretty much all of my social interaction into the half- *koku* before and after midday, thankfully, so I also run by and briefly chat with everyone— which is to say, Shino and Hitomi-sama.

We usually get back to Kagami-jiisan’s house in time for dinner, though… not always. After all, it’s not like the second round’s going to stop in the middle of the night. I have not tested any of my hypotheses yet, though— I love and trust chakra, but I don’t trust myself enough to not permanently damage my vision. To be honest, considering that my choices already damaged my vision in a past life and that one of my favorite parts of this world is that I don’t need glasses or contacts… yeah, it’s better that I avoid anything that could damage my eyesight.

The rest of the time is spent in the forest and Shisui’s house… “training”. It’s a mix of training, playing, studying, eating, and hanging out with friends.

Somehow, everything’s fun. Even exercising until I practically throw up, have a mini-asthma attack, and/or need to run to the toilet is somewhat fun.

...yeah, that’s probably way too much information, but… seriously. I don’t even know why. It’s painful and I absolutely hate working on my core muscles, but somehow, it’s easy to push aside the pain.

My muscles are, again, almost permanently sore, I can now touch my rear end with my head and am almost as flexible as a mediocre contortionist, and I’ve learned enough acrobatic tricks to probably be a mediocre gymnast. I’m also covered in bruises and my extremities are almost constantly trembling— though whether with muscle exertion or adrenaline, I do not know— and I’ve managed to more-or-less figure out how to tree-jump, which is terrifying, after almost three weeks, about two of which were dedicated almost entirely to learning how to properly fall from outrageous heights, but… I have confidence that I shall master the art of jumping through trees.

...eventually.

Honestly, it’s harder than it seems. I have reference for this. I have, on multiple occasions, been told to jump from a great height. Usually, it’s a ropes course in the forest. Sometimes, it’s a climbing thing. Regardless, there’s that sensation of the bottom of your stomach basically dropping out and forming this bottomless pit whenever you… have to… well, let go. Stand up. And then… ignore the swaying, ignore the height, and try and act normal.

Here’s a hint: you never act normal.

And somehow, if you’re supposed to jump … well, somehow, the muscles in your legs just kind of freeze up in the middle, or even before your jump, and you just… fall. It’s twice as bad when you need to use chakra to augment your jumps. (Using chakra that way is hard enough, to be honest. I’m still a bit confused as to how some of it works, and I’ve already felt what Shisui and Itachi do.)
And free-fall? It’s terrifying. I’ve grown used to it in the sense that I am very comfortable in being carried—by people I trust—while they are jumping through trees. It’s like being on a small roller-coaster with that safety thing that goes over your shoulders. You just feel safe.

I do not trust myself nearly as much as I trust Itachi…or Shisui, for that matter.

Ever part of my body—including on several memorable occasions, my face—has been hit by or has fallen on some part of a tree. I’ve gotten insects in my eyes, in my mouth, in my nose…it’s unpleasant. And I really tend to feel guilty—and rather gross—when I fish them out, especially if they’ve died.

According to Shisui, you just get better at avoiding them…and more nonchalant about the entire thing happening.

...no. I just cannot get that casual about accidentally consuming any insect, bug, arachnid, or…any invertebrate that lives on land. I’m fine with seafood. Yeah, it might just be because of what I’m used to and societal brainwashing, but…I’m happy to stick to what I’m comfortable with. Thanks.

...well, food-wise, at least. I’m definitely not comfortable with fūinjutsu, as should be obvious with my charred facial hair, and currently-shorter hair—I’m very, very good at making things improve. I’ve gotten very good at knowing exactly what to do to make a seal—pretty much any seal—explode. I’ve also gotten pretty good at redirecting and limiting the range of several explosions.

Luckily though, I do manage to make quite a few functional multi-use storage seals. Itachi spends several days working them into his outfit and multiple hours on using them effectively.

...

I’ve also managed to figure out a new technique, which, according to Shisui, shouldn’t work.

So, it started with Itachi’s running low on chakra a lot after spending lots of time practicing genjutsu and ninjutsu, especially since he often has a shadow clone working at the same time.

I actually spend a few days in the library, looking through medical ninjutsu…and there’s a technique referenced. There’s no hand seals listed, but one book mentions that sometimes, for severe injuries, medic-nin are also capable of transferring chakra, and lists Tsunade-hime and her summon, Katsuyu, as a good example.

...

I decided to try and reverse engineer it. Only…it’s hard. One day, I try…well, essentially feeding Itachi my chakra. I manage to let it flow into some of the tenketsu, but…it’s hard to cut ties. To be honest, it’s just plain hard. It’s like trying to put shampoo back into the bottle—technically possible, but ridiculously tricky and time-consuming, and often doesn’t seem to work at all.

So, I tried approaching it from the other end. Absorbing chakra. I knew that was possible. It happened in the first part of canon, and it was also in that Youtube video that was probably from Shippuden.

…It’s surprisingly easy. I just…kinda spin my chakra in a certain way, and it acts a bit like a whirlpool, pulling in what’s around it. I think I’ve accidentally pulled in nature chakra at one point…but luckily, I was aware enough to stop, immediately.

I am not getting turned into a stone statue.
And… it’s weird. It’s a bit like caffeine for me, in the sense that it somehow simultaneously gives me a headache, makes me sleepy, and wakes me up. It also has a faint… well, nature-y taste. It’s very faint, and it’s bit like shiitake mushrooms with vegetables. It’s also a bit sweet, in the way that fresh water and clean air are sweet.

...I don’t know. It was faint, and I’m not repeating that. Maybe after I find someone who knows how nature chakra works, but not on my own.

Shisui’s chakra is somehow… almost a bit spicy-sweet, kinda like that faintly spicy sweet-and-sour soup, but also clear, if that makes sense. Itachi’s chakra is mild and… almost… smoky? Wood-y? But there’s also a faint sweet aftertaste, for some reason. It also somehow tastes vaguely floral, kinda like when you drink too-concentrated flower tea and it takes a bit like how you’d expect perfume to taste like? Yeah, that. So, it’s a bit like how you’d imagine sweet incense to taste?

...I know, it’s weird. Itachi tries to imitate the technique, and decides that it’s too risky — for both the person taking the chakra and the person getting their chakra taken. It could cause damage, potentially irreparable damage, to the chakra network.

…He told me to just be careful, and… I mean, I kinda get what he means? You know that feeling after you’ve eaten too much? Imagine it all over your body. That’s how I feel after I’ve taken too much chakra. It’s not overwhelming or painful, but… it’s a bit uncomfortable. Not unlike stretching, though, and just like stretching, I decide to keep trying. And keep trying. And keep trying. Just like stretching, it’s like… the amount of chakra I’m able to take in increases. Slowly. And soon, like stretching, it doesn’t even feel that uncomfortable anymore.

I don’t want to overdo it, so I make sure to take it super-slowly… but it’s interesting. I give up practicing it, though, in favor of more physical conditioning— Itachi and Shisui really need all the chakra they have, especially with their increased time spent on practicing with the sharingan.

...and as a result, the sore muscles get even sorer.

Sometimes, a few days a week, we stop by the sento in the village— the bathhouse. It’s not an onsen because it’s not hot water from a geothermically-heated hot spring, but the hot water still feels nice. (The official onsen are more common up north, especially in the Land of Hot Springs and Kumogakure, as well as on some of the islands.)

It’s a bit… awkward… with the nudity thing… but it’s more of the cultural difference. I get over it pretty quickly— literally no one else makes a big deal of it. Plus, the hot water feels amazing, even if I do need to take occasional breaks to go run and drink water when I get a bit lightheaded.

It’s even better than the jacuzzis Before, with how everyone first actually washes themselves first— the baoth is just for soaking. Everyone first scrubs of the dead skin and dirt in a separate room. Also, it’s actually pretty useful to bathe with friends— you get a separate pair of hands when it comes to washing your back.

I’ve accidentally dropped my head-towel in the water before, and it’s a bit embarrassing… but I guess one of the benefits of being four years old is having people turn a blind eye when you screw up a bit.

It’s very nice… and I’m actually the one to push for going there more often. That usually results in a sleepover at my house. But… it’s nice. I tend to be a bit less sore, and also, you overhear a lot of stuff if you keep an ear out.

Afterward, over dinner and in our room before sleeping, we usually go over the more… paper-based
studying. We go over the contestants, the poisonous flora and oversized fauna and maze-like layout of the forest, and general academics. I don’t have much to contribute here, but I keep an ear out. It’s interesting information, and learning this stuff can’t really hurt that much.

Shisui’s very thorough. Sometimes, his fun, comedic, lighthearted nature makes you forget about how smart he is. But really, he is a genius in his own right. With Itachi, he goes over the history of the ninja continuing from the Sage of Six Paths. Alliances, treaties, laws of uniformity among the different lands. Fundamentals, advanced techniques, practical strategies in fighting. Theory on physical ninja arts, kekkei genkai. Introduction to chakra. Tailed beasts, summons. Everything.

…

The last week, the week right before the chūnin exams, are spent… in a considerably more relaxed manner. We spend more time just hanging around, napping, cooking, eating, and relaxing. We prepare the meals to be packed away in storage seals— the variant I know basically means that anything taken out is the exact same as how it was going in. Hence… the meals. There are thermoses of tea and okayu and hot soup and stews, warm bento, cold bento, and plenty of random snacks, from dango to senbei . Sore muscles heal and lose the soreness, bruises fade, and chakra replenishes. We try and set a routine, for when to sleep and when to wake up.

The day before the exam, we make sure to sleep well— not too early, but not any later than usual. We wake up at the normal time, too— routine is good for making sure we’re just the right amount of rested. We warm up lightly, then return for breakfast, which is, as usual, okayu (though the price porridge was prepared the night before). After that, Shisui and I follow Itachi to the building where the exam will be taking place— the building that doubles as the Academy and the Hokage Tower.

There’s practically a knot forming in my stomach. Logically, I know there’s nothing to worry about, but… still… “Take care, okay, Itachi?” I force out. “Be safe. Be scary, but don’t scare anyone too much.”

“Don’t worry, Mako-chan!” Shisui laughs. “Ita-chan’s going to knock the competition out of the water.” He gestures to both of us. “Come on, group hug!”

I actually let out a shaky laugh at the sheer absurdity, and Itachi cracks a small smile. We both let ourselves get pulled into the hug, and for a moment, we acknowledge the truth— we’re all nervous. Our heart rates make that pretty clear.

But when we pull back… another thing’s clear.

“I am as prepared as it is feasible to be,” Itachi murmurs softly. “Don’t worry Makoto. It will be easy.”

“Here, let’s have a bet!” Shisui gasps, turning to me. “Mako-chan. Let’s have a bet! I say that Itachi’s going to finish the second stage in under six koku . If I win… hm… you have to treat me to a full omakase meal!”

I laugh helplessly, ignoring Itachi’s disapproving eyebrows and sticking out my hand. “Deal! And if I win… you’re going to show me… five jutsu that are at least C-ranked! I say that Itachi’s going to finish the second stage in less than three koku .”

Shisui laughs with delight. “Deal, Mako-chan!”

I giggle, turning to Itachi and squeezing him in a hug. “Ganbatte, Itachi!!” I cheer softly. “Do your best!”
“I will, Makoto,” Itachi smiles. “Shisui… Makoto… thanks for everything.” His smile turns slightly mischievous. “I promise I won’t let you down… Makoto.”

“Hey!” Shisui protests, “You can’t rig the bet like that!”

He shakes a fist at Itachi’s back in mock anger, and I can’t help but laugh. Yeah. Itachi’s going to be just fine.

花ちれる水のまにまにとめくれば山には春もなくなりにけり

The scattered petals
Carried on the waters
Answer but one question:
In the mountains, spring
Has passed completely.

hana chireru mizu no manimani to mekureba yama ni waharu mo nakunari ni keri

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: So… first of all, I highly doubt that any parent would literally name their child “big-snake”-maru. Even Jiraiya, which can translate approximately to “young thunder,” even though it was probably derived from “I was here,” is more likely of a name. And Tsunade is, apparently, “mooring-rope.” When you consider that her grandmother was from Uzushio, which is… well, kinda-canonically, an island… that makes sense. Great/big snake? Even with canon characters like Itachi, whose name… bears a very close resemblance to the word for, “weasel”… yeah, no. I know what I wrote in chapter 12. It was a bit vague. Itachi’s name is not “weasel”. That, along with many other bugs, will be fixed. Eventually.

