The Legend of Three Leaves

by peccolia

Summary

Unwanted. Overlooked. Ignored.

She grew in her brothers' shadows unchecked—and when they finally noticed, she'd become wild and unstoppable as a weed. (SI OC fic)

Notes

Welcome to the AO3 edition of The Legend Of Three Leaves. This fic is inspired by not only Ysmirel's support and request for a fic like this but also these wonderful OC/self-insert/reincarnation fics: Supporting Hashira (柱) (Kasu. Hagase, now Emocean), Heaven and Hell (Abundant E), and the OC fic: Redesign (xLilim), but on the Senju side of things. Probably will have more than just a couple of OCs. As usual, it's a drama fic revolving around family and siblings, with some lighter tones of humor and plenty of angsty shadows around the edges. And even some romance later on. This fic will be transferred hopefully on a weekly basis until it's caught up with the FFNet version, and will then only be updated here on this site. Feel free to follow me on tumblr at peccolias or peccoliawrites for updates, progress info, and excerpts!

WARNINGS: It's set during wartimes, so there will be graphic death, violence, brutality, and cruelty. Also in the forecast are issues of sexism and misogyny and
alluded sexual assault/rape, for a fair content warning label heads up. And lots of swearing.

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy!
"Damn. I'm \textit{way} too old for this shit," was in no way a particularly striking or notable statement to make upon waking up in a body too small for what you are—or at least, what you once were.

But it will, for \textit{damn} sure, fill you with a nauseous surge of dread when the words come out as nothing more than a string of disconnected and unintelligible, whining babbles. So, you make more of those same sounds to protest it, hoping for a miracle. With a tiny, heavy little baby tongue that has no grasp on spoken language whatsoever.

This was Mitsuba's first problem. And—well, her name wasn't \textit{always} Mitsuba, but it was now and will continue to be, and that's what matters. In fact, she'd be more than happy to leave the past behind, if not for the second problem.

That being the large, heavy body kneeling over hers. Dripping something hot and thick that stunk of sharp, bitter metal and by all means was probably more a corpse than a living body, at this point. No—not probably. \textit{Definitely}, because of the blade skewering through their chest and sticking deep into the ground, cutting into the outside of her arm on the way.

Inch by inch, the slack corpse slipped down the blade and pressed heavier upon her new, small and defenseless form.

Death had come once, and it had come again, soon.

The whining babbles turned to choked, wheezing sobs. The small baby arms did nothing to shove the crushing weight away, and she'd always had nightmares of being smothered to death by those stupid trap ceilings in adventure movies. Maybe this was some twisted sort of hellscape she'd ended up in, where all of her worst fears came to life.

Maybe she should have converted to Christianity in her final breath.

Better yet, maybe she should \textit{now}.

Whatever blips of light that had been flashing by beyond the corpse's clothing became complete darkness as the full weight sank upon her, restricting her lungs. Pushing them flat as her creaking ribcage strained to hold its shape.

\textit{Fuck. Fuck!} The words no longer hit the air—didn't even leave her throat. The darkness—she wasn't even sure if it was because the body's clothing had curtained around her or if she was just on the verge of blacking out. She hoped—begged, \textit{prayed}—consciousness would give out before her bones.

If she could have closed her eyes, she would have, resigned. She regretted every bug she'd ever stepped on and smashed with her fists.

\textit{This is how I go, crushed under the weight of my own sins.}

But if she'd closed her eyes, she wouldn't have seen the light.

Just a flicker, a slash of white in the dark—not like the whirling starbursts dancing and popping in her vision.

Then, it exploded into a bright, blinding burst of white as the corpse's crushing and final weight
vanished.

It could have been the stark and sudden, second pass into death—but, no. She knew it wasn't, because the blade sliced into her skin again as the body rose up and fell away, assuring her she still had a life that felt pain.

"Mitsuba! Mitsuba!"

The light flickered, strange. Like fire—lots of it. Burning white, yellow, orange—vermilion. As oxygen filled her body, filled her up like a balloon that had gone too flat, too fast, she saw a face. Not a full face—but the image of a face, blurry, like from the other side of a frosted glass window.

Her arm—the one that felt pain, the one that made this nightmare real, unstuck itself from the muddy, bloody swamp she'd sunk into and reached up, high, toward that face. That person. Her savior.

They grabbed it. Not just it—her. Entirely, fully, pulling her close and leaving the scene of death far behind.

There's a saying that goes: out of the frying pan, into the fire, and, well, not to make it literal, but there was fire. Raging, burning all around them.

Surviving this ordeal brought Mitsuba to her third, and most distressing, problem.

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I. Sow

Chapter One

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For days, Mitsuba slept.

Recovering, they said, but really, she just didn't want to wake up and face the hot mess she'd been thrust into.

All things considered, she'd gone from being smothered and shoved toward death's doorstep to being booted back into life and dubbed a miracle child. Not a baby, but a child.

Two years old—and almost dead on the battlefield. The fucking battlefield.

The body that had almost killed her belonged to a midwife who'd scooped her up and ran, trying in vain to get them both to safety as they fled their home in the midst of enemy invasion.

In this world, women and children weren't spared—never were, really. That wasn't what bothered her.

It was hearing the names Uchiha and Senju thrown around so casually that did.

Senju—she was a Senju. And her brothers were Itama, Kawarama, Tobirama, and Hashirama. Her father, Butsuma. And her mother, Kanae.
Kanae was the one who'd so kindly and generously divulged this information to her while she slept, like some kind of fucked up bedtime story.

And, in all honesty, it should have been a story. A manga, to be exact. Nowhere near her, and life, and death, and universe-hopping reincarnation, or whatever this was.

A sick joke, she wanted to believe. Any second, she'd wake up in a hospital bed with her dad at her bedside, holding a cheap, shiny get-well balloon and smiling in that shallow, barely-apologetic way of his, because it was his fault she was here in the first place.

No—no. It was no one's fault but her own. Live stupid, die stupid, as it were.

She couldn't sleep forever.

When she finally opened her eyes, she wasn't alone. There, curled up beside her, was a child with wild, two-toned hair, snoozing quietly. She hadn't even felt him—not even with his hands so close to her treated and wrapped but still-sore arm.

He breathed through his barely-parted lips, eyes twitching slightly behind closed lids, chasing after something in a dream.

At least someone could sleep well.

Mitsuba sat up and felt the pull of her sleeve as she tried to drag it out from under the boy, not kind enough to keep from disturbing him. She gave it a rough tug, in fact, and his eyes scrunched together before shooting open wide as he took in the sight before him, lips still parted, but more due to the fact that his mouth was hanging open. Maybe he was a perpetual mouth breather.

He didn't speak—not to her. He scrambled to his feet, almost stumbling before pushing off from the ground with his hands, and scurried away, out of sight, with a high-pitched yelp.

"Mom! Mom!"

Her eyes followed him as he left, and she took in the sight of the room in the daylight.

Before, she'd watched the ceiling in the dark, dead of night, unable to see the finer details. Now, she knew without a doubt she was a veritable Dorothy in the majestic and mystical Land of Oz.

At her side was a screen—paper, a little dirty from age, depicting a swooping oriental design she didn't care to look too deeply at, but thin enough to let the light through. Probably to keep it out of her eyes during rest.

Beneath her was a mess of blankets and a lumpy futon set down across the criss-crossing pattern of pale, greenish-tan tatami mats. They smelled—strongly—of musty, earthy straw. Like the room hadn't been properly aired out in ages and this place that they'd taken refuge in was long neglected.

And her body, once clad in tank tops and T-shirts and jackets and jeans, was now covered in a deep green yukata tied loosely at her waist, rumpled and not fully wrapping around her small, chubby legs thanks to tossing and turning in her sleep like a whirlwind. Soft, but strange. She'd never even liked wearing bathrobes, before.

The pitter-pattering of fast little feet returned almost as soon as the boy had left—and when he returned, careened around the corner of the open doorway, he all but flew straight into her.

She kept her balance as his arms wrapped tight around her body and his face smushed against her
cheek, trapping her hair in between. He still didn't utter a word. No: *oh, boy, am I glad to see you!* or even a simple *hey*. He only nuzzled his cheek against hers with the widest smile she'd ever seen anyone send her way.

"Oh, Itama, give her some space, won't you?" a gentle, soothing voice chimed in from the hallway. Itama—one of her brothers. Yet, so close in age.

*Twin*, a voice whispered in the back of her thoughts. Among other things. Like who he was. And when he'd die.

But—more importantly, she hadn't even heard Kanae's footsteps, and before she knew it, the woman had knelt at the edge of the futon and reached over to coax the boy out of the stifling hug and into her own lap. She bent down to press her red-painted lips to the crown of her son's head and her fair, almost translucent, eyelashes fluttered gently closed as he snuggled against her instead.

For the first time, Mitsuba paid close attention to her looks—and, really, it was hard to look anywhere else.

Kanae was albino. Blatantly so, with silvery-blond hair taken straight from moonlight, snow-pale skin with some veins almost visible beneath but covered like a secret, and striking, slanted red-violet eyes that wavered between colors in shade and light.

A damn beauty, she was—the frail kind that looked like it would shatter if you tried to touch it—like a falling snowflake.

But she wasn't frail. Her hands and arms, when they slipped past the sleeves of her royal blue kimono, were peppered with tiny scars from where they'd been nicked by blades in battle before she'd settled to bear children.

Even so, there were lines and shadows under her kind eyes that spoke of onset illness.

On some level, Itama must have noticed it, too. He didn't press quite as close to her.

"And how are we feeling?" Kanae's voice floated through her thoughts like a melody as she returned the stare, the smile never falling from her red-painted lips.

Mitsuba parted her lips, then pressed them together again. Ran her child's tongue along the back of her tiny, baby teeth and sought the proper words. Japanese—what little she'd once known of it. What little more she'd picked up from listening to Kanae.

"Gotta pee."

In some way, almost being crushed to death had compressed her into something strange and alien—at least, that's how everyone seemed to treat her. Everyone but Kanae and Itama. And in some way, they were right.

That day, Senju Mitsuba had died. But revived anew, with another person in her place as a stand-in with a second chance.
It had certainly compressed a grown-ass woman into the body of a child. One who was ill-prepared for the gruesome nature of this war-torn world.

But, oh-so-fortunately, the clan leader's only daughter had her place in society and Mitsuba had already been cast into the shadows as a future tool for political marriage and a current homemaker who helped her mother tend to matters of the household while the boys were away.

All work, with little play.

Tiny, clumsy hands learned to whisk up a proper cup of matcha.

Tiny, chubby fingers re-learned how to mend torn seams and embroider delicate fabric.

Tiny, child's brain yearned to make use of the adult knowledge it remembered.

Otherwise, it would sit like a stagnant reservoir and sooner or later evaporate. She had to figure up a plan before then. Make use of the time, of the people, to—frankly—get the hell out.

She knew the drill. Could recall most of the story from start to end, and a bit past—but not too much, because sequels never quite lived up to the originals. But there was no use in whining about that when she'd been plopped right in the middle of one of the most harrowing times of shinobi history.

She didn't want any part of it.

Even if she had a sweet, gentle mother and a pretty adorable and devoted twin. There was Butsuma, too, and, well… He was the one who'd saved her, anyway.

(Why, why, why?)

The other three brothers, she didn't see much of. Ultimately, she had to leave while emotional connections were weak—better not to get too attached to a family that was doomed to die. Tobirama and Hashirama, not as soon as the others, but death came for everyone eventually.

Sometimes twice.

Even so, where would she go…? Arguably, she was the safest she could ever be, around someone like Hashirama. Anywhere else, she'd be vulnerable. Alone. A child of barely three, without an inkling of chakra yet.

But—no. There was still hope on that front, wasn't there? It was in her blood. Her heritage.

Mitsuba put aside the day's laundry (let it drop straight to the mud, where it would need even more scrubbing later on) and set her gaze on one of the few, skinny trees that grew within the compound's walls.

On the leaves that grew from its spindly branches.

Too high up for her to reach—so she dropped to her knees at the base of its trunk and sifted her fingers through the soft, patchy grass in search of a stray one that had fallen.

No luck.

"Mitsu, Mom said you could wash this for—what are you doing?"

One of her brothers—no, not just one of. She knew by the upbeat voice that it was Hashirama who
asked the question. And he didn't leave it at that, too curious to just dump his laundry and up and leave like Kawarama or Tobirama would. In fact, she could almost visualize the way his head tilted slightly to the side as his lips parted, much like Itama's, when the shuffling sound of his sandals approached and he stopped at her side.

She looked up when his body blocked the sunlight and met his eyes, blinking owlishly. Without speaking, she rose to her feet and pointed at the branches hanging above them, eyes shifting away from him and following the leaves swaying in the wind.

When she looked to him again, fully expecting him to pick up on the request, she could only breathe a short sigh upon seeing his expression scrunched up in confusion.

Maybe she shouldn't put so much faith in a six-year-old.

His lips rose up in a wide grin. "Aw, come on, don't sigh like that! You sound like Tobirama." A light, carefree child's giggle escaped him before he set his hands on his hips, raising his head toward the treetop. "No, no, I think I get it. You want one of the flowers?"

She shook her head. Hadn't even realized there were blooms on the tree.

His shoulders drooped. "A…a bug? Did you see a butterfly?"

Again, she shook her head.

A frown settled on his face as he hummed, at a loss. "Oh, uh…a leaf, then?"

Third time's the charm. She let a tiny, fake smile pry at her lips and nodded in time with the grin that returned to his face full-force.

Then—he jumped at the tree trunk, feet aimed out as if to kick it down, but when his soles connected he walked against it as if it were an extension of the ground, fully breaking the rules of gravity. Climbed it, effortless, and flipped up to land on one of the overhanging branches that was, to both of them as children, too high for either to safely reach under normal circumstances.

*Normal* being the keyword.

Shinobi—this was what shinobi did. What they were. Rule breakers. Ninja wizards.

Not totally human.

When Hashirama reached the leaves, he didn't just pluck one. He grabbed an entire branch and gave it a firm shake to cast down a flurry of dozens, all falling like a green blizzard into Mitsuba's hands and around her feet. And he followed them down, touching the tree trunk only once to kick off before landing in a crouch beside her. All the while holding his dirty eggshell-colored scarf in his hands.

He handed it out to her as he straightened up, still smiling, oblivious to the twigs stuck in his dark, bowl-cut hair. "There! That's plenty, right? Now, uh, why I came here… I got knocked in the mud earlier and Mom said you could clean this for me. You will, right, Mitsu?"

She nodded. Took the garment from him and fully expected him to leave her be to finish her chores. But…he stayed. Completely threw a wrench in her plans to try testing out the leaf concentration exercise, the barest of basics, well away from watchful eyes.

He stayed, and he plopped right down on the ground in front of her with crossed legs and wide,
curious eyes.

She returned the stare with a furrowed brow, taking a small step back toward the washbasin. Then, almost a beat too late, she huffed out another sigh and closed her eyes, nodding. "Thank you."

"Say, Mitsu, are you really out here to wash laundry?" By now, he'd set his elbows on his knees and leaned forward to rest his chin on his hands, frowning.

She knew he was training as a shinobi (she knew what he would be), but could he really be that perceptive? So young? She scanned his face for something shrewd, but all he gave away was a blank and goofy stare.

"There's nothing else."

"It's just, your sleeves are loose. Where's your tasuki? Did you forget it?"

"Tasuki?" she repeated dubiously, squinting. Balling the scarf between her hands and turning away to return to the wash basin and the laundry she'd abandoned. She dropped it atop the dirty pile and cast her gaze around the area, as if the answer would leap up and bop her in the face if she looked hard enough.

"Yeah, the thing to tie your sleeves back. Didn't Mom show you?"

Oh. Right. The string. Kanae used one to tie back her sleeves during daily chores, and did so often. Might have even mentioned it to Mitsuba before, but it'd slipped her mind. She did provide her with one, but...hell if she knew how to actually tie it herself. She'd planned on just doing her best to not get her sleeves wet.

Mitsuba fished the strip of white fabric out of the space in her obi where she'd tucked it away and held it up for him to see.

Hashirama smiled and beckoned her over. But just as soon as she'd taken a step toward him, Tobirama (or at least she thought it was Tobirama, because he and Kawarama were strikingly similar from a distance until you could get close enough to get a look at their strikingly different eyes) rounded the corner with an irate expression aimed right at their brother.

"There you are. Father's lesson is starting."

He didn't bother sparing her a glance. Didn't linger, either, and left again as soon as he delivered the message.

Definitely Tobirama.

"Ah! Right, right, I'm coming!" Hashirama hopped to his feet and threw Mitsuba a final smile before trailing after their irritable sibling, leaving her with a pile of leaves, a pile of laundry, and a tasuki she had no idea how to use.

But it was easy enough to figure out. And by the time she'd finished scrubbing the laundry clean and setting it to dry, the wind had only blown a few of the fallen leaves away.

She scooped one up by its stem. Held it up to the light and watched its thin surface illuminate with the shape of each vein and filament crossing it.

_How hard can it be?_
Pretty hard, it seemed. The first leaf dropped away immediately. So did the second. And third.

She did have chakra—every living thing did. But, much like the standard circulatory system, she couldn't feel it, and had no idea how to control it, like a strange and foreign beast.

*Come on. Come on—go by your instincts.*

The fourth fell. The fifth fell. The sixth—blown away by the wind.

Her foot stomped down on the ground, hard enough to sting, as frustration surged. As she smacked another leaf against her forehead and held it there, eyes clenched shut.

It was there. *It was there.* Had to be. Deep within, coiled up like a sleeping serpent. It had to be prodded into action. Coaxed to obey. Wake up.

*Wake up.*

*Wake up.*

*Wake up.*

The seventh leaf—

"*Mitsuba!*"

Her eyes snapped open. Turned slowly toward the *engawa*, toward the door her mother had thrown open and all but leapt past just to hurry to her side, to drop to her knees and throw her arms around her, holding her close and breathing hard. Pushing herself far too much.

Trying to stop her.

The seventh leaf had fallen. Dropped away, almost instantly. *Almost.*

Kanae was a chakra sensor. Never outright said it, but that was the only thing that made sense to Mitsuba. It was the only way she could so astutely have known her chakra flow had spiked suddenly and sharply, if only for an instant.

Kanae was also invariably ill. Had been so strong, for a while, but relapsed because… Because of her. She'd heard the wheezing, rattling breaths as her mother held her close, drew her away from the way of the world and dragged her back into the safety of the home.

Now, she was confined to her futon, sweating, coughing, weak. It was only right that Mitsuba took care of her in her ill days.

"*Mitsuba*…"

She'd been sleeping, but at some point she'd stirred and opened her eyes, blinking slowly at her.

"What's that you've got there? Reading practice?" She tried to raise her head to get a better look at the small, bound book clutched in her fingers but ultimately decided against it and let her head fall back against the block-like pillow.
Her hair, usually wound up high atop her head, hung loose, now, in thin, silvery threads fanning over her shoulders. Even her beloved red lipstick was nowhere to be seen. The lack of that bright color, even with her matching eyes, made her look washed out and diluted. Like...a ghost.

Mitsuba tore her eyes away and returned them to the page held between her thumb and forefinger, mid-turn. It wasn't reading practice—though she could have used it for that, since there was plenty of kanji mingled in among the hiragana notes.

It was a medical field guide for herbs. One of the midwives had brought it along and left it behind when they'd moved on to other families, or died. But, fortunately, she didn't need to read the more complicated names since the author had provided illustrations of the necessary plants in high detail, from the leaf shapes and vein patterns to the number of nodes present that put her niche herbalism knowledge to good use. And it was organized broadly, by symptom.

With lips pursed, she held the book up for Kanae to see.

A tired smile crossed her face. "Oh, my. Are you trying to find a remedy?" One of her hands stretched out beyond the blankets and her fingers ghosted against her small knee, too exhausted to lift it toward her hands and compromising. "What did you find?"

"Comfrey," Mitsuba said quietly, tapping a small finger against the broad-leafed, drooping flowers on the page. "It grows here, in the forest. It helps."

Her smile fell, dead on her pale, chapped lips. "You will not leave the compound's walls, Mitsuba."

"It helps," she repeated firmly, with her limited child's tongue. But her furrowed brow softened as a feeble cough interrupted her mother's stern stare. "...Please."

Kanae rested her head back and closed her eyes, breathing a strained sigh through her nose. "Such a stubborn child. But if you must, take one of your brothers with you. Tobirama?"

Mitsuba's brow furrowed once more as she squinted at her mother. The woman knew full well which sibling she got on best with, and he was for damn sure not the one. But her confusion cleared when the door to the hallway slid open and said brother looked in with that perpetual expression he managed to keep between bitter and impassive, much like their father.

Each of her brothers had come by to visit Kanae at various times during the past week between their training, and he and Itama had visited the most frequently. It didn't fit with his character, to be a momma's boy, but he probably felt the closest to her since he'd inherited her looks entirely. Even if he didn't speak much when he sat at her side.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Have you completed your training for the day?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Please take your sister out foraging."

His expression pinched in, just slightly, as his gaze flicked toward her, and then back to their mother. It didn't take a genius to figure out he'd rather be anywhere else. But no one refused Kanae's requests.

To his credit, he didn't even breathe a bratty sigh. He nodded, obedient, and returned to the hallway. "I'll wait by the front gate."
Don't keep me waiting, went unspoken.

Mitsuba cast a long-suffering stare at Kanae as she only smiled, small and knowing. Even a bit sly. "There's a basket in the storage, just over there. Don't forget to take your book with you. And… please, try to get along."

"…Yes, Mom."

Ordinarily, sending children outside the safety of the home during hostile times would be terrible, horrible parenting, but in a time where children were shunted into war as highly-trained, pint-sized killers, it was no different than sending them to a neighbor's house to play for the day.

A four-year-old shinobi was apparently adequate as a bodyguard, in said times. Or—maybe he was five. She wasn't really sure. When you didn't talk with a sibling, you didn't get to know much about them. No matter what kind of world you were in.

But, admittedly, the only hostile thing around for miles was Tobirama.

Away from their mother's sight, he openly pouted. Walked a lazy distance behind her as she scanned the brush for a familiar plant, with his hands set on his hips, or arms sometimes crossed tight. Glaring.

Jealous prick, she wanted to say, but lacked the proper words. And—to be fair, he was just a kid. Probably, before she'd come along to monopolize the woman's time, he'd been Kanae's favorite. How did she know? Because he never tried to hide the way his eyes just glittered when she patted him on the head despite trying to meticulously cultivate that cool and collected bullshit shinobi front. Because she provided that love and affection every child needed and craved, that their father never cared to give.

But, he was just a kid. The boredom of being broody and bitterly silent grated on him, and after a while, he spoke up.

"What are you looking for, anyway?"

"Medicine."

"Medicine?"

She turned to cast him a narrow-eyed, blank stare as she crouched beside a patch of wild grass. Really, if he was going to be belligerent, he should have just stayed behind. "For Mom."

The words hit him like a sucker-punch, by the way his mean expression buckled. But then it returned full-force, meaner than before, as he clicked his tongue and stormed ahead of her. Probably just to hide the tears shining at the edges of his eyes.

…Kanae's sickness couldn't be healed by simple herbal remedy alone—there was no panacea. Mitsuba knew that. They all did. But, at the very least, she could provide her some comfort in her final days.

And you, Tobirama? What are you doing to help your dear mother? Again, she lacked the vocabulary to ask the biting question. But it was petty, anyway. He was just a kid.

Instead, she sighed and sat back on her heels, taking her hands away from the rough, scratchy blades of grass pricking at her wrists. Let her arms rest on her knees as she regarded the messy tangle of green set against the dirt, wondering if this was a fool's errand.
No.

Not entirely.

Getting away from that house, getting some time to herself, even with Tobirama around, brought a peace she hadn't known in a long while. If she'd been forced to stay within that compound, that stifling home, she'd just go stir-crazy.

Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet and turned her head in the direction her brother had stomped away, only realizing he'd vanished from sight with the jolt of a skipped heartbeat.

Surely he didn't hate her so much that he'd just leave her.

She looked behind her, just to make sure he hadn't circled back around. Only the tree trunks and bushes greeted her in a green and brown smear. All blurring together—all the same. She didn't know her way back.

Where would she go?

Where could she go?

Her fingers clutched tight to the small, flat basket hanging in the crook of one of her arms, as her eyes flitted between the trees, trying to catch sight of pale gray or blue. There was still plenty of sunlight—it wasn't even close to evening, yet—but the solitude was getting to her, pressing in close, like that damned body that almost crushed her—

Leaves rustled.

The darkness blinking at the corners of her vision faded away as Tobirama glanced back at her with narrowed, red eyes—appeared right out of nowhere, with his hand pressed against one of the tree trunks a short distance away. Or maybe he'd been there all along.

She blinked, hard, as his drawling voice drifted toward her.

"Are you coming or not?"

She hurried after him.

The comfrey grew close to the ground. Mitsuba found it, quite accidentally, after tripping over her stupid, close, stifling kimono that caught on the undergrowth and sent her sprawling. But—

she found it. Its sharp leaves, tapered like blades, and its tiny white flowers, drooping like bell-shaped dresses and gathered together like a gossiping group at a dance party, matched the book's description perfectly.

"What?" Tobirama grumbled out, caught halfway between holding out a helping hand and just leaving her to pick herself up as she totally and completely ignored his presence at her side.

And she did pick herself up. Shifted onto her knees and reached out to touch the flowers and leaves, before grabbing them by the stem and yanking them from the dirt, root and all.

Some of the dirt must have sprang from the ground and hit him, because he scowled and yanked it from her hold just as soon as she'd uprooted it. "This? This is the medicine you want to take to Mother? A flower?"

"An herb," she corrected evenly, biting back her own scowl. "For tea."
You know they're useful, you brat, why are you getting so worked up over it?

As she reached for it, he held it out of her reach. "You don't even know, do you?"

Pressing her lips together so tight they almost went numb, she turned away and picked another plant, dropping it into her basket.

I do, stupid. The words danced on the tip of her tongue and she chewed them into pieces just to keep them from slipping. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

But he wouldn't leave it at that, because he was jealous. Jealous, and frustrated, and cruel in a way only a child who lacked the proper means to express himself, lacked emotional care and development, lacked everything but how best to prepare himself for battle and bloodshed, could be.

The leaves crunched together as he clenched the plant tight in his fist, then threw it to the ground at his feet, just missing the basket. "Father says she won't make it through the season."

Maybe he expected her to cry. Maybe he wanted her to cry, too, because it was clear in his strained voice that he was getting choked up just thinking about their mother's fate. She didn't turn to confirm it. And maybe he even meant well, unwilling to sugar-coat what everyone else would, just to baby her. Because they didn't give him that courtesy.

For someone who would, in time, claim their rival clan posed a threat for their deep-rooted emotions, he certainly was ridiculously in touch with his.

Instead of answering, or even acknowledging him, she reached for the dropped plant and set it into the basket with the other. Two was plenty—there were more leaves than she needed, already.

Mitsuba rose to her feet calmly, cool, everything he tried to be and failed, and stared into his red and reddened, shining eyes with a frown. The words gnawing up her throat were petty, were cruel in their own way, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

"Spend more time with her, then. Idiot."

He didn't speak another word during the trip back.

But when they returned to Kanae, he didn't leave right away, either.

Kanae did last through the season. A miraculous bounce back, the visiting doctor had said.

(But not because of the comfrey, no, Mitsuba wasn't so self-important to think that changed anything.)

And as such, they entered into the summer a full and complete family, untouched by tragedy.

She was still ill.

Well enough, though, to sit on the open veranda and brush through Mitsuba's hair—pin-straight, long and growing—while she browsed through the old field journal she'd decided to keep close and studied, religiously.
Her hair—she'd never looked that closely at it, before, except when glancing at Kanae's mirror, but it was...strange. Like Itama's, but less so. Where he had two full and opposite colors clashing atop his head, hers was mostly dark with just a strip of unpigmented silver-blonde from scalp to tip at the left front of her head, mostly blending into her bangs. Like her body had been in the process of coloring her hair fully dark before snapping back, realizing she wasn't what she was supposed to be. Or, like an empty marker, there just hadn't been enough ink left to fully color either twin's hair and it ended up split between them, uneven.

Whatever the case, Kanae simply adored brushing her long hair. It was a quiet, peaceful time.

The perfect time to bring up a subject that had long been tabled.

"Mom…" She let the name fade off into the sounds of the droning shriek of the cicada in the trees and the summer breeze that shifted the leaves in a dry rustle. Kanae hummed a response, but kept running the stiff-bristled brush through her hair. "Why haven't I started training like my brothers?"

The brush halted.

"Mitsuba…"

Kanae set the brush down on the lacquered tray she'd brought along with them, already occupied by the slightly-tarnished mirror and a few finely-crafted hairpins.

Mitsuba kept her head forward, steeling herself. "Itama got to the day we turned three."

"Mitsuba, you... You will not be trained as a shinobi."

"Why?"

"Because you're—"

She cut her off, frowning deep. "A girl? I see Touka practice. She—"

"Because you are my daughter." Her uncharacteristic, strong reply commanded silence. Even the cicada's cries had lulled, as if they'd heard it, too, and cowered.

Mitsuba's hands clenched tight around the book's binding, and she kept her stare resolutely on the oscillating treetops she could see beyond the compound's walls. Even as Kanae's hands gently touched her shoulders before slipping around her and pulling her close, up to her chest, with her cheek resting against the crown of her head.

"Far too many of my sisters have been felled in battle. I could never let you face that same fate, Mitsuba. Never." As she spoke, her voice thinned—not from sickness, but from the tears she could feel wetting her scalp. "You are strong, and stubborn. Just like your father, who shares my sentiments. I can see you want more. But, please. Please... Can you not be happy supporting him and your brothers, here, with me? Please. You are the only child I can keep at my side."

"My chakra..."

She didn't finish the thought. Couldn't, because why had she even brought it up in the first place? She already knew the answer before she asked.

Even so, the clunky word she'd never fully pronounced or spoken aloud before still hung at the tip of her tongue, and she liked its taste. Wanted to say it again. Wanted to know it, and its power.
But couldn't. Because no one refused Kanae's requests.
If this life was supposed to be a second chance, it was a piss-poor one.

Especially during the summers that brought on infestations of fleas and lice—but mostly fleas, thankfully. No, not *thankfully*—it was just that they were the lesser evil. Easier to get rid of.

But no less itchy.

"Mitsubaaa," Kawarama's nasally voice, perfect for whining, floated in from the veranda as he climbed up and plopped down on its edge. Not entering the room, no, because she'd already cleaned it and yelled Hashirama into a spiraling faux-depression when he'd come to her seeking a quick fix for the parasite itch with dirt-covered clothes. Kawarama, when he'd gotten wind of her growing talent with folk remedies, warmed up to her damn fast…and also heeded her warning glares without protest.

Of her four brothers, he was the strangest. The second youngest, born soon after Tobirama and not even a full year before Mitsuba and Itama, he greatly resembled the former with a spiky mop of fair hair and cold, blank expression—well, except when he opened his mouth. But, unlike Tobirama, and just like the other siblings, he had brown eyes. And unlike any of his siblings, he sported an x-shaped scar across his right cheek.

A memento from the battlefield—earned from their most recent training campaign. Still covered in the bandage and salve she'd patched over it the previous day.

But, Kawarama... he was the strange one because she hadn't really known anything about him, beforehand. Only that he'd die on that god damned battlefield at a heartbreaking seven years old.

Looking toward the closed door, where the sunlight projected his shadow on the latticed *shoji* screen from behind, he looked impossibly small.

Looking at his dopey face as he picked his nose the moment she slid open the door, he looked impossibly dumb.

He smiled vacantly as he flicked away a booger and set his hands on his crossed legs. "Ah! There you are. Hashi-bro said the flea repellent you gave him worked really great. Have some more to spare?"

*Hashi-bro?* Could one really be so casual in this era?

Mitsuba squinted at him with her mouth half-open as she tried to comprehend it—comprehend *him*. All the while, he smiled, swaying slightly to the side. Scratching his fingers through his hair, with one eye scrunched up.

Sort of...like a puppy.

"I do. Just wait there." It was a challenge, holding back from rolling her eyes at the sight, but somehow she managed it as she turned away from the open doorway and made her way to the
small closet storage space where she kept her tools of the trade.

It was nothing impressive. Just a small, lidded rectangular basket Kanae had provided when she'd realized how serious her interest in herbal medicine had become. She'd even gone so far as to request a "starter kit" of sorts from the visiting physician for her. Whether said physician was a medic-nin or just a civilian practitioner, Mitsuba didn't know, but he used what connections he had to provide her with a bundle of herbs and a mortar and pestle. Not all local—some were imported, it seemed, like the familiar rosemary and basil, or maybe they'd made their way to this land as an invasive species.

(Even now, she had little knowledge of how accurately the shinobi world reflected the culture it was based on, or whether it was all a mixed-up and bastardized smorgasbord all its own, already affected by worldwide trade and a fictional touch.)

He'd even provided a scroll detailing the things her field guide hadn't, though she still had little idea of how to interpret the more complicated kanji characters without asking her mother.

Kanae, no matter how good her intentions were, was not the best language teacher.

But, that aside, Mitsuba had slaved over a hot stove and, through much trial and error, mixed up a salve that kept the fleas at bay and even soothed the bites they left behind. She kept a big, ceramic jar of it in the front of her basket and transferred scoops of it into smaller jars to share with those in need.

At some point, Kawarama had quietly padded into the room to watch her work—her heart leapt into her throat as she turned around and came face-to-face with him, crouched down to look past her shoulder.

"Kawarama! I asked you to do one thing!" Small jar clutched tight in one hand, she reached out to push him back outside—and she knew he let her, because she was small, and he was a trained shinobi.

"Sorry, sorry! I just wanted to see!" he laughed out, obediently returning to his place outside as her small hands insistently shoved at the middle of his back. "You work so hard, Mitsuba. We barely get to see you! Aside from Itama." His smile fell. "Do you hate us or something?" Then, as an aside, he mumbled, "Where is Itama, by the way? I haven't seen him all day…"

"No. Of course not. Don't be dumb. Itama's just…clingy."

"So if I was clingy, too, you'd quit hating me?" Kawarama grinned again, and held his arms out as if to hug her before her glare pinned him in place and the outstretched jar caught him in the chest.

"I said I didn't." And it was true. She didn't hate them, or love them. It was just easier keeping them at arm's length.

"And change that bandage, already! Jeez."

"Hmm…I don't really get you, Mitsuba, but…" He took the little jar from her hands and reached out to quickly muss her neatly-brushed hair into tangles. "Thanks!"

The door barely missed him as he jumped outside with a childish giggle.

Mitsuba stared hard at the latticed screen with her hands set firmly on the door frame, seething, until a gentle, nervous laugh sounded behind her. She closed her eyes and reached up to smooth
down her hair, fingers tugging apart the newly-formed knots.

"Am I really clingy?"

"Yeah. Like a baby. I'm the youngest one here."

"Ehehe... Sorry, Mitsu. But I like being around you. It's calming."

"Calming?" she repeated, turning to face Itama with a skeptic quirk of her eyebrow, wondering what his definition of the word could possibly be.

He folded his hands, wringing them together as his light gray haori sleeves slipped over them. It was too big for him—she'd offered, insisted, so many times to take up the hem after she realized she'd sewn it the wrong size, but he always refused. He liked it as it was. But it was sloppy.

So was his obi, loose and not tied properly at all, just as skewed as his kimono top.

With a silent sigh breathed through her nose, she shuffled across the tatami mats and prompted him to raise up his arms. She took hold of the faded olive-green obi and worked on securing it properly around his waist and just, in general, straightening up his outfit so he looked halfway presentable. He didn't speak during her fussing; only smiled in that meek and adorable way of his that always softened her heart.

But, being so close, she realized he wasn't nervous about what she'd said at all.

Peppered all across the front of his clothes were short, bristly little hairs. Almost invisible against the fabric unless the light caught them just right.

Animal fur.

No—not just any animal. She knew that musky, earthy wet-clay smell, and it was all over him.

He'd been hugging a dog. A downright luxury in a world like this.

"Itama," she began, picking off a tuft of the beige and orange-red dog fur and squinting hard at it, "what did you do today?"

"Oh, uh—y'know! Just the usual. Practice kata, with Hashirama, Tobirama, and Kawarama..." He leaned away, cheeks blushing pink as he struck up the little white lie. As if that would throw her off the trail.

"Kawarama said he hadn't seen you all day." She caught his eyes.

His cheeks flushed deeper, eyes drifting away from her scrutinizing stare. "Wha—! Well, maybe I was wrong. It was only the other two."

"Hmm. Really? Hashirama came by earlier, too."

His jaw dropped, perpetually half-lidded eyes that mirrored hers shooting open wide. "Wha—! Well, maybe I was wrong. It was only the other two."

"Hmm. Really? Hashirama came by earlier, too."

His jaw dropped, perpetually half-lidded eyes that mirrored hers shooting open wide. "Well, Tobirama—!"

"Has been with Mom all day." Mitsuba gripped the front of his haori and leaned in close, expression deceptively calm, until their noses almost touched. "Just show me where the dog is, already."

"N-no! It doesn't have fleas, I promise! I-I didn't bring them in!" His feet shuffled on the floor as he
tried to take a step back, but he didn't break free of her grip. He did, however, hold his hands up in surrender.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't care about the fleas. I just wanna see the dog."

*Please be a Shiba Inu, please be a Shiba Inu, please be a Shiba Inu!*

His worry melted away, replaced by a bright grin. "Really?! Aw, Mitsu, I didn't know you like dogs!" He leaned forward and threw his arms around her, crushing her arms between them before she could let go of his clothes, getting the dog fur all over the front of her kimono, too.

"C'mon, just follow me!" He dropped the hug after smushing his cheek against hers and grabbed for her hand, dragging her out into the hallway, through their home to the main entrance to grab their sandals, and then outside. All in a winding path that led to the back of the compound and behind one of the three buildings present—the unoccupied meeting hall, well away from prying eyes from their family and the sentry alike.

He stopped right in front of a clump of oh-so-inconspicuous bushes that pressed up close to the stone wall that surrounded the area and cast a furtive glance over his shoulder.

It just screamed *bad idea.*

"Itama—"

He held a finger up to his lips and shushed her, eyes pleading.

With a shrug, she pulled her hand free from his as he crouched down beside the bushes, moving aside one of the boughs to reveal a makeshift tunnel that led into a broken crag of the perimeter wall.

…Straight out into the surrounding forest.

"Itama," she hissed again, grabbing him by the back of his obi and yanking him back so hard he fell flat on his ass. "What are you doing?!"

He rubbed at his tailbone and actually, honestly, *glared* up at her. That was a first.

"Taking you to see the dog, remember? What, did you think I'd really bring it into the compound? Dad would never let me! And Mom's allergic…" A pout overtook his frowning mouth.

God.

*God.*

Kids would be kids, no matter the circumstances. Finding and keeping a secret pet in the woods, even smack in the middle of such dangerous times.

Mitsuba reached out and snagged his arm, fully intent on dragging him right back home because, dog or not, there was no way they were going out there in secret, alone. Even if he was a shinobi.

*Especially* because he was a shinobi.

He pulled his arm away, still pouting, but this time he unleashed the crocodile tears. They welled up in the corners of both eyes as his lips trembled. "I didn't even show our brothers. I…I thought you would understand, Mitsu."
"I do, but—I just..." She stared into the shadowed tunnel of shoved-aside, scratchy leaves and prickly branches, and peered further out into the unknown. It beckoned them out in that strange, tempting way bad ideas had a way of doing, tamping down reason in exchange for adventure and, well, dogs.

"Dammit, dogs."

She closed her eyes and held them together tight before opening them once again.

"...Do you have a kunai?"

He nodded, reaching toward his waist and to a spot she'd been sure she hadn't felt a weapon in when she'd re-tied it for him. Then again, he should know how to hide his weapons.

A smile instantly took hold of the corner of his lips as her worry translated itself into something he could understand. "Don't worry, Mitsu. I'll protect you!"

He said it with all the confidence of a naïve child unaware of his heavy fate, not fully comprehending the vicious ways of the world and how promises like that only got people killed.

Even so, he crouched down on his hands and knees and crawled through the bushes, his hushed voice calling for her to follow.

Idiot...you don't need to protect me.

The thought went unspoken, lost to the summer breeze, as she sent a searching glance around the area, toward the back corner of the building and its closed doors, half-hoping someone had spotted their shenanigans and would come running and shoo them back to the main house. Tobirama. Maybe Kanae. Even Butsuma But, no, it was too far out of the way, out of sight, lost to the world, and he was already on the other side, whisper-yelling for her to hurry up.

She followed.

At some point along the way, as they clomped across plush grass and dry dirt and between the tall, tall trees that seemed to stretch up higher than she remembered (and much farther than she'd expected them to go), he'd grabbed her hand to keep her from walking too far ahead, or falling too far behind. She didn't really hold it back, but he didn't let go. His other hand, he kept close near his obi—near a weapon. Just in case.

"How much farther?" she asked, voice low, eyes wandering out in front of them, in between the trees, and over her shoulder behind them, where the shadows the sun didn't quite reach took on nefarious and wicked shapes in a jumpy, paranoid mind.

"Just a little more!"

A little, just a little, she wished the cheer in his voice was infectious. That it would ease the worry from her mind and let this just be a stupid and carefree kid's adventure. But every twig that snapped, every tiny creature claw that scratched and scurried against the tree bark echoed in her ears like the cocked hammer of a gun about to shoot.

Were they alone?

"No—" she said sharply, stopping in her tracks and yanking his arm back as he tried to move forward. "We shouldn't have left. I wanna go back. Let's go back! Mom's gonna be mad. Dad's gonna be mad."
You might die. I don't want that on my conscience. The dog's not worth it.

Now, she gripped his hand hard in hers just to keep him from walking ahead.

"Ow—Mitsu, come on. We're almost there. We'll go back right away, I promise." He gave a half-hearted pull at her hand as he turned to look at her, brow furrowed.

"No."

"Mitsu…" His whine trailed off into a sigh as she didn't take a step, didn't let up on that iron grip.

"How do you even know it'll be there?" she challenged, keeping her small, small feet firmly on the ground even as he tugged at her arm. Half-hearted, because she was convinced he could pick her up and just carry her if he wanted to.

Even with the flicker of irritation that passed across his face, he remained patient. His eyes drifted toward his feet as he answered her with a shrug, not even needing the next words. "I…I don't know."

Every passing minute left them vulnerable.

"Let's just go back home."

His shoulders drooped when he peered up at her furrowed brow and determined frown. Both were unwilling to budge on the matter. And in that silly and proud, competitive way that only children and people who believed they were unquestionably right could be, neither backed down first.

They could have stood that way for hours, or for just a moment. But either way, it had to end.

The thing that ended it was a sharp rustle of leaves that no small animal could be responsible for.

Itama's hand dropped away from hers faster than a shot, and the kunai appeared instantly in his grip. He held the other hand out to shield her as he scanned the area for the source, keeping close, and ready to fight.

Brave, but foolish.

They should have left at a moment's notice, to enjoy the rest of the day in peace—it was a beautiful day.

In another life, on a day like this, she'd be bumming a cigarette off the cute lady next door and sunbathing on a stolen moment in which she should be manning the front of her father's stupid, musty old joke of a pawn shop while he operated under the table in the back, unaware she'd locked up and flipped the sign to CLOSED.

She shouldn't be out in the wild, fearing for her life with her brother.

Again, the leaves shook, rattling dry in the underbrush.

Even as Mitsuba's brain screamed that she was the adult, she was the adult, dammit, she pressed close to her brother's back, hands gripping the back of his haori tight enough to leave permanent wrinkles she'd never be able to straighten out.

Another rustle—then, silence.

A whiny, yelping yip echoed in the air around them. Pattering paws approached.
Mitsuba's head shot up to peek over Itama's shoulder as he lowered the kunai with a relieved, whooshing breath and a laughing cry of, "look, Mitsu, it's the doggy!"

Her eyebrows scrunched together as she pinched him through his clothing so hard that he yelped, too.

"Itama! That's a fox!"

Of the two times they'd both leave the compound's safety in pursuit of something, this one was the least eventful.

Summer gave way to autumn in a gradual flurry of colored leaves and a cooling breeze that brought on chilled nights, tightly-shut doors and screens, and many hours near the indoor hearth's warm coals…and the vicious return of Kanae's sickness.

She made it to Mitsuba and Itama's fourth birthday, but she didn't last to the end of the season.

Winter hit them colder than ever.

"Mitsuba-sama! Are you paying attention? Straighten out your back."

Kanae's passing left need for a new mentor in Mitsuba's life. And, apparently, the only woman suitable for the clan leader's sole daughter was Mariko, a strict and domineering old woman tall as a willow tree and withered as a dead one, with wispy gray hair tied up in a high twist and a penchant for demanding absolute perfection.

Well, at least she was a better teacher.

Mitsuba squirmed into a better seiza posture as the woman hovered over her like a buzzard, though her attention was still far away. Well, technically it could never be closer. But it was focused inward, so deep she may as well have been somewhere else, mentally.

Her mother's death, no matter that it brought few tears to her eyes, brought forth opportunity.

Chakra thrummed in her veins. Squirming within its shell, ready to break free. More than once, her calligraphy paper had stuck fast to her fingertips (though she'd excused it away by saying she'd only forgotten to wash her sticky hands after lunch, and Mariko grudgingly believed it).

Mariko clucked her tongue and took a step back, pressing a hand dramatically to her forehead. "Even the boys have better posture than you, child. You do want to grow up and be worthy of a husband, do you not?"

"Yes, Mariko."

"Hmm?"

"Yes, Mariko-san," Mitsuba emphasized, because the woman just wouldn't let her lack of manners slide.

Sometimes she just wondered if that was all the woman had to nitpick her on, since her basic sewing skills had long since been mastered, carried over from a past life. Her tea preparation was
passable, and she completely skipped flower arrangement since she occupied herself with herbal studies and flower pressing instead. Other than that, her handwriting was too scrawly, at times, like chicken scratch written in haste so, really...the woman did indeed have to grasp at straws and find a new angle.

By turning her into proper, elegant, obeisant wife material.

She'd be working at that forever.

"Okiku, show the girl how it's done."

Okiku—or Kiku, as she usually called her, was a young girl a handful of years her senior, probably at twelve or thirteen. Pretty, with long, dark hair she sometimes let Mitsuba brush and braid before Mariko came along and slapped her hands for neglecting her studies. But quiet as a mouse. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes often flitted about, restless, and she jumped at loud, sudden noises and kept mostly to the corners. She listened to Mariko's every word, and never disobeyed. (Though Mariko was considerably more lenient with her than anyone else.)

She also wasn't a Senju—not an Uchiha, either. Mitsuba wasn't sure if she'd ever belonged to a clan, or if she'd just...been picked up.

But she liked her. And so did Touka, who'd been tasked with guarding her in her brothers' and fathers' absence. She rarely sat in during lessons, but she was always around. Somewhere.

Kiku rose up quickly from her corner, her wound-up hair flouncing with each step until she knelt down in front of Mitsuba and sat with her knees together, back straight as a pin, hands folded neatly in the lap of her gray and gold kimono. Dotted with puffy, threaded yellow chrysanthemums, just like her name.

"There's a good girl. Now, Mitsuba-sama, take note and follow her example."

With a brief roll of the eyes—which Mariko caught, and pursed her sour, shriveled lips at—Mitsuba pushed back her shoulders and set her hands in her lap, too, lips pursed to one side. Her form wasn't as slender or elegant as Kiku's, still pudgy with baby fat, but, well, at least her back was straight now.

She closed her eyes and held the position, counting the seconds in her head as the old vulture circled around her with slow, deliberate footsteps, analyzing her posture.

"It's a definite improvement. Hold it for the next ten minutes."

Her eyes snapped open. "Wha—"

Mariko held up a silencing hand. "Oh, you moved—start over. Ten minutes, now."

With lips pressed tight together to prevent from screaming out an entire fucking river of expletives she didn't even know, she straightened her back once more and wished she was anywhere else.

Fuck you, old hag.

By the time ten minutes were up, her knees were sore, and her legs were asleep, buzzing with static. But the day's lessons had concluded.

"For a girl claiming she'll become a shinobi, you certainly can't tolerate much routine."
Touka's veiled, sly sarcasm fanned out in the cold air in front of them and drifted past her ear. She leaned against said girl's arm, using her as a crutch until the feeling returned to her wobbling feet while they crossed the dry, frozen courtyard, heading back to the main house.

Touka was only a bit taller, and a bit older, around Hashirama's age, but far less tolerable at times. Maybe because she saw her as a spoiled, bratty, mouthy little princess—the gem of the clan.

Truthfully, she just liked to make fun of her.

Mitsuba angled her head up at the girl's sharp-featured face and narrow eyes, unable to catch her stare but catching sight of the faint smirk on her thin lips. The wind blew at her high, pin-straight ponytail, let down from its usual stern topknot, and both briefly flinched at the cold, sharp bite.

She couldn't put a valid retort into words.

Her thin eyebrows, tapered, not thick like Mitsuba's, and scarred at one corner, drew together as she looked down to see the exaggerated pout. "Oh, come on, don't pout. I was only joking; you've been making such decent progress with the leaf concentration exercise."

"Hmm. I guess. But is it enough…"

This time, Touka didn't reply. Only wrapped a consoling arm around her shoulders as they clambered past the front door and quickly slid it shut against the cold. "It's probably going to snow again," she muttered, folding her hands together and blowing warm air onto them to heat them up. "I'll take care of the fire pit. Go get your leaves."

Mitsuba kicked off her sandals and padded down the hallway to retrieve her field journal, where she'd hidden away numerous leaves between the pages before the season had turned. A cute, feminine hobby disguising an ulterior motive.

One that she'd shared with Touka, and only Touka. Because she seemed like she'd understand—and everyone needed a friend to trade secrets with. It paid off well. Through her, she'd learned just where her brothers kept their secret weapons stash. And she was so, so easy to talk to, even with her habitual, playful derision.

When she reached the edge of her bedroom—the one she'd shared with Kanae once, now so cold and closed-off, abandoned—she stopped, idling in the doorway, fingers still resting on the sliding door. Even after she'd moved further into the house, away from the cold and the memories, and into another room she now shared with Touka, she couldn't bring her herb box with her. Because only Kanae's room had a storage closet where she could shove it away in a corner, out of sight, so no one would go snooping.

Steely, blue-white light filtered in from the closed screens, bathing the wide-open space in a ghostly glow. Illuminating the faint, silvery threads that lined Kanae's favorite, deep blue kimono, that now hung loose and open from a rack in the corner, arms outstretched as if waiting for a hug that would never come.

If spirits ever did come back from the dead, she was certain Kanae's had returned here.

She ran her fingers through the long chunks of hair that hung down to the edges of her face—too short to stay up in the bun wound atop her head like a ball of yarn, but not long enough to really bother with—as if straightening the tangles, making herself presentable in her mother's presence.

No. That was stupid. She shook her head hard and clenched her small hands into fists as she strode into the room with purpose, straight to the closet.
Kanae's old futon had been folded up and shoved inside—and under it was the box she came for.

She left without looking back. Not quite brave enough to face the woman whose heartfelt plea she'd completely pissed on.

*I'm sorry, but...I'm not your daughter, Kanae.*

By the time she made her way to the center room, where Touka had indeed started up the fire pit and filled the space with warm, toasty heat, she'd already stuck one of her pressed leaves to her forehead. It slipped off halfway there, sure, but she put it right back on and that's how Touka saw her.

"Did you keep that there the entire time?" she asked, a single eyebrow quirked as she crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"Well, no, just a couple seconds, but still. It's something, right?"

For a moment, she stared. Her eyes searched her face, and the leaf sticking weakly to her skin.

"...Earlier, you asked if it was enough. I didn't answer then, but I don't think it is. Not if you want to make a formal request to Uncle. You need to be able to *control* your chakra and not rely on chance."

God, she was so smart and she wasn't even ten, yet.

Mitsuba looked down at her hands—at the leaf that had slipped away from her forehead once again. "Alright. I can feel it, and sort of direct it when I focus hard, so...how do I get better at focusing?"

"During my training, I learned how to regulate the chakra flow through meditation. Clear your mind of worry and focus only on clear skies and victories of a distant future."

"Distant future. O-kay."

"*You* asked."

"Not judging."

Touka held up her hand, index finger pointing skyward, and smiled. "Once you learn to focus properly and hold the leaf in place for ten minutes, you'll be ready to approach Uncle."

A disgusted scoff left Mitsuba's mouth as she shoved aside her bangs and pressed the leaf to her bare forehead once again.

It took a full week to master the lesson.

But in that time, her family had returned from the battlefield.

She was prepared to speak with her father.

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Butsuma was a busy man.
Not only as clan leader, but as an active shinobi. Even when he was at his home territory, he never quite stopped giving orders and overseeing the compound's activities. He was so busy, in fact, that he never set foot in the main house.

Then again, Mitsuba couldn't recall that he'd ever lived there when Kanae had been alive.

After asking Kawarama, she found their father holed up in the meeting hall alone, poring over a series of scrolls and marking down something-or-other on a map filled with a handful of notable clan crests in strategic locations. She didn't get a decent look at it—he rolled it up tight and set it aside, leaning one arm against the low table set in front of him as his disgruntled gaze turned to her. He didn't need to speak to let her know he didn't appreciate the interruption.

She knelt to the floor without a word.

In prim and perfect seiza, of course. Had to make a good impression.

She couldn't really remember speaking to her father before this. He'd always been present, but distant. Even at Kanae's funeral, he scarcely spoke a word to anyone. Only sent her a glance in passing and nod, like he didn't know what else to do.

Her eyes drifted toward the lantern burning at the edge of his table, lighting up the area in place of the outdoor light, dimmed by closed doors during their struggle against the cold.

That morning, the clan had woken up to a dusty powdering of fresh snow blanketing the frozen earth. Mitsuba even still wore a pale coral-colored scarf close around her neck, courtesy of Kiku.

If she watched the screen close, she could see the shadows of tiny snow flurries that still fell outside. Just a bit, she wished spring would come early—to melt it all away.

Her eyes returned to his.

She wasn't supposed to speak first—Mariko had all but beaten that lesson into her. Even so, her hands clenched and unclenched in her lap as she fought down the request that was bubbling up within her like a soda bottle shaken too much, ready to just burst.

"Mitsuba," he finally acknowledged, staring her down with chilled, unfeeling eyes that did nothing to put a damper on her enthusiasm. "It isn't often we speak. What brings you here?" He spoke through a tense jaw, like the words were forced and he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"I…" Her words died on her tongue as she heard her tiny, high-pitched child's voice and had to wonder how stupid she looked, sounded; a pipsqueak kid with a big head and a serious expression, playing at being an adult in that small body. Would he listen? Would he even listen?

"I want what my brothers have. What Touka is allowed to do. What Kanae wouldn't let me choose."

"I've learned to focus my chakra, Father. I want to be a shinobi."

"No."

When she looked at him again, his expression had hardened, the bland, passive slush freezing into the hard, dry ice of sharp anger. Every exhausted, premature stress line etched into his face drew
taut, and he looked old, so old, despite still being so young. And even in his anger, when he sat here, so casually, without armor, with his dark hair hanging limp and loose and scraggly, he looked so suddenly huge. Impassable.

A massive mountain, standing in her way.

"No?" she questioned in a quick breath, and that was her first mistake. In the Senju clan, his word was law.

"Give up pursuing foolish fancies. You will never become a shinobi."

He may as well have slapped her.

The lantern light burned in the corner of her vision, but she kept her eyes focused fully and unblinkingly on him, holding her head high. "I can hold a leaf on my forehead for ten minutes. My chakra is—"

"Mitsuba!"

He slammed his hand on the tabletop along with the shout and, against her better judgment, she jumped at the noise. Pressed her lips together tight and rose sharply to her feet, hands still clenched into fists—shaking.

"Why?" she bit out, so bitter that he almost flinched, because she'd always been so, so demure, playing the good child. "Why can't I? Because Mom didn't want me to? I'm your daughter, too! Teach me ways to protect myself, at least!"

When he didn't speak, still stricken by her outburst, she continued her tirade. It still didn't match up to the words in her heart, but her vocabulary had grown, and she could lash out better than ever.

"I don't understand! If this is the life you wanted to—to lock me into, why did you even save me?"

Butsuma's teeth gnashed together before his lips closed over them, pressing tight. She didn't think his eyebrows could furrow any more than they had, yet they'd drawn so low over his eyes that the dark irises were almost pinpricks.

Then, all at once, the anger vanished. Replaced by that cold and stoic shinobi façade.

"I didn't do it for you."

Because of that detached look, those words struck her right in the heart. Pierced through. Shredded. As if physically stabbed, she took a step back.

Then—then, he dealt the coup de grâce.

"I did it for Kanae."

Unwanted. You were born an unwanted child. No man with four sons would ever need a daughter. Only a mother would.

Tears burned hot and fast in her eyes, trickling down her cheeks as she bit her lip so hard it broke skin.

You worthless savior.

I hate you.
I hate you. 

_I hate you I HATE YOU I HATE YOU—_

Butsuma turned away, attention returned to the scrolls on the table, breathing a weary sigh. "You are far too emotional to become a shinobi, Mitsuba. All you can do is learn to become a good wife."

She didn't bother closing the door behind her as she stormed out into the snow, running—running. Wishing she could run forever, until her lungs gave out. Wishing circumstance and too many unfortunate factors all bundled together without her say hadn't trapped her in this godforsaken place, as damned as a wildflower ripped from the soil, dumped into a glass vase.

Then—she stopped. Let her heaving lungs expel fogged clouds of breath as she squeezed her eyes shut and scrubbed the tears away until her skin burned and froze in turn against the chilled air. It pricked at her eyes as she stared down at her numbing hands, fingers flexing, trembling.

She didn't need his permission. Never did. When it's time came, spring never _asked_ winter to thaw.

She'd grant her own wishes, and…

_She'd prove him wrong._

Chapter End Notes

Currently on tumblr at peccolias or peccoliawrites with updates, progress info, and excerpts (and info on where I'll move to if that site can possibly go any further down the drain). Please leave a comment if you enjoyed reading!
Kanae's death hit her sons the hardest.

None of them had been present the day she passed—only made it back from field training just in time for her funeral.

Out of the four of them, though, Mitsuba suspected Tobirama suffered the most. Not outwardly, no, never. He was far too proud for that. But he was moodier than usual, quiet and mean. Even when he relied fully on her to get a painkiller fix for his cavities.

He watched her from the center of the room with narrowed eyes and a hand pressed against his aching jaw as she dug through her lacquered medicine chest (graduated from a lidded basket, now, since she'd inherited a handful of Kanae's furniture, as Butsuma allowed) for a clove to chew on. She'd wrapped some up in a cloth bag, before…she just couldn't remember which. A bigger storage case should have, by all means, meant more opportunities for organization. But somehow it remained as messy as ever.

Tobirama huffed out an obvious and impatient sigh—so prissy. Such a damn drama queen.

"I can pull that tooth for you," Mitsuba said under her breath, pursing her lips as she continued riffling through her inventory, finally locating the small, swirl-patterned bag crumpled against the far corner.

"What?" he asked, further narrowing his eyes as she turned to face him and opened her palm to reveal a couple of dry, shriveled cloves. Hesitantly, he reached out, then decidedly snatched them from her hand and popped them into his mouth, cheek puffing out slightly as he chomped one between his molars—and winced.

"Be careful." She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I said I can pull that tooth for you. It'll fall out sooner or later, anyway. Rotten or not."

"It's not rotten," he snapped, still rubbing his cheek, fingers pressing against the sore spot brought on by the cavity. His eyes narrowed again, but not at her.

"What do you think a cavity is?"

"What do you know, Mitsuba?"

*More than you, brat,* she barely held on the tip of her tongue, only huffing in response as she balled up the clove bag in her hands and returned it to the medicine chest.

"You're not a doctor. Don't touch my teeth," he grumbled out, wincing against the pain as he prodded his cheek too hard trying to soothe the ache away. Served him right for not listening.

She hoped he'd just throw a silent tantrum and storm from the room to leave her in peace, but all of her brothers seemed to share the annoying habit of lingering. Well, it wasn't that strange. They were family. Siblings. People who *should* spend time together and find comfort in each other's presence no matter how often they bickered.
Her hands lingered on the smooth brass latches of the medicine chest as she snapped them shut, fingers tapping against them silently as she tried to figure out the best way to boot him out.

…And whether or not she should. Maybe his tooth was still hurting and he needed something stronger.

Maybe she really should pull it. It would certainly satisfy her long-suffering endeavor of putting up with his attitude.

When she finally turned to face him again, he was no longer sitting on the floor with his legs crossed, but kneeling on his knees a short distance away with his back to her, idly flipping the pages of one of her bound writing books.

"Nosy," she jeered, but he didn't react. Whatever he'd found written there was apparently terribly interesting. Curious, she approached him and glanced over his shoulder.

Ah. It was Kanae's.

At some point in the past, she'd gathered together a ream of her best calligraphy pages and had them bound—Mitsuba had often referenced it when learning how to properly ink her strokes and please Mariko's insufferable standards. Tobirama must have recognized it, too, because he wouldn't take his eyes away even as she stretched her hand out to take it from him.

But couldn't—not quite. Not when she saw the glistening tears shining in his eyes.

She had to reach out and yank it from his hands when the tears started to fall and dampened paper and ink.

Her eyes darted between the book she held out wide open, fanning the pages to keep them from sticking together, and Tobirama, sniffling and covering his face with the sleeve of his blue haori.

A grimace pulled at her lips.

_Dammit! Dammit…_

Dealing with crying children was not her forte. Even so—they were more important than some old book.

Quietly, she set it down with its binding flat across the tatami mats and reached a hesitant hand out to touch his tensed shoulder.

He jerked away and continued sniffling into his sleeve, getting it dirty with tears and snot that she'd just have to wash off later during laundry duty.

_What do I do… What do I do with a crying kid?_ She didn't know. Before, in a time long past, she'd been the baby of the family. No younger siblings to comfort—only older ones that were barely present. Sometimes Itama cried, sure, but never for long. He tried to keep up a brave face around her and hated being coddled.

Her eyes darted around the room. She bit her lip, looking for a sign; a stroke of inspiration. But there was nothing. Only the medicine chest and tatami mats and closed screen doors.

What would—what would _Kanae_ do?

It wasn't that she wanted to be the stand-in mother for these kids, but, god. They _were_ kids. Where
else would they get affection, now that their loving mother had passed? How much longer could they freely cry those tears before their father beat them into stoic, shinobi silence?

She didn't need to do anything after all. After Tobirama got tired of blowing snot into his sleeve, he looked her way with a trembling pout and reddened eyes, as if—no, definitely—asking for a hug. So, she sank down to her knees and held her arms out and he all but bowled her over as he threw his arms around her and bawled into the shoulder of her teal kimono instead.

*It's okay,* she almost said, but really it wasn't. Nothing was in this fucked up place. Not really.

"I know. Just...cry it out," she said softly as she patted his back, wondering if this small child's body was as comforting as a mother's warm, safe embrace. Either way, it was all they had now. And he clung to it. And cried. And cried. And cried. Shed every single tear his little body held, probably, and maybe some borrowed from the future, because one day they'd all dry up and he'd become just as cruel and unfeeling as Butsuma. Maybe just to protect himself. Maybe because he'd just forget how to cry.

But now...he was just a child. A hurting child.

He cried himself unconscious. At some point, his sniffles had evened out and turned to sleeping breaths, and she squirmed out from beneath his arms to try and move away and leave him to sleep on the floor, more comfortable, but when his head dropped to her lap, his fingers balled into the sides of her kimono and clung tight like she was a beloved bedtime teddy bear. She couldn't get him to let go.

*Fine.*

"Brat." She uttered the last word on a whisper as she gave up the fight. Her shoulders drooped as she set a hand atop his head, musing the feather-soft spikes of fair, silver-white hair. Just like she'd seen Kanae do.

*If I were a better person, I'd keep you all children for as long as you deserved. But I'm not. I'm not your mother. Or your sister. You aren't my responsibility.*

*But for now...*

She closed her eyes.

For now, there was no harm in pretending.

"Oh! Hey! No fair, Tobirama, quit hogging Mitsuba to yourself! I wanna sleep on her lap, too!" Kawarama's boisterous shout echoed through the room and jerked Tobirama from his slumber as he threw the door open wide and thundered past the threshold.

Tobirama's head shot up solely to aim a glare over his shoulder. "What do you want, Kawarama?" he asked in a bitter, cranky tone that she, and their brother, no doubt heard as go away.

Of course, he didn't go away. He grinned a lopsided grin and dropped to the floor at their side, throwing his arms around both of them as Hashirama and Itama appeared in the doorway after him.

"What? Hey! I came here to hug Mitsuba," Itama protested, sporting a near-identical grin as he hurried toward them and tugged at the back of Kawarama's kimono until he pulled him out of the way and snuggled in under his arms, flush against Mitsuba's side as she tried, and failed, to shove them all away.
"Stop—jeez, you're too heavy! All of you, get off!" Her demand went unheard, drowned out by Itama's, Tobirama's, and Kawarama's voices in turn, overlapping.

"Nooo, you're so warm, Mitsu!"

"Ow—idiot, you elbowed me in the face!"

"I never get to hug Mitsuba. I'm never letting go!"

She turned a pleading stare to her more sensible brother.

"Come on, you guys…” Hashirama watched them bicker from the doorway with a small, fond smile playing at his lips. And, for a moment, she thought he'd finally taken on the responsibility of being the mature older brother who broke up sibling squabbles and saved his poor little sister from getting squashed.

Then he jumped in to the pile, too, and knocked them all flat.

There was no easy way to avoid her brothers—Mitsuba had long since realized that. As long as she was there, as long as they were there, their bond only grew, and pretending became reality, and...

And leaving them behind became that much harder.

As time passed, turned into months, into a year, then more, she did become the stand-in mother in the sense that she provided them with emotional support in confusing and painful times. Not because Butsuma, or Mariko, pushed her into it, not because there was little choice, but because… she just wanted to.

Her body may have been young, but she remained an adult at heart. It didn't sit right with her to ignore them.

When they got mud, or dirt or blood on their clothes, she washed the stains clean. When they got sick, she stayed by their side and let them rest their heads on her lap until the fever and aches passed. When they cried, she held them close.

But, as siblings...

When they were well, they bickered. They yelled. They picked sides and held grudges and pouted at each other for days until one side or the other gave in and apologized. They swapped ghost stories in the dead of night when Butsuma had passed out drunk, and whimpered when the wind rattled the doors. They laughed, and smiled, and played, like children should. At least, mostly. Tobirama insisted on trying to be the mature one who spoiled their fun more than once.

He never did come crying to her again.

And when the boys were out, she trained with Touka. Mariko didn't care what she did anymore—because she played into her designated role and did it well, until there was no more room for complaint from even that hardass of a crone. Of course, she'd have much more to teach her after her childhood passed, but that was still some time away. For now, as long as she completed her lessons and her chores, she let her be and had nothing but decent progress to report to Butsuma.
Mitsuba never spoke to, and rarely saw, him.

In the summer of her sixth year, she held a kunai in her hand for the first time.

"Hold it firm, in a way that you will never let it go. Because if it falls from your grasp in battle, you will lose," Touka said, arranging Mitsuba's small fingers on its narrow grip until she was satisfied.

Despite all of the time she'd spent helping her, teaching her, she'd never quite done away with the grave sadness that sat like a permanent shadow in her eyes. When she spoke again, Mitsuba had a feeling she knew why.

"And know that by holding this, by coming to know this weapon, or any weapon, that you must be ready to forfeit your life."

Propaganda spread to children. To little boys and girls that were forced to grow up too fast and thrown into the messes the adults created.

Even so, Mitsuba accepted it. Because to her, it was more than duty. It was her freedom.

"It's heavy," she admitted as she hefted the cool iron in her hand and tested its weight. Full-sized, and far too big for her, or any other children's hands to wield. Far too dangerous for a child to hold.

She held it in front of her face—let her eyes rove the sharp, inverted v-shape of the smooth blade, to where it tapered down like a diamond toward the narrow, wrapped hilt. Forged in a way that it would stab deep and pull out with no snags, so it could stab again. And again.

Touka nodded as she took a step back and let her practice her hold, letting it slice through the air. "When I had hands as small as yours, I directed chakra into them to keep it from slipping."

Chakra—they hadn't touched upon that topic much since the leaf exercise. Touka had tutored her from the ground up, focusing on the basics, just like an academy teacher, and teaching her as much as a competent child could. Built up her strength bit by bit before moving on to the juicy stuff. She did, at one point, try to teach her how to tree walk, but when she fell and got a bloody nose, Touka decided against it. Strange injuries would only tip Butsuma off regarding their intentions.

She still tried it when Touka wasn't looking.

Mitsuba watched little blips of sunlight gleam off the blade's surface as it shone through the swaying leaves above. They hadn't gone too far out from the compound, but just far enough away from prying eyes, under the pretense that they were foraging. If any guard had seen the clan head's daughter holding a kunai, nothing good would come of it. And, really, no one paid her much attention anyway, so long as another (shinobi) child was at her side.

Just like Touka said, she channeled chakra to her palm, to her fingers, and strengthened her grip—not much, but enough to make a difference. Enough to give her a foolish swell of confidence.

She tested her dexterity—tried to spin it, and it did spin, but only halfway, before a hard stop.

She couldn't for the life of her realize what had gone wrong until she saw the blade piercing into her skin, into the meat of her palm, where blood slowly beaded up and trickled along it and down her arm.

"Mitsuba!"
Immediately, Touka grasped her by the wrist and carefully wedged the blade out from her palm—it was only a shallow wound, but the bright blood surely alarmed her the most. She tossed the blade aside, where it stuck into the dirt at an angle, blade-first, and pressed the fingers of one hand firmly over the split skin as she rummaged through a small pouch she wore at her obi with the other.

It didn't hurt.

But for the first time, Touka's carefully-carved, passive expression had broken into worry, with bitten lips and a puckered brow. *That* did sting, just a bit—causing worry where it was undue.

"*Gods*, Mitsuba, I realize you are eager, but foolish, impulsive actions only lead to death!" She'd pulled a small roll of bandages from the pouch, and released her wound long enough to wrap the thin, white strip firmly across it with bloodied fingers.

"It was just—"

"And, just look at you, not even a tear shed. What am I supposed to make of that?"

Mitsuba watched, disengaged, barely feeling a part of it, as Touka tore the end of the strip and tied it securely around her hand, fingers still lingering against it, applying pressure until she was absolutely sure it wouldn't bleed through and keep bleeding and, god forbid, need stitches.

The sting of a cut palm was nothing to her—she'd been through worse. Burns, dog bites, a jammed finger, twisted ankle, chronic back problems, menstrual cramps—getting stabbed in the stomach. Not to mention almost getting crushed to death. The memories of past pain had a way of lingering. Even so... Touka didn't know that.

She gingerly pulled her hand away and kept her eyes fixed to it with a faint, apologetic grin.

"Sorry, Touka…"

Touka sighed, quiet. "Well—that's enough of that, then. We'll save weapons for another time."

Her head snapped up. "No way! Didn't you say you brought shuriken, too?"

"Oh, yes, I can imagine you'd do so well with *four* sharpened points. No. Not after this."

"But what about throwing—!"

She held up a hand to silence her. "I will teach you to throw them. That sort of practice starts small and simple. Have you ever skipped stones with your brothers?" Her eyes caught the bloodied splotches on her fingertips and she lowered her hand, once again shuffling through her pouch for a scrap of white fabric that served as a handkerchief. *Pretty*—handmade. The same delicate construction of Kiku's gentle craftsmanship, just as mild as her presence.

Touka hesitated just a moment, with a softened gaze observing the finely embroidered detail, before wrapping her fingers in it and scrubbing away the stains.

"Kind of. The koi pond in the compound is too small for it to be any fun. And last time we tried, Itama fell in." She fell in, too, when she tried to help him out—but she wasn't about to mention that detail.

By the knowing smirk that rose to Touka's lips, she probably already knew. "Then it's just like that. Learn to fling a pebble, a rock, control its path, and you'll learn the proper form for shuriken throwing." She'd opened her mouth to say more, then, but stopped suddenly, lips pressing into a
thin line as her eyebrows drew together and her eyes darted to the side.

Quiet—so quiet. She hadn't even heard. Touka barely had.

Tobirama had appeared out of thin air—no. Not thin air. He'd jumped down from the tree branches and landed behind them only a moment ago, but he could have been lurking in the trees for quite some time. Home early. Still scuffed-up and covered in dirt from the trip back, wearing those gray-blue hakama and a sleeveless black shirt that they tended to wear out on training retreats, or missions, or battles, or whatever they did that they never shared with her.

"So this is what you get up to when we're away," he began, and what was worse, his expression revealed nothing. No irritation. No disappointment—no anger. He didn't even bother looking at Touka, who'd gone starkly silent and several shades paler. Only Mitsuba. "Father asked me to fetch you, so I've been looking... Your chakra was strange."

Of all the people to find out, it just had to be him.

"But now I know why." He took swift, but calm, steps toward her and grabbed her arm, still streaked with blood and wrapped in bloodied bandages. A flicker of concern passed through his eyes, but the care was lost when he caught her in a narrow-eyed glare. "What are you **thinking**, Mitsuba?"

If only it had been Itama—the easiest to sway. A hug and a little pleading would move him to her side and keep this secret. Kawarama? All he'd ask for was a handful of sweets to snack on and he wouldn't breathe a word. Hashirama would have taken a bit more convincing, as the oldest, the most protective, but the weakest to heartfelt pleading who would cry along in sympathy if she shed a few crocodile tears and ultimately come to understand her reasons.

But it **had** to be Tobirama. Because he was a chakra sensor. Because Butsuma always used him as a little tattletale. Because he'd never understand what she wanted to do. Never.

And she couldn't blame him, either, because he was just a child who obeyed his father and did what he believed was best, no matter what.

He could have asked *what are you doing, Mitsuba?* as he held her injury up to make an unspoken point, and she could have sassed him as her sleeve pooled around her elbow, bloodied at the hem from the winding streaks of red that ran down her forearm and dried in the wind. But he knew she would have, and so he chose his words carefully. To make her take responsibility.

She didn't respond. Only pressed her lips together tight and refused to meet his cold-burning gaze.

Touka took a single, shuffling step forward to help—then froze, as Tobirama cast her a quick, seething, sidelong glance of warning. It wasn't her business. And she'd face Butsuma, later, for ever getting involved.

"Go back to the compound," he said, and she did, with only a passing glance to Mitsuba before she turned her eyes away and disappeared, blending in with the trees.

No one else could help her get out of this predicament.

"I...don't have to tell you," Mitsuba finally spoke up, both hands curled tightly into fists, both trembling from the strength put behind the action.

"Father **told** you—" He stopped. His rage flickered like a flame in cold wind while he struggled to control his emotions and balance his temper. It took practice—a lot of it, especially for someone so
irritable. But he succeeded. He suppressed his irritation and let go of her arm, watching her with an unreadable stare. "We're going back. Now."

The urge to snap back at him was strong. Mitsuba let her hand fall slowly back to her side, still clenched tight, blood soaking into the bandages, as she kept her feet planted firmly against the ground. Focused her chakra—challenging him. Only making it worse for herself, but, shit, the moment they returned, the moment Butsuma saw her, it was all over anyway.

His eyes narrowed. He was still using his sensory ability—recognized the challenge.

"Mitsuba…" A warning.

One she should have heeded, but was too damn proud to.

She gathered her chakra in her hands, like Touka had taught her, to strengthen the blow. He saw it coming. And she knew he did, but she rushed forward and struck out anyway, even as her fist sailed straight through the air when he tilted away from it. On reflex. All on reflex.

He also retaliated on reflex. Snatched her arm out of the air as it passed him by and twisted, shoving his knee against her back as she bit out a yelp and dropped to the ground with a heavy *whump* that echoed in her ears.

But as soon as he realized what he'd done, he yanked his hands away from her and fell back, eyes wide. "I—"

His hand hovered at her shoulder as she felt the sharp, aching burn of a split lip bitten through by a tooth and rubbed in the gritty dirt and slowly raised her head. It wasn't just her lip—when she spit out the blood pooling between her lower lip and teeth, one of her incisors fell out with it.

Just a baby tooth. It was fine. Loose and due to fall out sooner or later, anyway.

"Mitsuba—"

She jerked her shoulder away from his touch as she lifted herself up on her hands and knees and pressed her bandaged hand to her mouth to wipe the mud away. And the tears. And the snot.

*You are far too emotional to become a shinobi.*

*Foolish, impulsive actions only lead to death!*

Lesson learned.

But getting kicked down—no matter how accidental—only made her want to get back up and try again. No matter what Butsuma would tell her. No matter that Kanae was rolling in her grave. No matter that her brother was stronger; so much farther ahead. So conditioned.

Without a word, she pushed herself to her feet and picked up the fallen and forgotten kunai, tucking it away into her obi. Never once looking Tobirama's way.

Neither spoke again until they returned to the compound.

"*Sorry,*" he muttered at length, so quiet she almost missed it, but she couldn't ask him to repeat it because their father met them with a harsh, tired frown and crossed arms at the front gate, still clad in a leader's scarlet armor and the Senju crest headband. One she'd personally embroidered.
He didn't comment on their messy appearances—because Tobirama hadn't had a chance to take a bath and change his dirty clothes, and because Mitsuba had a sneaking suspicion he knew of her sneaky training without needing to be told.