But… so, with Orochimaru, there is no ambiguity. On Narutopedia, his name is written in kanji. And it’s just so patently ridiculous that I decided… no. Nope. He knows of the stories (see Jiraiya Goketsu Monogatari, or Tale of the Gallant Jiraiya… there’s a version [here](https://example.com)) and so after his parents died… he decided to honor them… while also reminding himself of his new goals. Kinda fitting, since in the story (which you can probably also find on Wikipedia), Orochimaru’s name was originally Yashagorō (夜叉五郎), which approximately translates to “night-split-fifth-son”. And in this, “split” is… from what I can tell… like, a fork in the road. (If I am wrong, please let me know. I get a lot from RōmanjiDesu.).

But it’s even more complicated than that. Because the kanji for yasha, even those above, can also apparently refer to Buddhist guardian deities sometimes depicted as demonic.
warriors.

...that’s actually kinda fitting for what he is for Makoto, ironically. And yeah, I just found this out while writing this chapter. So, no, it was most certainly not planned. Seriously. There are so many uncanny coincidences I’ve stumbled into while writing this story.

But, orochi can also refer to the boa constrictor/python... even though the kanji that are provided don’t.

...fun. *cue sarcasm*. But seriously... I’m pretty sure it’s people who are studying this in college/graduate school/their profession who are supposed to know. I most certainly don’t.

But basically, I’ve kinda decided to ignore how or who decided or why 蛇 can be pronounced as rochi. It just is. If you have an explanation, just please let me know. Some people have the clan name as Yashagorô, but I decided against that... since a clan with two of the kanji meaning “fifth son” is, again, patently ridiculous. No. Just... no. Hence, rochi.

...

But now we have Yoruko, night-child, and Gorōmaru, fifth-son-maru. Which is very uncreative, but more logical in the sense of a given name, not a family or clan name.

...but seriously. I developed so many headcanons while doing... *waves hands vaguely*... this.

Like, Jiraiya’s not an orphan, but he was born to a group of performers. His name makes quite a bit of sense that way. They stopped by Konoha, he thought it would be cool... and then everything just fell in place. Hence, his flamboyance and general disregard for privacy, as well as how he’s so at ease in... the places he likes to frequent. But it also ties into how he writes stuff.

...and this is actually really important. Everyone should read LullabyKnell’s series Team 7 vs. Paperwork. It is a beautiful series, and I’ve gotten permission to use some of the elements, so... *squeals inaudibly*.

...

There is a possibility to win yet another free spoiler/possible omake! *clears throat*. Ahem. Okay... what do you think is going to end up happening with Makoto and Hanabi?

Also... I think got the initial ideas for this while reading An Invincible Summer by ShanaStoryteller. Or maybe Growing Strong by silenceia, formerly silencia20. You should read both stories. Personally, I am very attached to the second one, if only because it was the story to introduce me to the Narutia fandom. I found it on Fanfiction.net when it was only, like, four chapters. It is very nostalgic for me. (And anyone who knows my former title for this story... well, they say imitation is the highest form of flattery... or something like that.)

Mind you, this is a very open-ended question, so there are a lot of possible right answers. I am looking for one very specific one. There is a faint hint about it in the first
half of the chapter. Also… I got some inspiration from the actual show, based on some snippets I found on YouTube.
Of Chūnin Exams and... more Chūnin Exams?

Chapter by ShadowAccio6181

Chapter Summary

...the chapter title should be enough. It's literally just the Chūnin Exams. All three stages. And then some. Mostly from Makoto's perspective.

...

There's some other stuff, mainly awesome friendship stuff, and that kinda-but-not-really filler stuff, but... this chapter's not that complex.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

あききぬとめにはさやかに見えねども風のおとにぞおどろかれぬる

When autumn came

My eyes clearly

Could not see it,

Yet in the sound of the wind

I felt it.

I wait anxiously, perched in a tree that's... decently close to the Forty-Fourth Training Ground, namely, the Daiyonjūyon Enshūjō, which is probably better known of by its alternate moniker— the Forest of Death, Shi no Mori.

This particular training ground is located north, along the cliff that borders the city where the Hokage faces are carved, quite a ways off from one of the oldest parts of the city. It's... rather far from the city.

I don't want to risk getting much closer. If I stretch my senses out, I can almost feel the energy coursing through the area. The Forty-Fourth Training Ground naturally produces a bunch of this... really weird chakra, for a reason, which has been contained by seals along the fence. I don't want to reach too hard. My chakra almost feels... hungry, somehow, and the chakra that saturates the Forty-Fourth Training ground is a bit... heavy. It's rich, woodsy, almost nutty, and it tastes a bit like how coffee smells... all mixed with a bit of a mushroom-y, vegetable-y flavor, and I don't want to accidentally... well, eat any of that. That's probably not the best way to describe it, but it's the closest I can get to how it feels. Tastes. Smells? Senses are weird when chakra is involved.

It's overwhelming enough that it's a bit tough to feel the chakra of the people inside. The animals and chakra-dense flora don't make it any easier— there's just so much chakra that it's honestly a bit
overwhelming when I try to poke around.

Even so, I spend a lot of time just… waiting nearby. Itachi’s not going to be out until the five days are done, but it’s almost like I can’t keep myself away. It’s hard to focus on anything else. Like, logically speaking… nothing’s going to happen to him. Everything’s going to be absolutely fine, he’s going to get out, I’m going to show him the information I got on everyone while watching the Hokage tower and the forest, and we’ll start preparing for the third round.

It’s just the first day. There’s still four days left to go.

I’m sitting at my desk, glaring at my latest attempt at capturing one jōnin-sensei’s face, when I hear a knock on the window.

Disgruntled, I shove a mass of semi-tangible chakra at the disturbance, and… oh. It’s Shisui.

I dart over, flinging open the window and almost hitting Shisui in the head.

“What is it now?” I sigh.

He jumps in, rudely choosing my bed as his landing pad.

“Don’t be like that, Mako-chan!” Shisui whines, practically vibrating in place. “Mikoto-sama managed to get my name on paper as Itachi’s jōnin-sensei,” Shisui crows, rubbing his hands together. “He’s finished already, so I guess this means I win the bet! Now, come on! If you can get permission from your parents, I can probably sneak you into the tower. Itachi can’t technically leave until the second task is officially over… and technically speaking, this is probably against the rules.” Shisui grins mischievously. “Luckily, I’ve never actually read the rule book.”

I sigh, but my heart’s not in it. I’m also grinning furiously.

“Give me a bit of time to pack… and let Okaa-san and Otō-san know. Unlike what you might think, I actually do try to be a well-behaved kid.” I pause. “Most of the time, at least,” I amend. “So… I’ll be ready to leave in… oh, a quarter-koku?”

“I’ll be waiting outside the back door!” Shisui shouts, laughing. “Also, get ready to pay up!”

I really need to get back in the habit of tying my hair out of my face. I make a face as I pull yet another strand of hair out of my mouth and glare at Shisui, who looks annoyingly unruffled from the effects of his shūnshin as he knocks on a door. I’m clinging to Shisui’s back, genjutsu-ed as a vest, and I’m honestly amazed we managed to get into the tower this easily.

The forest is seriously disturbing at night, and it’s sad, but… I really wish Orochimaru-san were the one carrying me, instead. Throughout the entire trip, I was disturbingly aware that while Shisui is a jōnin and a skilled shinobi… he’s also only thirteen years old. And yeah, he’ll be turning fourteen in about a month, but… I want Oro-sensei. The forest is creepy, I was very much scared, and even with the Shūnshin, I am still scared. Because even apart from the animals and bugs and plants… there’s also plenty of potentially-hostile and probably-hostile genin teams out here.

Ironically, the only consoling factor in the last part is that, like I said, it’s nighttime. To be honest, that’s probably a key reason why we’ve been lucky enough to pretty much go unnoticed so far.

There’s a pause, then the door opens quietly, spilling light into the hallway.
I dispel the genjutsu, hopping off of Shisui’s back. “Itachi! You’re okay!”

Itachi ushers us inside, closing the door just as softly as he’d opened it.

Shisui moves to the door and the corners of the room, setting up a genjutsu to deter eavesdroppers.

My eyes widen with glee. “Holy Amaterasu, you’re done already!” I whisper-scream.

Itachi nods, smiling. “We were fortunate that any worries proved groundless.”

“And I’ve probably managed to already figure out everyone in this exam by process of elimination during the day, but there’s always a chance I missed someone,” I nod. “But that can wait. So, how’d it go?”

“You were right,” Itachi smiles, “The first stage of the Chūnin Exams was a written test, with questions probably intended to be too difficult for genin to be able to answer, which would thereby forcing them to cheat without being caught.”

“Let me guess,” I grin. “It was easy.”

“Well… not easy, per say… but solvable,” Itachi admits, humbly. “After I finished, I used the time remaining to study what methods the other examinees were using to cheat, and formed hypotheses about their abilities based on their methods.” He pauses. “I actually used your technique, as well as my sharingan. There was at least one Yamanaka and… possibly, several non-Konohagakure shinobi slipping into the minds of their targets. Others, watched the movement of another’s hands. Others still traced out the answers from the sound of pencil rubbing against paper. They were all cheating with the technique they were best at.” Itachi smiles. “I’ll show you what I learned later.” He looks at Shisui. “Your information was correct as well, Shisui. We did not receive our scores directly after the first stage.”

“You’ve finished now, though,” I butt in. “Did you get them back, yet? How’d you do?”

Shisui laughs. “Well, you probably didn’t. The jōnin-sensei got the scores. And… well, the proctors gossip.” Shisui turns to me, smiling. “Makoto, guess what?”

“What?”

“Well, Itachi got the second highest score in the written test’s history. And the only person with a higher score was Namikaze Minato,” Shisui grins, wiggling his eyebrows. (And seriously, how does he even do that?) “And unless I’m mistaken, he definitely wasn’t your age when he took these exams. Didn’t he graduate the Academy when he was ten?”

“Uwa!!!!” I squeal with delight, ambushing Itachi with a hug. “That’s awesome!”

Itachi smiles. “Well… I doubt Otō-san would have accepted anything less. Hopefully, my performance will placate the clan for a while.”

I stare up, face blank. “Itachi. No offense, but that’s the most depressing response to a congratulations I have ever heard.” I sigh, untangling my arms, then go over to face-plant on the camping roll Itachi already set out by a wall. “This is mine now,” I mumble, nose a bit squashed. I’m not quite willing to end my performance over a bit of pain, though. “Please leave me alone. I shall be contemplating the possibility of expiring from how ridiculously sad that statement was. Or, alternatively, it might be more practical of me to contemplate assassination.”

Itachi sighs, walking over and plopping down next to me, before leaning against the wall. “We have
spoken about this, Makoto.”

“I still don’t see why selective murder won’t help,” I grumble. “I mean, I get that non-violent solutions come first, but it’s still better than killing everyone in the clan.”

Itachi shifts, pulling me into a sitting position and grabbing a comb from out of his pack. “It’s the principle of the matter, Makoto.”

I oblige, fishing out a ribbon and handing it to Itachi. “We’re shinobi. Killing is basically half the job description. Also, have you been carrying that that around the entire time? Oh, and Shisui… you’ve been suspiciously quiet. I don’t think you’d wait to gloat, so…” I grin widely. “Did I win the bet?”

“By almost a quarter-koku,” Shisui groans in mock-exasperation, plopping down next to me.

“Shisui, hold this?” Itachi asks.

“Mm,” Shisui nods, and there’s a tug at a section of my hair. “Good job, Itachi, you’ve set a new record for the exam held in the Forty-Fourth Training Ground.”

“Which means that the more annoying members of your clan should hopefully be quiet. For a while, at least,” I grumble. “Though, alternatively, they might start pushing harder…”

“No assassinations, Makoto,” Itachi mumbles, with a sound of clacking metal. “You really shouldn’t have killing people as your first option. But, to answer… your earlier question… well, I actually only realized I brought it half-way through the exam… oh, sorry,” he apologizes, when I flinch a little. “Metal hair-pins have more uses than wooden ones, so they tend to be the only ones I carry around.”

“Mm. It is a bit hard to pick locks with wooden hairpins,” I acknowledge. “Kichi-ojisan says that he tried that, once, with his date’s hairpins when he realized he’d lost his keys, and they splintered in the lock. It… was a bit of a mess, after that.”

“I really want to meet that uncle of yours,” Shisui pipes up. “Honestly, your family’s ridiculously cool.”

“Says the person with a grandfather who was on a team under the Nidaime and a brother who was a student under the Yondaime,” I shrug. “Not to mention all of the other cool Uchiha. You belong to an awesome shinobi clan with awesome shinobi. I just belong to a pretty cool civilian clan with some pretty awesome nobles.”

“But… do you know how many cool civilians there are?” Shisui groans, flopping onto the ground with an arm over his eyes.

“Plenty. Just usually not involved too deeply with shinobi. Or, at least, not shinobi villages.” I frown for a moment. “Actually… no. I’m pretty sure there’s awesome civilians here, too… but considering you live in a shinobi clan, and you don’t have that many reasons to associate with civilians…”

I shrug again.

“But really, the relationships between shinobi and civilians are pretty complicated… and they’re not really fun,” I grumble, elbowing Shisui over a bit as I find a comfortable spot. “Also, we’ve already had enough depressing stuff with what Itachi brought up earlier.”

I scowl at the room. “Though, speaking of depressing stuff… I can’t believe I didn’t think to bring a futon or even just seal up my bed. I really need to remember to bring them next time.” I sigh, wiggling until I find a comfortable position that allows Itachi to pick the pins out of my hair. “So,
Itachi… what happened in the second stage?

“So, again, you were right. For the second stage of the Chūnin Exams, teams have five days to reach the center of the Forest of Death with two scrolls in their possession. I headed directly for the center as soon as he enters the forest, openly carrying his scroll in order to lure another team into attacking him. I was confronted by Kiri-nin, and…”

"Not like you can surround all three of us," the boy said with a grin.

Itachi dropped his eyes to the scroll he held in his hand.

Those who were participating in the exam in the hopes of becoming chūnin were scattered about the forest. The scroll in his hands had the character for Heaven written on it in bold, black calligraphy.

“Taking the chunin exam by yourself is suicide,” a different boy shouted down to him from behind.

And then came the laughter of a girl, ear-splittingly high-pitched.

The three ninja were spread out in a triangle formation surrounding Itachi—four wavy lines on their hitai-ate marked them as Kiri-nin.

“If you hand the scroll over, like a good boy, we won't kill you. But, if you're gonna fight back, then I can't promise anything,” the first boy drawled, arrogance all but dripping from his bearing.

Itachi looked at the smirking boy in front of him. The assertive teen—likely fifteen or sixteen—seemed to be the leader.

Based on what was just said… the boy must have the scroll that paired with the one in Itachi's hand.

The aim of the second exam was to reach the tower in the center of the training ground with both Heaven and Earth scrolls in hand. In small squads of three-person cells, the examinees were given either a Heaven or an Earth scroll, and sent scattering throughout the training ground. Then, they were to take the complementary scroll from another team, wherever they might be in the field. After getting both scrolls, they had to make it through the Forest of Death— with its man-eating beasts, poisonous insects, and all kinds of dangerous creatures— to reach the tower standing in the center.

The time limit was five days.

Within the first few hours, Itachi was suddenly attacked by the enemy— the Kirigakure ninja before him.

Rather than making the foolish move of searching for the matching scroll, Itachi was heading straight for the tower, just like he’d planned with Makoto and Shisui. And, just like he wanted the Earth scroll, his opponents wanted the Heaven scroll. If he moved toward the tower from the start, his opponent would certainly come to him.

The Kirigakure ninja had already confirmed that Itachi held the Heaven scroll—he had deliberately held the scroll out in the open as he walked toward the tower for that purpose. These three were the ones who had fallen into Itachi's trap.

“So, three against one. Be good, and—”

"There's a requirement in the qualifications for this test," Itachi cut off the boy in front of him, "that you have to participate in a three-person cell. So, why am I here alone like this?"
Think, he prayed. It would be preferable if they did not have to fight.

"Maybe your teammates ditched you," the girl mocked from the left. The boy in the back laughed.

Itachi wanted to sigh, but resisted.

Tilting his head towards the girl, Itachi noted, "The other two are waiting in ambush. Can't you anticipate that much, at least?"

A careless smile froze on the girl's lips, and her face paled. Itachi wanted to smile, but held it back. This was too simple. He knew that not everyone understood chakra intuitively, the way Makoto did, but surely they should have anticipated his attempt to bluff?

"Relax; I was alone from the start," Itachi said, and turned his gaze back to the leader. "The only conclusion you can come to from this three-against-one situation is that it's to your advantage. As a leader, and as a potential chūnin, you are a failure."

Peace does not mean being nice, and foolishness often leads to death.

His opponent bristled. "Y-you watch your mou—"

"You're even using my childish appearance as fuel for your carelessness," Itachi cut back, bluntly.

"Hey, Kiruru, let's just finish him already," the boy in the rear called, rather uneasily.

The leader, Kiruru, gulped back the saliva building up in his mouth. Sweat ran down his forehead.

"Why doesn't it make you uncomfortable that I'm here alone?" Itachi continues, attacking him with logic. This sort of foolishness cannot be allowed to continue in the world of shinobi. "Why do you not consider the possibility that I was allowed to take the test alone? Don't you think there's some meaning behind the fact that I am taking the test alone, when the basis for the test is the three-person cell?"

"Kiruru!" This time, it was the girl who called out.

The opposing team was starting to lose themselves to a mixture of offended pride and an almost unfathomable fear.

"G-get him!" Kiruru half-shrieked, half-shouted, in a mix of fear and anger, and shuriken launched at Itachi from three different directions.

In the next instant, the leader before Itachi, and the boy to his rear, both started running. The girl leapt up, aiming for the top of his head. He was caught in an attack from both sides, and if he fled upward, the girl would catch him.

Not bad, necessarily, but… childish. Physical Fundamentals for the Three-Person Cell, Chapter 1, Paragraph 3. Such a plain strategy. He held back another sigh, and molded his chakra in a well-practiced pattern.

To his opponents, Itachi didn't seem to move.

Countless shuriken stabbed every part of his body.

Without pausing, the two boys raced toward his front and back—a classic pincer attack—driving kunai into his belly and back.
Itachi dramatically vomited out blood, but either boy had the luxury of watching this as they yanked their kunai out and made room for the final phase of their attack. Hair and clothing swayed as their kunoichi teammate landed on Itachi’s shoulders, and plunged a dagger through the crown of his head.

“Got him!” she cried out, happily.

Their triumphant was short lived, though.

In the next heartbeat, Itachi’s supposed corpse burst open.

Each of the black fragments scattered in all directions, transforming into crows. In a cacophony of caws, the feathery murder started to peck at the heads of the three ninja.

Itachi watched for a while from the top of a large tree nearby, observing the silly way his enemies were being taken down. All three were frantically trying to beat the crows back while covering their faces with their arms.

After he judged them suitably cowed, he dropped down in front of them, flaring his chakra to disrupt the careful web of the genjutsu. “Kai!”

The crows disappeared at his cry.

Unable to understand what had happened, the three ninja stood dumbfounded, their eyes finding Itachi all at once.

“Just hand over the scroll.” Itachi held out his hand toward the leader. “I have already shown you that there is a drastic difference between our capabilities. To continue fighting, and risk death, would be foolish. I do not wish to harm you, but I will complete my mission. Give me the scroll, and I will let you go.”

“D-don’t underestimate us,” Kiruru forced out. He began weaving signs. The boy and girl to his left and right also wove the same signs. “Got it?”

“Right,” his teammates responded.

“Suiton—” Kiruru shouted. However, that was as far as they got.

The wall of flames that abruptly materialized scared the three senseless, to the point where they actually forgot to activate their own techniques.

At a speed three times that of the three weaving signs, Itachi activated Makoto’s version of the Fire Style: Great Fireball Technique. He had been molding his chakra since the first exam. It was child’s play to spread it out and ignite it. The field of view of the opposing team would have been swallowed up by flames in an instant, but they would not have been harmed. The flames were not meant to cause the three injury—they were simply a threat. A warning.

This was a test. There was no need to kill or injure anyone. All he needed was for his opponents to lose heart. And if they continued to be foolish… well, he would have to make things “painfully obvious,” as Makoto so often puts it. Makoto was also right when he complained, ‘there is nothing more annoying that trying to explain stuff to someone who’s not listening,’ and Itachi firmly agreed with his statement.

The brilliant, yellow-orange flames danced up to the heavens—then abruptly vanished when Itachi stopped feeding them fuel.
Legs trembling in fear, almost giving out from under them, the three somehow managed to stay on their feet. A thin film of tears welled up in the three pairs of eyes staring at Itachi.

“If you still wish to continue, I do not mind.” Itachi closed the distance between them, jumping down the tree. Give them a chance to surrender, Makoto had said. “I have already given you three chances to back down. I have warned you twice before, and I shall warn you once more— give me your scroll, and I will not harm you. However, if you persist, I will not hold back.”

“What?” Kiruru asked, looking about ready to burst into tears.

Itachi stared at him and focused his chakra in his eyes. His field of view colored red, and the waves of chakra flowing through the bodies of the three before him began to hazily come into view. The chakra would never be as clear as it might to someone with the Byakugan, but they were more than clear enough.

"Sh-sharingan," the unnamed boy stuttered.

Tears began to spill from Kiruru’s eyes.

“I don’t know if you have ever seen eyes like this before, but if you are shinobi, then you should know what they are,” Itachi said.

The girl moved her pointed jaw up and down several times. All three of them were completely ruled by the fear of death.

Itachi yet again resisted the urge to sigh. Think of what Makoto said. Small words. Pretend you’re explaining it to Sasuke, but don’t spill anything too important. “Your techniques will not work on me,” Itachi expanded. “I can see what you are going to do, and I will counter them, and then… well, it would be within reason for me to kill you.”

"H-have mercyyyyy!" Kiruru wailed, pressing his forehead to the ground, then reached a trembling hand into his bag and dug around. Itachi stared at him, the tomoe in his eyes spinning slowly, until the boy thrust the Earth scroll at him.

Itachi took the scroll with slow, deliberate, carefully-telegraphed movements. “As long as you all understand.” He sent a little chakra down his legs, and with a flicker, he was behind Kiruru. “I cannot risk leaving you free to pursue me. Take a little nap here.”

A quick strike with the side of his hand, and Kiruru collapsed sideways on the ground. Itachi flickered to the girl, knocking her out as well, and then settled behind the last boy. A hand resting against his neck. They might get hurt if he knocked all of them out. One conscious member would be sufficient to defend the team, and he would not be capable of chasing after him with two unconscious teammates as baggage.

“They will wake up soon,” he murmured softly; feeling the way his opponent trembled beneath his palm. “There are too many dangers in this forest to risk leaving three genin unconscious. However, be warned— if you follow me, I will not be held responsible for my actions afterwards. I am not cruel. Neither do I enjoy hurting people. I do not want to kill you, but I am a shinobi.”

Itachi pauses, recalling Makoto’s advice. Make it painfully obvious, Makoto had said. If they were Sasuke, would they understand the hidden meanings in his statement? Itachi resists the urge to sigh again. He squeezes a little, just enough to feel the boy flinch. “Feel free to tell your comrades. I am merciful, but I am not weak. Do not mistake my kindness for weakness.”

With that final message, he pushed chakra to his limbs, just as Shisui had shown him, and shot off.
The two Heaven and Earth scrolls were together. Now he just had to head for the tower in the center of the training ground.

I can’t hold back my laughter at Itachi’s description of everything.