She and Touka hadn't been as careful as they should've.

"Tobirama," he began, voice low and commanding, never to be crossed, "come with me. Mitsuba..." Words failed him. He withheld the sigh that was so clearly in his weary expression and turned his back on her. "Return to the main house."

Mitsuba watched their retreating backs, feet rooted to the ground in deliberate defiance as her father's dismissal hit her like a wave of chilled water. He didn't want to hear a thing from her. He just needed Tobirama's testimony to end her ambitions for good.

She shook her head. Curled her hands into tight fists, blood seeping out from the broken skin of her palm once more. Slowly, slowly, she lifted her feet and trudged toward her home.

On the way, under the shadowed eaves of the adjacent building, she caught sight of Mariko gesticulating wildly while berating Touka, who stood with her back straight and head bowed, eyes closed. She didn't know what she'd done—not yet. It was just that Mariko had requested a few specific flowers while they were out, and they hadn't had the chance to forage a thing.

Itama, Kawarama, and Hashirama poked their heads out of the main house as she approached. All wide-eyed, curious, and looking to get answers as to why she had blood smeared on her face and sleeve, because that wasn't how they'd left her, and a far cry from how they wanted to see her when they returned.

Hashirama approached her first, expression pinched in worry even as, or especially because, she ignored him and plopped down in the entryway to yank off her sandals and toss them aside. Itama ran off somewhere into the house, and Kawarama lingered awkwardly in the hall with his mouth half-open.

"Mitsu?" Hashirama asked, reaching down to help her up but drawing back when he noticed the dirty bandages on her hand.

"It's nothing. Don't worry." Even if he had tried to help her, she would've brushed him off and pushed herself to her feet like she did now. And, really, the confused concern was sweet, but she didn't have time to think up a lie just to get them to give her some space. Because just seeing them—seeing the dried bloodstains half-washed from their collars and the scrapes and bruises they'd earned willingly and never had to hide—grated on her nerves.

Itama blocked her way, holding a damp cloth in his hands, eyebrows furrowed and lips sticking out in a pout as his eyes searched her face. He didn't speak. Only reached out and took her uninjured hand and led her to the center sitting room. She let him, if only because she'd been heading there anyway.

But she drew back sharply and swatted at his hand the moment he tried to wash the dirt off her face.

"Itama, cut it out!"

"B-but you're all dirty—what happened, Mitsu?"

"It's just dirt. It's not a big deal."
His pout persisted as he clutched the cloth between his fingers, at least listening and keeping it well away from her face. "It is. Did someone... It wasn't..."

Hashirama and Kawarama were quick to follow, and sat down on the floor beside them. "Did you and Tobirama get into a fight?" Again, he displayed that inexplicable perception he hid behind a carefree attitude. Now, his expression was unreadable.

Kawarama snapped out of his silent daze and looked between them, eyes wide. "What? No way Hashi-bro. Tobirama wouldn't... I mean, they do argue a lot, and he's always mad when she beats him at rock-paper-scissors, but—Mitsuba?"

Mitsuba shook her head. "No! It wasn't Tobirama. Jeez. I just—" She bit her lip—winced, when her tooth hit the split skin. "I fell. I also cut my hand."

God. It wasn't a complete lie, but it sounded like a shitty excuse in her ears. Even so, there was no way she could blame it on the muscle memory of a child soldier. She knew, and she threw that punch anyway, like some shounen manga miracle would strengthen her in her desperation to prove herself and prove that she could handle herself.

But there was no shounen manga logic here. Only harsh and unfair reality.

"On a kunai," she clarified. "I was... training."

No use keeping it from them when Butsuma probably knew now, too. She tossed out the bloody kunai and it fell to the floor with a heavy thump.

In nothing less than perfect synch, all of their eyes shot open wide.

"Mitsu! Didn't Dad forbid you?" Itama gasped, then quickly covered his mouth with both hands, letting the damp cloth topple to the floor.

"What? How do you know that?" She grabbed for his hand and pulled it away from his mouth to get him to speak, even as he shrunk back and shook his head. Tobirama knowing about it wasn't a surprise, but everyone else, too...?

"Uhh..." Her brothers all exchanged a long glance before shrugging, guilty.

"Sorry, Mitsu. I sort of overheard you and Dad a while back." Hashirama's shoulders tensed as he met her eyes with a shaky grin, hands set on the ankles of his crossed legs.

Kawarama scratched at the back of his head as his eyes drifted toward the ceiling. "Yeah... we didn't want you to feel left out or anything, so that's why we spend so much time with you." A sheepish grin spread across his face, showing off his dimples.

"Kawarama! Don't make it sound like we're just doing it out of pity!"

"What? I didn't mean it like that, 'Tama! Mitsuba's fun to be with. Her hugs are the best."

"Well—anyway, it—it got you hurt! Now you know why Dad didn't..." Itama's voice faltered as he aimed his gaze back at Mitsuba and caught her vicious stare. He shied away, wringing his hands together. "It's just—you're supposed to let us protect you. You don't need to... don't need to be a shinobi or anything, Mitsu..."

"What—whatever," Mitsuba sighed out in disgust, raising a hand to prod at the dull ache at the edge of her mouth. "It doesn't matter now. Someone told—one of the lookouts, maybe. They look
gossipy. I don't know. But Tobirama's telling Dad all about it and none of you will have to worry about me getting hurt again. You can all protect me as much as you want when he forbids me from ever leaving the house again." She didn't hide the bitterness seeping out in her voice.

Hashirama sighed. "Itama didn't mean it like that, Mitsu... But you're our little sister. Even Tobirama... You know he has trouble expressing himself. But he cares in his own way. Like you care for us. If he's telling Dad, it's for your sake. And Dad..."

Even he didn't know what to say about Butsuma.

Itama shook his head furiously, brow furrowed. "But I did mean it like that, Hashirama. Mitsu doesn't need to fight. Not like kunoichi like Touka, or like us. So why...why would you even want to try?"

"Itama!" Hashirama shot him a mild glare.

"I'm not gonna take it back! I'm—I'm serious, here!"

She was silent during the exchange, idly watching Kawarama as his vacant stare switched between his brothers. Perhaps not fully grasping the situation, or just too tired from the trip home to throw in his two cents. But then he caught her gaze and shut his mouth, frowning blankly and blinking owlishly. "Uh, Mitsuba. Why do you want to know how to fight?"

Damn him—it was a good question.

The question caught them all off-guard. Hashirama and Itama's argument drifted into silence as all eyes focused on her.

Frowning deep just to keep her lips from trembling, she snatched the damp cloth up from where it fell, before it seeped through the tatami mats and rotted them and left her with future work, and pressed it up against her mouth to scrub away the dried blood. "Because I hate it here. I don't hate you guys, but—I hate my lessons. I hate being—being treated like something—"

Useless.

"—fragile. I want to use my chakra. I want to be strong. I want to—"

I want to leave.

She could never say the truth.

I want to leave and I don't want to die defenseless out in this shitty, shitty world. And I don't want to stay here and watch you die.

She didn't know if she'd cleaned away all of the blood, but the lukewarm cloth did nothing to soothe her busted lip so she tossed it away and stared down at her bloodied hand instead. Made half of an effort to wipe away the snaking tracks of red on her forearm but gave up when she realized she'd just have to take a bath later anyway. And also wash the blood out of her sleeve.

Her appearance must have looked...frightening, for them to be gathered around her with such serious expressions. And Itama, trying to baby her so much despite being barely a minute older. Always trying to be so strong, reliable...

"Big words, for such a small girl." Quiet as a prowling cat, Tobirama appeared in the open doorway, arms crossed, narrowed red gaze focused on a distant corner of the room. Unable to meet
her eyes, or his brothers'. "Give up, Mitsuba. It's better that way. Even Mother thought so."

Of course he knew what Kanae had told her. It didn't even faze her. She only shut her eyes and grit her teeth before opening them again and looking to Hashirama. He could deal with this. Only he could ever sway Tobirama.

"Tobirama..." Hashirama began to speak, but shut his mouth. Couldn't find it in him to argue the point. Or he thought the same, too. He met her eyes and shook his head, as if trying to dissuade an outburst she just didn't have the energy to rile.

None of them would side with her on this. Not this time.

Butsuma passed down his punishment through Mariko, who rode her ass harder than ever and demanded pure perfection even from her best work. Nagged like an absolute harpy over the tiniest and most pointless mistakes. Doubled the lessons—doubled the time spent obeying her father's order and not running amok trying to play shinobi. And was damn bitter about having to give up her time on a disobedient little brat.

Touka... Touka had been relieved of her post. Still a shinobi, but with different orders, now. Mitsuba didn't see her around for a long while after that day.

Her brothers spent less time in her company, again a result of their father's interference.

When they were away, and when Mariko's lessons had ended, an older Senju shinobi kept close watch on her every move, only giving her privacy in the outhouse and the baths and her bedroom.

Butsuma was thorough, and made damn sure she had next to no spare time to pursue her training.

And he'd almost succeeded. But stolen moments were her forte.

Practicing her projectile-throwing through skipping stones could easily be overlooked as a child having innocent, harmless fun.

Carrying as much weight in laundry and foraged vegetables to keep her strength up was nothing to bat an eye at.

Learning how to water-walk and keep her balance on the filled surface of a small wooden tub wasn't ideal, but she took whatever she could get. Even if it was more like a defunct game of the hokey pokey than aspiring (and long-suffering) self-teaching.

It wasn't the best approach, bullshitting her way through training, but it was a small step forward. Small steps added up, little by little, as time passed on.

For that reason, she could handle whatever Butsuma threw her way—and things weren't so bad, they really weren't.

A slow year passed.

Then Kawarama died.
WELL I missed the moving one chapter over per week goal I set for myself so I might just lump everything else I have together over the last week of 2018 and cap it off with the newest chapter (chapter 7) for a nice end-of-year thing. Also totally missed my personal goal of FINISHING this fic within the year, but well. It'll happen sooner or later. Thanks to everyone for reading/commenting/kudos-ing! See you in the next update.
Chapter Four

Kanae's death had hit them hard, and their brother's death hit them harder.

No—not just his death. His brutal murder. Seven years old and dead in the midst of war, hailed as a noble sacrifice in this world of (unnecessary) necessary evils.

Mitsuba didn't get to see the body, or the burial. Only heard all the dirty details secondhand, from Itama, as he bawled into her shoulder and tried, tried to be strong, be a shinobi, but utterly failed. And who could blame him.

Kawarama wasn't the first child to die, and he wouldn't be the last. Yet his brutal killing brought on a heavy blow that hit their family in a way that would never mend. The entire compound became sick with unrest in the wake of the clan head's loss—even Mariko allowed her a break from lessons.

It hardly felt real. And despite knowing he was long gone, a small part of her still expected him to stride into the compound with that dopey but sweet airheaded smile on his face while he picked his nose and sought her out to ambush her with a laugh and a smelly hug on his way to the baths, or whined and begged for an upset stomach fix when he ate too much, always the glutton.

No…no more of that.

Tobirama didn't speak. Didn't seem focused, either. The one time she saw him, he didn't even notice her, too busy staring into space, trapped in his own thoughts.

It affected Hashirama deeply. Sparked a defining outrage in him that would forever change history, and also drove a wedge between him and their father to the point where he frequently disappeared and left the compound on his own—likely to meet up with Madara for that short-lived summer friendship.

Kawarama's death and Madara's arrival were only numbers on a timer ticking ever closer to...

Mitsuba's fingers curled tight around the sleeves of Itama's dark green kimono top while he sniveled and hiccupped, face pressed tight against her sleeve in a mash of tears and snot as they sat on the veranda in the summer heat.

It was a familiar situation, just like the time he'd seriously fallen ill.

The memory resurfaced slow and blurry. Out of focus like an old-fashioned TV screen full of white noise—one that required fine-tuning for the picture to come through, but not so much that it was lost in passing as it overlapped with reality.

The sound of static, though, wasn't static at all. It was the steady and incessant pitter-patter of raindrops drumming against the wooden roof overhead, and the engawa just beyond the door. Thankfully staying outside where it should be, and not seeping through the cracks and into the tatami mats and thin, skewed futon that already failed to fend off the cold.
Mitsuba dipped an old cotton cloth into the half-filled basin at her knees until it was well and submerged, then drew it out and wrung most of the lukewarm, herb-infused moisture free. What remained dripped along her kimono as she dabbed at the sweaty, sticky face buried against her obi.

*Crybaby,* she wanted to say, but she couldn't, not when he was coiled up like an accordion, knees drawn to his chest, breathing ragged between muted whines of pain, eyes shut tight and seeping tears at the edges despite his best efforts. Instead, she hummed gently—not a tune she recognized, but one she remembered instinctively through the haze of a time long past. A soothing voice had always guided her through times of suffering, after all. A cool cloth to coax the heat of the fever out, and a soft lap to cry on, too.

Whether it was Kanae or a mother from another time, she didn't know.

But she did remember what Kanae had told her.

*You must take care of your brothers, Mitsuba. They are far too diligent.* She'd spoken those words almost as a tenet even before the days leading up to her death. But in retrospect, she was asking her a favor. She was asking her to be there for them when she knew she wasn't long for this world.

So she did. Even if it wasn't just for Kanae's sake.

Itama got sick often—whether from allergies or just plain lack of thought. But this time it was… bad. He wouldn't have gotten sick at all if he hadn't insisted on continuing his *kata* when he first started showing symptoms.

All just to impress their *father*.

"Stupid," she sighed out on a breath, a whisper hidden in the notes of the familiar song. There was no way a warmonger who threw his sons into the hungry, fanged jaws of combat as sacrificial lambs would ever truly praise their struggles. When death struck them down in cold blood, he would only bow his head a moment.

And it would strike them down. Again, and again, and again. Always.

Their body count would justify a victory, eventually. Those fortunate enough to live through it would ease their grief with triumph. They would pacify that sick, black serpent of guilt constantly by claiming they did the right thing, but it would always remain coiled up within—a sin burned deep into the soul.

Just seeing her brother here, so small, so weak, brought on a stale wave of nausea.

What if he died from this, instead of someone striking him down? Taken by sickness may have been the less cruel fate.

"Mitsu…keep singing. Please."

She hadn't realized she'd stopped. But with the way he pleaded, with that weak, raspy voice, through tightly clenched teeth, how could she refuse?

His small hands (the same as hers) coiled into the folds of her kimono as he curled up closer, like an animal seeking warmth.

*Hey…let's run away from here. Let's go somewhere better. You can be a normal kid. You won't have to grow up so fast.*
...You won't have to die before you do.

The words came so easy, in her head. But they stuck to her tongue, cleaved into pieces by the teeth that tried to speak them. "I'm sorry," was all she could manage before she picked up the song once more.

I'm sorry.

Mitsuba blinked away the memory when a sharp and sudden moisture pricked at her eyes. Back then, she hadn't been able to speak the words in her heart. But now...? Now, when it was more crucial than ever?

At some point, she'd threaded her fingers through his grown-out, tangled two-tone hair—black and white, light and shadow. With hair like that, surely he should have been prescribed a better fate. To stand as the balance and to help destroy the crooked system, or at least find a way to meet in the middle. But...he wasn't, and he wouldn't. Each time he set foot on the battlefield, it may as well be a funeral march. Because one day...one day, he wouldn't return. Just like Kawarama.

And as each day dragged by, she wasn't sure she could handle that. Not again.

Her eyes dropped from the treetops fringing the space beyond the compound's walls to the top of his head. "Itama..." She spoke barely above a whisper, and it went unheard, lost in his breaths that leveled out to snores. Fast asleep.

How far can we make it on our own? Can two children survive out there? Would it be enough?

No—she knew the answer instinctively.

But she couldn't stay here anymore. She couldn't just sit around in wait for his slaughter only to hear about it days—weeks—after the fact, left wondering and worrying. It was cruel. It was torture.

A low sigh left her lips as she let her fingers slip from his hair and fall quietly to the wooden slats beneath them. "Itama," she asked again, knowing her words went unheard as his calm breathing continued on, undisturbed, but carrying on his side of the conversation in her mind as if he had heard, and did respond.

Mitsu?

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

Mm... I dunno. Why?

"I think..." She chose her words on measured breaths, choosing and laying them out one by one like she was setting up a castle of cards, "I think the person I used to be was waiting to die for a long, long time. In a wasted life. One not worth living, day after day, with more problems than solutions. And pain. But...seeing things now, maybe the me of the past was wrong. Maybe she should have wished she'd stayed alive a little longer, and shouldn't have taken what she had for granted before she lost it.
"There are always going to be struggles, and problems…and pain. And I don't want to waste this new life. I want something happy. I want hope. Even if I can't reach it, if I can't find it, I still have to try. Itama…"

She hesitated. Looked down at the fingers clinging loosely to her kimono, so small, so young, but so bruised and calloused, as she gently pried them away and lowered his head carefully, so carefully, to the floor. He tended to sleep heavy around her, safe at home—didn't stir at all.

"Goodbye."

Today—and today, only, perhaps, was simultaneously the best and the worst day to flee. Because, like an eclipse, it aligned perfectly with Hashirama's absence, and in turn Tobirama's. Whether he and Butsuma were aware of who he was meeting yet, she didn't know. All she knew was that her sneaky brother was nowhere in sight. Not in the main house, not meditating at his usual place on the stepping stones in front of the koi pond where Kawarama had once tried and failed to shove him into the water as he honed his sensory abilities.

Despite it being the midst of summer, a strained and solemn cold had dropped over the compound like a wet and heavy blanket. Even clouds had gathered, blocking out the sun. Promising tears as their way of mourning.

A little too late, really.

When her brothers were home, no guards watched over her. Perhaps it was something Butsuma overlooked, assuming her brothers could hold her attention and distract her from her true goal. Or with Kawarama's death still hanging over his family's thoughts, he'd simply forgotten. Either way, she used their absence to her advantage and ducked around to the back of the meeting hall where the hole in the compound's wall remained, well out of sight behind overgrowth and just waiting for mischievous children to find it again.

If it hadn't been for Itama, she'd have never known it was there at all.

She dropped down onto her knees and thrust her hands into the scratchy shrubbery, pushing it aside and squinting into the shadows for the telltale signs of sunlight streaming through cracked concrete. There—it was faint, but light did spill through from the other side. No one had noticed a slip of deteriorated wall or even tried to repair it after so many years.

All the better for her.

She drew her hands back and took a quick glance at the sleeves bunched at her arms, then dug a hand behind her obi to pull out a folded length of white fabric—took the tie between her teeth and quickly wrapped her sleeves up, to keep them well out of her way.

Now, there was nothing in her hands—no supplies, no weapons. Only the clothes on her back, and the field journal tucked away deep into the folds of her kimono, stuffed full of loose leaf pages of her own messy notes. All she needed was the forest—to feed her, and when there was a river, to bathe her. To hide her. To protect her.

Until she found something else.

She cast one, final glance over her shoulder, to the unoccupied meeting hall at her back, to the corner, fully expecting a familiar face to round it at any second.

No one showed.
She hiked her kimono up to her knees and crawled through the bushes until she was free and clear on the other side. Picked a direction and ran.

Never had running been harder.

The ground, deceptively even, without bumps, tripped her up at almost every step, as if the dirt itself and the roots below reached up with grabbing fingers to stop her. The trees, standing silent, bent down over her from above with branches like clawed arms that tore at her skin even when she seemed well out of their reach. And, as if sensing her strife, as if refusing to cover her escape with their sounds, the cicada did not cry. The birds did not chirp. The wind didn't even stir the leaves. The forest was silent, save for her footsteps that seemed to echo far too loud each and every time they struck the ground.

*I t's just in your head,* she told herself. *Just keep going. As far as you can.*

Heat surrounded her—the thick, rising humidity of oncoming rain. It caught her like a web trying to pull her back the further she ran, refusing to break. The struggle coated her forehead in droplets that matted her two-colored bangs to her skin and ran into her eyes as she squinted to keep the ground ahead of her in sight.

Something snapped.

With a strangled cry, she threw her hands out in front of her to catch the dirt as the world turned topsy-turvy and collided with her body. One hand smashed against an outcropping of thick roots from a tree, scraping into her skin and jamming two fingers, but better them than her face, or her nose.

A quick glance at her left foot revealed her sandal straps had broken and slipped out from under her sole.

She exhaled deeply, letting her body relax against the ground as she dropped her forehead against one of her sprawled arms. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

*After all the training... How embarrassing.*

Slowly, she pushed herself up and retrieved the broken sandal, turning it over in her hands and contemplating just how she was supposed to keep on walking without its protection. There was no fixing it—not unless...unless...

It would leave her with a lessened range of movement, but she untied the *tasuki* to let the sleeves of her teal kimono fall free, and held the stretch of narrow white fabric between her hands, trying to figure out how to tie her shoe back to her foot and keep it fixed in place without slipping or coming undone again. She could forage, she could fish and hunt small game, she focus her chakra—but she wasn't a girl scout. She couldn't tie decent knots. Mariko had complained several times about her lack of fine finishing when it came to sewing, even if the knots and tie-offs were always out of sight. Especially when it came to tying fancy obi knots—the damn crone's birthday came early when she discovered that was a particular weakness of hers.

*Just tie it like a shoelace,* her mind provided, and she could visualize her reflection shrugging, nonchalant. But there was too much fabric for that—she couldn't leave it trailing along waiting to trip her up again.

*Hmph. Some ninja you are, then.*

Words of doubt grated on her ears as she set her foot back into the straw sandal, stepping onto the
fabric strip and bringing it up over her ankle.

Why did you even run? Even with chakra, what can you do? Where can you go? This isn't like home. You can't phone Daddy to come find you when you're lost. Or your sisters. Or your brothers. Not that they'd even come.

And what about the bears? Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my.

This isn't Sesame Street. This isn't even Oz. This is a feudal land rife with wild beasts that are both human and animal, and you are on the enemy's territory, no matter how far you go.

Where will you ever find freedom in a place like this? How can you possibly survive?

Just go back. Go back and be safe and support your brothers, just like Kanae asked. There's no shame in putting aside the desire for physical strength and keeping your hands clean with sewing and flowers and herbs and housework. Everyone has a role no less than any other—something only they can do. Sometimes it isn't fighting or rebelling. Doesn't have to be.

She couldn't close her ears to the words that bit from within.

Support your brothers—until they died? No.

No.

Not again.

There was no hope—not back there. Only a pillow slowly pressing down, suffocating.

This—this was her answer, and the decision had been made long ago.

Eventually, she managed to wrap her shoe back to her foot with the length of fabric, and tied it securely across the top. It didn't loosen when she tugged at it, anyway. And when she took a few steps to test it, it didn't slip.

Her eyes wandered toward the patches of sky that filtered through the leaves and branches. The cloud covering still concealed the sun's position, but it was still sometime in the afternoon. Not much time had passed.

Still, she had to keep going. Sooner or later, her family would notice her absence and send pursuit.

The only way to avoid a shinobi was to maintain a vast distance and never let them cross it.

As for whatever enemies lingered out here, away from the safety of her home? She'd just have to do her best to avoid them.

She took a deep breath to balance herself, pressed her hands tight to her chest, and ran.

Or, tried to run, before she stopped dead in her tracks.

Really, she should have known. Just leaving, so simply, with no one blocking her way had been far too easy. Running for so long without someone on her tail had just been a foolish hope.

Thinking she could get away without saying a proper goodbye was just too much.

"Itama."
He stood in her path with unshed tears in his eyes and hands clenched into fists at his sides, meeting her stare with a pout. So, so small and taking the full weight of this responsibility on his shoulders.

"I thought I was dreaming," he said, voice clogged with sobs he did his best to hold back. "But then I woke up and you weren't anywhere, Mitsu. I looked all over the compound. I saw the bushes moved aside. I just… Are you really that unhappy here with us? Do you hate us? Hate me?"

Words failed her. Really, what could she say that wouldn't just make him cry?

"I can't think of anything else, because with Kawa—with Kawarama g-gone, there's no way you could just abandon us if you didn't." The tears dribbled down his cheeks and he lifted his arm to scrub them away before dropping it back to his side. "And—I never heard you talk like that before. I was—I'm scared. I don't wanna lose you too, Mitsu." He squeezed his eyes shut and sniffled, and the pain distorting his gentle face broke her heart as she struggled to respond.

"No, Itama, I…" She held out a hand and let it hover in the air between them, unable to cross the distance. Afraid that if she did, she'd never leave again. It fell back to her side. "Please just go back. Go back."

He sniffled, again, this time dragging the back of his gray haori across his messy face. "No! I told you, didn't I? I'll protect you. You don't need to—to be so difficult. Just—just come back home with me and…and be our sister."

"And what does that leave for me?" she snapped back, sharp and hot in a burst of rage, shoulders tensing as she raised her clenched fists, lips trembling from pressing them together so tight.

"I know you care. I know. That's why you have to go! I can't—"

"Mitsu!" He dropped his hand away from his face and frowned, mirroring her expression with the face they all but shared. The fair half of his hair still stuck up, crooked, from where he'd been sleeping on the floor, but in this moment it was like an angry cat's puffed-out fur. "I told you I'm not going back! Not without you! How could I just leave you out here?"

His brief bout of fury cooled into resignation.

"Please. Please just…find a way to be happy with us. You...you don't know what it's like out here. You don't know how happy it makes us to have a little sister to go home to. Kawarama..." His voice caught. "Kawarama talked about it all the time. He thought so much of you. So, so much—sometimes I hated it because I always thought I liked you the most. Because we're twins… shouldn't it be that way? But you're always so closed-up and distant I can never tell how close you are to anyone. Then you go and do something like this and I just…"

He took a step forward—just a small one, to test her reaction. When she didn't move, didn't try to run, he continued forward and reached a shaking hand out to touch a jagged tear in her kimono, just under the shoulder. Then at the others that peppered her sleeves, and even at a scratch on her face she hadn't felt.

A little mother hen, parroting how she'd cared for him.

Slowly, slowly, she held out her arms and wrapped him in an embrace he gladly returned.

"Fine," she breathed, too exhausted to be angry as he clung tightly to her and she smoothed her hand along his back. "Fine, Itama. I was going to ask you to come with me, you know, but how could I when you say things like that?"
"If I could," he said, voice tearful and muffled by her kimono, "I would go with you. I have to protect you, after all. But...you don't get it, Mitsu. Hashirama, Tobirama, Kawarama... Dad says we all fight so people like you don't have to. We fight to protect our clan, our families, to assure them a future of peace and make sure no one who's been struck down dies in vain. Kawarama...I can't just let him die without reason."

You poor, brainwashed child. His death isn't yours to avenge. It wasn't your fault. And this isn't your fight.

Even so, he spoke with such conviction that it almost moved her.

"Shinobi are born to fight, and to die."

She pushed him away.

"It's shit," she spoke plainly, testing out a swear on her child's tongue for the first time and finding it bitter. "It's shit you don't deserve. Adults, fathers, using their children to fight a war is—is...it's shit."

"Mitsu! Don't speak ill of Dad!" A flash of anger—fear—and disbelief, sparked in his dark eyes. Absolute blasphemy.

"Come with me," she said, now, insisting. Demanding. No sweet or tolerant words left in her. "We'll run away together and you will be a normal child. If—if I can save you, then..."

He snatched her arm up by the wrist and tried to drag her back the way she'd run from.

Her heels dug straight into the dirt, chakra focused fully on keeping her anchored where she stood.

"Mitsu, you—"

"Don't 'Mitsu' me, Itama! You're right, okay? I can't understand! I don't want to understand something so stupid. If you could just...if you could just see how wrong things were, this would be so much easier."

"You sound just like Hashirama," he completed his sentence, expression set in a pinched and worried pout as his eyes dropped to the ground. His grip on her arm loosened, but didn't completely fall away as he turned toward her with trembling lips. "I don't get stuff like that. I just do what Dad says. If I follow him, I know things will be okay...so don't...don't say those things."

"You know Kawarama's death was wrong. And I do understand you wanting to—to avenge his memory." She struggled for the proper words—the words that would sway him. The words that would save him.

Because, if there was any rhyme or reason to why she'd been born here, this could be it. It was as good as any other.

She'd resigned herself to acting as their stand-in mother...and mothers protected their children.

No. So did sisters—they protected their brothers, too.

They didn't just run away, alone.

She grit her teeth. "But I can't be here anymore. I can't watch my brothers, children, die for no good reason, one by one. Think of how I would feel, to be the only sibling left."
She paused.

"Run away with me now so I don't have to be."

The right words hit her like a lightning bolt. She took a breath, and took the plunge.

"Mom would want you to."

He broke.

He snatched his hand away from her arm and held it close to his chest as if stabbed. Took a full step back.

Complete, ringing silence filled the space between them as he lifted his head and met her eyes with a vacant stare, struck speechless by the sheer nerve of bringing up their dead mother in this situation. But even he couldn't deny the validity of the statement.

Again, he squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head. "Mitsu, I told you…I can't do that. We should go, now, and get home before dark. Just—please, Mitsu." When he opened them again, they were red at the edges and full of tears.

He tore his eyes away from her and looked around them, anywhere else.

"I can't even…I don't even know where we are, right now. I wasn't paying attention. It's getting dark. Cloudy."

Looking around now, neither did she. Whichever direction she'd come from had long been lost to her eyes and all paths looked the same, lined by trees and shrubs alike, never ending.

She took a breath to steady herself. "How did you find me?"

"I can track. That's easy! But the reverse…"

"Did Butsuma ever say which direction the compound was on your way home?"

If he did, she'd just go the opposite way.

He shot her an odd look when she used their father's name, but didn't question it and only shook his head. A pout overtook his lips. His fingers curled into fists.

"…Are you playing dumb just to lead me back there?"

"No! I promise, Mitsu! I'm not that clever. But it's a good idea… Ah! Don't change the subject." He stopped, almost wincing as he pressed a hand to his forehead. "Hashirama said there was a farm north of the compound. Sometimes they give us rice when our rations are low. Otherwise, we—we can wait until the sun sets and find out where we are from that. If the clouds clear…"

She shrugged, setting her hands on her hips. "Fine. We'll look for the farm."

"You don't sound like you mean it."

"…There's no guarantee we'll find it. All we can do is walk. Somewhere."

Hopefully far, far away from everything.

"Yeah. I guess you're right. But—just remember I'm definitely taking you back, once we find the
way!"

With a long-suffering sigh, she held out her hand. He took it immediately.

They set off once more. Wandering, not quite aimless, but as good as lost, like Hansel and Gretel without a trail of breadcrumbs. Only, a witch and an oven didn’t await them. No, not a witch and her oven.

At some point, the clouds grew tired of holding in their moisture and dripped rain in a slow, hazy drizzle that caught on the overhanging leaves until it flooded over and fell in fat, heavy droplets on their heads. At some point, Itama draped his gray haori over her head to keep her dry.

When the dirt got too wet, their sandals began to stick in mud, slimy and treacherous and stinking beneath their feet and splashing up over the edges of their soles, all the way to their ankles.

To two children lost in the wild, the world was unforgiving. But she’d known that. She knew that, and she continued on regardless.

Between patches in the trees, the sky faded from pale blue-gray to a smoky purple-gray, threaded with spidering flashes of lightning. Thunder rumbled like drumbeats, distant but steadily approaching.

The rain became a torrent, swirling in the mud at their feet and creating small ponds like mires, eager to grab them and never let go.

Still not too late in the day, but could have been evening for how dark it had become.

"We have to stop," Itama panted out after some time, resting his hand against a tree as he pulled his mud-covered foot free from a sticky puddle. "We aren’t getting anywhere in this storm."

"We can keep going," Mitsuba insisted, having lost her shoe and her *tasuki* to the sludge surrounding them—easier to walk through it than on sharp, dry land.

Their hair clung tight to their faces and necks—she'd even lost his haori to the wind, and to the mud it fell into. Low branches had caught the high bun on her head and snagged it from its tie, leaving it free in a long, wet tangle hanging heavy down her back.

Ahead of them was a wide, surging river, flooded, with its current strengthened by the unforgiving rainfall. It was the only way forward. Otherwise, searching for a way around it would take up the rest of their day.

"Mitsuba! Just look at the river. How?!!"

Using her full name—he rarely lost his temper with her. Today, though, his irritation was understandable. She was pushing. Too hard, too far, persistent as the downpour. Even she knew. But it was too soon to stop.

"You're a shinobi. Can't you find a way?"

"I—I can't. We have to wait."

Wordlessly, she turned her back on the roaring river and crossed her arms as she took refuge under the tree with her brother, if only to show her displeasure. The foliage did little to actually shield them from the rain, but having something solid at their backs during the storm was at the very least reassuring when the ground shifted every second.
They waited in silence as they leaned against a tree trunk, side by side, shoulders pressed close together. There was nothing to say that hadn't already been said.

"How far do you think we are?" she asked anyway, watching him sidelong as his worried gaze flitted over the area around them.

He didn't answer, too focused to listen. And too preoccupied with something else, with his lips pressed together tight, like he'd sucked on a lemon. She hadn't noticed it before, but his shoulders had tensed up, and he wrung his hands together, shifting from foot to foot as the rain drip-dropped onto his head.

"Itama?"

"What?"

She repeated the question, eyebrows furrowed.

"I don't know. Not too far, I hope." He didn't meet her eyes, still staring at their surroundings.

"Well, we'll leave as soon as—why do you keep fidgeting?"

"I—umm. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." She nudged his arm with her shoulder, frowning. "Tell me."

"It's—I have to pee! I was supposed to, when I woke up and saw you were gone. When I followed you I just forgot, and—this rain isn't making it any better. But there's not really a place to go…I'll just hold it! Don't worry about it."

"Don't hold it! That's not good for you. Here—I'll turn around. Just go." Saying so, she turned her back and crossed her arms, taking a small step away—as far as she could go without slipping in the mud.

He huffed a sigh, probably pouting at her, but didn't reply aside from a grumble. Fabric shifted behind her, but other than that small sound, everything else was lost to the rain beating against the ground.

Jeez. He needs to take care of himself a little better. She'd tell him that out loud, if she wasn't sure he'd just throw the words right back at her.

Even so…when he wasn't out watching, analyzing the woods around them, everything seemed so much bigger. And darker. And dangerous. Her senses hyper-focused in his absence, but there was nothing to see—nothing to give form to. Only a lingering, nonphysical presence of dread.

He bumped her back with his shoulder when he returned to her side.

"Done? Good. I—"

His hand slapped over her mouth—he grabbed a fistful of her kimono sleeve and dragged her down toward the ground, holding a finger tightly to his grimacing lips and glancing off to the side, eyes wide and pupils impossibly small.

At first she didn't see, didn't know what he'd spotted because: pee hands, pee hands! He's touching me with pee hands! But the indignation and disgust evaporated, replaced by something worse.

A presence—dark, heavy, hot, as hot as the first flames she'd awoken to—passed close by, not
making a sound amid the thousands of raindrops striking the mud. So, so close—just above their heads, with only their tree and a small scrub of bushes between them.

It stopped. Lingered. Burned.

"Hn... I thought I heard voices." The voice belonged to an adult man. Speaking in a deep, rasping voice, more to himself than anything, but whoever he was, he was an enemy, and enemies did not travel alone.

Itama's eyes remained wide and his lips parted the moment he lowered his hand from them, reaching slowly into the back of his hakama for what she could only hope was a kunai. No—by the look of utter despair that creased his eyes, she knew he'd found nothing there but fabric. He shut his eyes tight, briefly, then turned his head slowly toward the man's voice. Just as slowly, he dropped his hand away from her mouth, trusting her to hold the silence that was crucial to their survival.

"Perhaps not."

Mitsuba curled her fingers deep into the squelching mud beneath her, not moving, not breathing, as they waited for the man to leave, none the wiser that there were indeed two children who'd been speaking only moments before.

They remained frozen for what felt like hours—but couldn't have been, because the rain never ceased and didn't let up at all. If anything, it fell faster. Colder.

Gradually, the burning presence dissipated.

Itama's eyes returned to hers as he pressed a finger to his lips once more, brow furrowed deep. The lines around his eyes were an awful sight; no child should ever look so frightened. But she was sure her expression looked the same. Felt it in the pinched, tight-lipped frown and squinting eyes.

He took hold of her arm once again and hefted them both to their feet, careful to keep her close and to keep them from slipping in the mud when they regained their footing. She was ahead of him, there, and controlled her chakra the best she could, knowing one bad step could ruin them.

They didn't even get to take one step.

"Only joking. I see you."

Red eyes burst to life before them like burning pin lights, so bright and bold she could see the single tomoe burning in each iris like punched-out black holes.

The scream died in her throat as Itama lurched forward and threw his arm out to shield her. Even unarmed in the face of their worst enemy.

Uchiha. He's an Uchiha. Uchiha... The name circled in her mind, whirling like a tornado.

"What are two children doing out here in the forest, alone, during a storm?" He spoke in a cool, deceptively calm tone, shrouded mostly in shadow save for those awful eyes. "You'll catch cold."

"That boy's a Senju. I recognize the ugly hair." Another voice. Another Uchiha.

A chill skittered down her spine faster than the rain that trickled across her skin as the silhouettes of the two shinobi advanced out of the shadows, starting with their eyes and ending with their devil smirks.
Itama's foot slid back against the mud, just slightly—he grabbed her and ran. Toward the roaring river, though he'd claimed they had no way to cross it. Maybe this situation called for it—for an adrenaline leap that would carry them both over. Because chakra could do that. It could.

It had to.

As they ran, sprinted, Mitsuba grew acutely aware of every tree, every root, every leaf surrounding them, glowing a dull green in the halo of the raindrops that bounced off their surfaces. Even the grass, swaying beneath the puddles they both kept their feet above, though hers dipped through more than she would have liked.

The river was close. Had only been a short distance away.

"Mitsuba," he whispered at her ear, voice hoarse with an urgent fear as they approached the muddy bank that sluiced rain straight into the raging current. "You have to jump. You can do it, you—you've been training your chakra, right? I'll help you. Just—just jump. As far as you can."

"I—" Words escaped her, stuck deep in her throat as one hand pressed on her back and the other gripped her at the waist and he ran faster, sandals pounding against the flooded ground in wild ripples.

"Go!" he shouted as his feet hit the edge, just short of falling straight in.

More than helping her jump, he threw her. She pushed off the river bank with both feet and, with the aid of his strength (all of his strength, she knew), her body sailed through the air, weightless.

But only in her mind.

The rain weighed her down and that, combined with gravity, pulled at her as she descended hard and fast toward the other side, barely clearing the opposite bank. Her knees caught the edge and she crashed deep into the mud as the river whirled around her legs, trying to suck her straight into the rapids—but she gripped the muck and hauled herself up to higher ground with shaking hands.

"Itama." She expected to see him at her side when she blinked the blur of rain and dirt from her eyes. No. No one else had followed. "Itama!"

The rain beat down upon her like glass as she wrenched her body from the sucking mud and crawled back to the edge of the bank with fingers digging into the weak ground like claws, straining to see across—to find her brother.