Shisui claps him on the back. “Nice going! Very dramatic.” He only manages to keep a straight face for a heartbeat—maybe two—before he, too, collapses in laughter.

Itachi smiles a little.

There’s a long stretch of silence, before I interrupt it with a stretch and a yawn. “Okay, good job. I won the bet. Shisui, get ready to cough up. And Itachi… after this stage, we’ll worry about who’s going to be in the finals.” I grin a little. “And Shisui, don’t be too sad— if Itachi does well, I’ll treat you to dinner as a congratulations.”

“What about when Itachi’s promoted to chūnin?” Shisui interrupts eagerly.

I shrug. “Like I said.” I grin happily. “Personally, I think it’s a sure shot.”

Itachi huffs a little. “You overestimate my abilities.”

Shisui laughs, falling backward. “I think you’re underestimating yourself!” He rolls back to a sitting position with a more serious visage. “Trust me, you’re chūnin-level. You’re probably high-chūnin-level, to be honest. And the higher-ups can see that.” He tilts his chin at Itachi. “They recommended you for this entire mess for a reason, after all.”

I stretch again, yawning. “But… that’s all later. Now, it’s time to figure out how to waste four days of time…” I grin as I flip open the needle-sharp blade in my bracelet, extract a drop of blood, and swipe it across a storage seal. Normally, I use this for clothes. But, today…

I resist the urge to cackle at Itachi and Shisui’s faces as they beheld my pile of… stuff.

“Hey, just because I forgot a bed doesn’t mean I wasn’t prepared!”

Four days pass in a blur of origami, card games, various ball games, my experiments with chakra, a lot of writing, quite a bit of drawing, and a surprisingly limited amount of training.

I’m probably not supposed to be here. I think. There’s probably some unspoken rules against having civilians in the middle of the chūnin exams, even if it’s just for liability reasons. To be honest, there’s probably some very spoken—and very much written—rules against having anyone who’s not a proctor, chūnin-hopeful, or jōnin-sensei in here. I mean, there’s probably an exception for the Hokage, but… I’m still trying to figure out if we were supposed to go through the training ground or not. I’m not sure if I want to actually know or not, though.

There are several rooms for training in the building, but we use those very minimally. As in, we don’t. For the most part. We sometimes sneak down during the day and monopolize one for… like, half a day in the beginning, but as people swarm in and also want to use the rooms, it becomes a bit risky for me.

It’s a small miracle we don’t get more stir-crazy in that little room, but… it’s big enough for three people, and we keep ourselves busy. I nap, try doing random stuff with chakra that’s arguably pointless, but also not, and eat. Shisui and Itachi have a lot more freedom, but they usually don’t
Shisui waves it off when I ask if someone will notice my chakra. “Eh, it’s basically expected at this point. The biggest question will be who’s sending out the chakra, and… it shouldn’t be a big deal. It’s risky, but even so, that’s only assuming someone realizes you’re doing it in the first place.”

Despite Shisui’s reassurances, I don’t do it that often—it’s not like I don’t have my hands full with just trying to draw an accurate portrait of some of the shinobi.

Also, I spend quite a bit of time practicing sitting in kiza. I’ve gotten pretty used to sitting in seiza, though agura, the criss-cross position, is more comfortable. This is one of the few times I’m kinda glad to be a boy—agura is generally considered uncouth for women, and female informal sitting positions aren’t the most comfortable.

One has both legs off to one side, with one side of the hips on the floor, termed yokozuwari, but that’s arguably a bit bad for the spine. Or, alternatively, there’s wariza, which is that kinda-cutsey position where the knees are together, but your feet are on either side of your posterior and the posterior is directly on the floor. But that’s probably not the best for your joints, so… I guess it’s a toss-up of which medical problem you want, especially considering the fact that seiza is really good at cutting off circulation.

Kiza is kind of like seiza, but instead of having the tops of your feet touching the ground, you’re sitting on your heels with the balls of your feet on the floor and your toes pointing forward.

It’s generally a better resting position in terms of how quickly you can get up from it… and say, draw a sword. Like in iaido.

So, I’ve decided to try and get comfortable with both resting in and getting up from that position, since it’s practical, but… well… it’s a bit painful for your toes.

…

It’s a bit painful for the toes, which is rather unfortunate. I finally have fairly attractive feet. Hopefully, my feet won’t end up the way they did Before, when I did ballet. It probably doesn’t help that I tried standing on my toes several times without pointe shoes—I think I was about five—and ended up with pretty large bunions.

…My feet were in the approximate shape of a kite. Diamond? It is still a mystery whether my weirdly-shaped feet were the result of my actions, or my genetics (my father had had similar feet), but either way, I really don’t want kite-shaped feet again.

But, I want to be killed while trying to get up from agura or seiza even less, so… you win some, you lose some.

Suffice to say, it’s not my favorite four days. It’s nice, but… it could be better.

Hence, at the end of the second exam, I’m pretty excited. Shisui already told me that we’d probably get a preliminary round. As a result, on the final day of the second exam, I am dressed—and positioned—accordingly. I’m wearing my normal dark pants and shoes, with a dark shirt that I borrowed from Itachi. Add in a tiny genjutsu—just to further hide me from where I’m perched by the two fingers on the giant hand that’s forming a weird version of the ram hand-seal—and I’m
virtually invisible… provided I don’t draw too much attention to myself.

I’ve gotten better at hiding my chakra. So long as I don’t move too much, I should be okay. Fingers crossed. Maybe I’d better knock on wood, too.

Regardless, I am more than ready to wait for everyone to arrive and watch— basically, spy— on the wannabe-chūnin.

Okay. It’s been what seems like forever, but now… everyone’s here. I resist the urge to giggle. Itachi looks perfectly ready to just leave. Meanwhile, below me, Shisui’s practically vibrating from where he’s perched on the walkway with the other jōnin-sensei. Yeah… we’re all a bit stir-crazy at this point.

I only give the Hokage’s speech half of my attention— I’m more occupied with trying to recognize everyone that made it through, and making note of it in my book-of-faces.

The only interesting facts are probably that Inuzuka Tsume proctored the second stage, Ebisu proctored the first, and now someone called Namiashi Raidō is proctoring the third. And those facts are things that I overheard from before the genin all arrived.

The Hokage’s speech is… really not that interesting. Yeah, it’s dramatic as hell, but… that’s all. It seems like he’s both trying to psych out and motivate the genin, but it’s pretty interesting to watch their reactions. Some are scared. Some are motivated. Still others, like me, look like they want to roll their eyes. Others… don’t react at all.

Regarding the teams, though…

Six teams, plus Itachi, made it this far intact and are ready to move on. Ignoring Itachi, there are two full teams from Konohagakure. From the other countries… there is one team from Kumogakure, one team from Iwagakure, one team from… I think Kusagakure, if I’m remembering the symbols correctly, and one team from Kirigakure. I assume everyone else has been disqualified from participating for one reason or another.

Three people forfeit before the preliminaries— two from the Kiri team, one from the Kusa team.

And now… the matches are starting. The proctor shakes a cup, and withdraws… two balls of wadded-up paper. He unfolds them, and announces the names of the first two contestants.

“First match!” He shouts. “Konohagakure no Tekuno versus Kumogakure no Darui!”

There were eight preliminary matches total, as follows:

Tekuno (Konohagakure) vs. Darui (Kumogakure)

Ranka (Konohagakure) vs. Shiba (Kusagakure)

Nemui (Kumogakure) vs Gantetsu (Iwagakure)

Chōseki (Iwagakure) vs Hyūga Iroha (Konohagakure)

Gōzu (Kirigakure) vs Midori (Kusagakure)
The fights were… not the most exciting, I guess? A lot of them were pretty one-sided, and the ones that weren’t were pretty much straight *taijutsu*. It makes sense, though—even if they are capable of more, it’s probably best not to reveal it. Even so, I learned a lot through them.

**Tekuno (Konohagakure):** probably mid-teens, with a rather solid build—that implies he likes food—and shaggy brown hair. He seems very laid-back, and rather friendly. Interesting fact: he wears fingerless gloves. His abilities seem to primarily revolve around the use of explosives and… probably traps. He seems decently capable at weapons.

**Darui (Kumogakure):** pre-puberty, probably around thirteen. Seems easy-going and rather mellow, even possibly lazy. However, he’s very skilled, even for his young age. He’s got dark skin and shaggy whitish, yellow-grey hair. He carries a sword, and he knows how to use it. He also seems rather skilled in Lightning Release techniques, though that’s mostly conjecture, and he is good at *taijutsu*.

**Ranka (Konohagakure):** probably mid-to-late teens, with brown hair that is covered by his hitai-ate, which he wears as a bandanna. He has smaller eyes, which pretty much always seem to be in a squint. Maybe he’s near-sighted? He’s… rather generic, though I think he’s got a good grasp of the human body, given the areas he targeted with his *taijutsu*.

**Shiba (Kusagakure):** early-to-mid teens, with straight—not spiky—brown hair that’s a bit long. He wears a bandanna-styled black Kusagakure hitai-ate and a really big scarf. His fighting style is… rather generic. He focuses a lot on *taijutsu* and has a sword, though he didn’t use it. He probably is decent with *shurikenjutsu*, based on what he carries on him, but I do not have any evidence to back that statement up.

**Nemui (Kumogakure):** pre-puberty, probably around thirteen. He seems almost always sleepy, which I assume to be his default state. He… fights while he is sleeping. I don’t know how that works. Personally, I hypothesize that he is merely dozing, and not in a heavy sleep. I can also pinpoint one possible weakness: he must wake up periodically to maintain awareness of the battle. He’s very fast, and I’m not sure I was seeing it correctly, but I’m thinking that he’s good at Raiton ninjutsu, and maybe incorporates it into his attacks. He is very good at *taijutsu*.

**Gantetsu (Iwagakure):** late teens, with a head of spiky dull-black hair, thick sideburns and dark-coloured, squinted eyes. He’s older than most of the other people here. He’s also very generic. He’s really quite rude and impolite, and arrogant to boot. He’s also really aggressive, but he can’t back up his words with his skills. He seems to be rather vain, too, and he’s slow at *taijutsu* and slow with his Doton ninjutsu, too, but he also used a bit of Katon ninjutsu.

**Chōseki (Iwagakure):** late teens, I’d guess. He’s got thick, kinda rough features. He’s also got really thin black hair that’s kinda greasy, which makes him seem older, but based on his teammates, he can’t be too old. He’s also rather generic, but I’d guess that he’s decent with Doton ninjutsu. I’m honestly not that sure how he passed. He seems to look up to his teammate, Gantetsu (see above), a lot. Maybe he’s just not in the best condition and is tired from the second part?

**Hyūga Iroha (Konohagakure):** probably mid-teens, with brown hair—almost like a greyish-
chestnut, weirdly enough— that’s parted in the middle, with two strands framing his face under his hitai-ate, which he wears as a bandana. He looks… like a generic Hyūga, and he fights like one, too, with close-quarter Jūken. He’s good.

Gōzu (Kirigakure): mid-teens, with straight, rather limp black hair and dark eyes. He’s very good with weapons, namely, weighted chains… kinda like a meteor hammer, and probably uses poison. He wears an air-filtering apparatus-thing on his face. He doesn’t talk much, and he seems quite smart. He’s definitely not easy to rile up, and seems rather rational and level-headed. He has a very loud member on his team, though, with spiky hair. He seems to be most proficient in mid-range combat— just the right distance for his chains and poison to work effectively without endangering himself.

Midori (Kusagakure): early-to-mid teens, with long, greyish hair tied by his neck, under a black Kusagakure forehead protector that he wears as a bandanna, tied in the back. He wears a pair of reddish-coloured glasses with black lenses— perhaps he’s sensitive to light— and a really big scarf — choking hazard, potentially useful part of the wardrobe to target during taijutsu bouts— with one end in front and one end behind him. He’s a bit of a coward, and he fights dirty.

Hayase (Konohagakure): probably mid-teens, with spiky black hair that kinda spikes out a bit to either side. He has a grey hood that honestly seems rather out of place. I… really don’t know much about him, since he forfeited right at the beginning of his match with Itachi.