She did find him—and the two Uchiha men, too. Smiling, cruel, looming over her brother, her brother, like wraiths as he remained standing at the edge of the riverbed, shoulders squared. Brave—so brave. Even when the men drew their katanas.

"Goodbye, Mitsu," she thought she heard him say, but the wind, the rain, was deceiving, and, really, how could he speak when his legs were shaking so bad? His lips, too, were surely pressed tight as tears raced down his cheeks, lost in the rain. Yes—they definitely were. He turned to smile at her over his shoulder just after speaking, eyes wide, terrified, as a blade sank through his stomach like a knife through tender apple flesh and not a child's body, not—

"ITAMA!"

Wind shrieked in her ears as lightning crackled down and splintered trees, as her heart shattered, as something within her snapped and pulled and wrenched free and grew and grew and grew and grew—
Her hands slipped.

The river swallowed her whole in its chilled, gaping jaws, chewing her up and tossing her about, bashing her between the roughened crags of pebble teeth at its floor and the hardened, slashing fingers of fallen trees and punching rocks that lurked within it.

Her kimono caught. Tore.

Her bones rattled in her skin.

Her face burned, straight across the eye. Ripped open.

She felt it—she felt it all, until she didn't.
Mitsuba wasn't dead. No—she knew what death, what *dying* was like. For her, it was a sharp and sudden pain that opened her body like a broken dam and let her soul flood out, or the brink of suffocation—then nothing. But she could still think, still *was*, so she wasn't dead yet.

Certainly, she'd passed out at some point, but gradually she became aware of her body. Soaked and weighed down by a heavy, damp kimono. Aching, like she'd been running too far, too fast, hurtling forward and unable to stop. Eyelids heavy, weighed down by anchors—and one hurting, pulsing, with something pressing down on it physically as well as metaphorically.

Solid mud supported her—damp and squishy and tepid beneath her fingertips and in the beds of her fingernails, but no longer a swamp.

The rain had passed. But the sound of the river still roared in her ears, so, so close.

Someone was with her, at her side. Speaking, urgently, sometimes patting at her face or jostling her shoulders. On some level, she knew who he was. But it didn't matter, because he wasn't *Itama*.

Because *Itama* was—

*Itama* was—

…Never before had she cared to hate the Uchiha. But, no, it wasn't even that clan as a whole. Only two.

Only two.

Two, with leering red pinwheel eyes and blurry demon faces but oh-so-distinct voices, one deep and rough as sandpaper grit, one like a tangle of skittering spider legs; cruel, ruthless, and…delighted.

Both far too eager to hunt shinobi children as blood sport. And it was a blood sport.

It was, because the only thing that made sense was that this era was full of twisted psychopaths who *enjoyed* slaying children.

Put a weapon in a child's hand and call them a shinobi? Bull*fuck*ingshit. If only they'd put aside their pride before drawing their young into the warzone and let it raise them with the same ideals, if they survived at all.

But she wasn't any better. She wasn't, because she hadn't done a thing about it. *Couldn't*. Because it led to death no matter what.

Just what separated a father that shoved his children into bloody battle and a sister that dragged her brother down and allowed him to stand between life and death?

*Oh, god. I'm the same. I'm just the same as him and no better. Maybe worse. I let this happen. I'm no mother. No sister.*

*I did this.*
"Mitsuba!" A hand struck her face a bit harder than before, enough to just sting—and like a trigger, it shot her from her mind. She coughed, retched, water spilling from her lips and into her hair and onto the ground, and turned her head, wheezing. River swill trickled out of her lungs until her breaths came clear.

Only one eye opened. The other remained closed, with something pressed tight against it, including a hand. Another hand grabbed at her shoulder and helped her sit up. She didn't resist—moved like a doll, not quite feeling herself, as the world dipped in and out of bleary focus and a pair of red eyes blinked at her side.

_Uchiha_—

She jerked away, reaching behind her to grab at the ground and push up and _run_, but when her palm hit the mud her entire arm buckled beneath her with a numbing, white-hot flare of pain that stole away her consciousness like a swiping hand.

It wasn't a silent peace, though.

Voices drifted closer, then away, sometimes muffled and other times loud, like floating bubbles popping too close to her ears. Everything hurt. Everything felt…separated, like nothing was holding her together and she was a bundle of yarn that had snagged somewhere in the river and unwound and unwound and unwound the farther she traveled.

When she felt like herself again, she didn't feel much different. Drier, certainly, but no less heavy. No less broken. Something still pressed tight against her left eye and prevented it from opening, held fast with something wrapped around her head. Bandages—but they felt like a vice.

"Are you awake?"

A warm presence shifted at her side.

When she opened her eye, Hashirama's face filled her vision, pinched in a grim frown that smoothed into a grateful smile when she blinked and let her gaze dart around the wooden walls of the bare room, fully lucid.

Not her futon. Not her room. Not the main house.

She sat up until a hand on her shoulder stopped her—and a good thing it did, too, because her body all but crumpled in on itself the minute she moved.

"It's only been a day! Don't try to do so much yet, Mitsu." He breathed out a sigh as he sat back and set his hands on his crossed legs, watching her with his lips pressed into a thin line, eyebrows wrinkled together. Too serious. Much too serious for a child his age. "I—_what_ happened?"

By the way he asked, hesitating just a second, he wasn't only asking for himself.

"You tell me," Mitsuba replied, gnashing her teeth against the way the words scraped their way up her throat and past trembling lips and into something ragged.

She rubbed at her throat with her good hand, looking down at the slow-pulsing arm that was wrapped fast in bandages and what looked like a makeshift splint. It didn't really hurt that much
anymore and young bones could take a beating, but it must have been a full break with that kind of care.

Bruises—those hurt the most, now. All angry deep red and purple at the edges, speckled across her skin.

"Tell you what I think happened or what our father thinks happened?" He had no time for her evasive attitude—not today. Not right now. Still, he wasn't cruel about it. Just urgent. From the sleepless shadows under his eyes and the pinch of irritation in his expression, he'd stayed by her side through the night. Maybe not entirely on Butsuma's orders, either.

On one side of his face, just under the cheek, was a blossoming fist-shaped bruise that looked as bad as hers.

She almost reached out to touch it. Almost.

"...I don't know. Is there a difference?" she asked instead, letting her hand fall to her chest, where she straightened the collar of her yukata. A spare—not hers, specifically. Maybe one of Kiku's, for the way it fit. Either she or Mariko had been tasked with changing her into dry clothes.

"I... Honestly, I don't know. It's just—so much happened between now and then. When I came back home yesterday, everyone was in a panic. You were gone, Itama was gone, Father and Tobirama were gone... I went after them and still don't really know. Part of the forest was really messed up, worse than by a storm alone—then Tobirama found you down the river—way down the river. I thought—I thought you were dead.

"We evacuated the compound—we're staying at a camp for now, until we can make it to the new one. It's not too far, but when we have to change locations like this..." He trailed off, unwilling to linger on the subject of why.

Why? She wanted to know. Couldn't muster the energy to ask, though.

"Father and Tobirama are out looking for Itama, still." One of his hands scrubbed at his eyes, pushing his bangs out of the way before they settled across his forehead, askew. "What did you do, Mitsu? I mean, did you and Itama wander off to play, or—you didn't... you didn't run away, did you? Did Itama follow you? No one, none of the guards, have anything to say on the matter. No one even knew you'd gone. Was Itama with you?"

Each time he spoke their brother's name, it was a solid blow to her heart. Her fingers dug into the fabric of her yukata, but he didn't see her reaction. He'd squeezed his eyes shut as his voice shook and tears shone in his eyes again.

"I think he had to be, because Father says the forest damage looked like...like..." He knew exactly what, but he wouldn't tell her. He took a breath. "It was ruined. Trees upturned, weird growths—what happened? Did he protect you? Then how did you fall in the river? And where is Itama?"

"Uchiha..." It slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it. Almost flinched as Hashirama reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders, eyes wide.

"Uchiha?! You ran into Uchiha?" Grim despair, now—watching his emotions change was like speed-flipping through a picture book.

"No—yes—stop!" Mitsuba snapped, smacking his hands away as tears burned in her eyes. Red eyes and pointed smiles and swords and—
For the way he recoiled it was as if she'd slapped him straight across the face. He gave her a moment and let his gaze wander meekly away as his shoulders slumped and his panic deflated. "Sorry. I'm sorry, Mitsu. But I need to know. The Uchiha—they're dangerous. Not only them. But..." He met her eyes again, pleading. "I need to know. Tell me what happened. Please."

"We both went out..."

She didn't intend to lie. Really, she didn't, but the story formed itself in her fear and guilt and regret and denial.

"We left the compound and went looking for something in the forest—a fox. Itama thought it was a dog. There's—there's a hole in the back wall, behind the meeting hall. Hidden behind bushes. That's how we got out unseen—no one knows about it but us." She bit her lip as it began to tremble. "We went too far out...Itama wanted to go back, but we got lost. Then it started raining. Really bad. We went as far as we could—"

_Then the Uchiha—_

"—then we got stuck. The river was too high—the current was too strong. Some men—shinobi—cornered us. I-I don't know what else happened. I fell into the river."

"Were those men Uchiha? Do you know?"

"No—I don't know. I didn't really see..."

"And Itama?"

_He's dead._

"I don't know."

_He's dead._

"Mitsuba—"

_"I don't know!"

He held up his hands to placate her. "Okay. Sorry. Sorry, Mitsu. It's okay."

_No, it's really not. It never will be."

"Uchiha...Itama told me about them. He said to watch out for them. Maybe they weren't..." She shook her head and sniffled back snot as tears burned at her eyes—eye. She pressed her good hand over the bandages, feeling small—smaller than she'd ever been. A child, for the first time in forever. Helpless and afraid and alone for the lie. For the mistake. For _everything_.

One of Hashirama's hands rested gently against her back, warm. "It's...it'll be okay, Mitsu. Sorry for asking so much."

"Itama—"

The sound of voices, floating muffled through the walls, halted her sentence.

Butsuma opened the door to the small cabin, with Tobirama at his side. In his hands was a muddied bundle of gray fabric she knew well and once she saw it she couldn't look away.
"...Itama let me wear that. I lost it in the storm." She held out her hand, as if fully expecting the man would hand it over. He didn't. He wouldn't even look her in the eye. "He... Where is he?"

No one spoke a word.

And with one look from Butsuma, Hashirama rose to his feet and followed his father and his brother out of the room.

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A day later, they arrived at the new compound.

It was smaller, shabbier, and not nearly as spacious as the previous location—but the walls surrounding it were high and strong with no hidden holes for foolish children to slip through.

Mitsuba's belongings had been packed together in a rush—two of her kimonos, Kanae's hair brush and a few hairpins she'd been fond of had been left behind. Her medicine chest, tucked so safely away in its closet corner, had gone overlooked. Hidden a bit too well.

The field guide she'd so studiously kept at her side had been lost to the river.

Ultimately...she had nothing. A penalty for her lie, perhaps.

But it was one they'd bought. No body, no signs of any remnants, meant Itama would remain forever missing—not dead. They would forever hold on to the hope that, one day, he would return to them, alive and well. Smiling, as he always did. Crying, too, so relieved to be reunited with his family.

Was it really so cruel...?

Butsuma never spoke to her on the matter. Not after a day, not after a week.

Mariko, waspish when far away from his presence, criticized him because he hadn't dealt her a harsh punishment, but once the bandages came off, she clicked her tongue and claimed the scar that remained was punishment enough.

The injury didn't steal her sight. Her left eyelid never opened fully again, but her eyesight remained, if not a bit blurred in the distance. Really, the only part she regretted on that front was that she didn't get to wear a cool eyepatch.

Touka said so, too.

This was the compound she'd been sent away too after their training incident—the one silver lining to everything that happened.

"You must be thankful for your life," she consoled as she sat behind Mitsuba in their shared room and combed out her long, tangled hair, freshly washed of grime and dirt. A week's worth of tangles and knots did not come undone with one smooth stroke. For the better part of an hour, she'd been steadily picking and brushing them through from the end and working her way up. "From what I understand, you had quite the brush with death."

"It isn't the first time." Never mind the unintentional pun—Touka probably didn't even realize she'd made it.
"Ah, yes. When you were younger…” Her voice trailed off. No one liked to recall the past. Not in these times.

Mitsuba winced as the comb's teeth yanked through a particularly tough knot. "Did you know the woman who saved me, back then?"

"I did. She was Mariko-san's daughter."

"No wonder she hates me."

"She was also my aunt."

"Oh…I'm—" Sorry didn't seem sincere, or appropriate. In the end, she kept silent and dropped her good hand into her lap, picking at the bandage brace that held her splinted arm still. It wasn't a full break. Only a fracture—somewhere on the ulna. It didn't hurt, not anymore, not when she accidentally moved it, but the doctor, a new visiting doctor, told her to take care regardless because young girls should treat their bodies better.

(And what of the young boys? She'd asked, but received no answer.)

"No need for condolences. It was a noble sacrifice, but…we weren't close. My mother's side of the family never approved of her, or my, interest in combat. They believe women should be more…distant…in relation to battle.” She breathed a short huff through her nose. "There is a reason I call my grandmother Mariko-san."

"I see. No love lost…” Just like her family, it seemed. At least, with her father, and probably Tobirama. Hashirama cared enough, but, still…they were distant. Ever since Kawarama died. And now, with Itama… Well, it didn't bring them any closer.

She might have already lost them to that growing rift.

But she was the one who split it right open.

"Mitsuba…are you alright?"

The question caught her off guard, even with the added tug of tangled hair. It pulled free soon enough, and Touka moved on to the next section, awaiting an answer. Skillfully maintaining focus on her task as she did so.

"…No. I don't know."

I keep dreaming of evil voices and red, red eyes and a child, a baby, being stabbed, over and over, and sometimes he's smiling and dripping blood through his teeth. I keep dreaming of his body, flushed away by a raging river and washing out to sea, lost to the depths. When I look into the well outside sometimes I think he's staring back at me. Sometimes I think he'll reach up and pull me right in so he won't be so alone. I can't even watch you peel a damn apple when we eat lunch together.

I don't have any right to feel sorry for myself. I lied to my brothers. I did this.

…And I'm right back where I started. I hate it here, I hate it more every day. I hate...

The comb stilled. "Your anger is almost palpable. Chakra has a tendency to react with emotions, you see…and yours is flaring. Wild, like the leaves of a tree battered by storm winds. My sensory abilities are not strong, but even I can feel it."
Mitsuba stared down at her hand—how it curled into a tight fist when she wasn't paying attention or doing something with it. How her fingernails bit into the skin of her palm. Of course, she'd noticed it, but didn't question the way her body's equilibrium bounced painfully between hot flashes of rage and the cold, steel grip of mortal fear—two states a child's body or mind should never know.

A quiet sigh brushed past Touka's lips—it tickled against Mitsuba's scalp as she moved her hair and started on another section. "Your father and brothers are going to battle in a day's time. Would you like to train again then? It will help."

She almost laughed. "And risk being caught again? Where will Butsuma send you away to next?"

"No…No, alright. Let's train. Thank you, Touka."

"Train" she meant nothing more than harmless meditation—but Mitsuba shouldn't have expected more when her arm was still mending and crooked at her side. That, and they weren't allowed to leave the compound. Well, she wasn't allowed. Aside from Touka, a guard had been assigned to keep watch over her each time she left the lodging house.

Unlike the previous compound that was made up of three large buildings, this one contained three smaller, one-room houses and a longer lodging area where her family, and Touka, stayed. All about half the size of the one she'd come to know as home, and more functional than aesthetically pleasing, with no ponds, no gardens, no trees within its walls. Only sandy, dirt ground and a well in the corner. The craggy peaks of mountains poked over the tops of the walls on one side, with trees and foliage on the others.

Outside, from the few rare glances she'd stolen out when the gates were open, was a shinobi encampment. Empty, now—all absent, following Butsuma's lead.

"Souma," Touka called out, waving a hand slightly to catch the attention of the nearby shinobi standing with his back to them, but by the way he barely turned his head to look her way, he didn't need to be called at all.

He was young, but older than them. A teenager with short, mousy hair, a severe, narrow face like Touka's and eyes like a hawk. Silent, cold. A little blank. Clad in the standard Senju shinobi's black battle uniform and olive-green armor. Faded, and cracked at some edges. He wasn't a stranger to the battlefield—and by the way he looked at them, he wasn't pleased he'd been one of the men tasked with staying behind.

"Leave Mitsuba to me, today. You don't mind, do you? We'll be near."

He watched her with an unblinking stare. For a moment, Mitsuba wasn't sure he'd heard her at all, or if he was simply ignoring her even as she watched him and awaited a response. After an awkward moment, he nodded, squinting against the sunlight hanging overhead. "Alright. I'll go guard the gate. Stay within eyesight."

"He's…agreeable," Mitsuba commented as he turned his back on them again and headed toward the front gate, a straight walk down the path to their right—the only path, really. Between the three smaller buildings and the lodging house was a long stretch of sandy courtyard and not much else.

"He's my brother. He may look strict, but he is surprisingly lenient." Touka watched him go, eyelids dipping down over her eyes. "I worry, when he embarks on a campaign. I've only ever been
out twice, yet he's been out almost triple that. Still, he comes back every time." A small, sad smile rose to her lips. "Sometimes I think I only ever started training just to have more time with him."

The way she spoke, he was the only family she truly had left.

The way he yielded to her, trusted her, proved he respected her—a bond between shinobi siblings, perhaps. Between those who'd both been through battle and witnessed loss.

Between those who would die, and kill, for each other.

It should have been touching, but all it did was piss her off.

Touka set a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Forgive me—I spoke without thinking. It must be difficult for you."

"No—it's not that." She ignored the stare burning into the side of her face in favor of turning her eyes away from the sun and staring out across the courtyard. "Let's go already."

Meditation didn't help.

Not the first time, not the second.

By the third day, she'd had enough.

"This isn't working!" She jumped to her feet just to kick at the sand beneath her, the inner child beating within her heart.

Touka followed, and stood aside as a dirt cloud puffed up around them. She grabbed at her good arm and did her best to calm her before she twisted something and hurt herself.

"I try… Is it so wrong to want to be strong like my brothers? Like you? Even you said so, Touka. You started training to be with your brother. To protect him. To protect your family. If I was strong, I wouldn't have to be here. If I was strong, I could have—"

Whirling red eyes. A blade, piercing straight through. A smile dripping with tears.

It wasn't the thought that halted her tirade. A pair of arms drew her swiftly into an embrace and held her tight. Tears burned in her eyes—flowed free, soaking into the front of Touka's navy kimono.

"It isn't wrong, Mitsuba," she said, voice low and soothing above her ear. "And you are strong—you still feel. The fact that you care means you have something to fight for. Something to protect. If you lose that will, you become weak. Without purpose. Your anger…everything you feel gives you purpose. You cannot let it overwhelm you. But you must learn to control it. Let it become your drive. And never let others use it against you."

Despite the calm, Touka's fingers clenched tight at her sleeves.

"I did say I began training to be with my brother. That was true for some time. But there is also another reason. Someone dear to me was hurt, beaten, violated, by a wicked group. I will not rest—I will not die—until those men responsible for her suffering see the point of my sword." She stopped speaking for a moment, trembling. But only for a moment. "I cannot erase the damage they brought. But I can stop them from inflicting more pain and bring peace of mind."

…We all fight so people like you don't have to. We fight to protect our clan, our families, to assure
them a future peace and make sure no one who's been struck down dies in vain. Kawarama…I can't just let him die without reason.

Don't worry, Mitsu. I'll protect you!

Whirling red eyes. A blade, piercing straight through. A smile dripping with tears.

"...You don't have to hide it from yourself. Only those around you. A shinobi's—no, a kunoichi's mask is only a method of defense against our foes. Not suppression, not erasure, but control. If you learn anything from me, please let it be that."

At some point, she'd reached up and grasped her sleeve, too, holding her close as a sister, kindred in spirit.

Running away and leaving everything behind... had been wrong. Mitsuba hadn't wanted that, not really. She just didn't want to suffer the pain of it all—of loss and heartache and a family so broken there was no possible way to put it back together.

All she'd wanted was a mother who stayed. A father who cared. A father who'd be proud.

All she'd wanted was a family who believed in her. A family who'd protect her—who she could protect in turn. Who she could save.

But she couldn't erase the damage—she couldn't change the past.

She could only move forward through her mistakes and make damn sure it never happened again.

She could only move forward, left alone to mourn a brother only she knew had been lost. Left alone to ensure his bravery did not go unrewarded.

Itama was right. Touka was right. Hashirama—young in his ideals, at this time—was right, and maybe no one was wrong when all they were trying to do was build a better future for the ones they loved.

Slowly, she drew away from Touka's embrace. On her face was a smile, just like Itama's. An adopted mask, because his death was her responsibility to bear and she'd never let herself forget it. They shared the same face. The same smile. Even the same hair. She'd never forget.

And her tears dotted the ground, falling, falling. One. Two. Three. Sowing the seeds to something that would grow into a legend.

Chapter End Notes

Currently on tumblr at peccolias or peccoliawrites with updates, progress info, and excerpts. Thanks for reading and please leave a comment if you enjoyed! There's one more chapter to transfer over before we hit new content :)
The thing about faking a smile for so long is that, eventually, it becomes second-nature. You start to forget it's an act at all.

Mitsuba liked to think she grew into her mask well.

Two years passed, but the pain in her heart never dulled. The memory—the voices that never left her, asleep or awake—sharpened her, propelling her through each day she trained in secret with Touka, and sometimes Souma.

She'd gained several tiny scars across her hands and fingers from handling kunai and shuriken and sometimes a sword (because, oh, she wanted to be ready for the day she found those men, to skewer them as they'd done to Itama) that she skillfully blended in to needle pricks from embroidery tasks and scrapes from chores and gardening incidents.

All things considered, she juggled her two sides of life as the obedient child and rebellious daughter well—even if she didn't really need to.

Butsuma still hadn't spoken to her. Not a single word. She may as well have died that day, for the way he ignored her.

Even so, she smiled at him whenever he passed her by and she followed his orders that were passed along to her through Mariko without complaint.

(Her demeanor had shifted along with her thoughts that Mitsuba's life as a woman had already ended before it even began, and she turned a blind eye to the unsightly scars peppering her hands—let her do as she pleased, now.)

She couldn't blame him, really...he was a busy man. Hashirama's infamously short-lived friendship with Madara and subsequent familial clash had sparked greater conflict between the two clans that pitted them against each other even more frequently than before.

It hadn't always been so extreme, but as word of their victories and losses spread throughout the lands, as two particular brothers and their siblings began to display notable strength and prowess, the names Senju and Uchiha became prevalent. If a lesser mercenary clan had harassed a village, a farming community and its coveted land, the victims pooled their funds and hired the Senju. If the patron who'd set that lesser clan upon that village lost it to said Senju, they spent twice as much to hire the Uchiha.

The conflicts grew from simple land disputes to assassination attempts and sabotage of the power-hungry opulent to—anything and everything. Whatever the ones holding the hiring contracts could conjure in their petty minds for a war they couldn't fight on their own. At times, even, the two clans intentionally sought each other out, hungry for blood.
There were other clans besides the Senju and Uchiha, though. Smaller, satellite clans found it necessary to integrate with one or the other or risk facing them in battle and falling to extinction. The braver ones, though, like the Hagoromo, still lingered, sometimes resulting in three-way deadlocks, if not a bloodier battle.

In the two years since their move to the new compound, the Senju clan had been joined by the Hou clan. The Uchiha had picked up the Naka, somewhere along the way—and they both continued to grow out of necessity in this war without end.

Mitsuba didn't have anything to do with any of that—but she learned it anyway, as Touka explained the current situation when no one else would.

Today, while Touka tended to other things, Souma took up that duty.

There weren't always such crucial developments and, oftentimes, the state of affairs were drawling and dull, more like the plotting of a shogi game than breaking news.

This clan has moved further out west, and that clan has purportedly expressed interest in a tentative alliance. The death toll has increased this week and the clan branch in the camp to the east is out for blood payment. A new patron has expressed interest in buying out an entire clan for privatized defense and everyone is anticipating a bid...

Mitsuba listened to his reports—what he could report of it, anyway—as she plowed out a trench for the season's seedlings, digging her fingers deep into the warm summer soil and foregoing tools because getting her hands dirty was just that much more cathartic.

The garden she'd been given—yes, given, whether it was by her silent father, to let others know that he remembered he had a daughter, or from Touka and Souma's combined efforts to return something that had been lost—was nothing special, but it was hers. There was no room within the compound's garden space for such a thing, so it had been constructed outside the compound's walls and provided a temporary escape from watchful eyes and stifling, stagnating relationships. It also provided a wonderfully clandestine cover to maintain her shinobi endeavors.

Again, Butsuma underestimated her. Just as the day he'd forgotten to assign her a guard and she'd slipped away…

No. It wasn't that at all. She'd long since come to terms with the fact that he just…didn't care. Probably wishes I was the one who died. …Disappeared. The bastard.

Her fingers clenched deep into the dirt—something squirmed against the fine hairs on the back of her hand.

When she looked down, it had already latched on and crept slowly up her grimy wrist with all of its eight, spindly legs. She almost smashed it—but thought better of it and, with a sigh, gently shook the spider off into the edge of the grass where it could remain undisturbed and live on.

She leaned back on her heels and wiped a dirty hand across her damp forehead, letting it linger as she examined the newly-prepared soil, dotted with finger-sized dips for new seeds, surrounded by the carefully-tended herbs and flowers that still remained under the heat of the sun. Some of it was permanent, some not so much.

She drew out a stiff, hand-bound book from her pale pink obi and flipped through the first couple of pages until she found the seasonal garden plots she'd sketched out. Among the other pages were field notes—what she could recall from her old journal—and tried and true recipes for herbal
remedies. Not as pretty as the first incarnation had been, with graceful, neat kana strokes drawn by a confident hand, but at least readable.

It had been a gift from Kiku, for her past ninth birthday—made specifically for her when she'd discovered her first and ever-present one had been lost to the wild. Each page had been gathered so painstakingly over the months and then bound into a single volume for her to fill with whatever her heart desired. On the front, in Kiku's hand, was Mitsuba's name in simple, but delicate, embossed characters. As if to emphasize that it was hers, without a doubt.

Someone else (Hashirama, she suspected) had left a few small, labeled bags filled with handfuls of seeds outside her room on the very same day.

"Mitsuba?"

Mitsuba looked away from the pages and met Souma's sunlight-squinting gaze with a squint of her own. "What? Sorry. I got a little distracted."

"Were you ever listening…?" A fake-wounded sadness tinged his slow, deadpan voice as he frowned—a bit too much like Touka. It was no wonder where she'd picked up that habit.

"I was! I was."

He blinked, face blank and bland as it ever was, and leaned forward to set his elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm. "Good. And, your answer?"

"I…" She took her time closing the book and set it on her knees, lips set in an automatic smile and eyebrows arched in apology. "I wasn't listening. Sorry, Souma. I tuned out around the bodyguard bid part."

"That was ten minutes ago." He sighed. "No—I understand. I am quite boring. Mariko-san says I should 'inject more' when I speak."

"Inject? You mean inflect? Anyway, who cares what the hag says."

"Don't be bitter. You'll become like her."

"Never." She stuck out her tongue. "Well, what did you ask, then?"

"I asked if you'd like to learn what your chakra nature affinity is. I managed to obtain some specialized paper slips that reveal them. Although I can't quite remember what the reactions mean…" As he spoke, he reached into one of his sleeves and pulled out three thin slips of eggshell-colored paper—the same kind used for explosive tags and seals that he'd shown her before.

"From what I know, it's self-explanatory." She pushed away from the ground and shuffled over to where he sat to get a better look at the papers. "Touka's mentioned the process to me," she added, even though said girl hadn't breathed a word about chakra natures yet. But—Mitsuba knew. Remembered.

He kept one on his grasp, but handed the other two over to her, and she held one in each hand, eyes roving back and forth between them, pensive.

"What's yours?" she asked.

The slip of paper held between his index finger and thumb crumbled away the instant he applied a blip of chakra. "Earth," he replied, gesturing to the fallen pieces as they fluttered in the breeze.
"Touka, too. It's common among this clan." His eyes drifted toward the greenery among them. "And, well, you're quite in touch with nature."

"In other words, don't get my hopes up?"

He scratched at his short-cropped hair. "Well, short of channeling a fire affinity that puts you at a disadvantage against our greatest foes, it doesn't truly matter. What skills you learn will depend on your personal strengths. Touka, for example, excels in kenjutsu and genjutsu. She doesn't use many ninjutsu in combat. I, on the other hand, make use of Earth-based ninjutsu to alter my opponent's footing and catch them off guard in combination with kenjutsu."

"So, don't get my hopes up."

A smile flickered at the corners of his lips, but he didn't otherwise respond.

Mitsuba looked at the paper slips in her hands and, not getting her hopes up, flared her chakra toward her fingertips.

As expected, it crumbled. At least—the one in her left hand did.

The one in her right had slumped over, soaked through, and stuck to her skin.

Souma's eyes opened wide. "Strange—is it raining, suddenly?"

They both looked skyward, but no clouds were in sight anywhere among the great blue expanse.

An apologetic smile crossed his face as she met his eyes. "…One must be faulty. Sorry, Mitsuba. I'll see if I can find another, and you can try this again some other time."

She shook her head and picked at a corner of the damp paper, lifting it away from her hand. "No—don't bother. It was just for fun, right? As you said, it doesn't really matter at this point. Besides, I don't want you getting into trouble for it. Let's just count it as an Earth affinity and be done."

"As you wish, Mitsuba-sama."

"Come on, you know I hate that," she chided lightly, out of habit from dealing with his and Touka's strange and gentle way of making fun of her. She didn't pay it much mind, though, too caught up in wondering what two simultaneous chakra affinities could possibly mean. Interference? Was it really faulty? A fluke? Or…

She picked up the seedling bags and fished out a few seeds, bending down to sprinkle them into the pocks in the raised soil. Her eyes roved over them as she covered them up and let her hands linger over the dirt, feeling its warmth—its energy that churned through the ground like a network. Faint, but still noticeable under her touch. Her eyes drifted shut.

Life—it was full of life. Slithering, creeping in every direction. Ready to burst forth.

*The forest damage looked like—*

*It was ruined. Trees upturned, weird growths—*


"No," she said under her breath, opening her eyes and moving on to bury the next cluster of seeds. "Not possible. Not…not me."
"Did you say something?" Souma piped up as the sound of idly-flipped the pages fluttered from somewhere behind her. Nosy—he was nosy and he liked to see what she put in her journal despite not being able to read much more than a few simple hiragana words.

She glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "About today's training—"

He held up a hand to silence her, sharp eyes aimed toward the compound.

"They've returned."

Even if she didn't really care to see them in such a state, Mitsuba always made a point to be nearby whenever Butsuma and her brothers returned from battle, all haggard and exhausted but holding their heads high.

Hashirama, soon to be a teenager, and Tobirama, still a little farther off, were both sinewy and a little gangly, on that awkward threshold of growing into their ever-changing heights. Despite that, their armor fit them well—like it belonged.

They still looked more like boys trying to carry the burdens of men.

The smile rose to her lips, automatic. Even as Butsuma's eyes passed right over her, refusing to see her; as Tobirama met her gaze and looked away, impassive; as Hashirama returned a small, tired smile of his own.

"Welcome back," fell from her mouth on auto-pilot, too, born from Kanae's and Itama's wishes more than her own genuine intent. But, well, there was no difference, not when she was the vessel of their dying will.

*You must take care of your brothers, Mitsuba.*

*You don't know how happy it makes us to have a little sister to go home to.*

She knew—she knew.

As they passed her by and headed into the training hall to put away their armor and leave those burdens behind for a short while, she returned to the main house to prepare the wash basin for laundry duty, back to her obedient child routine in their presence.

Before, she would have set the basin down beside the well and, once filled, just left it close by. But now…she carried it a safe distance away so she wouldn't have to be so close, so aware, of its depths and what lingered in the shadows.

Each time she did so, the water-filled basin grew lighter.

She didn't always have to do her chores alone, either.

As she tied back her kimono sleeves with a well-worn *tasuki* and stared down into the water-filled basin, at the way the water glimmered under the sunlight like glass and sent out waves when a stray leaf landed on its surface, another face joined hers in its reflection.

"Kiku!" she greeted with a grin, turning to face the older girl who returned the look with a tremulous smile of her own.

Always kind, always helpful, but still never really spoke a word to her, meek as a mouse. Before, she'd wondered if the girl was simply mute or otherwise incapable of speech, but in the dusk hours
when everyone was granted some peace and rest from daily duties, she'd heard her speaking quietly, gently, with Touka, outside on the veranda.

Whatever the root cause was, Touka was the only one she trusted enough to sound her voice to.

Mitsuba didn't mind. Some people showed things better through actions than words, and between the two of them that was definitely the case.

Kiku bent down to fish the leaf out of the water and tucked it away into the tightly-wound, round bun atop Mitsuba's head in one smooth, graceful motion, smile gaining a rare humorous strength as she did so.

She reached up with a mock-frown and nearly plucked it out, but stopped and shook her head. "Well, if you think it suits me, then."

Kiku nodded and crossed her arms, satisfied.

"In return, I'll bring you a nice bouquet of flowers once they've blossomed."

Not in return for the leaf—no, she meant for the help she always provided. The flicker of doubt that crossed Kiku's brow seemed to reflect the way she didn't initially understand her intent, until it smoothed and she reached the same conclusion. She smiled and breathed a quiet sigh in response, then went about winding her sleeves back and securing them with her own tasuki, setting up the long pole they used for drying soon after.

Unlike the days where they washed yukata and kimonos en masse, shinobi underclothes cleaning was by far a simpler task—and, fortunately, the men cleaned their own underwear. Fundoshi, weren't they called…? Completely different from the type women of this era wore, which…were completely different from what she'd been used to.

All things considered, though, cleaning dark, battle-worn clothing that leaked dull, rust-red into the water as if it bled fresh was a trade-off.

Mitsuba eyed Kiku's fine, delicate hands as she gave the horizontal pole a testing yank to make sure it would hold up under water weight. They weren't the kinds of hands that should have to deal with that. But if it wasn't hers, it would be someone else's. Wives and daughters did the same for their husbands and sons, after all; they felt every bloodstain, from enemies and their loved ones alike, and lived through their battles vicariously.

Everyone had their own burden to bear in this messed up situation. But she still wanted to spare her gentle soul from it.

She took a step forward, to help her with the task, but froze as something heavy thunked onto the rooftop above them.

Reflexes kicked in. She pulled the kunai from her obi and held it in a death grip, eyes wide as she looked up, adrenaline shooting through her body in a fight-or-flight panic as thoughts of an enemy siege or those two Uchiha flooded her mind, beating in her ears with the overbearing sound of her pulse.

It wasn't an enemy.

Tiny claws skittered and scratched against the wooden shingles of the eaves as a small, furry body rolled over the edger, flailing as it dropped through the air and landed on the dirt at her feet. She took a few rapid steps back, away from the threads of blood it spattered around with its struggle,
and felt a grimace pulling at her face as Kiku came up close behind her, glancing over her shoulder but not stepping ahead of her. She breathed a quiet sigh, shaking her head, then took note of the kunai clutched tight in Mitsuba's hand—and quickly stepped away again.

Mitsuba looked back, at that deep-set and out of place frown on Kiku's wide-eyed young face, and the way she clutched both hands to her chest, almost shaking.

The weapon scared her more than the suffering animal.

The grip on the kunai loosened. She held it out of sight, then remembered to breathe through the unpleasant thrill of terror. "It's—don't worry, Kiku." She didn't know what else to say. Wanted to say more, but something else drew her attention away from the suffering creature, catching her focus like a sudden ripple in a pond.

A presence—cool, calm, like a cat—slinks its way toward them. Mitsuba felt each step through the ground, reverberating.

It stopped behind her.

"You're being helpful today, Tobirama," she said brightly, trying to hide the adrenaline shake with false, mocking cheer, adjusting her sweaty grip on the kunai and wondering if he'd already seen it. Didn't bother looking over her shoulder at him.

"You're up to no good, as usual," he replied with a subtle bite in his otherwise level tone. She'd only caught onto it because she knew her brother, and her ears were trained to it. Others, like Kiku, heard only two siblings' teasing words—she didn't even glance between them as they spoke, too focused on the live weapon.

"Is taking care of my daily chores a problem?" Pulling up a stiff smile, she finally turned around and eyed the bundle of laundry he'd brought—which he dropped at her feet instead.

She ignored it, smile stretching thin.

*Petulant brat. I'm your sister, not a maid.*

"No, not that," he said, pointedly eyeing the kunai. "Your chakra was strange again—"

"And, what, you're spying *again*?" The smile dropped a bit as her temper flared—but she kept her voice low, doing her best not to make a scene. To keep her emotions level.

"I'm not in the wrong." His eyes met hers and it took everything in her not to flinch away, because they were *red*—not *that* red, but red all the same, and it had become her least favorite color.

She still couldn't hold his gaze.

He crossed his arms. Took a moment to decide his next few words. "But I wasn't spying. I know my family's chakra signatures well and I notice them—especially when they shift suddenly. Now I see what caused it." His attention turned to the creature squirming against the bloodied dirt—unable to move from the spot. He sighed. "I thought I saw something fall when a hawk passed over. So it tried to fight back and broke free, but for what…?"

Mitsuba's eyes followed his back as he walked by and crouched near the animal—a squirrel, now that she got a closer look at the limp, bushy tail spread out behind it.

Deep gouges, from grabbing talons, had pierced into its sides and oozed freely, matting the fur in a
black and red mess. Its back legs refused to move—the body also lay crumpled, awkward, displaced somewhere at the spine and paralyzed from the waist down. Its head still moved, jaw working soundlessly beneath dark, eerily shining eyes as it clawed at the dirt with small paws.

The fear never fully receded, lingering with each heavy beat of her heart, but it mixed with pity, now.

"Maybe to die on its own terms. Better than becoming food." She took a tentative step toward the squirrel and her brother, but didn't crouch down like he did. Only watched it from above, considering the situation.

"It's suffering," he said quietly, but plainly. "The hawk might have put it to death sooner."

"What...should be done, then?" She looked at the kunai in her hand. Was a mercy-killing in order? With a body like that, there was no way it would recover. No way it would survive.

With a body pierced through—

She squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment and blinked a few times as the mask threatened to slip away.

"You have the kunai, Mitsuba," he said, much too stringently for her tastes, as he glanced up at the blade in her hand with narrowed eyes. "You make the call."

"I don't—I've never—"

If she wasn't mistaken, his eyes lingered on the little scrapes lining her hands, fully apparent when her sleeves weren't hanging loose to cover them.

If anyone would know a kunai injury, it was him.

He looked to the squirrel again.

"...You've never killed anything. But this one is small, and it's for mercy's sake."

Kiku approached them both, her presence warm at Mitsuba's back. She set her hands on her shoulder and upper arm, peering out at the writhing squirrel again. There was something sure and fortifying in the gesture, like she was trying to ground her. To make the choice easier. Sticking with her, even being so near to the kunai that had terrified her only moments before.

Because the three of them were the only audience to this event—the few final and painful moments of this creature's life.

The only sounds, for what felt like forever, were the squirming scrapes against the dirt.

"I don't know how," Mitsuba said at last, holding the kunai out. "You do it."

He didn't take it.


He still refused.

Kiku's grip on her arm tightened, minutely.

Mitsuba glanced down at the squirrel, at its pitiful, slowing movements; at its tiny eye that seemed
to stare straight up at her.

She pressed her lips together and dropped to her knees in front of it, holding the kunai tight in both hands to quell the tremor in her nerves.

What was the best way to end its misery? Slit its throat? Cut its head off? Break its neck? She'd only ever seen mercy killings on TV before, and people had bullets to use, then. Quick and painless: right to the brain. For animals and humans alike.

If she had a way, she'd save it.

If she didn't do anything, it would die soon enough.

Taking a deep breath to steel herself, she raised the kunai, aiming the point at the squirrel's throat—where the spinal cord should be. Or close enough, at least.

She plunged it downward.

But faltered—right at the last second. It didn't hit deep enough, even through the nauseating crunching and wet squelch as blood beaded up around the blade, as the squirrel's jaws opened wide in a silent, unheard scream with a retching jerk.

A hand quickly dropped down over hers and pushed down, shoving the blade deeper in—and it stopped moving altogether.

Dead.

Her lips trembled. She wrenched her hands out from under Tobirama's and rose sharply to her feet, almost stumbling over the forgotten pile of laundry as the memories of a rainy night overtook her and weakened her at the knees.

Eyes wide, breathing heavy, she stared at the ground. At the blood.

"Why are you even here, Tobirama?" It took all of her self control not to snap. "All you do is butt into other people's business. We could have just left it alone to die on its own terms." But she kept her voice low—low and poisonous and seething.

For a moment, he looked stricken. But he brushed it off and set his arms on his knees, eyes drifting down to the squirrel, too. "Don't be a brat. Show some respect, Mitsu—"

"I'll show some respect when you do."

"I don't respect mouthy little—"

"Little what?"

"Little brats. Like you, Mi—"

"As if you're any better."

He frowned, but didn't respond right away. Cutting him off while he spoke wore away his patience little by little. Hell, it seemed everything she did pissed him off in some way or another. And, really, some siblings just hated each other—but she couldn't fathom why he always had such a problem with her.

(Did he know? Did he know?)
Behind her, audible sniffles could be heard. She looked over her shoulder and saw that Kiku's eyes had welled up with tears that trickled fast down her cheeks even as she tried to scrub them away with the backs of her hands.

"And look, you've gone and made Kiku cry. Making her watch something like that—what are you thinking, Tobirama?"

"You let her watch, too. Besides, she's killed chickens for dinner before. I've seen her help Mariko-san. Maybe your poor attempt at ending that thing's life properly is what's making her cry."

Mitsuba grit her teeth, both hands clenching into fists at her sides.

"You shouldn't hesitate, or else it makes things worse. Be swift about it next time. It's for the best."

"What a wonderful lesson. I hope you aren't expecting a 'thank you.'"

"And I hope you aren't expecting an apology. Children younger than you have killed adults." His eyes narrowed, first at her, then at the kunai still in his hands, now removed from the dead, still creature and shining red in the sunlight.

He had a point. And on some level, she understood his reasoning behind it. But what could she do? Acknowledge this as some stupid change of heart? When he'd been so opposed to her learning things like this before, completely on their father's side? Telling her to give up?

*Don't get my hopes up.*

She glared at him as he cleaned the blade on the ground, then wiped the excess gunk away on one of the dirty shirt sleeves from the laundry pile. And, finally, held it out to her, hilt-first.

She refused it.

"Spar with me," she said instead.

"What?"

"Let's spar, I said."

He hesitated. "Mitsuba, don't be dumb—"

"You're the one being dumb. Why not just be forthright and tell me that's what this is about? You do think it's a good idea I learn. Or are you just teasing me for some cruel amusement? You hate me, is that it?" A smile returned to her face—the first, since the squirrel fell from the rooftop eaves and sparked the entire situation. And it was anything but kind.

"Quit making things up. You're too impulsive—why not start with minding that mouth of yours? As I said before, I don't respect mouthy little brats. Especially the green kind who jumps into a fight she won't win." His usual calm façade fractured with a twitch in his eye and a faint wrinkle at the corner of his mouth that threatened to turn into a scowl.

"That kind of confidence sounds like uncertainty to me. Are you threatened by this green brat?"

"No—why are you pushing this? You're well aware of what happened last time."

She prickled, but the smile persisted. "Well, that was some time ago. The only way to see if that's changed is to accept my challenge."
"Take it as a lesson, Mitsuba."

"It's an outdated one."

He sighed. "You're as persistent as Kawarama—"

At that, they both stopped short and fell into a solemn silence. Whatever had sparked the argument in the first place faded away into nothing but memories of those lost, and the words they would say to intervene in this childish exchange.

Neither could look directly at the other.

"Here," he spoke up after a while, holding out the kunai once again. "Take it. I have training to get to."

She took it back.

Her lips thinned, in a not-quite smile, but not-quite frown. "Are you going to tell Father what I've been up to?"

Tobirama looked her way, expression a closed-off mixture of indifference and that veiled disdain that was so much like Butsuma's it struck her somewhere deep. "This isn't worth telling Father about."

"You're not going to tell me to give up this time, either?"

"Just go back to your chores, Mitsuba." He narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything else. Only turned his back and walked away, no longer willing to entertain her attitude.

"Brat," Mitsuba grumbled, tucking the kunai into her obi where it belonged, and making sure it wasn't visible when she turned to Kiku. "Um...sorry about all of that, Kiku. I shouldn't have made you watch any of that. The squirrel situation or the argument."

Kiku, no longer tearful, rushed to her side once he was out of sight—set a light hand on her arm and watched her with wide-eyed concern.

"I'm fine," she told her, looking down at the dampened handkerchief in her other hand. "Looks like we both are—good. Let's just start on the cleaning already. Then we can take a break and go see what Touka's up to."

Kiku nodded, appeased.

But for her, the whole ordeal left an ugly and unresolved feeling sitting heavy in her chest.

The kunai didn't hit its mark.

Mitsuba clicked her tongue, then ran it briefly across her lips as she took the next one into her hand, squinting and lining up a proper trajectory through the branches. She held her breath and let it fly from her fingertips, piercing through the air.

It ricocheted off one of the thicker branches and landed flat on the ground. Not even close.

She clenched her jaw as she picked up another, spinning it in her grip—not stabbing her hand, this time—and tilting her head as she observed the distance between where she stood and the overhead target.
With a sigh, she rubbed at her eyes and took a moment to collect herself.

"You're distracted today." Touka came up behind her and set a hand on her shoulder, patient as always. "Is it your eye?"

"No—I don't know. It is a little blurry."

"Let's rest a moment."

"I don't need rest. I'm just preoccupied. I don't understand Tobirama at all, aside from the fact that he's a brat."

Touka offered a sympathetic smile. "Ah…Kiku did mention the altercation."

She sighed. "It was hardly an altercation. But he knows what I'm doing and he still hasn't told Butsuma. It's been a week! He's always so quick to tattle, too. But this time…this time, it's as if he's goading me. Trying to shove my own weakness and failure in my face."

"Tobirama is…" Her voice trailed off as she considered her words, always careful to speak about Mitsuba's siblings despite their distant relationship. "Complicated," she settled on, shrugging a shoulder. "But I cannot believe that his intention is to antagonize you, Mitsuba. He is your brother."

"There's a fine line." She consciously reeled back the animosity clinging tight to her words and managed a wry smile. "If he truly wants to help, he should just say so. Otherwise it only makes me want to hit him."

"No—not yet. Please don't."

"I won't," she assured, pouting. "I think I can control myself better than that." Her pout leveled out as she stared up at the target again, kunai clutched firm in her hand. She held it up and blinked as the sunlight caught its edge. "I suppose I'm also a little jumbled up because it made me realize that… I'm still so far away from accomplishing what I need to."

"Didn't you beat Souma in a spar just the other day? He is fifteen, you are almost ten. You are progressing just fine."

"I still haven't beat you, though."

"Well, I am also talented," she joked, breathing a small laugh. "But am I not your mentor? Please believe what I say."

"Yes, Touka-sensei."

The smile persisted. "I insist you take a break, then. Let's check the garden."

It was a nice thought, in theory.

But there was barely a garden to check on.

Where fine, tall stalks and leaves once grew in proud tangles were nothing but green tatters, if anything at all. Ripped up—shredded. Straight from the soil. With stray roots and ruined seeds strewn about, too.

Dead—as dead as the thrashing squirrel, put out of its misery.
And the cause?

Two men—shinobi—stood in the midst of it, but not alone. On the ground at their feet was a mound of bristly brown and white hair, and a snout and tusks—a wild boar, hunted and captured. Chased through the garden that now lay crushed by hooves and feet alike. The proof of it still remained scattered beneath them, but they paid it no mind, too cheered by their future dinner. Grinning to themselves. Laughing. Completely unaware they'd just destroyed one of the only things Mitsuba could call her very own in this world.

It was…a small thing. Nothing to lose her cool over. Even so…

Something within her frayed and pulled loose. Hungry—reaching for the nearest thing to feed and grow from.

Bring it back.

"Oi, Touka!" called the oblivious man crouched at the animal's side, rope in hand as he tied its robust body up for transport. "Look what we caught! It's big enough to feed the entire compound." The grin on his face came off more callous than victorious. Blending into something ugly and misshapen as tears blurred her vision, ready to burst through the mask she'd so carefully cultivated.

Bring it back.

The other man gave an irritatingly bright laugh. "It gave us the run around for the better part of the morning until we found it here. Whoever planted this garden saved us a great deal of trouble! Shame it didn't survive the ordeal."

"Ah, we should have watched our step. Some of these herbs would have gone well with pork. Can any of it be salvaged...?"

Touka wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close to her side and holding her in an iron grip. But she barely felt it. Barely felt anything, as a flurry of emotions passed her by so hard and fast that none really caught on for too long.

When Touka spoke, it wasn't to her, but to the men. "Leave it. You've done enough. Neither of you were assigned to hunting duty today."

"Does it matter? Food is food."

"We couldn't just let it go once we saw it. And pork is your favorite, isn't it? You should be happy!"

"Bring it back." The words shot out of Mitsuba's mouth in a voice so commanding that it didn't sound like her own. She wrenched free from Touka's grasp and took three heavy steps forward, painfully aware of the grass that curled around her feet as her weight pressed it down.

The men stopped what they were doing, and the blurred shapes they'd become stilled, heads turning to her.

"Ah, who's this? Don't tell me the garden was hers." The one crouched by the boar sighed. "Little girl, you can understand this is just how things are, can't you? Something was lost, but something better was gained. And your plants can always grow back."

"Whose kid is she...?" asked the other man, under his breath, leaning against the spear he'd stuck into the ground.
"She is not a 'little girl,'" Touka said, voice cool. "Mitsuba-sama is the daughter of the clan head. Refer to her with respect."

The men froze.

"Shit—this was her garden? What is it doing outside the compound?"

"Don't look at me. The boar was already trashing it—it isn't as if we did this all ourselves! And I didn't even know Butsuma had another kid!"

"Hashirama's mentioned a sister! You don't remember?"

The man tying up the boar rose to his feet, holding blurred hands out to placate her fierce stare. "Well—what can we do to make this up to you, ah, Mitsuba-sama? You don't have to tell your dad, right?"

"Bring it back," she said again, without hesitation. Unable to say anything but that, as the words repeated in her head, pulsing against her skull. Cracking the mask little by little, until it was no more. Tested far too much in the span of a few days, and not nearly as resilient as she'd hoped.

At her side once again, Touka pressed her hand solidly on her shoulder, trying to anchor her down and comfort her all at once. "Calm yourself, Mitsuba—now." She spoke at her ear, voice low and urgent. "Please."

But the time for calm was long past. Everything but calm all surged, roiled, thrashed, and beat against the confines of her small body, trying to break out.

The men hesitated. "Bring it—bring it back? That isn't…"

"Bring it back," she said once more, hands curling into tight fists at her sides, fingernails biting into flesh to the point of tingling numbness. Her body was a livewire. Channeling something, whether it was rage or her chakra. But it built up, growing, racing through the ground and through her body and back again, and it did not want to be contained.

"Don't be unreasonable, now. No one could bring it back. Not so soon."

It broke free.

"Mitsuba!" Touka tried to grab her in a firm embrace and she shoved her back.

Their voices blurred together just as their faces did, and Touka's warmth at her side vanished, lost in a rush of green—not the red of anger. Green.

Someone yelped—one of the men. She couldn't see them, but she knew where they stood. Two sets of feet—both close. Shuffling across the soil and reverberating with each small step. One even stumbled over the still body of the dead boar, and crashed to the ground with a painful sensation.

Her garden grew. Unburied seeds that hadn't sprouted burst open. Stems and roots still stuck in soil, severed, rejoined and regrew, shooting up from the damage like a million tiny phoenixes from the ashes. So small, but strong. Alive.

They covered the fallen man's body. Seeking warmth. Seeking food. Because a corpse contained a
myriad of nutrients, wonderful fertilizer, and a living body didn't have to stay living for long.

Grabbing vines latched onto the other man’s leg as he tried to flee—caught him in a tight hold and dropped him, too, reeling him back into the depths of the upturned garden soil.

*Mitsuba,* someone said, but the name blended into the song of the growth, diluted.

Soft green stems, safe and gentle, hardened into rigid, unforgiving woody boughs, layer by craggy layer. Bending and looming over their prey like gaping jaws. Because someone had to pay. And the boar was already dead.

"*Mitsuba, stop!*"

This time, the voice was too close to ignore. Too loud. Accompanied by hands grabbing at her arms and a flash of red that cut right through her vision, so stark and bold against the green it made her flinch harshly away and cover her face with both hands.

And with that movement, the woody stems and vines lashed out, cutting into something familiar—but shallow. Because as soon as she recognized what it was, the connection terminated with a painful *snap*.


Red?

She blinked.

Knocked down on the torn-up grass before her was the still body of a child. Splayed on his side and seeping something red into the ground, right from underneath the spikes of white hair.

Tobirama.

"No—" The word caught fast in her throat. Hurt to say. She tried to take a step, but her knees buckled and she crashed next to his body, catching herself on stinging palms before her chin hit the ground.

Footsteps shuffled rapidly across the grass, light and gentle, but echoing painfully in her ears like an elephant stampede.

A whirling rush of white, like peach blossoms, swallowed her thoughts, and grabbed her, too, before she lost herself.

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Not even dying had felt this…awful. Not the first time—not the near-second. Not even the narrowly-missed third.

This kind of pain was a monster of a different sort. One that sank its claws in through every nerve like a fever ache—as a warning to prevent it from ever happening again. As its own way of saying: *hey, idiot, next time consider how hard this body will have to work to replenish what you wasted! Take better care of yourself. It’s the difference between life and death.*

Chakra exhaustion, then? Had she used *that* much…?

When Mitsuba came to, when her eyes flickered open and squinted against the bright, burning light of a nearby lantern, she expected to see Touka, or even Hashirama, at her side.
It was Butsuma.

He sat with his head bowed, forehead leaned against one hand, shadows cast deep and dark throughout the lines etched into his face—it made him look much older and distraught than usual. More pissed than usual, too.

In other words, his presence—his acknowledgement, finally—was of no comfort.

Despite that, she sat up from the thin futon she'd been placed onto and rubbed at her eyes with painstaking care, biting back the surging pain that rolled and prickled beneath her skin like pins and needles. The heel of her hand came away wet, from tears she hadn't known she'd cried. She stared down at her open palms, eyes widening at the sight of curved, dried red crescent-marks.

*Red.*

"Tobirama," she rasped through a parched throat, turning her head to Butsuma so fast that a pinching ache shot through her neck. *Where is Tobirama?! Is he—*

*Do not speak,* came Butsuma's gruff voice as he drew his hand from his face, harsh eyes lined and shadowed from not only the current predicament, but stress and problems that were beyond the compound. "Tobirama is fine. The wound was light. Fortunate, for both his sake and yours, you fool child."

She closed her eyes against his words, not cowed by his tone, but by the sheer gravity of the situation. Tobirama was *alive.* Thank god. But it was still her fault he'd been hurt. Even through all the times she'd wanted to spar, to knock him on his ass and win for once, she never wanted to *hurt* him. She didn't want *any* of this.

"Do you understand what you could have done? What you did?"

Before, she would have shot back a biting retort. But now the rebel in her had withered and she couldn't even meet his gaze. Only stared at the flickering glow of the lantern, meek where she'd once been so fierce.

*Mitsuba.*

She nodded—a swift jerk of her chin. Just to move the conversation along.

He huffed in disbelief. "No. No, I do not think you do understand. And if you were not my daughter, a reckless child who knew no better, you would no longer be a part of this clan. You attacked two members of this clan. And your own brother. If Touka had not explained the situation, I…" He hesitated. Uncharacteristic. And that much more terrifying.

It was better that he left the sentence hanging in a long stretch of pressing silence.

"…It was not your fault."

She finally met his gaze.

Unreadable, closed-off eyes flicked briefly to the scar across the left side of her face, then back to her timid stare. "The Wood Release chose you—you had no choice in the matter. You were not taught to properly control your chakra in preparation for that possibility and it caused great harm. It could have killed others, including you. It… No, the fault is *mine.* For rejecting the proof in that forest, that day."
He took a deep breath, exhaled, and closed his eyes. There was no warmth, no regret in his words. There was nothing but a stern, factual perspective dealt through a forced patience.

"If I hadn't neglected you, perhaps you would not have come to envy your brothers and their training so. If I had told you of the dangers of this world, perhaps you would not have run off to play like a child, and Itama would not be lost. If I had trained you, perhaps you would have been prepared to harness the Wood Release."

*Itama.*

His name raked at the inside of her mind. Haunting her with the memory, over and over, rewind—play. Rewind—play.

*Not lost. Dead.*

She dropped her gaze.

*The Wood Release... it wasn't him. It was me.*

Something that should have been a blessing had become a curse. Something that only hurt.

"But I cannot train you."

She couldn't even protest that decision. Tears burned behind her eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

"I will not betray Kanae's wishes. Not even with your display of the Wood Release. However... you must be taught how to conceal your chakra, and how to better control it. Because, while you cannot be a shinobi, you now possess something of infinite value."

Pins and needles prickled as she clenched her hands into fists.

"Do you know what happens to those who are valuable, Mitsuba?"

She didn't nod—didn't shake her head. Only breathed in, and out, lips pressed into a flat line as she watched the lantern light wash over the swirling gray kimono pattern across her lap.

"They are pursued. The Uchiha Clan, for instance. Do you know what makes them so formidable?"

Again, she didn't answer. It was rhetorical.

"Their dōjutsu—their Sharingan. Yet, despite belonging to that clan, they function properly with any other person. Other shinobi strike them down in cold blood and pillage those eyes for themselves as cruel prizes. But if they are women—kunoichi and civilian alike—they face the risk of being... captured. Used. Shinobi lineage is as valuable as a physical Kekkei Genkai. I have heard of Uchiha women being stolen. We have had Senju women stolen.

"Do you never wonder why you are so cloistered away from the world and its ways? You are my—the leader of the clan's—sole daughter. Hashirama has obtained and begun training with our clan's blessed Kekkei Genkai—a supreme rarity that is at times unseen throughout entire generations. And now it has manifested in you. You, Mitsuba."

He let the words hang in the air, heavy, while watching her—watching them sink in and register in her mind as she held his gaze, refusing to startle or back down among the revelations and cruel realities of strategic murder and rape in this twisted, brutally competitive world.

Or maybe it was some fearmongering bullshit warning he'd spun just to convince a child who toed
the line too much that this was all for the best. Empty, rational words to quiet a raging, impulsive beast ruled by emotion. Words he would never have thought to say if she hadn't been valuable.

Words he shouldn't have said at all, if he cared.

But there was no care, no affection, hidden between the lines of this lecture. Only a mountain, rising ever upward.

This wasn't just about Kanae's ghost holding her back.

This was brought on by a poor mixture of actions and consequences and Butsuma's inability to care for her as anything more than a future clan token.

Please. Just let me down easy. Tell me that you truly don't care. Never will, no matter what I do. Just tell me you never wanted a daughter. Never wanted me. Tell me—

He did.

"I do not know how to handle an unruly and volatile daughter such as you. Nor do I have the time to learn. Forgive me for that failure."

Mitsuba opened her mouth to speak, but found that words failed her as badly as he'd failed her as a father. Too locked up as a shock of fear prickled within her—because those cold words were final. Parting words.

A frigid goodbye.

Without waiting for her response, or a response at all, he rose to his feet and turned his back on her. "You will depart to a new, safe location better suited for you at dawn."

He disappeared—the door sliding closed fast behind him. Clicked shut—locked.

Again, and again, he shut door after door and never gave her a chance.

And this one…

For now, this was one she had to accept.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand here we are, caught up with the FFnet version at last! Next chapter will have brand-new content (except for those who caught it when it was on GoogleDocs). Thanks for reading and see you in the next update! I'll catch up with replying to comments soon so thanks to everyone who's left one! I really appreciate it. Happy 2019!
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Aaaand here we are at last! New content! (Except, of course, for those of you who read it on GoogleDocs when it was available. Don't forget to follow me on tumblr at peccolias or peccoliawrites for chances to read chapters ahead of posting! And lots of other stuff, too.) Anyway, read on, and please enjoy and consider leaving a comment :)

Mitsuba passed her tenth birthday far away from home.

Once upon a time, it was exactly where she wanted to be. And, in a sense, where she was now had everything she’d ever wanted.

Only, too little too late. Far too late.

The compound she’d been sent to was filled with women, and mostly women. Only one man, an old, blind man who had brought his two daughters here when they were young to protect them and since opened the location as a private ryokan for others seeking refuge. There were boys, too—infants, and toddlers, shielded from the ways of war.

Mariko accompanied her here, but not Touka. No, instead of being sent away and punished for aiding her, Mitsuba was the one who’d been cast off.

But despite his cold heart, Butsuma did keep his word. Among the dozens of women populating the compound were a handful of kunoichi capable of training her (the way he wanted her to be trained). Some young, some retired. All skilled.

A necessity, to protect this place from those whose sole interests were to plunder and harm.

Rumor had it that the old man had been a shinobi once, too. But all she knew for fact was that he had connections with the Hou clan and, in turn, the Senju clan.

Mariko always shut her down when she asked too much.

“Mitsuba-sama! Mitsuba-sama, quit brooding and come out here right now, child.” Said old harpy rapped her hand sharp and impatient against the door of Mitsuba’s small room, even jostling it to try to get it open—but it was locked. “Oh—I have no time for coddling you. Be in the kitchen by sun-up or I will have you cleaning out the old baths for a full week.”

“I’m not brooding, I’m tired,” she grumbled into her blankets, breathing out a deep sigh that ended with a groan—none of which the old crone heard, too busy huffing and tromping away down the hall. “Oversleep one time and get branded as a broody problem child for life.”

Never mind how punctual she actually was, save for the rare day or two where training put her off schedule. Even then, it wasn’t anything to scrutinize. Mariko was Mariko, no matter where they were. She’d even usurped the place’s original matron and took over as head of housekeeping.

Well, it was easier to just let her do as she pleased, or else she’d nitpick and complain about every
little thing not done to her liking until her breath ran out. No one wanted to hear that.

A few moments later, another knock sounded at her door in a pattern signaling Mariko’s complete absence.

Fortunately, the sisters she’d found herself among were far kinder than the old woman.

“I’m up, thanks,” she called, lifting her head from the futon and blowing long strands of hair from her drool-dried mouth, swatting them over her shoulder as she stumbled to her feet and searched the room for her kimono…and all the layers that went into putting it together.

Before, when she’d had Kanae’s, Touka’s, and Kiku’s help dressing, she’d never realized just how much effort went into properly wearing a garment. So many rules, so many customs—so many layers and belts went into making it neat. Especially the obi bows. God, the bows.

It wasn’t impossible to accomplish alone, but the learning curve had bit her in the ass more times than she could count. Mariko never passed up the opportunity to criticize her when she did something the wrong way—when her collar was too close to her neck, when the sleeves were crooked, when her obi bow was too lose, when her hem dragged too close to the floor—because she had “so many fine examples all around” to learn from.

And, most common of them all, a wrinkled kimono was tantamount to murder, in Mariko’s book.

She’d developed an infinite fondness for wearing single-layer yukata instead. Would have worn one now, too, if not for the rapid approach of winter.

At least her hair was easier to tame, and once she had it wound high atop her head in a tight bun, she hurried out into the hall.

Sunrise was only seconds away.

And—unfortunately, her room was one of the farthest from the kitchen.

…There was another, specific, reason her kimono didn’t always look up to par in the old woman’s eyes.

Mitsuba hauled herself up on the windowsill across from her room, holding onto its frame as she glanced outside, to the treetops and to the landing below. This floor—the third floor—hosted the residents. The one below was meant for temporary guests, and the bottommost…was where the kitchen was, among everything else recreational and necessary. Her eyes rose to the sky.

A fine, needle-thin ray of light spread across the horizon as the sun prepared to peek out across the world.

She jumped. Barely touched the railing of the second floor’s landing before zipping toward a sturdy, overhanging gingko tree branch that curved around the corner of the inn, then dipped close to the ground—beside a conveniently open window.

She leapt through it, landing in a crouch—right in front of a chubby, dark-haired child, who stared up at her with an offended frown pulling down his round cheeks.

“Mariko-san says no ninja business inside the inn!” he pouted, shoulders squared and feet set sturdily apart as he stood directly in her path like his short and stubby, four-year-old body would hinder her. “She said you’re,” he pointed up at her to emphasize it, incredibly rudely, “not allowed, especially.”
“Come on, Haruhiko, since when were you a tattletale?” Her eyes darted to the outside, where the sky steadily grew lighter. Not long, now.

But long enough for a little fun.

His frown deepened. “Since you forgot to give me an extra dango when you promised.”

She hummed, straightening out her kimono sleeves. “Did I? Sorry, but how about I give you one today for lunch?”

“No.”

“Two?”

“Don’t want two.” He crossed his arms.

“Three?”

“Noope!” He wouldn’t budge.

“Uh—alright, listen, I’ll teach you an amazing, secret ninja technique if you promise not to tell her you saw me.”

His eyes widened. “Wha—really? Okay, okay! I won’t tell!”

“Good—so, watch close,” she said, bending down toward him and folding her hands together in the tiger seal for him to better see, smiling as he watched with those wide, mystified eyes.

A puff of smoke enveloped her—and revealed nothing but empty space the instant it faded away.

Haruhiko blinked, jaw dropping open as he whipped his head around to find her. “Hey! Where did you go, Mitsuba? No fair! What was that?!”

“It’s what I’ve dubbed the ‘avoid annoying children’ technique!” she called from further down the hall, waving at him with a full-blown grin as he whirled around to face her.

But even if teasing the local kids was entertaining, her time for fun was up. She turned away from his red-faced sputtering and power-walked—no running allowed—out of sight before he got the bright idea to follow after her and bitch to Mariko.

The kitchen was just around the corner.

As expected, Mariko stood in the doorway, arms set firmly on her hips, eyes glued to the open window and the sky—still just shy of full sunrise. She all but rolled her beady, wrinkled eyes away from it as she looked down at Mitsuba, scrutinizing her appearance.

“So you did hear me—you are even on time for once,” she said, voice strained high and gruff, maroon-painted lips pursed into such a pinched frown that it looked more like a prune than a mouth. “Hmm. You’re looking a bit fat lately, and I won’t have you stealing scraps from the kitchen.”

*Nothing wrong with being a little round. Not everyone can be skin and bones like you.* God, she wanted to say it out loud, but only kept her smile firmly in place on tightly shut lips.

“Go and gather some root vegetables from the garden today. And do try not to get leaves in your hair.” She pointedly eyed the top of her head, but didn’t try to swat the offending foliage from her
hair. Only turned on her heel and disappeared into the kitchen.

Mitsuba unclenched her jaw and let her smile fall. “Just send me to the garden first, why don’t you, you hag?” she grumbled out loud, leaning against the wall as the soft pattering of quick little footsteps fast approached.

“Mari—!”

She reached out and wrapped her arm around Haruhiko’s entire head, pulling him into an iron-maiden hug the instant he rounded the corner—just to keep him quiet. His yell for Mariko drowned out into a muffled babble against her obi, unheard.

“Looks like I captured a little garden gnome. Lucky me!” A nasty grin spread across her face.

His scream of despair also went unheard.

The one constant in her life was the presence of a garden and, in some sense, it was more of a home to her than anything else had ever been.

Mitsuba pressed her hands flat against the soil, letting her eyes drift shut as the life thriving underground seeped upwards like a placid river current. Like—well, it was only fictional (and oh, weren’t those famous last words), but it was something like what she’d expect the ever-flowing Lifestream to feel like. Or the Force. Chakra was just a variation on that concept, after all—one among many others, both fictional and not. It all boiled down to the world being alive with an energy not everyone could consciously understand but could tap into and harness nonetheless.

A small, peaceful smile drifted onto her lips—at least, until something smacked against her face.

It skittered—it wriggled. She gently pried it away before it crawled up her nose, pressed her lips into a thin line and blinked several times at the plump and juicy caterpillar writhing in her hold.

“Oh, very funny, Haruhiko.”

“You said they were bad for plants,” he said nonchalantly, arms akimbo as he looked away with all the innocence of a child who hadn’t just flung a bug at her.

“Well, that’s true, but this one is fine.” Gently, she set the caterpillar onto a sturdy leaf, eyeing the several lattice-like lace holes chewed into its surface from past meals.

“Mama says tobacco can make stuff like fight bugs leave the old wood piles alone,” he piped up suddenly, crossing his arms and preening a bit at his own display of knowledge.

Fight bugs? She squinted at him a moment, then shook her head.

“It’s fine. There aren’t any stag beetles here. And they aren’t really pests. Not like these.”

Pests weren’t a problem. Damaged, devoured leaves returned in no time at all in a constant cycle of rejuvenation. Only as long as she tended to them and cultured her talent, that is.

It was nothing special (nothing she could take into combat), but over the past few months she’d learned to direct a carefully-measured amount of the Wood Release’s energy toward nurturing and
amplifying what nature had already provided, rather than creating anew from her own chakra.

(Soil pH? Who needed that when you had extraterrestrial alien power at your fingertips? Chakra granted her a better green thumb than anything else.)

The coming winter would be a test against the elements—a test of whether or not she could sustain certain vegetation beyond its standard season.

While she stared at the leaves, lost in thought, Haruhiko had approached and crouched at her side, craning his neck closer to watch the caterpillar as it meandered along. Somehow, he’d already gotten dirt on his face, in a messy streak right across his nose like a scar.

In one of his hands, he held the top leaves of a bundle of turnips as they splayed along the ground behind him, so at least he was helping out and not just messing around with whatever bugs he could find. Still not the best garden gnome she’d ever wrangled into helping, but it wasn’t like she had many other kids to choose from. The rest were a bunch of babbling droolers. Cute ones, but still.

“Yeah, we never have trouble with the garden since you’re here,” he hummed, picking his nose and spreading more dirt grossly around his skin. “So, anyway, are you gonna teach me something cool, Mitsuba? You ditched me before! And I’m here helping out, so fair’s fair, right?”

“I lied. Your mom would kill me if I taught you shinobi stuff. Did you know she smacked me for making the miso soup too weak yesterday? I thought the hag was the only one who got violent, But Kumi-san is sure something…”

“What? Again? You’re cruel!”

“And you’re noisy. Sooo noisy!” She stuck her tongue out before reaching out and snagging a carrot from the ground, dropping it into one of the small baskets she kept around the garden. “Besides, there’s no time. If we don’t hurry back soon, that hag will burst a blood vessel and stick me on outhouse cleaning duty.”

He stuck his tongue out, too, pouting. “Well—there’s time to show another technique, isn’t there?”

“Do I have to?”

“Pleeeease?”

“Now you’re trying to get me on Nagisa-sensei’s bad side. Why don’t you go play with another caterpillar or something? And give me those turnips there.”

Haruhiko’s cheeks puffed out wide as his fuzzy eyebrows drew together tight. “You’re no fun!” He hopped to his feet and threw the bunch of turnips down, so hard they bounced against the outside of her thigh.

“Hey!” she snapped, grabbing them up and checking them over for damage. “Quit being a brat, Haruhiko!”

He didn’t reply—didn’t say anything as he waddled away in a huff.

Some kids were more trouble than they were worth.

It wasn’t until a few moments and vegetable unearthings later that she realized he’d stomped off in the wrong direction—further into the forest and not toward the inn where a small child should be,
safe and sound.

“Tch, come on…I’m not your babysitter.”

Mitsuba tossed a handful of leek stalks into the basket among the other vegetables and rose to her feet, brushing the front of her teal kimono off as she narrowed her eyes at the fringe of the sun-dappled forest, relieved that she at least had daylight to search by.

But, at the same time, feeling a cold chill race down her spine when he was nowhere in sight. **He had to have known where he was going. What a brat.**

There wasn’t exactly a troop of guards on duty at the inn—and the kunoichi present were not trained to handle fuinjutsu barriers. Only traditional barricades and alarm systems like sink pits, log traps and noisemaker tripwires. Any of the residents could wander in and out as they pleased, so a disobedient child wandering off and getting lost wasn’t impossible. Uncommon, but not impossible.

With her heart beating hard in her chest, Mitsuba set off at a jog toward the tree line, letting her feet do the tracking.

Her current teacher—Nagisa, a seasoned kunoichi who wasn’t quite on the threshold of old but still sported a few lines and faint wrinkles, well on her way to it—claimed the skill was a sensory ability. A bonus paired with the *Kekkei Genkai* that traced one’s presence directly through nature rather than a chakra signal. But if she trained hard enough, she’d said, she could shape it into a conventional sensory ability. But that wasn’t the purpose of her training. As Butsuma said (and as he ordered the teacher he’d assigned to her), her goal was to learn impeccable control of her chakra—and to conceal it when necessary.

…Whether that meant Butsuma would allow her to fight at her brothers’ sides on the battlefield once she accomplished that remained to be seen. He did emphasize how valuable her talent was, after all. But his mind was a mystery to her.

Either way, none of the kunoichi present were willing to cross a Senju just to teach Mitsuba a little something extra. The responsibility to learn fell on her shoulders. As always…

Light, pitter-pattering footsteps echoed around her mind, tracing an invisible map across the immediate area—not too far beyond her current position. Not even too far beyond her field of vision, but with the trees blocking most of everything, it definitely helped.

Small creatures—squirrels, rabbits, foxes—scampered, hopped, and trotted along the ground, brushing through foliage and darting up trees. Each tiny paw hitting a solid surface reverberated through the numerous root systems nestled throughout the dirt and traveled straight to her.

It didn’t take long to locate Haruhiko’s heavy tromping. So heavy, for such a young kid—more like a bull.

*Is he really that mad…?*

She pushed aside a low-hanging bough and carefully weaved her way between the tall grass and leaves, quiet as she could, scanning her surroundings for a telltale puff of deep black hair.

She found it—and more.

She came face-to-face with a stranger just as soon as she released the branches and let them rustle
back into place behind her.

The man—shinobi, by the presence of armor along his forearms—held a petrified, teary-eyed Haruhiko up by the back of his *jinbei* like a wild cat, and pressed his index finger immediately to his lips to silence Mitsuba when her mouth opened in alarm. But he didn’t need to. Her voice had already caught in her throat.

*Red eyes. A sword, piercing straight through—Uchiha. Uchiha.*

No.

This shinobi wasn’t an Uchiha. He didn’t even have red eyes.

But no one *good* held a child like a sack of potatoes.

Obediently, she shut her mouth—but as she did so, her hand crept toward the back of her obi and just beneath the fabric, where her fingers brushed warm metal.

Inch by inch…

Nearby, a bird’s scratching talons plucked at a worm wriggling in the cool soil.

Inch by inch…

The second it snapped free, she yanked out the kunai and flung it straight down into the unguarded top of the stranger’s foot.

“*Augh—!*”

He dropped Haruhiko.

Mitsuba caught him before he hit the ground—barely.

She pulled him safe and close into her arms as she turned tail and ran, propelling herself forward with chakra in her legs. He buried his clammy face deep into the collar of her kimono and clung tight, not making a peep. Trembling like a leaf.

Her own footsteps didn’t hinder her senses—she made sure to step light, toes barely touching the ground as she flew—so she recognized the absence of the shinobi’s weight as soon as it vanished.

She dug her heels into the dirt in a hard stop when a puff of smoke erupted in front of them—turned and fled in the opposite direction before it cleared.

He hissed something, but her ears were too flooded with the rush of her pounding heartbeat and an incessant ringing to hear exactly what.

A second later, something cracked hard against her back and sent her stumbling. Not a blade—no, she pressed her palm to her dry kimono, briefly, as Haruhiko tumbled out of her hold, and spotted a heavy rock rolling away as she fell to her knees.

Haruhiko let out a choked sob, stammering her name in a thick, panicked voice. A bit of blood trickled down his lip, where he’d bit it or scraped it against the ground.

Mitsuba scrambled forward and held one arm out to shield him as she turned to face their attacker, feeling his approach more than seeing it. She clenched her other hand tight, tense. Waiting.
A blade whistled through the air—pierced the ground just shy of her knee. Covered in something slick—shining blood. Her kunai.

"Like a knife through tender apple flesh—"


“Dammit,” a gruff, hurried voice spat from beyond the shrubs, from the shifting leaves as the shinobi moved through them and stepped through, limping to favor his wounded foot. “You’re too feisty, girl. If you just would have listened to me—”

Mitsuba hurled the rock at his head—he caught it. Tossed it aside and continued to advance.

“Like I said, just listen—"

“Don’t take another fucking step!” she snarled, voice low as a growling dog. The arm protecting Haruhiko moved further back, until her fingers touched his sleeve. She gripped the fabric tight. The other hand gripped the hot steel of her returned kunai as her chakra stirred like the twinging belly of a starving beast.

Focus—focus. Control it.

Her vision narrowed to a pinprick as pure, cold concentration fixated on the shinobi that stood far too close.

“Sh—shhh!” he hissed, pressing his index finger to his mouth in a panic. “By the gods—I’m stopping. I’m stopped!” He waved his hands palm-out at her in surrender. “Stop already! Listen—we have to get you two out of here now.”