Shinobu (Konohagakure): probably mid-to-late teens, with a very distinctive nose, spiky brown hair, and dark eyes. He wears what seems to be… like a helmet, with his hitai-ate forehead protector attached, and he seems to have some skill with kenjutsu. He seems to prefer mid-range combat.

Ittan (Iwagakure): later teens, with light brown, spiky hair and dark eyes. He’s very good with Doton jutsu. We’ll have to watch out for that.

C (Kumogakure): pre-puberty, probably about thirteen, with paler skin than I’d actually expected from someone from Kumo, and blonde hair. He’s serious, and rather quiet, and seems mature for his age. He’s confident without being overconfident, and that’s not for no reason— he seems to be a sensor, he’s pretty good with genjutsu (from what I can tell), and he also might know a bit of medical ninjutsu. His taijutsu style is very efficient, and I think he knows at least one Raiton technique that he’s good with. That’s mostly speculation on my part, to be honest, but… it’s not without basis.

Shimon (Konohagakure): probably mid-to-late teens, with a gaunt frame. He has shoulder-length brown hair with two long bangs in the front. He… isn’t very proficient in taijutsu, but he seems to know a bit of genjutsu.

... 

The matchups for the first round of finals will be as follows:

Itachi (Konohagakure) vs Nemui (Kumogakure)

Shiba (Kusagakure) vs Ittan (Iwagakure)

Gōzu (Kirigakure) vs C (Kumogakure)

Darui (Kumogakure) vs Hyūga Iroha (Konohagakure)

The team from Kumogakure is legitimately scary. Nemui isn’t going to be easy to beat. I’m pretty
sure Iwagakure no Ittan is going to beat Kusagakure no Shiba, but there’s no guarantee. I have no idea how well Hyūga no Iroha is going to do, but… I’m not very optimistic. I think he might be fine if Kirigakure no Gōzu manages to beat Kumogakure no C, but… I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure Kumogakure no C and Kumogakure no Darui are going to end up facing each other. I’m not sure why and I can’t explain why I’m so certain, but I am.

We— Itachi, Shisui, and I— have already drawn up plans of what we’ll need to prepare during the month-long intermission.

Nemui probably focuses on taijutsu. C… I would wager, genjutsu. And Darui would be ninjutsu and/or kenjutsu. Of course, Darui and C aren’t pushovers in taijutsu, and I’d wager that all of the genin on the Kumogakure team know Raiton ninjutsu.

I personally would bet on Ittan beating Shiba, although it is possible that Shiba might be the one to advance. Not likely, but… possible. Still, I doubt Itachi will have a problem countering shurikenjutsu or taijutsu. Shisui’s going to get Itachi more familiar with fighting against kenjutsu during the month, so that shouldn’t be a problem, either. They can more than take care of that.

My role is the jutsu specialist. It’s a bit ironic, since they’re the ones with the fancy dōjutsu, but… it makes sense. I might not have fancy sharingan, but I know a bit more chemistry and physics. Not much, unfortunately, but it should be enough to give Itachi an edge.

I’m also the PR-specialist, which is really not ideal… but considering how I’m the one who can most easily gather information, it also makes sense. To an extent.

Itachi knows Katon ninjutsu. Unfortunately, fire release won’t be much use against Doton ninjutsu or Raiton ninjutsu— fire isn’t particularly strong against earth or lightning. My biggest problem right now is that I have no clue whether any of the Kumo-nin know Suiton ninjutsu.

Water beats fire beats wind beats lightning beats earth beats water.

Explosives, along with Itachi’s current skill-set, should be more than enough for Doton ninjutsu. If necessary, having water might help, but… I’ll have to have faith in Itachi for Ittan. I’ll give him as many explosives and explosive tags that I can make, and I’ll make sure whatever he wears is sufficiently sturdy, and that will have to be enough.

Raiton ninjutsu is… a bit more interesting. Assuming that it acts as actual electricity, which evidence suggests that it does, that means that it should be easy enough to counter should you have sufficient knowledge of conductors and insulators.

Using insulators, you can protect yourself, and with conductors, you should be able to divert the jutsu. If you’re good enough, and manage to catch the opponent off-guard, you might even be able to turn their jutsu against them.

…the problem for me is that I have no idea what’s a good enough conductor or insulator, and for the things I do know… what’s copper in this language? I mean, we have wires and stuff, but…

Okay. That should be enough. One month should be more than enough.

I know that good insulators include rubber, glass, ceramic, wool, wood… but I’m not sure which would be best.

I don’t even know how to get my hands on actual rubber.

…yet.
Okay, it’s time for experimenting… and to go ask Otō-san for stuff. And to see where I can get my hands on… oh, several thousand *koku* of water. (The unit of volume *koku*, that is. Not the unit of time.)

Also, it’s time to figure out how to get Itachi to appeal to a large audience.

I’ve already got this hilarious idea about samurai-style armor, or Warring-States-shinobi-style armor, rather. Don’t want to be rude to any samurai. But, my thought is to borrow some of the ideas from various literature. And… samurai are cool, okay? Usually? At least, they’re cool in the stories that are common in Keishi.

Namely, I’m currently deliberating on whether a set of wool-wood-ceramic armor, on fire, would be considered to be *too* dramatic. Also… fireworks. I really kinda want to figure out if I can include fireworks. And, I mean… if we’re also going for chemical explosives… fireworks might look cool… but they could also be too gaudy and therefore *hurt* public perception of Itachi.

Preparing some things is somehow simultaneously a headache and mind-numbingly boring.

Like… the water. I got freshwater, from that weird… uh… Valley of the End canyon with the statues of Hashirama and Madara on each side of a truly magnificent waterfall.

It actually prompted a question for me— if we can make massive full-body statues of shinobi… why don’t we do that instead of just carving their faces clumsily into a cliff? It would look so much cooler!

But seriously, do you know how annoying it is to distill the equivalent of… oh, several hundred thousand galleons of water? By hand?

It was absurdly tedious. But arguably necessary— it’s the dissolved minerals in water that makes water conductive.

Hence, I also have… well, a lot of various unpurified salts from the ocean. I’m not sure what it might be used for, but I’ve got a feeling that it could be important.

Other than that… the explosive tags are done, my hair’s a bit shorter from accidental explosions, and the storage seals seem functional. (I hope.)

Itachi also has a new set of clothing. It’s nothing fancy (unfortunately). For the most part, Itachi’s still wearing what he normally does. (He just looks weird in anything else). The *kumihimo* braid that I gave him to tie up his hair is a nice touch, though. The hardest part was probably choosing the color — I personally think that red would have been coolest, but red and black just looks *scary*. Itachi ended up choosing a nice vivid greenish-blue that… honestly, looks a bit weird, but still suits him.

Other than that, he’s just got a somewhat-loose long-sleeved shirt and long pants, each tied at the joints— elbow and wrist, knee and ankle— with more *kumihimo* braids. Shisui and I also replaced his weapons pouch with another one that’s pitch-black, with embroidery in the same vivid greenish-blue, and did something similar with Itachi’s sandals. Okaa-san was very helpful with her sewing lessons. So, the shirt and pants now have neon-ish green-blue stitches along the hems, too. The end result is surprisingly cool. Honestly, it’s probably too minimalistic and “modern”, to the point where it really seems a bit out-of-place, but… it’s cool. The overall effect is very cool.

…

Arguably a bit weird in conjunction with everything else, but cool.
And I’m second-guessing myself now. No. If Shisui and Kagami-jiisan and Mikoto-obasama and
Emigiku and Shinko-chan and Okaa-san and Otō-san and Kichirō-ojisan and Tōu-san and Nauma-
san and even Shijimi-dono and Daimyō-dono and Fugaku-jiisama are fine with it…

...nngh. No. Yes, they might have been trying to spare my feelings. But that’s a chance I’ll have to
take.

...

And I really need to stop thinking about that before I give into the urge to go bundle everything up
and hide them away at the bottom of a closet or something.

But yeah! A lot of people came here from the capitol. Kichirō-san joked that it’s mostly thanks to me
— more people came because they wanted to see me. That’s probably not without merit, though.
Most of the time, the exams are aimed for the shinobi. A few government officials might come, but
that would probably be those from other countries— the Land of Fire directs pretty much all missions
towards Konohagakure.

In the retinue of people that came to Konohagakure, there’s Kichirō-ojisan, Minamoto-kun, Ikkyū-
kun, Shijimi-dono, Daimyō-dono, and three of the Twelve Guardian Ninja— Tōu-san and Nauma-
san and Asuma-san. Asuma-san does not look very happy to be here.

I’ve made several bets, through Kichirō-ojisan (who’s somehow in charge of managing the wagers
for the capitol, along with a few friends). Shisui’s joined in happily as a partner, and he’s managed to
get practically the entire Uchiha clan— along with what seems like half of Konohagakure—
involved.

I have… a surprisingly large amount of money.

I’ve been saving up my allowance of 200 ryō per week, which has been the case since… oh, about
the time I started playing regularly with Shino— it’s enough for about one decent lunch and maybe
an order of dango, and something sweet to drink. Or, about four orders of dango. Or, one . It’s
probably the equivalent of $20 Before
.

But, the thing is… I don’t eat out that often on my own, and when I do spend money on something,
it’s usually a lot at once, and I get money from Okaa-san and Otō-san specifically for that. Like,
festivals. Or… shopping.

Otō-san’s been trying to teach me stuff from his side of the family, so… now, I’m in charge of
shopping. Otō-san and Okaa-san give me some money, along with a list of what they need, and I go
and try to get everything at the lowest price possible. That involves a bit of research, knowledge
about current market prices (which is… actually rather complicated), and… haggling. And Otō-san’s
smart, because I get an incentive — any money I save, I get to keep. As a result of that, along with…
a few other things, including a very good teacher— Otō-san— and my own eagerness to learn, mean
that… I’m doing pretty well for myself. I know basically everyone who’s normally around the main
street, and most of the vendors… as well as various farmers, artisans, restaurant-owners, etcetera.

I actually don’t usually use my pocket money. And recently, it’s been more like 500 ryō every week.

As a result, I’ve been just saving that up… along with what’s left every time I spend less than they
give me, like during festivals.

(Of course, that’s not counting the extra money I get during the Rinne-Matsuri and New Year, which
I now realize is probably from… everyone in my family. I mean, I normally don’t see it, because it’s a lot of money, because it’s put away, but… it’s mine. Okaa-san and Otō-san are taking care of it for me, but when I asked about it, Otō-san decided that I should learn to manage money. So… now I know a lot about Konoha. Let’s just say… it’s interesting. I have no idea how economics worked before, but… it’s honestly a bit confusing for me.)

But the thing is, I have a lot of money. Honestly, I have enough money that dropping 100,000 ryō on a series of bets is… well, a lot, but doesn’t amount to all of my savings.

…I could probably actually commission Itachi and Shisui on C-ranks without actually going through Okaa-san and Otō-san. Not many, but if I ever want to… it’s definitely an option. I just never realized it until now… because I had never thought to actually count my money until now.

Huh. I should really fix that. Note to self: ASK QUESTIONS. And seriously, don’t make assumptions. After all, as the saying goes…

…well, suffice to say, I’d rather not be a donkey.

The day of the final round is absolutely nerve-wracking. I feel like a mobile earthquake with how my hands are trembling— apparently, excess adrenaline does that to you. Shisui told me that it’s common, but something I’ll need to get used to— shaky limbs can be a liability.

I’ve quintuple-checked all of the storage seals and explosives and… and everything and Itachi has a good grasp of where everything is and how to use everything and we all went to sleep at the normal time yesterday and woke up at the normal time today and everything should be absolutely fine so there’s no need to worry, but…

…why am I so nervous? Itachi is fine. Itachi will be fine. His opponents are scary, but normal. This is a normal third stage for perfectly normal chūnin exams. There aren’t bijū or jinchūriki or S-ranked missing-nin disguised as one of the Gokage, the Five Kage, or invasions.

Everything is fine.

…

…

I just wish I could convince my heart of that. At this point, it’s could probably serve as Franz Liszt's metronome.

I’ve got a wonderful view of the stadium. There are shinobi all around. We are in Konoha. Yes, there’s a fatality rate for the exams, but no, Itachi is not in any mortal peril.

…

Okay, I just need to stop worrying. So… oh, yeah! The seats. Okaa-san and Otō-san bought tickets and seats for Shisui and me in one of the more-expensive— and thus, more comfortable— sections.

...Okay, it’s probably the most expensive section.

The thing is, there’s only three booths for spectators— most people watch the chūnin exams in public areas as part of specific broadcasts. It’s really special to get a first-person perspective. Kichirō-ojisan
is here. So is Minamoto-kun and Ikkyū-kun and Shijimi-dono and Daimyō-dono and Tōu-san and Nauma-san and Asuma-san. (Asuma-san really does not look very happy to be here.)

There’s two large spectator boxes to each side with rows of seats for… whoever bought tickets.

The center box is… a bit special, though. The bottom box isn’t quite that different from the others. The seats might be a bit nicer, but the changes aren’t that apparent. The biggest difference is the type of people in the box— for one, the box has two stories. The lower level of the spectator box is for important shinobi and important officials.

There’s a few Hyūga somewhere, and also a section of Uchiha. There are also other shinobi, along with several ANBU. They tend to stick to one side of the room, though, and the sides. Various government officials, with their scrolls and brushes and ink-pots, crowd the other side. It’s… pretty tense in there. I’d almost compare it to the feeling you might get if you shut a few large cats in one room with a bunch of rabbits.

The upper middle box, the one we’re in, is connected to the seating area for the various Kage. It’s the box for important civilians and other important people… or just the people who have the sway and the influence and the money.

Honestly, it’s kind of awkward. I know some of the people… but there’s about the same number of people I don’t know. They also don’t seem to be in the best mood— everyone’s alarmingly quiet. Any discussion happens in a very soft voice, and the kids— me included— get a sharp look whenever we’re the ones talking. I guess the “children should be seen and not heard” adage holds very true with these people.

It’s really nice to catch up with everyone, too.

I am a bit sorry that I couldn’t catch them before, but I assure them that my time was well-spent and that they’d definitely see something cool.

...

A hush falls over the crowd, and I turn to look, wondering why…

...oh. Oh.

Let me set the scene.

Below, a curving wall sweeps in and around a circular area, and the ceiling is rounded and open at the top. The ground is covered in dirt, and a few trees grow here and there. Scaffolding stretches out horizontally from the top of the wall. High above, atop the walls that curve inwards, there are the three boxes that play host to the large number of spectators watching these matches— the matches on which the futures of the genin below depend.

These spectators include daimyō and people from the ruling classes in all lands, officials from the villages in the ninja world, and shinobi of all ranks, from genin to chūnin to jōnin. Among them are probably even the faces of disguised black market merchants who had snuck in.

Everyone’s holding their breath as they eagerly anticipate the battles of the young ninja. Each of them is here to see the finest genin each village can provide. Each is here in hopes of catching a glimpse at the future leaders of the shinobi villages.

Below, the genin stand in a line.
Eight genin, each of whom carries the weight of their village’s reputation. Their showing here will… okay, not define, but… play a role in determining the potential prosperity… or potential ruin… of their homes.

This place, where capable genin from every village— technically— risk their lives in battle, is but a tiny microcosm of the larger world, and the wars waged there. They’re not simply wars fought with bodies and lives and blood… no. They’re also wars of economics, wars of politics… wars waged behind doors and behind painted masks, behind silken screens and with softly-spoken words.

The fights here often have direct correlations with the power structures among the villages years later. The genin who prove themselves here, in the exams, are names to be watched— those who will lead, who will pose a threat, tend to distinguish themselves early on. Each village hopes to put forth a genin who shows the potential future of their village.

From so far down… the spectators must seem like a faceless mass. It’s probably like seeing hawks circling overhead, waiting to catch the slightest hint of weakness, the slightest crack in the facades of each hidden village. No village is safe, no village is above it. Every village must prove themselves strong. There’s an unspoken challenge in the air, for the genin— show us why you’re so special. Why we should fear you, and the village you represent. Whether we should even fear you in the first place. Show us.

...

And that is exactly why Itachi needs this stage so badly. Itachi needs to demonstrate such overwhelming strength that the adults gathered here won’t dare to so much as think of laying a hand on Konoha.

If he can win this, it will send a message, directed at the other hidden villages, at the other people with their own agendas— Konohagakure has Uchiha Itachi.

Who are you, to think you can stand against Konohagakure?

---

To repeat, there are absolutely no rules. The contest continues until one side admits defeat. However, when I judge that continuation is impossible, the match will stop there. You both understand?”

I bit down on a knuckle, trying desperately to stifle my laughter.

Shunmin no Nemui looks absolutely ridiculous. He seems to be ready to drift off any minute. His eyes are half-closed, his body’s wobbling… and he’s yawned about twenty-six times The half-asleep face before him listened silently to the announcement of the high-handed supervising examiner. He had yawned any number of times now, to the point where Itachi wondered if he might actually fall asleep on the spot.

"Maybe we should have them push our turn back, if you’re really that tired? It would be best if you can get a proper sleep?" Itachi asks, gently, but his voice carries through the stadium.

I… can’t blame him. Nemui looks exhausted, with how his eyelids are hanging halfway over his perfectly round eyes, and how exhaustion plays at the corners of his mouth. "No need to worry," he says, smiling, but even his smile looks sleepy.

"Second round, third exam. Konohagakure shinobi Uchiha no Itachi against Kumogakure ninja
Shunmin no Nemui. Match… start!” the exam proctor shouts, and leaps backwards.

I tense.

…

"Haaaah."

Nemui opens his mouth wide, yawning, and there’s a smattering of muffled laughter from the audience around me. I twitch, irritably. This is serious, even if it doesn’t seem that way.

Itachi’s shifted into a ready stance, body leaning slightly forward, and he’s braced his feet. He had no weapons in either hand, but I know that doesn’t make him any less ready. He relaxed his entire body and set his awareness adrift, not concentrating on any particular spot, so as to be ready to react immediately, no matter what his opponent does.

“I’m so sleepy,” Nemui murmurs, standing up straight, arms dangling loosely at his sides. He definitely doesn’t seem to be in any kind of ready position, especially with how he wobbles from side to side, but… I squint.

I’ve seen this before, and the sleepiness isn’t an act, but… it doesn’t make him any less dangerous.

I chew on my lip, thinking.

"Maybe you should just go to sleep,” Itachi suggests, and I can sense the chakra he’s sending out, to encourage sleep. However…

Nemui’s eyes close. His body tilts forward, like a stick falling to the earth… but just before he slams into the ground, he blurs— and seemingly disappears.

I raise my eyebrows, humming. Around me, the audience is filled with gasps. That was impressive. Even if Itachi had been using his sharingan… it would have been difficult to see any tells in Nemui’s body language. He could be anywhere, but…

“Where’d he go?” Ikkyū-kun asks, from beside me.

I point. “There.”

As if on cue, Itachi jumps backward, flipping, even as an arm enveloped in crackling electricity almost grazes his face.

The most impressive part? From what I can tell, Nemui was asleep. Honestly, I think he’s still asleep.

I had hypothesized that Nemui falls into a very light sleep while fighting, relying mostly on body memory and possibly chakra sensing. He probably works very well with his teammate, C, especially if they’ve managed a bastardized version of some of the Yamanaka jutsu.

Personally, I think he relies a lot on hearing while he’s asleep, though it’s also possible that he navigates based on smell. It’s equally probable that he’s proficient at sensing.

Which means… yes. It’s almost as if we’re going over my plans again. As if on cue, Itachi grabs a kunai, throwing it in a line at Nemui. His body sways, just enough to doge the kunai, then wobbles back, as if nothing happened.

Murmurs fill the audience as they try to figure out what’s happening, but I pay them no mind. My eyes are glued to the match. I catch a flicker of electricity… and Nemui disappears, yet again.
Itachi jumps upward, and Nemui’s lightning-covered arm swipes through the spot where Itachi had been standing.

Another two kunai, a small explosion… and the pattern continues, like a game of cat and mouse.

Itachi lands, Nemui stills, there’s a pause, and then Itachi doges as Nemui shoots at him, body crackling with electricity.

There’s a growing murmur of disquiet in the audience as the pattern continues to repeat… but I smirk.

The trap’s practically textbook-perfect at this point, and Itachi’s about to spring it. I sit on my hands, desperately trying not to perform a preemptive victory dance.

He’s almost in position… he’s almost there…

…

Nemui stills, and I grin. Itachi’s got this in the bag.

Itachi lands in a crouch, attached with chakra to the wall of the stadium, and yet again throws weapons at Nemui…

…

Only this time, almost immediately as the shuriken leave his hands, there’s an almost painfully loud, concussive blast as the tags—which Itachi had been carefully scattering—explode.

The audience gasps, almost in union, but I’m on the edge of my seat. Please let this work. Pleasepleasepleaseplease…

There’s a sharp hum, a couple of twang-ing sounds… and a sharp, cut-off yelp.

As the smoke clears, the audience goes absolutely silent.

I grin.

Three… two… one…

“Winner: Itachi of Konohagakure!” The examiner calls, stepping away from Nemui. Or rather, the burrito of wires and explosive tags that used to be Nemui.

“Woohoo!” Shisui calls, practically jumping out of the booth, and I laugh.

“Good job, Itachi!” I call, running over to the window to wave down at him. “You did it! You won!”

One person starts clapping. Then, another. Soon, the entire audience is cheering.

Below, Itachi beams. He bows towards the middle box, and punches a fist into the air. The audience just cheers louder, and I feel giddy with relief.

After a while, when the audience finally quiets down, Kichirō-ojisan pulls me aside.

“You know, I’d been wondering why you’re wearing such an odd combination of colors,” he comments, eyebrow raised. “The kimono you’re wearing really isn’t proper right now. And I know
you’re not stupid, Hasuki-kun, nor prone to making these sorts of… mistakes. After the match, however… you’re making a very strong statement, you know?”

I look pointedly at my knees and nod, desperately trying not to fidget. “I had… asked, Okaa-san, that is. And… there are chrysanthemums on my obi, so it’s look like I’ll look completely ignorant.” I bring a hand to my head, feeling the metal perched in my hair, serving as the centerpiece for the half-up half-down hairstyle I’d decided to adopt today. “And, with this kanzashi… it’s not the most traditional, but it fits in well enough. Plus, it was a present from Itachi, so… I thought it appropriate enough.”

I shrug.

“Plus, it’s not like having a family heir decide to be a shinobi is very traditional and socially acceptable, either,” I mutter, a little defensively.

Kichirō-ojisan sighs, and I tense… but then, a hand plops down on my head, and I look up to see him smiling, even if he’s also rubbing his temples. “You… you are quite the handful, aren’t you? I thought I’d seen it all when Kimiko ran off with your Otō-san.” He laughs a little. “Well, everything turned out well enough for them. I hope, for your sake, that Amaterasu shines on you, too.”

I tilt my head, trying to decide if that’s good. “Thanks?”

Kichirō-ojisan pinches my cheek. “I have no idea what might come of this. You’re making a rather loud statement. However… I mean, at least you had the sense to declare yourself to a person and not an entire clan.”

“I’m not an idiot, Kichi-jichan,” I frown. “Some Uchiha are complete jerks, and while I like Itachi and Shisui and Kagami-jiisan and Mikoto-obasama… well, I’m not that close with Fugaku-sama. I’m not about to… say we’re allied or something.”

“See? You’re clever, Hasuki, and sensible enough. Also… what you did with the bright colors on black? Absolutely stunning. I’ll have to rush to be the first back to the capital.” Kichirō-ojisan winks. “Only five years old and already setting fashion trends. I couldn’t be prouder.”

A cheer from the crowd pulls our attention to the match, and Kichirō-ojisan bites back a curse. He reaches for the paper we’re all given, to keep track of the matches, but a quick glance of the field is enough for me to find out what’s happening.