The kunai lowered—a fraction of an inch. Her eyebrows creased as if a thread drew them together in stiff pleats. Begging the silent question.

The shinobi continued holding up his hands and met her hard stare, unblinking. “You two come from the ryokan, right? Uchiha are coming through, soon—getting closer by the minute. I-I didn’t mean to scare you—just come along with me now! I’ll return you both safely.”

Uchiha—Uchiha. The name echoed in her mind like shrieking steel.

Haruhiko buried his head against the back of her kimono, still whining in a raspy, strained voice. It brought her out of her thoughts.

Mitsuba kept the shinobi locked in her gaze as her chest heaved from suppressing her breathing for too long, lungs regulating themselves, and evaluated his claims.

He hadn’t hurt them—a little bruising aside.

He’d given her kunai back.

And he mentioned Uchiha—he wasn’t an ally to them if he warned them of their presence.

“Uchiha?”

As she lowered the kunai, the shinobi man lowered his hands. As she returned the kunai to her obi, he approached them again and brushed long wisps of white hair away from his eyes.
“That’s right—so let’s get going. No more wasting time.” He stepped around her—reached for Haruhiko as he huddled like a small frog at her back. She locked him in her glare again. “Oh—I am only trying to make the trip quicker!”

Slow as a blooming flower, she released her fingers one by one from the boy’s sleeve, still watching the shinobi man. He still clung to her.

She looked over her shoulder. “Haruhiko—it’s okay. It’s okay. Let him carry you.”

He didn’t let go until she abruptly rose to her feet. But he didn’t make a peep as the man scooped him up and held him in the crook of one arm—still a little careless, but at least like a human and not a vegetable.

The man looked down at her. “Alright. Get on my back.” Saying so, he turned his back to her and knelt. “Hurry.”

As soon as she grabbed onto his narrow shoulders, he leapt up into the trees, kicking off from branch to branch and soaring through the forest.

It barely felt like a minute had passed when he landed in a crouch at the corner of the inn’s garden.

“Alright, there you are,” he said quietly but still in a rushed tone, setting Haruhiko down beside the basket she’d left behind earlier, then looking over his shoulder as she dropped away. “Now, feisty girl, forget you saw me. Forget I exist.”

“You can’t just—”

Mitsuba’s words met only a puff of smoke as he body-flickered away.

“Cheap tricks,” she finished, breathing a deep sigh as it cleared.

But his abrupt departure wasn’t without reason. She barely had time to bend down and help Haruhiko to his feet when Mariko came huffing toward them with long, swift strides; an apron tied fast around her thin torso and a steel ladle in her hand.

“Why must you always dawdle?!”

The strange shinobi man hadn’t exaggerated when he said the Uchiha were on their way—Mariko’s immaculate breakfast had barely ended when a murmur of unrest rippled through the entire establishment.

News traveled fast, when new faces arrived. When new, specific faces arrived.

Mitsuba had been on her way to the second floor, with a broom and dustpan in hand, when she spotted a group of women peering silently out of one of the latticed windows, straight into the courtyard. It wouldn’t have worried her if they’d been whispering amongst themselves, but a dead-silent huddle was definitely cause for concern.

“What’s going on?” she asked, sidling up beside them and nudging her way past their hips to get a clear view outside. With what little went on at the inn, there was no way she’d pass up a fresh gossip topic.
Her eyes scanned the empty courtyard, the trees, the small koi pond, and then traveled the length of the walls to the front gate, which stood open to reveal a handful of unfamiliar faces.

“Shinobi…? U—”

“Shh, Mitsu-chan!” The young woman at her left hushed her swiftly, setting a hand on her shoulder—but all the better. Saying the name _Uchiha_ out loud wasn’t in her best interests. “Just stay quiet a moment.”

With a nod, Mitsuba focused on the three bulky figures in the distance, stopped at the opened gate where the old man and one of his daughters greeted them. Clearly adults. Perhaps women. It was difficult to tell from here. And the sun wasn’t in the best position for her to see without squinting.

Her hands tightened around the broom and dustpan handles as she drew in a shallow breath, trying to decode their fuzzy, smeared faces—the _atmosphere_. But they were too far away.

She toned down what little chakra she’d molded into something sharp, thin, and cool and settled in to wait like a spider in the center of its web as its prey crept ever closer.

“Uchiha,” another woman, older, blonde (called Rie, if she wasn’t mistaken) said under her breath as all eyes turned to her. She crossed her arms into her sleeves and shook her head to shake off their curiosity. “They have a way about them. I couldn’t mistake it. It’s no wonder they reached the front gate without some forewarning.”

“Uchiha? You don’t think—”

“Shh, Hori-san!”

“Ah—sorry!”

Rie waved a hand to quiet them. “They’re coming in.”

All eyes turned to the courtyard once again as the old man bowed and welcomed the two shinobi into the compound.

They dressed light. Not with armor straight from the battlefield, but the dark, long-sleeved, high-necked robes favored by their clan—no doubt strewn with concealed weapons. They also stepped light, so lightly that their footsteps barely registered in Mitsuba’s underground root network, even as they entered her immediate sensory radius.

Rie murmured something else, but she no longer paid attention to the women’s words as they stirred around her, attention and eyes fixed and unblinking on the approaching shinobi. Really, she couldn’t look away even if she wanted to.

Because they were _Uchiha._

Because this place wasn’t as _safe_ as she’d been told.

The moment they moved into a clear and open line of sight, one of the shinobi snagged the old man’s daughter and held a short sword to her throat. The old man took a step—was stilled with a single look. Then he, too, was held at sword point and forced to walk to the center of the courtyard.

“Listen up,” the second shinobi, with his sword at the old man’s back, called out in a low, rasping voice that still cut through the open windows. “Everyone, outside, now, if you value these two lives.”
That voice—it grated in her ears like sandpaper grit. The echo of a memory she’d never forget.

Her fingernails dug into the broom handle as her heart clenched in on itself as if she’d gripped it instead. Even this far away, the chakra burned, hot as hell itself, and she seared its heavy darkness into her mind as she leaned toward the window, raised her hand and—

“Move,” Rie whispered at Mitsuba’s ear as she gave her a light nudge, pulling her from her daze. She let her chakra go like a wisp of smoke and blinked, keeping her eyes closed for a long moment before turning away from the window and accepting the older woman’s hand as they shuffled away from the window and followed the others to the inn lobby.

As commanded, the entirety of the inn gathered outside. Some stood quietly in the shadows and peeked out from behind doors, not uttering a single syllable as the old man and his daughter stood on the brink of life and death. But were present nonetheless.

Mitsuba moved past them all a step too far—a hand fell on her shoulder to pull her back. She knew that hand by the firm grip; she didn’t have to look back to know it was Nagisa. No, she kept her eyes focused on the heavy-built, bald-headed Uchiha standing behind the old man, taking in the lopsided, wicked smirk, the thin eyes, the wrinkle lines, the whole face that haunted half of her nightmares since that rainy day at the river. The one that had been a shadow of a red-eyed bogeyman with a slit-mouthed grin—that was undoubtedly, and always was, human. Everything evil about a human.

He didn’t even see her.

“Quick to act, I see. Good,” he said, reaching forward to grab the old man by the head and pull him back, pressing his sword against his old and fragile throat, now.

To his credit, the old man didn’t even whimper. Didn’t flinch. Ex-shinobi indeed—he wore the face of a man prepared to accept his fate so long as no one else was hurt.

When his youngest daughter was brought up alongside him, his expression crumbled.

The Uchiha’s eyes roved the crowd, dark eyes glinting like tar in the sunlight. Testing the waters.

“This will end soon, so long as you continue to act agreeable. Now, there is an Uchiha woman hiding amongst you. Uchiha Makiko. Surrender her and her son and we will leave. Simple as that.”

No one made a sound. No one moved.

Mitsuba glanced briefly up at Nagisa—though she was nowhere in sight. Slipped away at some point, but her reasons were unknown. Certainly not to mobilize. There were less than a dozen kunoichi on the premises.

Hardly a match for two battle-honed, child-killing Uchiha.

“No takers? And we were doing so well.”

A shriek tore through the crowd—Mitsuba almost hadn’t realized what happened. Not until the old man’s daughter slumped forward like a ragdoll and twitched as a pool of red seeped out from beneath her head like spilled tomato soup and not—

Not blood.

The Uchiha didn’t so much as blink at the spectacle. Only kept his eyes focused on the crowd. “If you hurry, you can still save her. Perhaps. Now. Uchiha Makiko. I won’t ask again.”
Mitsuba’s hands curled into tight, shaking fists.

*You have a Sharingan, you fucker. Why don’t you just use it and find her? Why—why these games? Why?*

One of the women elbowed her way to the front of the crowd. “Just—just give her up! They’re Uchiha—this isn’t worth it!” The wild voice belonged to the old man’s eldest daughter—she couldn’t see her, but she knew that much. “Makiko, she’s—”

The Uchiha looked toward her when she spoke that name, and the instant he did so, the old man gripped the katana blade with both hands and wrenched it from his grip, flipped it and stabbed it straight into the man’s torso.

Or, tried.

The Uchiha swiftly blocked it with a kunai and knocked it aside with one deft motion, sending it careening into the air.

The old man’s eldest daughter caught it, snatched it right from the air by the hilt—and struck the Uchiha’s unguarded back.

It cut through fabric. Not flesh.

“A trap?” he asked, smirk ever-present as the crowd broke—as a group of women rushed to the fallen daughter’s side and a slurry of shuriken whirred through the air toward the two men.

“*Yama! She’s on the move!*” hissed the other Uchiha—whose voice was like a tumbling mass of skittering spider legs. Something flashed red as he spoke, and he kicked aside a kunoichi armed with a kunai before pushing away from the ground and leaping to the inn roof, scaling it level by level as he honed in on their target’s chakra signal—then fell back as a paper bomb detonated at his feet and another stranger appeared to block his way.

The shinobi man from the forest.

The raspy-voiced man—*Yama*, she’d never forget—clicked his tongue and brought his hands up into a seal—took a great breath and spat out a whirling stream of flame that buffeted the kunoichi onslaught and sent up a wave of bitter, stinking black smoke that concealed his escape.

But Mitsuba saw it. Felt it. Reached out to the forest’s chakra and followed each footstep that hit the trees; hit the grass.

A body hit the dirt. Light. Bled out fast. One of the inn’s kunoichi—quickly followed by another.

She didn’t have time to stop and check them. She pulled her kunai from her obi and gripped it tight as she followed Uchiha Yama’s path, pushing herself as far as she could just to keep track of his movements. If he got too far away—it was over. Done. She’d never get a chance like this again.

It went against everything she’d been told, flaring her chakra full-force just to feel as much of the forest as she could—even with her fingers folded into the snake seal to direct it all where she needed it to go, projecting it in a linear path instead of a spreading circle. Completely honed in.

His presence burned like fire, still. Embers scorching the grass with each step. And ahead of him, lighter steps—a woman, running. And a child, at her side.

Both desperate, pushing themselves as fast as they could go.
One fell. Tripped—not struck down. He hadn’t reached them just yet.

The same time they hit the ground, a hand reached out and snagged Mitsuba straight from the air, throwing her from the trees and deep into the brush below.

Thorns tangled in her hair as she sank through the jumble of leaves, pulling her bun loose and jerking hair free as gravity yanked her down. Stray hairs cut like wires across her eyes as she struggled to shove them away from her face and flailed free from the foliage holding her like a net.

The hand grabbed her again, by the ankle. Dragged her free from the brush. Dropped her to the ground like dead weight and stepped on her arm when she tried to strike him with her kunai—so hard she heard once-broken bones creak and grit her teeth hard against the pressure, eyes wide.

But didn’t cry out—couldn’t. Not with fear turning her stomach inside out, swallowing everything like a cold black hole.

Not with the rage raking up through her chest like a mountain.

Not with everything she’d learned screaming at her to *wait*, to *watch* and to *react* the moment he wasn’t expecting it.

A sword descended. Stopped.

The point of a katana brushed at her forehead—she didn’t dare make a move, or speak as it shifted aside the white streak in her dark hair. Only watched it through her scarred eye and kept the man in her peripherals.

The deep red glow of his Sharingan flared, on, off, as he blinked.

“I remember that hair. So, one of you survived.”

Each word prickled like spider legs against the fine hairs on the back of her neck. There was no underlying threat—he spoke as if delivering a birthday greeting. Or receiving one, and thanking the world for it.

The shinobi stranger hadn’t slowed him down nearly enough.

Killing Itama hadn’t been enough.

Slitting a defenseless woman’s throat hadn’t been enough.

Killing her wouldn’t be enough, either.

He was a vicious, twisted force of nature that stopped for nothing. Destroying and consuming for eternity, like a wildfire.

It would take a force of nature in kind to stop him.

“Look.” The man didn’t move the katana away as he reached toward his face and shifted his ugly, mousy grey hair away from the right side of his face.

Where his right eye should be—where a *Sharingan* should be—was all the horror of a gnarled, pocked mass of scarred flesh, like the knot of a tree’s bark.

Looking away from it—even blinking—wasn’t an option.
“Look at what one of you little brats’ Wood Release did. And here I’d been assured your clan’s Kekkei Genkai skipped another generation.” The katana moved to hover over her left eye, forever half-lidded even as her other opened painfully wide. “I’d say an eye for an eye would suffice in this case, though it seems you haven’t much luck in that area either.”

Yeah, well, a river hurt me and you don’t see me trying to kill the river gods. So keep talking. Just keep talking. Sick bastard!

She clenched the kunai tight in her palm—and finally dropped it as he stepped down harder on her forearm. The fingers of her free hand pierced into the dirt, reaching deep, searching, as ripples like hunger pangs stirred beneath her skin.

His teeth caught the light as he bared them—ugly. “So young, little girl, and already disfigured. It’s a burden even on adult kunoichi, I hear, to be so visibly scarred.” Despite the lighthearted, sickening glee in his voice, he never smiled. The point of the sword lowered, close, too close, and her left eye laser focused on it out of necessity as it blurred its way into her line of sight. “I can see what you’re doing with your chakra, there. Such ugly chakra. Like a fuming bog.” He breathed an amused laugh. “You Senju are the absolute worst. Always fighting up until the very end, even when cornered with nowhere to go.”

At last, his lips folded upward into a smirk. His remaining eye creased at the edges and she trained her focus fully on that expression, burning it into her mind’s eye.

“But that boy you were with. *He* had no time to fight for his life. What a pity.”

He’d said enough.

She’d reached deep enough—and pulled it all up from the ground with all her might.

Coarse tree bark surged up from the ground in a dozen narrow, skewering claws, knocking the Uchiha’s katana askew—one nearly punched straight through his jaw before he ducked away.

Mitsuba snagged the nearest one, breaking a length of it free and shaking off the craggy bark to reveal a bokuto, still uneven with twigs and sprouting leaves on a half-smooth surface and a bit jagged at the edges, but it had a sharp point and that point was all she needed to drive it straight through his face. Right into the other eye.

With a yell, she stabbed upward.

He parried its path with a kunai—the real, steel blade sliced straight through it.

She ducked away—threw the hilt of the broken weapon aside with a snarl and set her hands in the snake seal, crouching close to the ground, moving fast, reaching, reaching deep into that hunger that wanted to—

*Eat!*

Roots roiled beneath the soil like a wave, before shooting through and tripping the Uchiha up and rising, rising, as his single Sharingan burned bright in black and red, focusing on her and drawing up a familiar, precious, smiling face that filled her vision—

A foot kicked her from behind and sent her pitching face-forward into a mass of withering roots before either technique could ensnare the other.

“Kote. We have what we came for. Quit fucking around and kill her so we can leave.”
Mitsuba whirled around on her back, wiped the blood from her nose through a choking gasp and looked up at Yama—at who was flung over his burly shoulder like a bag of trash, limp and barely breathing. A child. A round, jovial, brat of a child.

“Haru—!” The words caught in her throat as the other Uchiha seized a fistful of her loose hair and wrenched her head back, baring her throat.

“My fun ends here, it seems.”

The blade came close—so close she felt the steel brush her skin like death’s bashful kiss.

Blood beaded up and trickled down—

But it didn’t slice through. A deep, indigo powder cloud exploded against a nearby tree trunk and latched onto the air, curling out and spreading fast and stilling his blade.

“Poison!” Yama yelled in a raw, snarling rasp. “Go, now!”

Mitsuba pitched forward, hands and knees scraping ground, as both Uchiha took a swift step back, sleeves covering their mouths. Another step, and they blended into the forest background as the miasma dropped between them like a steel curtain.

“No! Come back here, you—”

She shut her eyes as the noxious dust swirled and coiled down upon her and her screams. Held her breath as it prickled her skin and soaked into her pores.

But didn’t need to. Something pressed tight against her mouth while an arm grabbed her around the waist and yanked her airborne, into fresh, clean air.

“Take this,” a woman’s brisk voice said by her ear as the hand pressed harder—holding a round, solid pill that dug into her lips.

She let it past her teeth and swallowed it down fast as the air burned in her nostrils and around the delicate, exposed skin of her eyes. Her eyes watered freely—she let them run as she and the person holding her emerged from the trees, upwind and facing the blinding sun, too afraid to wipe them with any residue that remained on her hands.

“Nagisa-sensei,” she tried to speak, but the words scraped raw against her throat in a bitter, herbal mess.

Nagisa grunted under her breath—Don’t speak. You’ve done enough. You shouldn’t even be here. So much could be said with one simple sound. She shifted her hold around her waist as they dropped back into the forest, moving from branch to branch until they were well away from the poison cloud and then on the ground.

The moment her feet touched, her legs buckled—Nagisa didn’t let her fall and lowered her gently to the grass, crouching at her side as the trees see-sawed and swayed like the ground was a tilting board, all fuzzy at the edges and dissolving.

She ran her hands over her bloodied face, turning her head and checking the shallow slice on her throat, smoothing her tangled hair away and clicking her tongue as her eyes scanned her kimono and stopped at her dirty feet. “Oh, you’ve lost your shoes.” She shook her head and pursed her lips as she set a firm, anchoring hand on her back. “You’ll feel sick, soon, but don’t worry. You’ll need to vomit after being exposed to that powder. The pill is an antidote to prevent the major symptoms,
but—"I’m sorry for putting you in that position, Mitsu-chan. I had to drive them away from you fast."

"Mitsu," Mitsuba repeated in a hoarse whisper, blinking constantly to try to clear her blurry vision—but knowing it wouldn’t help.

*Mitsu.*

*Mitsu!

She hated that nickname, here, now, in this moment, and how it cut into her heart, but the words to say it escaped her. She focused instead on her teacher’s face, at the wavy, pale hair that hung in wisps over her forehead and ears. She’d seen that snowy hair, somewhere. Somewhere…

*Almost like Kanae’s.*

A dull pain pulsed in her forehead—she squeezed her eyes shut.

"That’s right, Mitsu-chan. Now, stay with me. We have to get back to the inn. If you feel worse, let me know. Try not to fall asleep. Not yet." Her urgent words spread out and stretched thin like taffy pulled too far, then scrunched up back together in turns.

She pressed her hands flat to the grass and soil to find purchase, but the chakra brimming up from below was too much, too fast, and only made her head whirl. Slowly, she nodded.

"Alright, let’s go." Nagisa hauled her up and wrapped a firm arm around her shoulders, holding her close to her side as she led them forward—then froze, as the bushes rustled ahead. Her shoulders tensed as she pushed Mitsuba back, just slightly, and reached toward her thigh for a kunai.

A white-haired someone emerged from the leaves, holding a mass in their arms that lay slack, lolling, lifeless and stained with dark splotches dripping down the side. The stranger shinobi, and a woman with black, braided hair swaying loose from her head like a rope.

If she could see the face clearly, she’d know—no, even without seeing, she knew that woman was Haruhiko’s mother. Not *Uchiha Makiko*—but the woman she’d known as *Kumi*, the sharp-tongued cook even Mariko hadn’t had the courage to scorn.

The stranger bowed his head over the corpse as he stopped before them, silent, long hair hanging loose over his shoulders. Expression hidden.

"Gen," Nagisa spoke at length, breathing out a quiet sigh as she re-holstered the kunai and pulled Mitsuba forward again, haori sleeve curling around her in not only safety and security, but comfort, as her eyes slid toward the ground in reverence. "Let’s go back."

They returned to the inn in silence—and remained silent when they reached it.

Half of their home had gone up in flames.
This chapter jumps around a bit and is a little more rough than I prefer, but an arc I’m looking forward to is coming up soon! On that note though, it’ll be a slow go for a while longer, but as always I appreciate y’all taking the time to read and/or leave comments/kudos. Please enjoy the chapter!

Four had been lost to the Uchiha’s two-man raid. Three dead; one stolen.

Two kunoichi, and Kumi—no, Uchiha Makiko—had been alive that morning but were laid to rest before the sun set.

Everyone else had been accounted for with various injuries. The old man’s youngest daughter had miraculously survived the ordeal of having her throat slit open, but came close to becoming the fourth casualty. Though in exchange for living, she’d never speak again.

Others suffered burns from Yama’s Fireball attacks and from trying to salvage the inn, but nothing so bad that it kept them from moving and clearing out what was still intact from the ashes. What was once a strong-standing building was now partway a charred, blackened, spindly frame with collapsed floors and destroyed memories. Like a devastating before-after makeover example, only Mitsuba wasn’t sure which was supposed to be which. Maybe burnt remains and lost lives were all they had to look forward to in the future, so long as the clan wars continued.

After they’d returned to the inn and separated the bodies between the dead and injured, Nagisa helped Mitsuba set up a makeshift clinic at the far end of the compound, well away from the thick smog that singed the air. Three blankets had been spread out across the ground, holding the old man’s youngest daughter (and her sister, who refused to leave her side), sleeping, but safe, and six children—also sleeping. Plus one pregnant woman too far along in her term to strain herself.

Mitsuba heaved a quiet sigh through her nose as she slathered a thick cooling salve over Rie’s wrinkled, reddened palms. The hems of her fine mustard-colored kimono sleeves and the layer beneath were singed at the edges and brushed her skin like black lace. But the burns didn’t spread beyond her wrists. It looked as if she’d gone inside to retrieve a prized possession before the ceilings had cracked and fallen in and seared her hands when she’d touched hot metal in haste, without thinking.

She wasn’t the only one. But she was the last burn patient left to treat, so Mitsuba took her time.

Fortunately, Mitsuba’s bedroom was on the undamaged end of the inn—Nagisa had retrieved the box she kept stuffed full of herbs. She even fetched what useful plants she could from the garden, which had been far enough away and spared from the destruction. Nagisa helped with what medical knowledge she knew, too—otherwise, the injured would have had to wait and suffer longer, and losing a home was pain enough already. Now, she stood a short distance away from the medical area, discussing something with Mariko, who’d set up a large pot to boil garden vegetable soup for the survivors.

The kitchen hadn’t made it, but the cookware had. So had the dining room, but no one was allowed
inside until the structural integrity had been evaluated. No one wanted to lose another person to an unforeseen collapse.

“My,” Rie breathed out as Mitsuba retrieved a length of bandage from her supply cache. “You certainly are capable.”

She didn’t respond. Only began winding it around the woman’s hands, starting at the wrist and moving toward the fingers—following a memory of a video she’d seen, once, and never quite forgot because she’d wrapped her first dad’s so many times before. Idiot never could take care of himself right.

*Just make sure the fingers can still move,* she told herself as she wound the bandage around each salve-coated finger.

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever found the need to do such a thing since Nagisa and Godō-sama have always helped us before.” She lowered her voice. “If not for his quick medical care, perhaps Michi-chan wouldn’t have made it…”

“But she did, and that is what matters. We shouldn’t think of negatives, Rie. Not now.” Nagisa had quietly approached, and knelt at Rie’s side as she spoke. She rubbed her hands across her face, weary. “Truly, I don’t know much in the way of medicine—more of the opposite, in fact. I can only wrap minor injuries and mix antidotes.” Her shoulder nudged into the other woman’s as she let her hands drop away from her face and rest on her ashy knees. “We are fortunate.”

Rie watched her sidelong for a long moment before nodding. “That we are. Only, I can’t help but wonder—how did those Uchiha get wind of Makiko? Everyone has been so, so careful to keep her secret.”

“Dumb luck,” Mitsuba said dryly. “If she hadn’t been here, if they’d gotten it wrong, they’d have slaughtered us all.” She tied off the end of the bandages and gently turned Rie’s hands over to check her work. Nodded, and released her.

Rie’s brow furrowed as she shifted on her knees—tried to stand, but quickly took the weight off of her bandaged hands with a wince. Nagisa rose to her feet and helped her up without missing a beat.

Mitsuba had never seen her move so fast, or watch someone with such a tender, concerned gaze.

She wondered over their lingering, clasped hands for a moment—only a moment—before smiling and lowering her eyes.

No matter how much they lost, they were still able to return to those they loved.

Nagisa stayed behind as Rie made her way to the makeshift kitchen area, and crouched down once again to help clean the space; to brush away the remnants of stems and crushed leaves. “Even if it was dumb luck…it was only a matter of time before someone came for her. This is not a secret location. And, as of now, it may not be a location at all.”

Mitsuba looked toward the inn. “Is the damage *that* bad?”

“When morning comes, everyone will likely depart for the nearest village. If they saw the smoke, they’ll likely have sent someone to investigate and check on us. But…for you, especially…” She ran a hand through her short hair, and left it on the back of her neck, sighing. “You and I should leave as soon as possible.”

“What? Why?”
Nagisa eyed her for a quiet moment before glancing toward the sleeping children, pensive. “How are you, by the way? Any more nausea? You’ve fared well thus far.”

She shook her head. “No, no more nausea—don’t change the subject. Tell me why.”

Her eyes returned to hers, and she held the challenging gaze without an inkling of annoyance. “For your own safety.” She leaned closer, lowering her voice as she set a hand on her shoulder. “You revealed yourself to those Uchiha. It’s possible they will come back to kill you, or worse.”

Mitsuba pressed her lips together tight. “Is this what you were discussing with the hag—Mariko?”

“Be respectful, Mitsu-chan. She cares more than she lets on. But this isn’t up for debate. Be ready to go by nightfall.”

She didn’t put up a fight. As instructed, she packed all that she could carry and, together, they left the inn under the cover of darkness.

At dawn, they reached an old shrine complex. One the old man Godō had worshipped at and cared for in his youth, before he’d been drafted as a shinobi, according to Nagisa. He and the head priest still kept a close relationship, met up for tea from time to time, and the man was more than happy to take them in for the time being for his friend’s sake.

No Uchiha would be disrespectful enough to cross onto holy ground with ill intent.

…but even if they were, it wasn’t like Mitsuba could do much against them.

They’d killed people she knew, and stole one she’d cared for. Perhaps not enough.

Haruhiko…

Mitsuba couldn’t even protect him a second time. Didn’t have the chance.

She’d been too focused on her revenge. And all for nothing, because she still couldn’t measure up against a grown Uchiha and had to be rescued at the last second by her teacher before he nearly slit her throat, too.

Her fingers idly massaged the thin skin above her collarbone as she blinked down at the tepid tea set on the small tray before her, mixed with a second serving of antidote from Nagisa, just as a precaution. She’d give her a third in the morning to fully purge whatever poison she’d inhaled.

Across from her, in the lodging room they’d been given by the priest, sat Nagisa and Gen, the stranger she’d mistaken for an enemy not even a full day before.

It seemed as if so much more time had passed, for all that happened.

Seeing them both side by side drove in the familial similarity, from the long, pale hair, coal-black eyes, and bowed, frowning mouths, to the rigid, controlled way they held their bodies. Even their dark-blue clothing was similar, and sleeveless, with long pants tied at the ankles with off-white bandages. But unlike Nagisa, Gen had a splash of faint freckles dotted across the bridge of his nose, and now lacked a front tooth where he’d had a full set of pearly whites before.

Amane Nagisa and Amane Genshiro—mother and son. Both sitting with their eyes trained on her as they awaited the answer to the question they’d asked. Namely, why a half-trained child rushed headlong after an Uchiha enemy, alone.
Mitsuba exhaled deep until all the breath left her lungs.

*Those men—those two Uchiha—took something from me when I was younger. I had a twin. They killed him in cold blood and he didn’t even have a chance. He was unarmed—protecting me. They slaughtered him. It’s only natural I do the same to those nasty fuckers.*

No. No—she couldn’t say any of that. No one knew Itama was dead but her. If she told them, it would make its way back to Butsuma. To her brothers. She’d lied already and couldn’t undo it. *Hurt* one already and couldn’t undo that, either.

Then…

“That clan killed one of my brothers. Kawarama. I—I saw an Uchiha and I had to try to avenge him. What kind of sister would I be if I didn’t try? What kind of—”

“Of shinobi?” Nagisa supplied lightly, though the words weighed of lead. “Mitsu-chan…you aren’t. That is not your responsibility.”

“Don’t fault me,” she said, eyes still focused on the teacup, shoulders slumped. The fight had long since left her and yielded to the thick shroud of grief that followed close behind loss. “What else am I supposed to use this god-forsaken *Kekkei Genkai* for?”

“To protect yourself. Isn’t that what you want?” She reached a hand forward but stopped when Mitsuba shook her head.

“It’s not enough. It’s cruel.”

“What’s cruel is intentionally putting yourself in peril. Leaving behind those who care for you without a second thought.” Gen’s words burned in the heavy silence that followed, though his expression remained passive. “I don’t know your story, feisty girl, but from what I’ve seen, you are too emotional to—”

“Be a shinobi. That’s nothing new.” She shrugged and reached for the ceramic teacup, cradling it in her hands. It was the same, every time. No one ever gave her a chance.

“—to remain untrained,” he finished with deep emphasis, straightening the hem of his threadbare, sleeveless *jinbei*-like shirt and sitting up straighter as her eyes shot up to him.

Her lips parted as she tried to speak, taken aback. “You—Are you—Do you mean—”

“Gen!” Nagisa smacked his shoulder, teeth clenched as her lips parted in a snarl.

He rubbed at the spot she hit, frowning back with his own sneer. “What? She clearly wants to learn. At her age, she should already be proficient beyond basics.”

“Her father—her clan’s *leader*—forbade it. I cannot lead her astray from his wishes.”

“She’s already done a fine job of that herself.”

“Am I hearing right?” she cut in, teacup frozen in her hands, eyes darting between them. But her words went unheard in their argument.

“There will be consequences.”

“As if I’ve ever cared.”
“Her chakra—”

“Is remarkable. I’ve never seen the Wood Release before.”

“—is volatile! She’s impulsive and—”

“Promising! Brimming with potential. Did you see what she did to my foot?” He unfolded his legs and held up the foot that had since been wrapped, but still stained through the bandages—waved it in his mother’s face so she couldn’t ignore it until she shoved it away and clicked her tongue. “She has a warrior’s spirit,” he continued. “A rough one in dire need of polishing.”

Nagisa buried her face in her hands. “Genshiro, you fool bastard. Perish the thought. You are well aware of what happened—”

“Mother!” He cut in sharply.

She didn’t seem to hear.

“What if it’s you this time—”

“Nagisa-sensei,” Mitsuba cut in between them, firmly, setting down the teacup with a resounding clink. “You act like I don’t already teach myself what no one else will. I know I’m not strong enough to fight those Uchiha as I am now. I know. But I’m never going to stop. So, if you’re saying what I’m hearing, then… Please train me, Genshiro-san.”

Her hands remained on the floor as she bent forward, until her forehead bumped the floor. Back arced downward—just like Mariko had taught her, but mostly for apology and not heartfelt plea.

Above her, both shinobi held their silence. Moments passed as she awaited their answer—hoped and prayed they’d give her one.

Nagisa clicked her tongue again, but didn’t otherwise speak.

Gen mumbled a bit, shifting where he sat, until a hand lightly touched her back. “Don’t—you don’t have to go that far, feisty girl. Not for me. Please sit up. …Come on, now.”

Slowly, she raised her head, eyebrows drawn together as she met his stare—which he avoided, staring off into a low corner of the room instead.

“I can’t refuse that kind of display.”

Nagisa rose sharply to her feet and stomped away. Their gazes followed her, briefly, before she shut the door firmly behind her. Mitsuba barely paid it any attention as her heart swelled with hope and finally, finally, the promise of progress.

Gen sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes. “…Don’t mind Mother. She can’t stand it when I go against her.”

“You are serious, aren’t you?” she asked, sitting up straight again and clenching her hands into tight fists across her thighs. Every muscle in her body drew taut, eyes wide and unblinking as she watched him. As she awaited his response. “You’ll train me?”

He let his hand fall and folded it together with the other, wringing his fingers for a moment before they stilled. At length, he met her gaze and nodded. Even managed a small smile. “I am. And I will. Only, don’t call me ‘Genshiro.’ Just Gen is fine.”
She couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face. “Thank you. *Gen*-sensei.”

Finally, a proper teacher.

Mitsuba had long since grown used to going without a bath for a couple more days than she’d prefer during the times she’d been injured or escaping. But Nagisa insisted—dragged her to the bath, actually, and scrubbed her down to wash away any lingering poison particles that might have remained on her skin. Washed her hair, too—then braided it.

She had a feeling the poison removal was only an excuse to mother her, just a little, because she didn’t speak a word the entire time and only coddled her. Even dressed her up in a clean kimono, soft green as fresh spring leaves. Maybe to tempt her back to the soft life of being looked after and cared for. Maybe giving her a few final moments to remain a child.

With only a bit of regret, she unwound the long plait, watching her reflection in an empty pond as she separated and smoothed out each strand with her fingers.

It was far too long—always tripped her up, somehow. Branches snagged it. Fists yanked it. When it was loose, it cut across her eyes and damn near blinded her.

Her sight didn’t need to suffer any more.

The kunai sitting on the ground at her side twinkled in the sunlight—she’d lost the old one in the fight, and Nagisa wouldn’t let her near her own stash (and she was a little hesitant to even ask), but *Gen* had been more than willing to lend her one of his.

Speaking of, he sat nearby, less than an arm’s length away, with eyes closed and legs crossed, hands folded neatly in his lap as he held his head straight and breathed evenly. Meditating. Biding his time until she was ready to discuss how far along she was in terms of training, what she knew, what she wanted to do, and who’d taught her before.

She watched his reflection for a quiet moment as the wind caught a strand from his long ponytail and blew across his face—and blinked as one of his eyes slid open.

He’d offered to help cut her hair when she’d made her intent clear, but when she refused he settled for just sitting by and watching her do a shitty job of it.

They held the stare for a few moments before he sighed and opened both eyes, turning to watch her as she divided her hair into roughly four sections. “Feisty girl,” he began, “did you know you are just terrible at lying?”

“I *do* have a name.” She picked up the kunai and watched its blade in her peripherals, lining it up against one of the sections and squinting a bit.

“Oh, Tsu?”

“No, *Mitsuba.*” With each stressed syllable, she hacked away at the long strips of dark brown hair until they fell just below her chin in an uneven bob. Just a few inches shorter, and it’d look exactly like Hashirama’s bowl cut.
She had the straight-cut bangs already—she’d have to be careful.

“Or Mitsu. What am I lying about?”

Gen set his chin on his palm and hummed in thought, choosing his words carefully. “I didn’t want to humiliate you in front of Mother, or risk bringing it up because you do have quite the temper. But... You don’t strike me as the impulsive type who just pursues any Uchiha in sight. Senju or not. So, humor me as your new teacher. Tell me the truth?”

She closed her eyes as strands of hair fluttered and dropped down like fine gossamer strings across the dirt. So thick when clumped together on her head, yet so thin when cut off and falling away. There was more hair than she’d expected—it’d grown out since Kanae died and hadn’t been cut once since then.

Again, Gen hummed. Leaned back and stretched his neck, staring skyward.

“…Alright. I’ll tell you a truth. You can reciprocate after.” He waited a beat, for a reply, perhaps. One that didn’t come, that left a space of awkward silence until he spoke again. “Uchiha Makiko is…was…my lover.”

The kunai froze.

“She came to Godō-san’s ryokan when she was still pregnant. We always knew who she was, but the old man has a big heart—he does not discriminate against those seeking shelter. But, well, you should be aware of my role. I keep constant watch from the outside, with little time to socialize and form bonds with the residents. My job is to protect, not mingle. So, she and I met in secret. She always had the best stories to tell—and such sharp wit. I fell in love with her before I’d even realized… But she loved Haruhiko more, as her child, and I accepted that. She devoted all of her time to him, up until a short time ago, when she confessed and returned my feelings… It was brief, but the most cherished time of my life. It should have been longer.

“I’ll never forgive myself for falling to a genjutsu—if only I’d been a little sooner… No, more than that, I’ll never forgive those two Uchiha for robbing me of that precious time, and I won’t rest until they’re dead. Until Haruhiko is returned safe. So, I know the face of revenge. You’ve seen those men before. It burns in your eyes. In your actions. I don’t have a sensory ability like my mother, but I am certain it’s in your chakra as well.”

“Why does everyone say that?” she sighed, pulling the next strip of hair from behind her head and matching it up with the new length.

“Everyone’s lost something…"

Gen didn’t speak again after that. She continued cutting, while he continued staring up at the sky, at the rare few puffs of clouds drifting past.

With a swift stroke, the final strands fell. Mitsuba lowered the kunai and ran a hand through her shortened hair, lingering on the shining white streak that she couldn’t cover no matter how short she cropped it, as permanent as the first strand of old-person hair that lost all pigment and kept growing back white as snow no matter how many times she yanked it out.

For an instant, as her eyes locked with her reflection’s, it wasn’t her face staring back.

She shut her eyes against that tearful smile and took a deep breath. Didn’t speak again until she dropped the kunai at her side and set her hands on her thighs, fingers curling into fabric, eyes still closed against everything.
No matter how hard she closed them, the memory would never disappear.

“I’ll tell you, Gen-sensei. It’s only for you to know. Only you,” she stressed, turning to fix him with a rigid stare. “My brother…”

Her voice caught. Snagged in her throat as she swallowed down a lump that felt solid and unforgivable as a rock.

“The one I mentioned—Kawarama? He did die, but he isn’t the one I intend to avenge. I…had a twin. Itama. Those two bastards murdered him right in front of me. Because he protected me—he was defenseless. It wasn’t even a battle, but they—” Tears burned in her eyes, unbidden, and she blinked them away before they fell. “Kote. Yama. I know their faces, and their names. I’ll kill them both.”

A small, melancholy smile pulled at his lips. “Then we have a common goal.”

Somehow, she managed to hold back the tears. She brushed a hand across her face and paused—felt the full weight of the frown drawing her skin taut. Her fingers prodded at the corners of her mouth, lifting it up into a smile.

Just a bit, she’d let that mask slip.

Lost herself to her anger and lost sight of the world around her. What Touka had taught her.

When she drew her fingers away, the smile remained, just as forlorn as his. “That we do. Don’t hate me if I reach it first, Gen-sensei.”