“That’s Kusagakure no Shiba and Iwagakure no Ittan. I don’t think we missed anything special—maybe a bit of taijutsu, some shurikenjutsu… but Iwagakure no Ittan is very proficient with Doton ninjutsu, apparently.” I jerk my chin at a corner of the field. “I think he just revealed that.”

“You don’t sound very surprised,” Kichirō-ojisan comments.

I turn, smirking a little. “No, I don’t,” I agree.

Itachi won his second round, too. It… was relatively boring. A few explosions, a few carefully placed genjutsu, clones, and more than one substitution… and a few fireballs. It was a very nice match. Clean, and actually interesting. I think I quite like Iwagakure no Ittan. He seems like a sensible person.

Of course, I definitely respect him for giving Itachi such an amazing opportunity to demonstrate his skills. Mainly, Ittan-san had sunk a square of earth around Itachi.
That was a very good move. It was a solid choice, and it could have guaranteed him a victory against anyone else.

... 

Itachi simply flooded the pit with water— just normal, un-modified river water— and jumped out.

Of course, he could have just provoked Ittan-san into throwing excess ammunition down until the boulders piled up, but… he probably decided not to draw the match out to the point where it would be a bit boring to watch.

As it is, his dramatic re-entrance— and subsequent takedown of Ittan-san— was seriously cool.

But, before that…

As expected, C-san was the one to advance. Kirigakure no Gōzu was good… but he wasn’t good enough, and his skillset put him at a unique disadvantage in this match. Hiding in mist doesn’t do much when you’re against a sensor. All it took C-san to win was to evade until he managed to grab the chain of Gōzu-san’s weapon. After that, well… metal’s a conductor. So, one Raiton ninjutsu, and… winner, Kumogakure no C!

...

Hyūga Iroha failed. Miserably.

It was actually kinda funny to watch… although you really had to cringe several times. He lost his temper in the middle, and ended up insulting everything about Kumogakure no Darui, from his stature to his clothing, to his parentage, to Kumogakure.

I’m actually very amazed at Darui-san’s composure— from his body language, and that of his teammates, Iroha-san managed to hit on a… rather sensitive point. That is to say, a sensitive point or three. I really don’t know. There was truly breathtakingly hilarious range and variety of insults, from my point of view. It probably wasn’t nearly so funny for Darui-san, or even Iroha-san, for that matter.

And… Darui and C? They didn’t fight. It was quite amusing. They’d walked down to the arena floor, faced each other… it’s like one of those scenes you’d expect from a cowboy movie, with that dramatic showdown scenery and tumbleweeds in the background.

...and then, “I forfeit.” The most disappointing letdown ever, made all the more frustrating by the fact that I had been really anticipating that match. It could have been so cool, but they just… gah!

...

Itachi’s match with Kumogakure no Darui, though… now that was a match to be remembered.

It started off as a mid-range sword-versus-kunai fight. Then, it moved to close combat. When Darui-san started channeling elemental chakra through his sword, Itachi jumped back, about as far back as he could go. Thus started The Plan.

Well… technically, there were about… I think eight Plans, but they were all part of the Plan-To-Have-Itachi-Beat-Kumogakure-no-Darui.

I’m actually quite glad it was Darui-san and not C-san— just as I’d hoped, Darui-san has some experience with genjutsu, thanks to his teammate, but he’s not as keen a sensor.
The short story is that though various sealed-away supplies, a copied jutsu from Gōzu-san, and copious use of genjutsu, Itachi won.

The longer story is that through a complicated system of various insulators and conductors, set in place with skill, luck, mist, and more than a few genjutsu, Itachi managed to trick Darui-san into electrocuting himself, which slowed him down enough for Itachi to repeat his earlier feat of burrito-ification. Or, maybe spring-roll-ification might be more appropriate? Makizushi-ification? I honestly don’t know. But, suffice to say, the end result was a cocoon of ninja wire, clay, slightly burnt paper, and oil.

Basically, Itachi wrapped Darui-san in wire, dumped the contents of a storage seal filled a mix of with wet clay and paper on him, covered him with more clay, aimed several low-temperature fireballs at him, and then dumped a bottle of oil over him.

I’m not sure if the clay-filled oven mittens were necessary, but I feel like they didn’t hurt.

…

To be honest, it looked quite ridiculous. Absolutely hilarious, even.

Also, I quite like Darui-san. He conceded his loss graciously.

In fact, the overall ending was very nice— I don’t think there was bad blood, or any new grudges.

…

I mean, realizing that Itachi had hurt his ankle rather badly during the match with Ittan wasn’t that nice, nor was the realization that he was running a bit low on chakra from the sharingan, the ninjutsu, and the genjutsu, but…

The injuries— cuts, burns, bruises, etc.— aren’t particularly severe, there’s nothing that can’t be healed, Itachi made a very good impression, and there wasn’t an invasion of S-ranked missing-nin.

Overall, I think I’d call the day a resounding success.

Of course, just winning a tournament isn’t enough— there’s also paperwork.

To be honest, Itachi’s promotion to chūnin is remarkably unremarkable. It was arguably the most anti-climactic event ever. One day, Itachi was called in, was tossed a vest, and had his registration changed from genin to chūnin.

Bureaucracy is rarely eventful.

The Uchiha clan politics are considerably more eventful, but also considerably less cheerful.

Shisui told me what happened… and, well, it wasn’t pretty.

Honestly, that should be common sense for everyone. When you have a large group of people dissatisfied with the status quo… things happen. Eventually.

Beyond that, though… well, I want to like Fugaku-san. I really do like Fugaku-san… to an extent.

I don’t feel anything like that for Yashiro-san. I’m perfectly fine with hating the two-dimensional cardboard figure of him that I’ve mentally built up.
Honestly, for me, he’s more-or-less become symbolic of everything regarding this entire mess that can be blamed on the Uchiha. He was against Itachi going into ANBU, for one. And yeah, I know that there’s bad blood between the Military Police and ANBU, mostly because of the fact that there is no clear line between what belongs under the jurisdiction of the Military Police Force and what’s the subject for investigation by the Anbu.

It’s up to the Hokage. A few words, and the investigation is taken from one and dumped on the other. As you might imagine… this leads to bad blood.

...

And… another reason I currently want to burn a straw effigy of Yashiro-san?

He was mean to Itachi. And the enemy of my friend is very much my enemy.


And… yes, it’s not entirely on him. I will admit that Itachi might have been a bit hasty in trying to soften tensions with his “we are all comrades of the same village” and “the Senju clan and the people of Konoha are still our people” and “we should stop creating this distance and doing things to fan the flames of rivalry” and “cycle of hatred and conflict” spiel.

However, it wasn’t even a spiel so much as a futile cry. A futile reminder. A futile plea to maybe consider not fanning the tensions.

...and then Yashiro had to go and badmouth me, because of the very fact that Itachi has a friend who’s not an Uchiha apparently means that Itachi’s a traitor to the Uchiha. Excuse me. At the very least, please kindly do some research and acknowledge the fact that I’m honestly more closely tied to the Land of Fire, not just Konohagakure. Also, to imply that I am loyal to Konohagakure… or rather, the Senju clan, especially over the Uchiha, is horribly offensive.

I don’t even know why I’m so offended at that assumption, but I really am.

Maybe it’s because of the… uh… early indoctrination of young children in Konohagakure? Maybe. Because then, his insinuation implies that I am too stupid to think critically. Maybe it’s because his insinuation could also imply that I am loyal to an idea over two of my closest friends. (Indeed, you could make a very compelling argument that Shisui and Itachi are my two closest friends, period. Sorry, Shino.)

I am very offended by that.

Or, you know, it’s probably his insinuation that Itachi— and Shisui— should break off our friendship and cut ties to me. That follows his insinuation that I am… not a good friend or something… and that our friendship is somehow unequal, or, again, that I do not value my friends.

...

It’s probably one of those. Yashiro-san is really amazing. Usually, when I think deeply about things, I end up stripping emotions away and casting everything in a logical light.

However, currently, I really want to punch Yashiro-san in the face.

...
No. A punch isn’t suitable. I want to *claw his face off*.

…

I guess this is what it means to feel “catty.”

…

At least Fugaku-san tried to smooth things over after that, even if in doing so, he basically just brought up Itachi’s age and blamed his statements on naivety and youth and… Itachi not knowing the full weight of what he’s suggesting and being a bit too impulsive.

I mean… I don’t like it, but I can accept it, and I also respect Fugaku-san for doing what he did.

…

I’m kinda thankful for Yashiro-san, though— it turns out that Itachi and Shisui can be spiteful when the mood hits them.

But… remember, it’s *Itachi and Shisui*, not just random spiteful teenagers/preteens who, due to relative maturity, are probably going through their version of teenage rebellion. And thus, they’re teaching me clan techniques.

So… the first thing you should know about clan techniques is not to ask about clan techniques. Learning clan techniques is considered, by some, to be somewhat similar to bloodline theft— a pretty big deal.

As in, there’s a pretty good chance of you getting killed if you steal one, whether by angry members of the clan you stole from… or because you’re just not predisposed to that type of technique.

Kekkei genkai are not the only thing that’s passed down in families. As you might know, chakra affinities are somewhat genetic. Other things, rooted in chakra and blood but *not* elemental affinities, are also genetic, or at least due to special early training or… something. It would be more accurate to call them chakra inclinations, I think.

For example… according to Kiyohime, Orochimaru-san’s family has an affinity for poisons and flexibility and disguise. They also tend to look very pretty.

Some families have better chakra control, some have denser chakra (like the Hatake), some have more chakra, etcetera. Some replenish chakra faster, some tend to have larger reserves of chakra… etcetera. Kinda like IQ and/or physical condition.

One good distinction between a kekkei genkai, an affinity and an inclination might be… oh, the Uzumaki clan. Physically, they tended to have red hair and vibrant eye colors. Some had the kekkei genkai of chakra chains. Most had an elemental *affinity* to water… though wind and lightning weren’t uncommon. For the most part, they were also *inclined* to have very strong chakra. (I’m not that good with adjectives, though, so my description might be a bit off.)

As I’ve mentioned before, this usually gets passed down in clans. Or families, which are like clans, but significantly smaller. Most of the time, clan jutsu stays in clans… partially because people who don’t have the correct inclinations, etcetera, might have… not-so-pretty results from using clan jutsu. For example, if someone who’s not an Akimichi tries to use an Akimichi technique… they probably don’t have the stores of fat to accommodate. And they don’t have the general training, bone density, etcetera.
Others are just private, and clan members don’t take kindly to non-clan members knowing. What I’m currently learning... falls into that category.

Namely, the Uchiha taijutsu forms.

(Technically, the Katon: Gōkakyū, or the great fireball thingy, also counts as a clan technique... but a lot of what’s currently Konohagakure techniques were first Senju or Uchiha techniques, so... things are complicated.)

We also finally get around to celebrating Shisui’s birthday, which is nice. We’d kind of pushed it off because of the Chūnin Exams... and the year before, it had been rather inconvenient in general, so we tried to go all-out. Or, rather, we followed Shisui’s lead.

Itachi and I both chipped in to create a... well, living space, for Shisui’s rabbits— now fully grown, and they shed and poop way too much for me. Shisui seems happy with them, however, but I think it’s because he’s out so often that it’s usually Kagami-jiisan who takes care of them.

It was a simple thing, with wood and wires, and it wasn’t actually that hard to build. Itachi and Shisui have been really insistent that I spend more time on shurikenjutsu these days, so while working with the wires is a bit painful, it’s not that bad.

The rabbits look pretty happy with their new arrangement, too.

Regarding the shurikenjutsu... it’s useful. Unfortunately, it’s not particularly fun. As a result, I spend a lot of time sulking while working on my flexibility.

...I’ve gotten pretty flexible. As in, when I showed Shisui, he commented that I could probably pass as a contortionist.

And that reminds me— on especially frustrating days, Shisui consoles me by helping me with other acrobatic tricks. They’re fun. I end up dizzy and sore and sometimes bruised by the end of the day, but I’m always cheerful. Shisui’s pretty good about making sure I don’t hit my head.