He held her gaze and his silence for a long moment before nodding reverently. “Likewise, feisty girl.”

This time, she didn’t correct him.

The Amane had been a clan, once. Quite recently, in fact, when Gen was just a child, still toting wooden kunai and shuriken and struggling to understand the way chakra worked.

By the time he turned three, it, including his father and sister, had been wiped out by enemy clans—not the Uchiha, or Senju, though they’d had brushes with both, as all groups did—and Nagisa carried the clan name on her shoulders with her son at her side ever since in hopes that one day it would thrive again.

That was seventeen years ago.

Funny—Mitsuba had assumed Gen was older by his weathered appearance, but stress had a vicious way of aging people beyond their years. The white hair didn’t help, either. Sometimes it was hard to look away from it because its length so resembled Kanae’s, when she’d worn it loose and let her brush it through with clumsy, chubby fingers. But it wasn’t nearly as pretty. Hers had glittered like crystals, like fresh snow, and his and Nagisa’s was dry and flat, like bleached straw.

…Even so, would a grown man get offended if a little girl asked to brush his hair?

“You told me you’d had throwing lessons. I am only counting three
out of seven attempts at the moment.” Gen clapped his hands to gain her attention and pointed toward the trees, expression strained and crestfallen in disappointment.

Mitsuba looked away and squinted at the hanging targets in the distance, watching the kunai she’d just slung bounce off of the edge and topple to the ground, piercing dirt. Three of eight, now.

“You haven’t yet mastered blind throwing,” came a sarcastic barb. Then, softer, “No, to be honest, I’ve been meaning to ask. Your eye…”

His voice trailed off as he held out another kunai and paused, drawing it back and observing the scar that traced an unfaded diagonal arc from the right-center of her forehead to the top edge of her left cheekbone, straight across her eyelid. Not easily missed—but with her hair framing her face, now, it was harder to spot right away.

She covered it with her hand. “I can see out of it. That’s not the problem. I mean, sure, things are a little fuzzy around the edges sometimes, but—”

“Fuzzy? How fuzzy?”

“Well…”

He idly returned the kunai to the holster straps on his left leg and fished around in his shirt for something. After a moment, he pulled out a tightly-wrapped scroll. He picked at the edge until it unstuck itself and unrolled it a few inches so the sunlight caught it and revealed a number of written lines on the other side.

“Can you read any of this?” With pursed lips, he turned it her way, eyebrows raised high.

She stepped forward—

“Nope—stand right there. Not one step.”

Briefly, she squinted at the inky scribbles, catching onto a few of the bolder strokes, but not every single character. “Some of… Wait a second. You’re testing my eyesight? It’s fine. I mean, things just blur sometimes when they’re too far away, don’t they? Isn’t that natural? Like, part of growing up?” She pursed her lips, too, tilting her head and trying to catch the writing from another, better angle.

She wasn’t a stranger to bad eyesight. She’d worn glasses and sometimes contacts, once. But even then, she hadn’t had perfect, crisp clarity of vision, whether it was because of annoying astigmatism or dirty lenses or—like she’d said—aging. And maybe lack of regular optometrist appointments. She couldn’t even remember what it’d been like to grow up as a child with poor vision because she’d worn glasses from a young age. There was nothing to really compare the experience to, but…

“Right?” she prompted again as he grimaced and re-rolled the scroll, eyebrows drawing together in thought.

“Tsu… You went after two Uchiha, absolute paragons of vision, with imperfect eyesight. What exactly am I supposed to say here?”


“Humor me. Here,” he held up a hand, five fingers splayed. “How many fingers?”
“Five. I can see that, Gen-sensei.”

He folded them into a fist and skipped back a few steps. Held up a few fingers again. “How many now?”

“Three.”

Again, he moved back. Held up his hand.

“Now?”

“I—are you flipping me the bird?”

“No, Tsu. Mitsu. Just answer.”

She sighed. “…Two?”

A little further.

“How about here?”

“Um…Five?”

“All a blur, now?” He dropped his hand and looked to the ground, dragging his foot across it in a straight line, marking the dirt less than twenty feet from where she stood. “Then this,” he tapped his foot on the line, “is the limit of your current visual range. At least until we can find proper glasses for you. Not to mention you have some level of sensory ability to compensate. We will have to make the most of it.”

“Glasses?”

“That’s right. I’ll ask Mother and the head priest if there is a specialist doctor nearby.”

“Glasses,” she repeated, nose crinkling. Of all the things that carried over into this world, it just had to be her poor eyesight. None of her brothers ever complained about that kind of thing—not counting Tobirama. Sunlight had irritated him at times when he was younger, but it was a separate issue rooted in what she assumed to be albinism. Kanae had been the same.

She’d taken her ability to see without them for a few, short years for granted. But if there was one thing she knew, it was that her vision wouldn’t get any better if she left it. Only worse.

…and the glasses of this era would be nothing less than clunky. Ugh.

“Don’t make that face. It’s for your own good. It’s my job as your teacher to look after you regarding these things.” He breathed a sigh. “Well, that aside, move closer to the targets and try again. I expect a perfect score when you can actually see them.”

Eight out of eight. Just as he’d asked.

But, really, he was only evaluating her on the basics. The baby steps. With all of what she’d learned, she could graduate from a ninja academy without a hitch.

As far as combat went, however…

Gen was not a weapons expert. He’d made it clear as soon as she’d mentioned the katana and sprouted a flimsy bokuto from the earth. He could only help as a sparring partner, in that respect.
Couldn’t advance her skill with it.

His forte was closer to what she’d known traditional ninja to be—stealth. Sneaking in the shadows. Ambushing and infiltrating. Along with a flair for explosive tags.

…In other words, keeping out of sight. Exactly what she’d always tried to do.

Only, this time she was able to accomplish it freely out in the open. Quite the oxymoron.

“Bastard said I had a warrior’s spirit, yet here I am hiding in the leaves,” Mitsuba hissed to herself, trying to not squirm as the greenery of the bush she hid beneath poked and scratched at her exposed skin. Gen had been kind enough to provide a training uniform for her that consisted of grey pants and a sleeveless, dark green kimono that were still a bit loose, but nothing that she couldn’t fix with a good needle and thread. The pants, though, she kept long—to grow into—and wrapped with bandages to keep them tied tight to her lower legs.

But, Gen had said, camouflage was a valuable skill for someone such as herself—she was a child of nature, after all. She should get to know it every way she could, and use every bit of it to her advantage with her eyesight and her small stature working against her.

…If she combined that with controlling her chakra, levelling it out to blend in with nature while hiding, she could create the illusion she wasn’t there at all.

Perfect for—

A hand reached into the shrubbery and yanked her out in a flurry of leaves as she bit back a yelp.

“If I’m going to help out, the least you could do is put into practice what I’ve taught you, Mitsu-chan.”

—sneak attacks…

Mitsuba thrashed as Nagisa held onto the back of her obi, holding her so high her feet dangled and kicked through air. Whatever qualms she’d had with the training issue had receded and she’d volunteered to oversee Gen’s mentoring while still implementing her sensory skills to help Mitsuba hone her own.

Two teachers for the price of one—she really couldn’t complain.

“What? I was fully focused! How did you—”

“I heard you grumbling to yourself. It is a bad habit you can’t seem to shake no matter how many times I tell you.”

The hand holding tight to the fabric released, suddenly, and Mitsuba dropped onto her stomach with a fwump. “Ow—a little warning next time would be lovely.”

“Your reflexes need work.”

“Good point.”

“Now, try again. I’ll count to ten.”

Mitsuba pushed away from the ground with a nod while Nagisa’s counting sounded behind her. She dove back into the brush, seeking shelter and also reaching for Gen’s chakra at the same time.
He was her main target—to land a perfect sneak attack on while he wandered around the forest. The tricky part of it all was avoiding Nagisa’s capture while leveling her chakra and gathering it for a technique simultaneously.

Neither made it easy.

Gen, because he never stayed in the same place for long and escaped her sensory radius frequently, and Nagisa because she took advantage of even the slightest chakra slip-up—or accidental sound that gave her away even when she was nowhere near her son.

Creeping and crawling was not her preferred method, but…there was a certain comfort in sticking to the shadows and close to the cool earth that she couldn’t deny. Maybe wanting to barrel forward with a sword had been wrong—at her level, it was the worst possible choice. There were other ways to fight, after all. Hiding, growing in her own way, and hitting her enemies where they’d never see her coming.

…They were Uchiha, after all. They’d always see her coming if she didn’t think about her approach.

She regulated her chakra, honed it down to a fine frequency close to that she felt through the soil, through the leaves, the trees—and locked on to the bull-like rush of Gen’s signature, loitering in the nearby clearing between the crook of two trees. One foot tapping, impatient. She couldn’t see him physically, yet, but could picture him crossing his arms while scanning his surroundings for telltale signs of her presence.

If she reached out to the leaves and branches and brittle twigs just right, she could still them with an invisible hand and keep them silent as she brushed past them. As she scaled a tree trunk and crept toward the end of the lowest branch, just above his head—

—and dropped down on his shoulders, holding a kunai to his throat.

He held up his hands in surrender the instant she landed and tilted his head to look back and meet her eye, but the grin on his face didn’t provide much assurance.

“Wait—dammit!” Mitsuba’s eyes widened as Gen vanished in a poof of smoke and she sank through air.

Clone decoy.

This time she made use of her reflexes and landed on her feet, eyeing her surroundings with keen eyes—he wasn’t far. Clones didn’t have chakra signals, so that meant he had to be…

The sharp point of a kunai tapped at the back of her collar as a hum sounded behind her. Just as she’d set her hands together in a snake seal.

“Not bad, but you’re still a bit naïve, Mitsu. Still attacking blindly.”

“So are you. Did you look at your feet?”

“My what—?” He looked down, and as soon as he moved the kunai away, she turned around.

Silent roots had sprouted from the earth and wound around the tops of his feet and up his ankles like ropes, holding him in place. Ready to yank him underground at a moment’s notice, perhaps not to fully entomb, but to trap him and throw him off his attack.
Gen hummed low as a grin spread across Mitsuba’s face. “Well done. You certainly are improving. How was her chakra control?” he asked, throwing a glance toward the copse of trees to their right, which rustled as Nagisa shifted them aside and made her way through.

She smiled. “Better. Though I did catch onto your presence at the end. Try it five more times, successfully, and I do believe we can call that improvement, Mitsu-chan.”

Five more times became ten, then twenty and more as the days passed and bled into weeks into months and into her eleventh birthday. Then past it.

Gen and Nagisa created a steady training regimen for her, from stealth tracking to meditation to ranged attacks and traps to basic ninjutsu and taijutsu for good measure, with five days of seven filled with a bit of each lesson between breakfast, lunch and dinner. On the sixth day, they helped the head priest and shrine maidens with various chores around the complex and the garden to keep it fresh and replenished, especially throughout the cold season, and on the last day of the week they rested. They rested. Not Mitsuba. She spent those days alone in the forest, just beyond the shrine’s sacred grove, tapping into the Wood Release and determining its limits. Dropping trees—and catching them with nets weaved from roots before they crashed to the ground. Then re-rooting them and repeating. Extending her range of awareness through the natural chakra network to make up for where she couldn’t see—they hadn’t had luck locating a pair of glasses for her.

When the new year came, news of a nearby conflict reached the shrine.

The name Senju couldn’t go ignored.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

Well. Life has been kicking my ass. I thought about dropping this story a few times, but, really. Who am I kidding? I’m here forever.

MANY MANY MANY thanks to everyone who’s reading and commenting/kudos-ing/bookmarking, y’all keep me going, each time I see the stats I remember y’all are out there, and without you this story would just sit on my hard drive without ever seeing the light of day. Hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Again.”

Mitsuba’s back hit the ground and she tried to keep from wheezing as the breath left her body.

Despite Gen’s slim stature and claim that he was best at stealth and tailing, he was remarkably skilled in hand-to-hand techniques. On good days, she could keep up with him, but on not-so-good days…

“Again,” he said, avoiding her lunge with a single, nimble step and kicking her over with a nudge as she lost her balance. “You’re distracted today, Mitsu. I’m a little disappointed you aren’t taking this seriously.”

She hit the ground again, but rolled into a crouch and recovered a short distance away, running a hand across her sweaty forehead and shoving her bangs aside. “No, really? How could you tell? It’s certainly not because my clan is close by.”

“I don’t think it’s your clan you’re concerned about at all right now. There aren’t any Uchiha around here. Not anymore. It’s another clan they’re disputing with—the Ihara. A local clan of elitists who never help the lower folk. Only the rich. So put aside those thoughts of revenge and focus on improving for your own sake right now.”

Gen could read her like an open book—again, she slipped up. But she hadn’t really tried to hide her irritation.

“Oh,” he said, clapping his hands and turning his head to her, “time for a short break. Come sit down and have a snack.”

She sighed. “You sound like a babysitter.”

“And babysitting you is one tough job, Mitsu. I’ve got my hands full.”

“Naturally. I won’t let anyone off easy. Least of all you, Gen-sensei. I’m still pissed about when you let me fall right into an ant bed.”

“Oh, didn’t you know it was there?”

“I didn’t! Now hundreds of tiny ants are dead for no reason. And I still think some are in my
“Well just grow a plant that repels them and wear it around your neck. Stuff it in your clothes. Speaking of growing plants, Mitsu, would you be so kind as to provide some tomatoes for this snack?” He’d already turned away to rummage through his bag for the food, so he missed the stink eye she aimed his way.

“I guess.” With an exaggerated sigh, she turned away and pressed both hands to the ground, searching for wild tomato plants nearby—or any Nightshade variety that was related closely enough to convince its genes to mutate and produce something edible. Wild potatoes and their fruits, for instance, could be de-toxified and altered through the Wood Release to produce more-or-less genuine tomatoes from their round, inedible vine fruits.

…Which she’d learned fully through trial and error and a bit of dangerous taste-testing Nagisa hadn’t been entirely pleased with. But along with that, some of the shrine maidens were quite knowledgeable about botany and horticulture and helped her experiment by suggesting related species of plant families and genera to try and sprout an edible target species from. The head priest had wonderfully detailed, illustrated records, too.

It sounded bizarre when she tried to explain it to anyone who wasn’t familiar with the Wood Release and its ability to sprout branches and trees from one’s own body through chakra, among other things, and even she didn’t understand the ability fully or know how to produce things from mere chakra, but if it worked…it worked. Damn whatever science she’d ever known in her past life. Who needed human anatomy and biology lessons when the world’s life force came from an extraterrestrial deity’s fruit theft that allowed superhuman abilities? Chakra was one hell of a thing.

Maybe Hashirama could explain it. And maybe give her pointers on which hand seals worked the best with Wood Release. Snake was a definite control trigger—dragon and dog and sometimes tiger helped steer her intent—kept it from flowing wild. Nagisa had explained it when she’d first taught her the twelve seals; that she had to think of her chakra as a constant flowing river trickling down a series of bamboo pipes. Adding more or taking some away directed the flow and changed its direction—controlled it. Amplified it. Sharpened it. It was easier, knowing which seals it took to produce which techniques, but… Here, now, she had to listen to her instincts. Listen to her chakra.

A wild potato plant grew just beyond the shrubs. Not a sweet potato root—the brown, round tuber kind, spread from a farming area. Damaged by the recent frost, but only above ground. The root remained underneath, thriving.

She brought her hands up into the snake seal, fingers folded, chakra beckoning the root forward, closer to her. Her hands flattened, then, one pressed over her fist into the dog seal as she let her chakra seep into the root, urging it to grow—to push through the soil and bloom in front of her. Then, thumbs and forefingers stretching up for the tiger seal convinced it to produce little round, edible red fruits barely big enough to fit in her palm, the size of cherry tomatoes. Ten total—five for each of them in an even split. But she wasn’t fond of tomatoes, so it was more of an eight-two split. Just because this life had cured her allergy of them it didn’t mean she wanted to eat them.

But she did test one, just to make sure it tasted right. Just to make sure…

“Here,” she said, dropping the tomatoes into Gen’s awaiting hands as he smiled from damn near ear to ear, showing a dimple in one cheek.

Ah. Almost like Kawarama’s.

“I never tire of that skill. Truly amazing,” he hummed, popping a tiny tomato into his mouth and
chewing extremely impolitely. A bad habit—Nagisa never let either of them chew with their mouths open. He was a rebel at heart.

Mitsuba rolled her eyes and set her hands on her hips. “Well, where’s the rest of the snack?”

“Oh, that was it. Just the tomatoes.”

“…You ate it while I had my back turned, didn’t you?”

“My hunger is a formidable foe.”

“Gen-sensei!”

“Only teasing. Here. A rice ball sprinkled with those little seeds you like.” He held out the nori-wrapped treat with an ever-present smile.

She couldn’t help but smile back. And not just because of her favorite food. Plain, sure—but the sesame seeds were just so crunchy…

“If it didn’t have the seeds, I know you would have eaten it. Glutton.”

His smile waned as she plopped down on the ground cross-legged and nibbled on the rice ball, eyes trained on him. They’d spent half the morning brushing up on taijutsu and now that her body was still, she felt the little aches and pains that came from a hard day’s work. But Gen didn’t even look remotely tired. At least, not until he finished his final tomato and then flopped back onto the grass, arms outstretched as he looked toward the cloudy sky.

No…he was just too well-trained to let it show.

“…Mitsu,” he began, lifting one arm and pointing skyward to trace one of the obscure shapes in the clouds, “why don’t you become a medic? I’ve seen how good you are with basic emergency care and herbal remedies. With access to so many plants, if you put your focus toward something valuable like that, Mother could even teach you about specific poisons and their antidotes and—”

“Is what I’m doing now not valuable?”

His arm fell.

Appetite dead and gone, Mitsuba set aside the half-eaten rice ball and crossed her arms, unable to catch Gen’s eyes but keeping a narrow gaze trained on him nonetheless.

“…I don’t care if it doesn’t have value.” She spoke when he kept quiet for too long, voice level. “I couldn’t become a medic-nin when I have things like bloody, violent revenge on my mind, Gen-sensei. It would do those in need a disservice. Just…look what happened to Haruhiko. If I hadn’t been so focused on those Uchiha, if I’d known he was the one who’d been taken—no, if I’d had proper priorities, I would have gone after any child and the woman who was in danger. Like you and Nagisa-sensei did. I don’t have the right personality for a healer. I…” She couldn’t add anything else to that, and shrugged as her words trailed off into nothing.

“The more I get to know you, Mitsuba, the less you seem like someone who kills. You care. You come from nature and return to it what it has given to you. You’d spare an insect sooner than squash it.” His voice had grown much gentler, quiet, as if afraid of how she’d react. Maybe fearing she wouldn’t listen at all.

She watched him carefully a moment as he folded his hands across his stomach, fingers fidgeting.
“Why does it have to be separate? I can do both.”

“…I am only saying that you don’t have to set revenge as your goal. There are so many more things… And while I did encourage it before, the more I consider it, the less I feel I was right to accept your revenge on the Uchiha. You are only a child,” he emphasized.

But, really, did he know that in her eyes he was more a child than she was?

“A child shouldn’t have that burden on their shoulders because revenge comes with a heavy price. Rarely do those who seek it come away alive and unscathed. If your life ended at that, then—”

“It’s what I want to do. It’s all I have. If I let it go, I could never face my brothers. I could never go back to my clan.”

“The clan that abandoned you?”

Painful words, spoken so lightly.

A hot slash of anger struck her in the chest, catching her off-guard. Stoked her temper—but she maintained control and blinked hard, taking a deep breath. “…You heard Nagisa-sensei’s and my conversation.” She didn’t ask. She stated it as fact. And not even a recent one—a week ago, she’d approached Nagisa, asking if anyone had sent her a letter. A message. A note. Anything…even a single word. She’d been away from her family for over a year, after all, and never once received correspondence since her departure. Hadn’t even been able to say goodbye. Hadn’t even been able to see Tobirama, after that horrible incident…

It wasn’t as if she expected anything from Butsuma (no, never), but Hashirama, at least? Touka? Souma? Kiku? Did they know where she’d gone? Did they miss her?

…Did Butsuma forbid communication?

The sweat prickling her skin was out of place in the cool weather.

A shaky smile rose to her lips. “Don’t be ridiculous. They didn’t abandon me. They can’t. Not with this Kekkei Genkai. Butsu—my father sent me here to…protect me,” she concluded. Trying to convince herself. Never letting the smile falter even when painful possible-truths and doubt chipped away at her resolve.

Even as she spoke the words and tried to make them real, to believe them, she didn’t.

…Half the ryokan had burned down. The smoke could be seen for miles. The nearest town and the nearest temple had seen it—sent aid and helped however they could—and there’s no doubt Mariko would have reported the accident to her father.

Mariko also knew where she’d gone with Gen and Nagisa, so if anyone had come by to check on her…especially when they were stationed so close…

She was far too old to live in denial.

“I accepted it the day my father sent me away, Gen-sensei. That he would never come for me. That there was little chance anyone else would. Not for a long while. Truth be told, I’m happier staying away. But…returning to my clan gives me the best chance of meeting and killing those two Uchiha. And…my oldest brother. I’d like his help with the Wood Release. So I have to go back. Better sooner than later.”
And I have to apologize to Tobirama. Make things right.

“If no one comes for you, you go to them?” Gen said under his breath, pressing both hands over his face and dragging them up toward his hairline. He breathed a sigh. “What will you do if your father turns you away?”

“I won’t give him the option. I’ll become so valuable that he can’t turn me away again.”

He fell silent for a lengthy moment.

“You are certainly on your way there. If not in skill, then in stubbornness.”

“If there’s one thing I inherited from him, it’s definitely the stubbornness.”

“Mitsu.” Gen took a moment to sit up and push his hair over his shoulder and away from his face. “I didn’t mean to antagonize you. You did well to keep your temper even when I spoke such awful words. But…no matter the case… If you truly wish to return to your clan, I won’t stop you.”

“Thank y—”

“I will just have to go along with you.” His smile returned.

“What?”

“You go, I follow. After hearing your words, what kind of teacher would I be if I let you go alone? What kind of friend? I’ve already taught you as much as I can. But I still have this to offer.”

“Gen-sensei…”

“And just imagine the trouble you would get into without your babysitter around.”

She flung her last tomato at him—which he caught between his teeth with a grin.

It was all well and good that she’d gained an ally.

But convincing Nagisa to accept their choice was a higher hurdle.

“No.”

Her answer didn’t surprise either of them. Not really.

“Just because your clan is near it does not mean you should go and meet them. Mitsu-chan, if your father heard, he would—”

“Then my father isn’t with the group?”

“…No. As far as I know, he’s at an encampment to the west. But that is far from the point. What you are saying is simply mindless, and, that aside, the inn has been rebuilt and all guests are in the midst of returning. We will return to them by the end of the week. They need us.”

Gen’s eyes wandered to the far corner of the small sitting room as she said this. If not to avoid her pleading stare, then to hide the guilt they pried out of him.
Mitsuba watched him from the corner of her eye before blinking hard and breathing a sigh. “They need you, Nagisa-sensei. I can’t stay. I think you knew that the day I arrived.” Slowly, she raised her gaze to Nagisa, and held her head high, conveying every bit of Senju in her that she could.

“Like a plant in a pot too small for it to grow,” she said under her breath, crossing her arms tight and refusing to meet those stubborn eyes. “Of course I know. But—what you are asking is… it is simply too much. And far too soon.”

Mitsuba kept her expression passive. “As much as I appreciate your dedication to train me since we met, Nagisa-sensei, may I remind you that you are not my guardian? I’m only asking as a courtesy. Gen-sensei and I will leave regardless.”

“Gen?” She said, voice rising sharply as her eyes darted to him. “You intend to leave as well? What is the meaning of this? Do you forget where you stand? What your responsibilities are? I knew this wouldn’t end well—but I did not think you were foolish enough to follow along. Damn me for helping and feeding both of your rash intents.”

“Mother,” he tried to soothe, holding up both hands in a placating manner and hunching his shoulders sheepishly. “Please do not overreact. This is—”

“And may I remind you I did warn you to not get involved with Makiko? With an Uchiha? If only you’d have listened. If only you ever listen…”

“There’s no point bringing that up. It’s too late,” Mitsuba intervened. Only because Gen’s expression crumpled, just slightly, when she brought up his dead lover. This situation had become tangled with a personal, family matter, but she couldn’t just stand by and watch them fling awful words at each other when she was the one who’d brought it to this.

Even so, Nagisa held up a hand to silence her, indicating this was family business now.

Holding back a sigh, Mitsuba turned her head away and focused on the fire pit burning at their side, casting the room in warmth and fending off the chill. It wasn’t nearly as warm as it should be, not with Nagisa’s chilled stare freezing them through. Even the tatami mats were somehow affected, cold beneath her legs.

“If we are reminding each other of important things, then please remember I am a grown man capable of making my own decisions, Mother. Makiko. Training Mitsuba. Leaving.” Gen’s determined stare matched his mother’s in its frigid, unyielding nature. “…I am grateful for all that you have done for me. Please don’t mistake my independence for ingratitude. But…we both knew a day would come where I would have to follow my own path. Just as you knew Mitsuba would not remain in your care forever.”

Nagisa exhaled and let her shoulders slump and she shook her head, putting a hand to her forehead. “You both misunderstand what kind of world this is. Are you prepared for war? Do you even understand the magnitude of that word? I taught you what I could as a shinobi to protect the family we’ve gained. Not to throw your life away like it means nothing. Why do you think I never sent you away to fight with the other clans, Gen?”

“…Because we are all that’s left of the Amane. Isn’t that it?”

Nagisa thumped her fist against the floor. “To hell with the clan. I kept you at my side to keep you alive!”

The conversation had struck Mitsuba as familiar from the start—now she recognized why. Nagisa,
while her actions were not the same, held the same reasoning as Kanae.

She was a mother who cared for her child above all else. A mother who had done all she could to protect her son, resisting society.

Yet the children they had tried to protect had their own goals, their own desires, and when those didn’t match up with the parents’, conflict was only natural until one side or the other got their way.

And children grew constantly. Changed, constantly.

It was only natural that they fought harder.

“Other clans sent their sons to battle,” she continued. “Children, too young to know what they are fighting for, are still sent to slaughter other children for causes their parents are too bullheaded to resolve with dignity. They rush in to blood payment and see killing as their only option. Just like the revenge you seek—it feeds a cycle that we in turn are fed into. Devoured. I have seen it. I have lived it. In my youth and the day our clan fell. And now you tell me you intend to head straight into that destruction?”

“Maybe it is where I was meant to be.”

Nagisa raised her hand and rose on her knees in a half-lunge in his direction before stopping. Her gnashing teeth trembled as she curled her shaking hand into a fist before letting it fall and embracing Gen instead, pulling him close.

“Please reconsider, Gen. For me. Please.”

“…Even when we stay in one place, Mother, we are not safe. We’ve seen that. If not with the Uchiha’s attack, then with bandits and thieves. Danger will always surround us. Death lurks around every corner. I could stay at the inn forever and still die if I lose focus for one moment and an awaiting enemy strikes. But…as Mitsuba said… She intends to leave with or without your permission. With or without me, should I change my mind. But I will not. I refuse to stay behind again. I would rather die following my heart than die in the place my heart can no longer call home.”

Again? Mitsuba wondered, but did not voice aloud, as mother and son embraced—as their hearts fought a battle where there was no right or wrong, no win or loss. She watched them from the corner of her eye, lips pursed tight to hold back from interrupting their argument. Perhaps if she’d spoken to Kanae more on the matter, before…tried harder to convince her…begged, even…then things would have turned out far different.

Perhaps she’d be fighting at her brothers’ sides, now. All four of them.

At length, Nagisa broke the embrace and held Gen by the shoulders, watching him with tears in her eyes. This time, he held the gaze, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

He’d made his choice.

Nagisa’s hands slipped away from his shoulders as she sat back on her knees and sighed deeply, looking to Mitsuba and then back to Gen.

“You are as unyielding as I am. You’ve inherited the worst parts of me. But…Genshiro, I will not wait for you. I will not worry over you in your absence. I will not—cannot bury you, should it come to that.” She closed her eyes. “This is the last time I will see you. Do not return here. Do not
Mitsuba’s breath caught in a hot rush. *Instant* disownment? Not even Butsuma had gone so far. “You can’t—”

Gen held up a hand to silence her, this time.

“Yes, Mother. I understand.”

“I have nothing more to discuss. You are both free to leave. Free to deal with the consequences you bring upon yourselves.”

Nagisa closed her eyes and sat with her hands folded firmly in her lap as they both rose to their feet and shuffled to the door, uncertain of whether there had been a better way to handle the situation.

It was too late, now.

Gen was silent as he closed the door behind them, but Nagisa’s quiet words filtered through nonetheless.

“…Your father would be proud, Gen.”

Amane Genshiro, while he was a patient and helpful teacher, and a loyal friend, was not a reliable adult.

“What do you mean we’re lost?” Mitsuba asked from her position on a high tree branch, squinting through the leaves and trying to spot something familiar aside from her teacher’s bright white hair below. Wound up into a bun at the back of his head—it turned out some grown men did *not* mind little girls asking if they could brush and do up their hair.

Well, with her vision the way it was, she couldn’t see much aside from a few green and yellow and brown-grey blurs. All trees. Trees, trees, trees. And more trees. “The clan’s camp isn’t supposed to be *that* far away, Gen-sensei. And you’ve been doing this shinobi thing longer than me. So you can’t just tell me we’re *lost.*”

Gen’s voice carried up through the leafy canopy. “I don’t know what else to say, Mitsu. I can’t navigate.”

They’d barely been traveling half a day. How was it possible to get so inexplicably lost in only a few hours?

If they knew of a landmark in the right direction, she could use her sensory network to find the way, but…

“The majority of my life was spent in one place. Mother never thought it necessary to teach me and I never found it interesting enough to study. Now, I regret that a bit.”

“Just a bit?” she muttered, moving a branch away from her face as she dropped back down to the ground and brushed her clothes off.

“You have leaves in your hair,” he oh-so-helpfully pointed out as he walked to meet her and
stopped at her side, index finger prodding at one. But it wasn’t the kind of help she was looking for.

“They just grow there sometimes.”

His expression turned aghast and he yanked back his hand just before he could pluck one of them out.

“I’m joking.”

Wary, he reached forward and snagged one of the leaves.

“OW! I’m not joking, I’m not joking!”

Gen stuck the leaf back in her hair and slowly turned away, face tinted green. For the way he trembled and slapped a hand to his mouth, she wouldn’t be surprised if he fainted.

“…That was a joke, too. Sorry, Gen-sensei.”

“You’re awful, Mitsu!”

“What, you really believed me?”

“What, you really believed me?”

“Well—! Your situation is…unique…after all. I don’t know what to expect.”

“If I start growing dandelions on my head, you can start worrying.” Mitsuba rolled her eyes and turned away, trying to get a read on their location. Still trees and more trees. Oh! And some shrubs. No plants trampled underfoot, no footprints, no spilled blood…no telltale signs that would give them a direction to pursue.

“…What about a river?” she asked quietly.

“A river?” Gen repeated, putting a hand to his chin in thought. “There is one that runs through the village by the inn. I think it comes down from the mountain over there.” He pointed the same hand over his shoulder, to the peak of a mountain that stuck up through a break in the trees, standing stark against the clear sky. “Why?”

“They’ll need water, won’t they? They’ve been camping around here for quite some time. We can catch a shinobi who comes by for a refill and tail them back to the camp.”

A smile rose to Gen’s face. “Now, tailing is something we can do! And I know the area well enough, where we’re going. There’s no way we can get lost following a river… See, Mitsu? All you need is a little faith.” He nodded, crossing his arms, completely confident in their new plan.

“Or a teacher who can track.”

His face fell. “You could always learn to track, you know.”

She watched him for a moment before looking skyward and just barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes. He was right, but—he didn’t have to know that she thought that.

By the smile on his lips, he already knew. “Well, let’s get going,” he hummed, turning away and taking a few steps.

“Gen-sensei, you said the river’s that way.”
He stopped and smiled at her over his shoulder before fully turning and heading in the opposite direction. “Oh, I know. That was a joke.”

Well, it wasn’t like she didn’t deserve that.

But, honestly, what had she gotten herself into with such a troublesome teacher…?

As they walked, she busied herself pulling leaves out from beneath the hard leather arm guards Gen had given her before they set off—just like his and Nagisa’s. Faded a bit throughout the years, and likely Gen’s from when he was a child, for the way they perfectly fit her forearms, notched with shallow marks and shiny, worn spots from past encounters or training sessions. But still useful.

In fact, her entire wardrobe reflected theirs, now, as if she’d been adopted into their family. From the arm guards, to the sleeveless top, to the pants tucked into bandages wrapped around their shins, she only lacked the fully-white hair. Gen’s outfit was all of a unified grey, though, where hers was all teals and forest greens and—stray leaves. He did wear a navy haori in the cold weather, though. She didn’t mind the chill, but he insisted she at least wear long gloves under her arm guards, and she didn’t put up much of a fight since they looked pretty cool.

In fact, he seemed to have everything they needed gathered together and in order the moment they decided to leave. Like he was more excited about this exodus than she was.

He didn’t only choose to follow her to help her achieve her goal. That much was clear—the fight he’d had with his mother proved there was a more personal element to it all. And not just for Makiko’s revenge and Haruhiko’s return. Because he’d handled their loss with grace and minimal emotional reaction, as if he’d lost before. And not just his clan, when he’d been too young to fully grasp the situation, either.

No, there was something else…

But was it her place to ask?

Hell yes it was, with as nosy and invasive as he could be at times with his observations.

“Gen-sensei,” she began slowly, chewing over her words before speaking them aloud, “why did you really decide to follow me? What did you mean when you told Nagisa-sensei you wouldn’t stay behind again?”

“All due respect, Mitsu, I would prefer to keep my silence on that matter.”

“…Fine.”

If he wasn’t going to speak openly, he wouldn’t speak about it. There was no use wheedling.

Instead, she shared stories of her brothers as they traveled through the trees. Stories of Touka, Kiku and Souma, too. At least, until they reached the river and burrowed down near the bank, keeping to the shady undersides of overgrowth and bushes that grew in clumps at the edge.

Catching a shinobi required silence and vigilance.

And a bit of clever terrain manipulation.

There was quite a bit of distance to cover along the river, after all, even if she and Gen split up and searched in a wider area. But refilling the water supply went hand-in-hand with a bit of forest
foraging, and if Mitsuba relocated a few edible plants in strategic places at the water’s side, then kept track of whether or not they’d been plucked away by hungry hands, she’d know just where to catch their target.

It took a couple of days of watching, waiting, and circling back, but it worked.

A nervous, flighty-looking shinobi had returned to a spot where someone had uprooted a handful of wild onions, laden with the camp’s remaining water canteens that couldn’t be filled on the first trip around. Eyes constantly flitted about his surroundings as he stooped and waited for each one to fill, trading them out rapidly from the bag he held on his back. A second shinobi stood watch nearby—both high on guard.

Mitsuba couldn’t tell whether or not they were Senju since the clan didn’t tend to wear their crest unless out in battle. For all she knew, they were from the other clan. At her side, Gen quietly asked the same thing, but without words. Neither of them spoke aloud. Knew better.

But if it was the other clan, the Senju wouldn’t be far away. Find one, find the other.

The second the two shinobi had completed their task, nodded to each other and took off like rabbits fleeing a wolf, they sprang from cover and pursued.

She reached out with chakra and locked onto their footsteps, never falling too far behind. There wasn’t much of a need to stay out of sight while following, as the two men shot ahead quick enough to avoid most who would ambush them and never once looked back. Even so, she and Gen took precautions and remained a safe distance behind, quieting their own footsteps and keeping the foliage stilled as they moved through the trees like shadows.

If either of the shinobi had been sensors, it would’ve been more difficult. As it was, they were lucky.

The camp wasn’t far.

Far enough from the river to make it hard to find, but not so far out of the way that it could remain hidden from every little thing. That wasn’t really necessary when they were locked in conflict with another clan, after all, and constantly facing each other. And when Uchiha and dōjutsu weren’t involved, there was no need to go out of one’s way to conceal a group’s presence entirely.

…Not that she knew much about the battlefield and its tactics. Only what little she’d picked up from Touka and Souma, and Nagisa, when she’d let it slip.

“Is it a Senju camp?” Gen asked from her side as they crouched in the bushes at the top of a hill that overlooked the site a safe distance away, but still within the edges of her sensory radius.

Senju or not, it wasn’t a large camp.

Only a dozen patchy, beige tents stood huddled, with doused campfires interspersed throughout, familiar by the ashy, burnt smell that drifted away from the earth. A tripwire border surrounded it, weaving between the leaves and tree trunks, but not much else. The two shinobi slipped easily back in with little attention paid to their return. The footsteps of around thirty bodies reverberated through the ground—maybe more, maybe less. It was hard to keep track when they were so close together and so many.

“I can’t tell—you’re the eyes, Gen-sensei. Is anyone armored-up? Do you see the crest?”

“What does it look like again?”
She drew it out in the dirt with her finger, two sets of ‘C’s approaching each other like ripples, with a line struck through, and then another smaller line between the ripples, separating their meeting like a wall.

“No,” Gen said, eyes flicking away from the sketch and narrowing slightly as he scanned the campground. “Nothing like it.”

“Damn. Well, the odds are fifty-fifty. Let’s just run right in.”

“Please don’t joke about that, Mitsu. We—”

She waved a hand to silence him, pulling him back by his shoulder and further into the bushes as a group of half a dozen men moved through the forest and returned to the camp. It wasn’t that the group was strange or troublesome in itself—what they had with them, however, was.

…Or, well, who.

Hag with a chakra signature like sharp pinpricks or not, Mariko was still a person, an old woman, and now she was an enemy clan’s hostage.

Mitsuba clicked her tongue as the shinobi jostled the old woman along, holding her roughly by the upper arm while her bony wrists were tied in front of her by strong ropes.

This camp definitely did not belong to the Senju.

“Is that…?” Gen asked in a hushed voice somewhere above her ear, leaning forward to get a better look at the woman he hadn’t known personally for over half of his life. Had he ever even seen her close up? Lucky him if he hadn’t.

Mitsuba clicked her tongue. “Yes. It’s Mariko. Dammit. Why the hell is she here and not at the inn? Did she—” No, she didn’t even need to ask. Without her return to the inn, there was no reason for the hag to remain there. She’d likely set out to find the clan just as she had, so she could tattle on her to Butsuma and then drag her back to the inn like a victorious hunting dog.

She hated the old woman nearly as much as she hated him.

Would it be so bad if she left her there to fend for herself…?

Ugh.

Ugh.

“We’re moving in closer,” she spat out, disgusted with her own decision, creeping forward through the foliage before Gen could protest. Only close enough to hear, though. Still out of range of the tripwires. The shinobi of this clan spoke loudly, too, so they didn’t have to strain their ears.

In the spaces between the trees and tents, flashes of the shinobi party could be seen, and Mariko’s silver-threaded kimono caught the light like glitter so she was easy to discern among their drab clothing.

As she’d sensed before, there were many. Too many to take on by herself. Perhaps too many for her and Gen to handle, even. She didn’t know. They’d never fought an entire group, before.

Quietly, she asked Gen if they could handle them all, and he replied with a shaky yes. It could be done if they approached it the right way—thought it through, first. This clan was made up mostly
of caravan guards who rarely faced actual battle. They were probably already exhausted from the
conflict with the Senju.

But it could be done. That was all that mattered.

They divvied up the targets between them before Gen broke away, heading toward the far side of
the camp and closer to the tripwire’s most concentrated area of traps. Right where they expected an
intruder to invade.

“Who is this old woman?” came a man’s deep voice, likely the captain of the unit—someone she
couldn’t see quite yet. “Surely not the only whore you could find in the area.”

There wasn’t a shred of mirth in the man’s pompous voice, but the…joke…drew a few
uncomfortable laughs from the group.

Mitsuba strained to get a look at the captain, but he stood behind too many obstacles.

One of the armored men holding Mariko answered. “We caught her sneaking around the forest,
heading to the Senju. Old or not, there’s a chance she’s a spy. She’s—”

“Spy? If I were a spy, I would not so easily be caught. By the likes of you fleas, no less!” A sneer
twisted her old, wrinkled face as she reared back, elbowing a nearby shinobi in their side.

They took a step back, but didn’t seem too hurt.

“—a bit disagreeable.”

“She tried to hit us with this iron ladle, Captain,” another shinobi, younger, piped in, sounding just
a bit offended.

Something dropped to the dirt with a heavy whump she knew, without a doubt, belonged to the
cooking ladle Mariko had used in the ryokan’s kitchen—and sometimes threatened her with when
she got too rowdy. Which was frequently.

She never tried to hit her with it, though.

“If you believed her to be a spy, why did you not kill her on sight?” asked the man who was indeed
their captain, deep voice drawing thin with impatience. No—he wasn’t the type who had time for
this kind of tomfoolery. No matter who was involved.

“Well, Captain, she…”

“She’s an elder? Is that it?” He remained out of immediate sight, but an armored hand shot out and
gripped Mariko’s jaw, holding her face still as she tried to spit at them. The hard grab would surely
leave bruises on such tender skin.

Mitsuba’s hands clenched into the dirt beneath her, trembling just slightly. She took a breath to still
herself, but something grew and writhed inside. Not just adrenaline, but…

Everything mean. Everything she’d ever held back—every past failure. Inadequacy. Indignation.
It spread through her fingertips—fueled her chakra. Focused it like a beam.

…But what pissed her off the most was that she had to put it all toward Mariko, of all people.

“No, Captain…but she could have information.”
“If an enemy resorts to using the elderly as spies, they’re fully prepared to die sharing nothing. They are closer to death than any other. They are of no use to us.” He released her face. “So, kill her.”

“Yes. Kill me yourself, why don’t you,” Mariko mocked, holding her head high despite the reddening spots on either side of her pointed chin. “Kill a defenseless old woman who simply wandered through the woods too close to a pitifully small camp of oafs.”

He’d begun to turn away, but stopped as her words hit him. The sound of metal grating against a sheath filled the silence, and a tantō blade flickered into sight. Far too close to her neck. But not close enough.

The tripwire snapped. Several resounding thunks hit a tree trunk as one of the kunai traps attached to it triggered—behind the group of shinobi.

“An ambush?” the captain snarled, taking a few more steps forward as his men drew their weapons and turned to face the disturbance.

Mitsuba folded her fingers into the snake seal—but couldn’t make a move. Mariko blocked her line of attack, rushing forward to snatch up her ladle and smack the captain soundly on his unguarded head.

The sound of something hollow being struck echoed in the sudden silence, but the hit didn’t faze him. Surprised the hell out of him, certainly, but not enough to keep him from slashing at her with his blade and catching her in the side and knocking her down as she tried to flee.

But it didn’t cut deep. Couldn’t.

Roots and vines had sprung up from the dirt like ropes and tangled around his arm, squeezing tight and stilling the attack. Continued to wrap around him like grasping fingers until his legs were stuck to the ground, too. And then all the way up, like a cocoon.

The other shinobi tried to turn—and stumbled, as a mess of thick roots and tangled vines and sprawling ivies trapped their legs to the ground. Any who tried to cut themselves or their allies free promptly found their weapons and arms and bodies consumed by those same vines that squirmed and danced across the ground like a roiling wave of snakes searching for prey.

She snared half of them before abandoning her position in the shadows and rushing into the camp headlong to drop down at Mariko’s side and check her injury. Because no matter how deep or shallow the wound may be, it still bled, and with as old as she was, she didn’t need an infection. And if it had cut in the wrong place…

Bodies thumped to the ground around them as Gen took down the remainder of the group, knocking some out and killing others, by the smell of blood vapor that hit the air and spread on the wind. He rushed through them like a bull, but one armed with agility and dexterity—and rage. Touka had mentioned emotions affected chakra, but she hadn’t fully realized just how true that was until now. It thundered; boomed. His failure to save Uchiha Makiko and Haruhiko had been long pent up and now found release in incapacitating the enemy camp.

“Mitsuba!” Mariko gasped, dramatic even when injured, as she held a hand to her mouth and focused on the girl kneeling at her side, ripping off her torn kimono sleeve layer by layer and pressing her fingers against the oozing slash in her arm. “You were out here, you foolish, scoundrel child! I cannot believe you—”
“I can’t believe you, you old hag! What the hell are you doing out here?” She tore the sleeve into long, clunky strips, winding them around her injury fast. It hadn’t hit an artery or anything—only broke through the surface and almost struck through to bone, but it’d heal fine. Just bled a lot through severed capillaries and crépe paper skin.

“What did you call me? How dare you speak so rudely, after all I’ve done!” The ladle, still in her hand, swiped the space near her head—missed, intentionally. Soared through the air and smacked an approaching shinobi, actually. He dropped, out cold. Without glancing back, Mitsuba secured his torso and arms to the ground with vines, should he wake.

But Mariko’s hand did thwack her on the side of the head as she drew it back. She twisted her lips as leaves and twigs fluttered down from her hair, but didn’t otherwise respond, too focused on bandaging the old woman’s skinny arm.

“I traveled all this way to find you—because I know better than to think you would avoid something like this—and lo and behold! A problem child to the end. And you still have leaves in your hair!”

“Stop squawking! I’m trying to help you—did you not realize you were about to be killed?”

“I believe I had the situation handled. And if not, I would die with dignity. I have lived a long, fulfilling life.”

“You’d die before you get to tell Butsuma what I did? Hard to believe. Unless you think your ghost would return to him and deliver one last strike against me.”

“Your tongue has become quite loose in my absence.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to stick around and reeducate me. Get up,” she finished, taking Mariko by her uninjured arm and trying to help her to her feet, before she swatted her away.

The bodies had stopped falling and the shouts and abrupt yells ceased at some point during their bickering, leaving them standing in the midst of scattered dead and unconscious, bound bodies (lighter, smaller, younger than the dead) and a warped display of garden statues wrapped in foliage from head to toe, frozen in action. Still wriggling and trying to shout from behind the roots and vines trapping them.

Mitsuba looked up at the captain’s immobile body looming over them and caught sight of the single eye leering out from between the coils, watering, with its pupil constricted into a pinprick. He spoke, but the vines muffled his frantic words.

“Don’t look at me like that. You can still breathe just fine,” she said to herself more than to him, waving a dismissive hand. “Now…what do we do about this?”

This question, she directed to Gen, who approached her with a kunai in hand, still dripping blood from those few who’d precision-killed. Considerably calmer, now, but his chest still heaved as he caught his breath. Sweat trickled down his forehead—he wiped it away before it hit his eyes.

Gen took a moment to exhale before crouching down to wipe the kunai blade on the patches of trampled grass below. He kept his eyes on the task at hand as he spoke, but there was a facetious smile in his voice. “Well, we could kill the ones you caught. Kill them all and leave the camp deserted. Or, we leave them as-is for your clan to handle. There was a reason behind their conflict, after all.”
Mitsuba looked back at the captain and silently reached for the kunai in her obi, tapping it against her palm as she considered her options. She raised it—he flinched—and cut into the vines around his face, peeling them away from his mouth so he could speak.

“You little Senju bitch—”

She slapped the vines back over his mouth with a smile.

He spit them away.

“Wait! Wait…”

“I’m listening.”

All the arrogance and bravado he’d had before vanished, replaced by trepidation, now that he was in the enemy’s solid clutches. “Tell your clan we yield. The Ihara will evacuate and allow Senju presence in this territory with no further resistance.”

“Tell them yourself. That’s where I’m headed. And anytime I visit family, I make sure to bring a gift. I think they’d appreciate hearing the words straight from your mouth, Captain. Well…”

She paused. Leaned up toward him, with the point of her kunai digging into the patch of vines over his throat.

“That is, if you apologize to Mariko-san here. I may be irreverent, but I don’t like grown men who know better calling their elders whores. Or trying to kill them. She’s a civilian, after all.” She smiled until her eyes narrowed and creased at the edges, but it was not a kind smile.

His lips pinched together, eyebrows creased, but he didn’t waste a moment complying. “I apologize! It was crude.”

“Say it to her, not me.”

His eyes darted to Mariko, who’d retrieved her ladle from the dirt and held it in one hand as she crossed her arms, standing to her full, intimidating height. Sweat that had beaded on his forehead ran down his pale, clammy face in streams.

“…I-I apologize, Ma’am. Forgive my slight.”

Mariko shrugged and turned her head away. Appeased for now, at least.

Mitsuba moved away from the Ihara captain and returned her kunai to her obi, brushing her hands clean. She wedged the tantō out of his vine-covered hand and passed it over to Gen before setting her hands in the snake seal and rearranging the roots and vines to bind the man’s arms to his sides fully and completely, from shoulder to fingertips. She picked up the excess still connected to the earth and gave a tug that unearthed them, then balled the tendrils tight and secure around her hand.

“Where’s the Senju camp?” she asked him, even as his eyes didn’t meet hers, but focused on the plants she’d commanded, mouth agape.

“Just…just a half day’s walk southeast of here,” he sputtered. “Who—who exactly are you? There’s only one Senju, one shinobi, with the Wood Release, and it’s the clan head’s son. No one’s ever spoken of a kunoichi.”

“Don’t pay it any mind. It’s genjutsu,” she lied, watching him carefully, eyes narrowed.
“Genjutsu…?” he repeated in a daze, still eyeing the vines encircling him. Then glancing out to his many men who were either fully wrapped like cocoons or tied to the ground, scrabbling at the dirt as they roused from unconsciousness. Not totally convinced.

She gave the vine-rope a sharp yank, and he stumbled forward a few steps. “They’ll be fine. The ones we left alive, anyway—Sensei? How many did you kill?”

Gen held up ten, then two, fingers behind the captain’s back.

“They’ll mostly be fine. We’ll come back to free them soon. But for now…Let’s get going.”

Without another word, they headed out to the Senju camp—toward her brothers, perhaps.

Or toward something else entirely.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks for reading and please don’t forget to comment!
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Finally posting the arc I’ve been excited about for several months!! I’m pretty proud of this chapter so I hope y’all enjoy it, too.

As always, thanks so much for reading/commenting/kudos/bookmarking!! Y’all are great.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Land of Fire, while generally hot out in the open and under the sun, had quite a bit of cool forest coverage—sometimes sparse, sometimes dense, and cool, and humid.

When the trees grew taller than their heads and the trunks far wider than their bodies; when the light faded and only glowed above through pinprick holes poked in the canopy, though, something about that dark and dripping density became bizarrely out of place.

As in, this is a trap, bizarre.

Mitsuba still kept walking, knowing they’d come too far to stop…or to turn back.

In the darkness, the path they’d weaved through the chest-high foliage couldn’t be distinguished from any other break in the shrubs and trees. Everything blended, blurred, together. Black and green—green and black.

…And by now, they should have reached another camp, or at least run into signs of conflict.

The surrounding area wasn’t even slightly disturbed by battle. No broken twigs, no weapon notches in tree bark, no plants crushed underfoot.

But there was something, lurking there in the darkness. Far above, in the tree boughs they couldn’t see, and far below, among the thick and vast roots that burrowed deep through the earth.

And there they stood between it, alone, and so, so small.

“…Where exactly are we continent-wise, Gen-sensei?” Mitsuba asked, halting the party’s advance. She reached a hand out to trace the edges of a spade-shaped leaf that was bigger than her entire head—and then some. She swallowed down the rising panic in her throat and forced the words through her drying mouth. “Specifically, in the Land of Fire.”

“About smack in the center,” Gen replied without raising his voice, perhaps afraid to, eyes never leaving the shadowy undersides of the surrounding flora. When they weren’t looking, the plants shivered. Shifted. Rustled. “We should have reached the camp by now.”

“It’s just through this forest.” The captain moved from his place behind Mitsuba, pulling the vine-rope taut as he spoke. She kept a tight grip on it, though. “Keep going.”

With a sigh, she turned to face him—and only him. Her head snapped toward Gen. “Where’s Mariko?”
“She—” He stopped. Looked away from their surroundings and to the spot where she’d been walking at the back of their group. A pained expression crossed his face as he shook his head. “She was here only a moment ago, Mitsu. I swear it. She…”

A twig snapped—echoed in the forest. They froze.

The captain took off running.

“Hey!” Mitsuba tried to hold onto the vines and keep him back, but his strength outmatched hers and she had to drop it before it yanked her arm out of its socket. But freeing her hands meant she could put them together into a seal and let nature do the work for her with whatever chakra she could still spare after the large-scale camp ambush.

Roots raised the dirt in shallow bumps to catch his feet and he stumbled—with no arms to help him retain his balance, he fell like a stone.

Gen caught him, then, kneeling over him with his knee on his back and his own tantō pressed close at his neck.

“Mitsu, I think we’ve been played for fools,” he hissed, eyes narrowed as he turned to her approach.

“Fools?” the captain asked, spitting out a derisive bark of laughter, turning his head so he could watch them from the corner of one eye stretched open wide in disbelief, barely a black dot in the center of a white circle. It almost hurt to look at. “More like naïve idiots! Don’t be so easy on yourselves. As if I would ever surrender to a fucking Senju! I’d rather die—and take you along with me. And here, in this forest, death is certain.” Spit mixed with dirt as he spoke, sticking to his rabid, scowling lips and chin in muddy streaks. “To walk so far into the Cursed Forest of Giants… so, so naïve. So inane! Mere babies on the battlefield.”

“I’m eleven.” Mitsuba crouched down and grabbed his chin between her fingers, just as he’d grabbed Mariko before. She wrenched his head further toward her, never mind that his cheek scraped the ground, and leaned closer. “Did Mariko get taken by something? Did you see?”

He spit at her—she turned away as saliva shot through the air beside her ear and flecked her cheek before landing on the back side of her shoulder. A nerve above her eyebrow ticked, but she didn’t otherwise respond.

A small smile played at her lips. “Okay. Yes. I’ll let you have that—we’re idiots. We don’t plan well. We can’t navigate. We walked straight into the Forest of… Death, willingly. But all I want to know is where Mariko is.”

“No, don’t.” She released the captain’s face and let it drop against the dirt. “Like he said, we’re all apparently dead here, anyway. But if we live, I still need him. I have to catch up to Mariko before she reaches the clan… Our destination hasn’t changed.”
He didn’t meet her eyes as she stared down at him, unblinking.

With a sigh, she waved Gen away and hauled the man back to his feet—nudged him to walk along, but they didn’t make it but a few steps.

Another cracking twig echoed through the forest, halting them.

Then another—in the opposite direction.

Almost…intentional.

To let them know they were surrounded.

She slowly became aware of just how quiet this deep, dark forest was when one strained their ears to listen for shrieking bugs and singing frogs and chirping birds—there were none. Absolutely none, and they were caught still in the silence, suspended in a solid gelatin of...nothing.

A primal fear like no other—not even in the face of death, not even in the face of the two Uchiha she hated from the bottom of her heart—reached deep into her core and rattled her bones.

The leaves overhead shivered, just slightly. Like temple bells stirred in a breeze.

In a breeze that wouldn’t stop. The bells continued to chime, to vibrate in the air until they buzzed—and the sound rose into a deafening, droning crescendo.

Whatever gods that slept deep within the woods had woken.

No one needed to be spurred into action. They all ran in unison, sprinting away from the sound and the cloudy shadow descending upon them. Sticking close—or trying to, leaping over exposed tree roots as high as they were tall, rushing through chin-high ground cover and whatever skulked in the shadows beneath.

The captain stumbled, at one point—they left him. He’d disappeared into the tall grass and couldn’t be seen. May as well have been swallowed.

At some point Gen had grabbed onto her arm—then slipped away, veered off by the uneven ground and foliage splitting between them as strong and persistent as a raging sea. Lost to the shadows.

Mitsuba stopped briefly, chest heaving as she tried to yell out, but no words left her rasping throat. Terror gripped her as she reached for more chakra—tried to find something, someone, but it burned, it bit her, and her blurring vision wasn’t only due to her poor eyesight. She was pushing too far, pulling her energy through the eye of a needle that was far too small, stripping and fraying each individual thread away until only one remained to pass through.

The feeling wasn’t only internal—it was physical. Something sharp swiped by her side, cutting into the fabric of her shirt and through to skin. Sharp, scraping legs scrabbled at her like wires, covered in curved hooks and scales. She shook them off and ducked low to the ground, retreating into the tall grass. Pressed her palms flat to the cold, murky ground, then brought them together into a seal. Channeled her chakra close, pulling, warping, and squeezing her eyes shut tight as the surrounding foliage bent and bowed over her like a dome.

Acid fire burned in her side—throbbed. Just like a wasp sting. The stinger hadn’t broken off—it had to be giant hornets. Titan hornets. Because this was a, if not the, Forest of Death, Training Ground Forty-four, and no run-of-the-mill hornet venom brought on an oily, indigo haze that
brightened even the darkness around her. It didn’t puncture her insides and turn them inside out and invert up and down and left and right and mix it all together.

Raindrops beat heavy upon the outside of her plant-shield’s heavy stems like a percussion band gone wild, disregarding its conductor, or like her heartbeat thumping in her ears, then lighter, softer, gentler… until all there was was the marshy ground under her cheek.

Softer than the pillows of her old bed.

But sleep did not come for her. Slashes of light flickered beyond the narrow gaps in the plant-dome, sometimes thinner, sometimes thicker, like strips, rectangles, then a full, jagged shape as big as her body as those stems dropped away, severed.

Shadowed hands broke in through the shadows, clunky silhouettes against the flickering backdrop of hazy light. Grabbed at her. Pulled at her. Dragged her by the limbs until they’d freed her from the shelter and birthed her into the blurring, smoking, foggy world.

It all blended together. Blurred.

Lights—not quite flames, not torches—burned and blinked in and out of sight.

Then out, deep.

Then back in—she was floating. Swaying through the darkness, jostled about, like a leaf on a raging river’s surface.

Her back hit something solid. Several tiny lights, stars, twinkling above, hovered over her, all around. Holes, punched in the darkness holding her down.

Something squirming—squishy, wet—latched onto her injured side; bit into her skin. She tried to shove it away, but couldn’t even lift her arm, no. Everything was heavy, like the venom had filled her and solidified into concrete.

Her thoughts, too, slugged along like cement mush, like mud, clogging where they should make sense and piling up against logic and leaving her in a constant state of oh god what the fuck what the actual fuck?

But when things got bad, really bad, they eventually hit a point where they had to get better. And frenzied thoughts and a paralyzed body were as bad as it got, here. Little by little, like the sun rising on the horizon, light spread throughout her body, fighting back the darkness. Warm—almost hot. But also cool and sharp as ice.

And it was that comfort that finally, fully eased her into sleep.

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The saying “my life flashed before my eyes” was never something Mitsuba experienced. Not the first time, not the near-second, not the near-third. Not now.

Keeping a running tally of how many times she almost bit the bullet again wasn’t something she’d ever wanted to experience, either.

But… memories did have a way of surfacing from the deepest, darkest, farthest recesses of her mind
when she was too exhausted to keep them pushed down.

She called them the Old. Nothing fancy—but they didn’t deserve a fancy name. The Old weren’t welcome. Not here. Not now.

Even so, they invaded.

*You remember this, don’t you?* The memories themselves spoke to her, voices overlapping into one echoing, repeating sound.

But it wasn’t always the Old. Sometimes it was the New—what she’d experienced in this lifetime.

Her awakening. Itama’s death. Her brother’s faces when the search parties returned with no news—no body. Kanae’s haunting final expression, so peaceful, so still, impressed upon a delicate white funeral pall. Butsuma’s refusal—his rejection.

Her failure to kill, to even hurt Kote and Yama when she finally had the chance.

*You remember this, don’t you?*

How could she forget?

They were worse—far worse, in their haunting, lingering reality. So she shoved them down and hid them behind a smile. Had to, or else the guilt would eat her alive.

It cracked, sometimes, but everything broken could be repaired.

…But pushing them all back, locking those feelings away, left her somewhere in between. Lost.

Lost?

No. That word wasn’t her own.

The word slithered against her ears, sneaking its way in through deceptive gentleness. Disguised as comfort.

Mitsuba opened her eyes.

Above, the blurry-round, doubled circles of light glowed down on her through the darkness, half lighting it, but not enough to fully see. They blinked off and on, like traffic lights, for the varied colors.


*Christmas lights...? No... no, not that. Lanterns?*

Her hand—slow, but no longer too heavy to lift—rose to the injury on her side and met an oily poultice and one large leaf spread across bare skin. No shirt.

*No shirt, no shoes no service.*

She swatted away the facetious thought and stretched her other hand out in the dim light until her fingers met fabric.

Lost?
The word drifted around her in a whisper. Again, and again, as she pushed her arms through the sleeve holes of her kimono and examined the torn fabric at its left side. Barely ripped at all. Her skin seemed to take the brunt of it.

When she moved to her feet, it stopped. Abruptly—midway between. That intentional silence filled her ears, so stark and deep it rang loud.

The lights continued to flicker. On. Off.

She took a step—the space she’d been taken to was small, so she couldn’t take many. A pile of soft grass, or moss, or leaves or both, was at her feet. A curved wall surrounded her on all sides—felt rough and jagged and a bit soft, like damp tree bark. Was tree bark, she realized. Peeled from a tree—one of the forest’s overgrown, grossly exaggerated trees.

*This is the to-be Forest of Death, The Cursed Forest of Giants*, she told herself, biting her lower lip as she gathered her chakra and wound it tight, into a ball, before releasing it outward little by little, reaching out.

If anything, the rest this place provided refilled her chakra levels.

But wherever she was, nothing responded. No—that wasn’t quite right.

There was simply too much of it around. Too much life. All combining, tangling up, running together like a singular being. Channeling the same presence.

Whatever lived here, in this forest, lived *with* it.

Successfully blending in…

She shook her head and channeled her chakra to her feet, and hands, and physically reached out this time, to grab onto the bark wall and start climbing, toward the ever-blinking lights.

She couldn’t stay here, after all. Gen was out there, somewhere. And that Ihara captain, if he was still alive.

…but if either were still alive.

The lights above were blurry, when she’d first seen them—beyond her range of vision and up far enough that when they snapped into crisp focus, the ground was far enough below that freefalling would hurt.

But…the lights weren’t *lights* at all.

Not the kind she’d expected, at least.

Fireflies—the length of her entire forearm, from elbow to fingertips, stuck to the surface of the bark, sometimes floating and flitting higher, or lower, or to the opposite side completely. Drifting about, lazy. The ends of their abdomens released the gentle glow she’d mistaken for lantern fire, though they were about as big as lanterns.

The glowing lights caught their black, eight-ball-sized eyes and glittered.

She reached out to touch one of their shellacked, beetle shells and drew her fingers back when translucent wings unfurled and the creature fluttered away, taking its light with it.

Better not to disturb them, then.
She continued her upward journey until she reached a break in the bark wall—and felt solid ground beneath her fingertips. It didn’t crumble when she grabbed and pulled, so she hauled herself up and onto her knees, eyes roving the area for as far as she could see clearly.

The fireflies continued to drift, lights blinking off and on, as if illuminating her way. Beckoning her forward through the tall, leafy shoots and ever-rising trees and shivering shadows between.

Even in a world like this, she’d only presume to see such a fantastical sight in her dreams, in memories of a Miyazaki or Tolkien-based film.

She still couldn’t distinguish Gen’s chakra signal from the large, unified signal thrumming around her—nor the captain’s, though it hadn’t been too memorable.

How long had she been out? Without access to the sun, to anything familiar, it was difficult to tell. But since her chakra was restored, it could be no less than half a day.

So, so much could occur in that time…

And the fact that her wound had been dressed, that her clothes had been left at her side, meant something human—or aware enough to act as a human—was present.

It wouldn’t be strange, in a world where shinobi could summon sentient creatures. But…what kind of sentient creature would choose to live their life in a place like this, cloistered from the normal world?

Would they be as kind to the others, as they’d been to her?

She took a few, tentative steps forward, keeping her chakra thin and sharp enough to detect any little misplaced ripple.

Nothing had been in sight—not at first. Not when she’d been standing still, simply looking.

But the instant she moved, it…appeared. She could’ve blamed her poor eyesight, but that wasn’t the only factor.

One by one, shapes rose from the earth and stepped out of the foliage, covered in leaves, in moss, in tangled roots—and some crawled down the tree trunks like insects, stopping. Staring.

They were alive—had chakra, but all the same. All as one, and many.

Lost?

Again, that word stirred in a whisper, carrying on a breeze.

No…not a breeze. Not this deep in the forest, blocked by so many gargantuan, supernatural growths.

Behind her… the air was warm. Strong. And far too much to belong to something small.

She didn’t dare turn. Not even as it stirred the hair that didn’t stick to her skin in the dense humidity. No—she didn’t turn.

Because the ground the giant stood on depressed the dirt deep, in a wide space, wider than she was tall—and that was just the foot closest to her.

Genjutsu—it struck her then that this could all be a nefarious trick, but—no. No. This was a strange
and mystical place, a pocket space far from the reality she knew, but it earned and championed every scrap of verisimilitude as the world outside.

The chakra confirmed it.

Fireflies hovering above descended slow, dreamlike, bringing the light with them and casting the shadows aside. One of the leaf-covered shapes trudged forward, stooped like an old crone, every bit of its body concealed, until it neared her close enough to reach out with a milk-pale limb—human. A human hand.

Her relief was short-lived.

The hand reached out to pinch at her face, prodding at her cheeks, at her scar, pulling at her hair—at the white streak stretching down from her bangs. Then, grasping at her hand—and both, as another hand emerged from the leaves.

“Lost?”

This time, the word had a voice—a source. Rased from beyond the leaves, rattling. Barely a hoarse whisper—spoken with a voice gone too long without use. Neither male nor female—little did it matter.

Mitsuba stared, stock still, only daring to blink as she let the leaf-covered human hold onto her hands. Bigger than hers—large enough to encompass. She was, after all, a small child. But they belonged to an adult, without a doubt. Mostly clean, save for the shortened nails, split and caked with soil. And warm. Surprisingly so. She hadn’t realized how cold she was until their warmth spread to her.

“No—not lost at all.” They decided it themselves in her silence. Spoke coherently despite the rasping. “Everything lost finds its way here. Eventually. And then it is found.” The hands slipped away from hers and reached up to the cowl of foliage, pushing through and parting it aside at the face. A single red eye stared out, framed by long strands of white hair—shining in the firefly light like jewels.

The sudden, stark red dropped the bottom of her stomach, but she kept her composure long enough to tell herself the eye she was looking into wasn’t that red—wasn’t a Sharingan. Just…red. Like Kanae’s. Like Tobirama’s.

But only one. The other was closed. Perhaps empty, behind its lid. The face it belonged to was old—had seen, experienced, much. The red eye, in fact, was glazed over. On its way to blindness.

“Are you…Senju?” Mitsuba breathed, almost afraid to speak the question aloud.

“Senju… A name is only a name. We belong to this forest. This forest belongs to us.” The words mirrored themselves—echoed. Their warm hands returned to hers. Gentle and comforting. “You belong here.”

She drew her hands away on reflex and took a step back—felt the giant’s gusting breath beat against her from behind, billowing her clothes. She almost chanced a glance over her shoulder at it before the one-eyed Senju’s hands reached for her again—she faltered, but let them grasp one. Let them lead her forward, to the other cloaked people huddled around.

They parted to allow them through. Their faces were still covered, still inhuman, but now she knew what was beneath was indeed human it didn’t strike near as much fear and uncertainty into her. They seemed more reluctant of her, now, as she caught flashes of eyes behind their leaf cloaks,
illuminated by the passing firefly.

“You will find something lost, here. Something that must be found.”

The one-eyed Senju leading her by the hand continued to speak in that rasping voice, even as they ducked beneath a low-hanging tangle of branches and waited for her to follow.

In the ground was a burrowed tunnel, laced with root systems and strewn with fallen leaves—even mushrooms, sticking out like shelves. All carefully crafted, carefully left intact with a respect that balanced their coexistence.

She followed—down, down, further into the earth, yet the roots never thinned. It wasn’t only a single tunnel—dark spots sprouted away from it into corridors of more sprawling pathways.

A home—it was a home. Like an ant colony’s tunnel network, or a rabbit den.

…Or a man-made root system that shuttled people instead of nutrients.

Mitsuba clutched her loose kimono top close to her chest with her free hand, eyes set forward, trying in vain to see ahead, to see what awaited them at the end, or wherever they were meant to go.

But the firefly’s light only stretched so far.

Soon enough, it didn’t matter.

The one-eyed Senju stopped.

They stood so still, she almost thought they’d frozen—that maybe she’d only been fooled into thinking she followed a person at all when it was a non-sentient shrub instead. But then they did move. The hand grasping hers fell away and pointed down a shadowed corridor.

Mostly shadowed, at least, save for a dim light oscillating a ways down—fluttering like her heart, in time with her rising pulse.

They didn’t speak again. Only pointed.

She nodded, wordless, and walked ahead. Folded her hands together in front of her chest, fingers crossed. Just in case.

She counted her steps, trying to calm herself and sense something even marginally different in that widespread, unified chakra current.

But there was nothing.

She reached the light.

To her left was a hollowed-out indentation in the tunnel corridor, a burrowed room, and within it was a blur, at first, until she stepped closer. Bit by bit. Creeping into clarity.

…Into nothing she recognized.

A person, certainly, hunkered down beside a low wooden table, beneath a cloak of leaves and dark cloth, face and body concealed, even the hands resting against the table’s surface, wrapped in tight, beige bandages. Over an open book—pages crumpled. Old. Wet—then dried poorly, buckled and smeared with runny ink. Some pages had deteriorated so bad they were little more than giant, lacy holes with thin paper borders.
On closer inspection, she recognized the binding. When they closed the book and held it out to her, she recognized the cover.

It was her botanical field guide—the first one. The one Kanae had given her. The one she’d lost to the river when she’d fallen in so many—so few—years ago.

They held it out to her silently for an uncomfortably awkward stretch of time.

“All the way here?” she mused, reaching out, and stopping, when her fingertips brushed the edges. “But…just this?”

This leaf-cloaked person didn’t respond. Only pushed the book fully into her hands to free up their own and reach for a knobby walking stick leaning against the wall beside them, using it to stand and wedging it under their arm as it disappeared behind the cloak. Their right leg dragged behind them as they walked away. The pungent scent of tobacco lingered in their absence, though no smoke or telltale burning had been wafting around.

“I just thought, so far down here, it would be someone held captive. A white-haired man, maybe? And another—dressed in armor. With a bitter face.”

Still, they didn’t speak. Didn’t even turn to look at her again after delivering the found book.

It grated on her patience, but losing her temper here, in the unknown, surrounded by many who knew these tunnels far better than she did, and lashing out wasn’t an option.

At the opening of the small chamber, they did finally turn to look at her—just a shift in the leaves, really, impossible to see their head or face, but the gesture translated regardless. They were waiting for her to follow. As they did so, the firefly sticking to the wall fluttered to them and hovered, taking its light with it. A sentient lantern.

She tried to tuck the field guide into her obi before realizing she still lacked one. Instead, she pressed it into the crook of her arm to leave her hands free, and followed with little choice. It was her only way out at this point, if she didn’t want to be left in the dark.

They traced the same path the one-eyed Senju had, but she couldn’t be quite sure, as the elder had already left the tunnels. With the flickering light, every path looked the same, or if it ever changed, that change was lost to the beat between dark and light. Yet the leaf-cloaked person never lost their way, shuffling forward until they reached an exit.

“Are they around here?” she asked again, as soon as they reached ground level and emerged into the firefly valley, beginning to doubt they even understood her. Just because one had spoken to her and understood, it didn’t mean they all did. “I need to see them, if they are.”

She may as well have been speaking to herself—and, really, hearing someone talk provided comfort, even if it was just her.

The others of the forest tribe had dispersed, or returned to hiding in their surroundings, leaves blending with leaves. The giant had also retreated from sight. Yet the one she followed continued forward, until their ankles submerged into a marsh—which deepened into a gulch. No—just a river. Slow—barely moving. Glittering on its surface when the firefly lights blinked. But also patched with lily pads of varying size.

The leaf-cloaked person set the end of their crutch onto one of the smaller ones before stepping up onto the water’s surface—water-walking across.
Mitsuba opened her mouth to speak again but only sighed and stepped onto the surface as well, snagging an oversized grass blade from where it grew and tying it around her waist to keep her top secured—then tucking her field guide into that, freeing herself of distractions.

The water—still as it was—was not devoid of life. Creatures stirred beneath the glassy black surface, slithering by and fleeing from the light shining down from above their dark home. Some, though, some nipped at the soles of her sandals, oily and black and squirming. Bigger than her arm—sometimes her leg. But she stepped too quickly for them to linger. And only barely repressed a shudder.

On the other side of the riverbank, more fireflies gathered together—and the shapes of more of the forest tribe came into view. Notably, the one-eyed Senju, who greeted them, face still bared from the leaves.

Their delicate old hand set gently upon the person who’d led her here and lingered as they stared beyond the cloak covering their face—into the unseen eyes. Then the one-eyed Senju breathed a sigh and shook their head, letting their hand fall and stepping around their kin to reach Mitsuba.

Again, the one-eyed Senju took her hand and urged her forward. More walking, but this time toward a fallen tree angled sharp over the ground, caught against another tree before it had the chance to drop completely. Strung with moss and something else that caught the light, wire-thin, then thicker, woven like—

Spiders skittered across the bark of the fallen tree, long, furry and dark. More like dogs than arachnids. They fled from the light and from their curtain of a web, but lingered in the shadowed outskirts.

Her eyes followed them before tracing the cord-like threads to the center.

Two wrapped bundles—distinctly human-sized and shaped bundles—hung suspended in it. Deathly still.

“Gen-sensei…?” she asked, so quiet it stuck in her throat before she repeated it, louder. Too afraid to reach out for chakra and find there was nothing.

The left bundle shifted. A muffled voice sounded.

“Gen!”

She rushed toward the web and reached out to grab it and climb—and held back a growl when the leaf-covered people moved to block her.

Her hands folded into the snake-dog-tiger seals, chakra focusing and kneading and reaching outward, pulling at the roots and stems and grass and swatting them aside, then arcing upward to make a bridge rising to the web. She leapt onto it and raced to Gen and the Ihara captain before something dropped hard through the air and cracked straight through the bridge, right between her and them.

A leg—thick as a normal tree trunk, and bushy. Jointed. Chitinous. Curving over from the fallen, slanted tree—from behind and far above.

Firefly light flickered and reflected off of eight distinct surfaces suspended above like ceilings.

She didn’t take another step, even as the leg ascended and disappeared into the darkness. Instead, she turned around to face the tribe, which had become larger, growing forward and surrounding the
ground beneath her like a mob. Even the ones she’d knocked down had gotten back up and retreated to the crowd. The one-eyed Senju and the one with the crutch stood at the forefront. Watching. Quiet.

Curious.

“I need them. Alive.” Mitsuba’s teeth gnashed together. “What do I have to do? Why am I here?”

The one-eyed Senju shook their head, eye gleaming in the light. “You belong here. They do not belong here.”

“Alive,” she repeated, hands still set tight in their seal, unrelenting. “We come as a set. Dead or alive, together.”

The one-eyed Senju did not move.

Mitsuba pressed her lips together, eyes narrowing into vicious slits. “Make your choice.”

Chakra flared—the section of the root-bridge destroyed by the giant spider’s leg regenerated into whirling tendrils that crossed the gap and raced toward the web. She followed it as it grew, feet always just at the edge, holding her hand out to grab onto a wood-carved bokuto that burst forth. Still not quite true-to-shape, serrated and jagged at the edges like an overgrown butter knife more than a sleek katana, but useful enough for its purpose.

She slashed through the web suspending the two human cocoons even as the eight-eyed beast looming above descended—oversized mandibles clicking, venom dripping.

Gen and the Ihara captain’s wrapped bodies slipped bit by bit as she hacked away at the rigid, cord-like web. Too thick to sever in one swoop.

The giant spider’s massive leg smashed down once more, breaking through her second bridge. It collapsed. Took her footing with it.

She grabbed onto the web with one hand before she fell, too, not needing chakra to stick. The silky material it was made of did well to hold her on its own.

Smaller, dog-sized spiders trickled back down the damaged web, some mending it and others surrounding the cocoons and grabbing at them with their legs to reclaim them as they drooped like stones through sludge. Too many—there were too many to fight off at once.

One grabbed her wrist in its jaw—held tight, but didn’t bite, but wrenched the hand holding the web away and threw her.

“No—!”

Her back collided with one of the root bridges, knocking the wind from her and bringing a new, sharp ache to her injured side. Something tore—seeped. Her head spun as, overhead, the colony of spiders reeled the two cocoons back into place, this time lingering as she threatened to take their caught prey.

“Stop it!” Again, she rose to her feet and leapt, grabbing onto the web and scaling it as the spiders swarmed over her in a blanket, picking her hands and feet away one by one as she fought back, tried to shake them off, and failed as they threw her away once more.

This time she hit the ground, right at the one-eyed Senju’s feet. They didn’t stir. Not even a little.
Completely unfazed.

Her hands curled tight into the scattered, jagged debris that had scattered from the destroyed bridges. Dug in hard—bled, when the edges pierced skin.

She grabbed the sharpest piece and pushed herself to her knees, narrowed eyes glaring up into their face as they looked down upon her, forever unmoved.

Slowly, she pressed the sharp edge of the debris to her throat, biting her lip hard as it pressed in and broke flesh.

If they wouldn’t make their choice, she’d make it for them.

She dragged it straight across.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks for reading and please don’t forget to comment! They mean a lot.

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