Other than that, though... I’ve been spending a remarkable amount of time with Emigiku-oneechan and having Okami-san, Hisagiku-san, critique my rather poor attempts at teaching myself traditional ink painting. She also happily yells at my ikebana arrangements. Emi-neechan likes coming up with backstories for why I might display or send each particular arrangement. They’re all love stories, for some reason. I still don’t quite get that, considering that’s almost never my intention.

(And I say “almost” because I wanted to see how I might subtly reject someone. And because Emi-neechan’s deliberately challenged me to make love-themed arrangements more than once.)

Shinko-chan, on the other hand, likes to make up the weirdest, most elaborate backstories possible.

Also, I made the very bad judgement call of introducing her and Emi-neechan. They were a bit frosty with each other for a week... but now, they’re practically best friends. Emi-neechan actually comes over during the slower times once a week or so, now, in order to chat with Shinko-chan and spend some time with me. It’s a bit awkward, and more than a bit unnerving when I see them writing down notes on... something. I don’t know what that something is. Hopefully, it’s just Shinko’s plan for the future. She’s quite the aspiring businesswoman, and rather ambitious, too. She’s somehow already doubled the shop’s clientele by adding a few elements to the menu, mainly through a few changes
that have since proved popular with genin, chūnin, and just younger people, in general.

...I think she and Otō-san and Okaa-san, and now Emi-neechan, are planning to expand the shop, though, because an expanded clientele also has its problems—namely, everything’s a bit too crowded, and now we might run the risk of losing some customers.

Apparently, there’s a shop or two on the Main Street that they’re planning on buying.

I really regret bringing up the idea of themed cafés. Emi-neechan and Shingo-chan have been drawing things, and I cannot emphasize the sense of dread I feel. I don’t even know why I’m so terrified, but I am. Oh, I really am.

I continue to practice my “cursive” on my own, sometimes with Kagami-jiichan or Shisui and/or Itachi. When he has time, I try to continue the English lessons with Itachi, but he’s a fair bit busier now that he’s a chūnin.

I can’t spend too much time with them, though—they basically hoarded the last month of my life, and I don’t want to make Shino feel like he’s being left out—I spend early afternoons with him, and often Torune-san, in the gardens...or, often, their house. Torune-san reminds me a bit of Itachi, sometimes, in how he quietly dotes on Shino. I actually feel bad for Itachi on some days—Torune-san and Shino have a very sweet relationship. In contrast, Sasuke’s...a bit of a brat.

There. I said it. And believe me, I know. I’ve taken pity on Sasuke, for some reason or another, and I spend many afternoons/evenings babysitting him. (Honestly, it’s probably more that I’ve taken pity on Itachi and Mikoto-obasama—Sasuke is seriously a brat. It’s almost nostalgic how much he reminds me of my little brothers Before.)

Of course, I also don’t want to be rude to Hitomi-sama, either.

I spend about a quarter- koku every morning with Hitomi-sama. Her stomach’s getting a bit noticeable now, and sometimes, I can even feel the baby kick!

I’m a bit worried about Hitomi-sama, though. She often gets dizzy. I’ve actually started scouring the library—and the brains of everyone I know—regarding...well, pregnancy.

I start running errands for Hitomi-sama, since she has some...rather weird cravings. I don’t mind, though. I enjoy having the opportunity to meet people, to network, to practice negotiating, and to just generally explore Konohagakure. I’ve actually already filled up two face-books, and I’m on my way to filling up a third. Hitomi-sama also lets me keep the change, when she sends me shopping, which is just the icing on the cake as far as I’m concerned.

Through a series of circumstance even I am not quite sure of, my studies go from researching—or rather, reading through any journals Orochimaru-san has collected regarding infants and expecting mothers—to scouring scrolls on medical ninjutsu for chakra control exercises I can use to challenge myself.

And it’s while I’m digging around in the Library for other, more beginner-friendly books that I bump into Hokusai Fukuto-san again. A bit literally, in this case, considering that during our meeting, he startled me...while I was on a relatively tall ladder, carrying a few books...which caused me to drop the books...which meant that I then jumped off the ladder in an effort to catch the books...and then, Fukuto-san caught me. And my books.

Thus started the interrogation.

“Aren’t you the kid...your parents were the civilians in that accident during the spring, two years
ago, right?"

"Hm. How old are you, gaki?"

"Are you planning to attend the Academy?"

"Do you plan on becoming a medic-nin?"

"That book’s a mess. Get this one."

After barely a quarter- koku, I somehow end up with two enormous books on biology and various processes within the body, and one thin book of chakra exercises and an order to visit Fukuto-san— because yes, it’s Fukuto-san and not Hokusai-san because yes, he is very clearly not a vegetable— when I master all of the exercises. And, apparently I’m not his patient, because there’s something about doctor-patient confidentiality that also exists in this world?

I actually don’t know. I remain quite confused. I think that whatever happened is good, though? I don’t remember any Fukuto-san in the original story. Still… I don’t know. I’m kinda scared, kinda nervous, but I’m also rather eager.

Also, I can’t believe I didn’t realize this earlier, but if Itachi actually ends up sick… maybe I can help heal him. I don’t have any plans, particularly, but I do know that “Itachi dying” is as far off from my list of things I want to happen as I currently am from Europe.

Unfortunately, my good mood doesn’t last long. There’s… rather bad news, from Itachi.

…

Apparently, he’s managed to find some of Danzō’s metaphorically sticky fingerprints, and… we don’t know why Danzō was meddling, but we’re all pretty sure it can’t mean anything good.

…

So, Itachi had been taking care of some paperwork in regards to his promotion to chūnin.

That’s fine.

His old teammate, Suzukaze Himuka, caught him there to congratulate him on the promotion.

That’s also fine.

What’s not fine is that… well, it turns out, his third teammate? Aburame Yōji? Around the same time as it was decided that Itachi would be taking the chunin exams, Yōji was transferred somewhere else, and Himuka-san hasn’t seen him since. In fact, the transfer was so sudden that she hadn’t even had a chance to say goodbye.

Itachi brought it up, mentioning that something felt weird about the situation. What kind of transfer happened so suddenly you couldn’t even say goodbye? There was only one thing he could think of— ANBU. When you add that together with the fact that Yōji had only just been made a genin, and Itachi couldn’t remember him ever doing anything vaguely amazing when they went on missions together… something didn’t add up.

…

That’s actually why I dragged Itachi and Shisui to go talk with Aburame-sama.
...so… you know, Itachi was… very right. Alarmingly right. As in, I really wish he hadn’t been right, but he is, and now I’m kinda scared to sleep alone.

When I asked Aburame-sama, we learned some… interesting facts.

So, first off… his mother died in childbirth. That’s actually not that surprising— having kids is amazingly dangerous. As in, if you’re giving birth to a kid, you have a 1% chance of dying. And that number only gets higher with shinobi, considering how hard it is for shinobi to get pregnant in the first place… and adding in various chakra-based complications. That’s also not counting the statistics of getting fatally wounded while pregnant, or something.

But, moving on.

Aburame Yōji was raised by an abusive father who was jealous of Yōji’s natural talent. When Yōji accidentally spilled juice on his father on his fifth birthday, his father slit his throat to punish him, which ended up rendering him… essentially, mute. He couldn’t speak. Yōji retaliated by killing his father.

And thus, Aburame Yōji became an orphan.

Aburame-sama did his best, but… well, after Yōji-san originally became a genin at the age of 11, he was soon recruited into Root, an ANBU faction led by Shimura Danzō, who somehow managed to develop a way for Yōji-san to use his kikaichū to produce words. Though effective, he prefers to remain silent, because it makes his voice sound weird and tires him out.

About three years ago, Yōji-san was assigned an undercover mission in the Academy, supposedly to collect information on the instructors. It was a simply, low-risk task that was implied to be just a routine inspection. A little while ago, however, Aburame-sama started getting suspicious— he had thought that Yōji-san had returned to ANBU. Thus, when we visited… and so clearly believed that Aburame Yōji was not, in fact, in ANBU… well, Aburame-sama decided to investigate.

He warned me to be careful.

…

I don’t need the warning— I know more than enough about what Danzō is capable of. The only thing I’m worried about… I hope Aburame-sama will take his own advice.

あききぬとめにはさやかに見えねども風のおとにぞおどろかれぬる

When autumn came
My eyes clearly
Could not see it,
Yet in the sound of the wind
I felt it.

aki kinu to me ni wa sayaka ni miyenedomo kaze no oto ni zo odorokarenuru
Author’s Note: I’m sorry about how long this took— as a junior in high school, my academic performance is currently really important. My GPA was slipping quite significantly, and preparing for AP exams is never an easy task. It might be best not to expect the next update update until June 1. AP Exams are over... but I still have an SAT Subject Test, and... yeah. I should be able to have a chapter ready by then, though! Fingers crossed!

…

Who here has seen those Google Translate videos with Malinda Kathleen Reese? If you haven’t, the main idea is that translations can get very weird. (Gradually watermelon, anyone? And, of course… this kind of tea is necessary to accelerate.) Well… apparently, this poem translates to, more or less, “Akinoku Tome looks like a kayak, but it's a marvelous windy weird” through the translate option on RōmanjiDesu, which makes use of Google Translate.

…just watch, that’s going to be the name of a character or something. I don’t know how and I don’t know why, but that name actually sounds like a legitimate name, and Makoto’s going to have this mental commentary that he looks like a kayak. Oh, and it’s going to have been a very windy, marvelously weird day.

Also, this is why I need people to let me know if something’s off.

…

On a separate note, I really sincerely hope you enjoyed this. Each of the characters in the final round, and quite a few before, are canon. They are canonical. However… well, this is my take on canon. Sometimes, I choose to make things a little different. Sometimes, it’s a legitimate mistake. I did my best.

Like putting Nemui on a team with Darui and C. The genin teams don’t make the most sense, but I did my best and pulled actual characters from canon when I could. This was a headache and then some, but I think the results are worth it. And I think it says something about me that I’d rather spend two days going through profiles of background characters on Narutopedia and sorting them out than just making my own characters.

Also, can you tell that I tend to get a bit wrapped up in stuff I like? This happens with school projects, too, sometimes. I pull an all-nighter on something kinda pointless.

Still… hopefully, you appreciate it. I didn't go into too much detail, because this is from Makoto's perspective, but I hope you like it, nonetheless. Canonically, Itachi only fights one battle and then is withdrawn, because the higher-ups decide that his one showing already qualifies for chūnin and therefore further participation would be pointless/a waste of time.

…

This is my middle finger to that. Canon Itachi is a bit of a mess. Correction: he's a complete mess, and his characterization is very much proof of that. He's more
melodramatic than Romeo, for heavens' sake. This Itachi’s much more well-adjusted and generally pleasant to be with. See? Makoto’s already making changes.

Also... this is kind of important. Itachi is not a pacifist. I'm honestly confused if this is a translational thing, or just a bunch of people not knowing the definition of pacifism. Itachi is not a pacifist. A pacifist is a person who believes that war and violence are unjustifiable. Canonically, Itachi's fine with violence. He realizes that force and intimidation are sometimes necessary... to the point where even Danzō kinda likes and respects him. Itachi might not like it, but he realizes that force, intimidation, violence... they're important, and often necessary. In the Itachi Shinden light novels, he basically tortures his opponent to the point where it's implied that the other person's shinobi career is over. Also... Sasuke? Tsukiyomi? I'll leave it at that. *Itachi is not a pacifist*. You don’t need to be a pacifist to realize that maybe wars aren't the best things to have. Itachi is just a very smart, very nice, *very sensible* kid who can think outside the box set by society. *ITACHI IS NOT A PACIFIST!*

…

Uh… okay. Rant over. Moving on! I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’ve made a discord. So, now, whoever guesses accurately will get the option to request something, as well as access to the spoilers channel… for a month. Or, possibly forever, depending.

The question for this chapter is…

What’s an important event in the Kishimoto’s Naruto that will happen very soon? As in, it will happen in the next year or so? (Hint: I’d recommend you look at everyone’s age.) Bonus points go to anyone who can figure out how Makoto gets indirectly involved.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!