Joyous Children
by whatcolor

Summary

I cannot move a single muscle as I stare at the piece of cloth hanging on the wall right across from my crib. A sheet with an all too familiar symbol stitched smack in the middle of it, its red and white coloring in a stark contrast against the dark blue surrounding it. I’m an Uchiha now. How is this even my life?

Notes

Hiya there,

my first fic on ao3! I hope you enjoy it and although there might have been thousands of SI-fics for Naruto before, I still try to bring in an original story line. This is heavily inspired by Electrasev5n’s ‘Deja Vu and Dreams’-series and Liangnui’s ‘Catch Your Breath’ which are both awesome SI-stories with original characters and definitely worth reading.

Enjoy the prologue!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Oh my God.

This can't be true. I refuse to believe that

I cannot move a single muscle as I stare at the piece of cloth hanging on the wall right across from my crib. A sheet with an all too familiar symbol stitched smack in the middle of it, its red and white coloring in a stark contrast against the dark blue surrounding it.

Oh God. I'm still here. Why am I still here?

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Up until now, I have never been fundamentally shocked in my whole relatively ordinary life.

Of course, like everybody else, I've had my share of dumbfounded, slack-jawed, wide-eyed moments. Surprise of both positive and negative nature, unexpected flashes of happiness and excitement, devastating backlashes followed by phases of near depression – sure.

But an event that was the emotional equivalent of an earthquake?

I don't think that the human mind was supposed to handle a shock of this magnitude.

That, at least, is the only answer I can think of when I look back at the first six months of my new life which I had spent in a state of total shut-down.

Yeah, that's right. First six months of my new life.


All the stories I have read on the Internet are true. Reincarnation is real.

Which is an amazing thing, really. Believe me, I was fascinated about this for the first approximately five minutes after calming down from the trauma of being squeezed out of a dark warm place through a tunnel into the glaring lights of a hospital room.

Not to mention the sensation of being picked up by giant hands and placed on top of another giant person.

I guess that that was the point where I realized that I had been reborn – and man was I excited!

I know, a lot of people would say I was insane for not going at least a little bit bat-shit over this but I can honestly say that my fascination crushed any shred of panic that might have popped up.

Because, people. Think.

Score for Buddhism, Hinduism and all those other religions and spiritual belief systems that I don't know about, because, yeah, they're right. Reincarnation is a real thing.
Oh gosh, I gotta tell my brother. He's gonna freak out and then we're gonna freak out together because he's awesome like that and then my mom is gonna ask us if we're insane and we're gonna tell her and –

I started giggling madly, because, gosh, I was so giddy.

"Oh" a voice suddenly exclaimed. "Kanojo ga waratte iru!"

What.

Can you say that again please. 'Cause I don't think I understand … is that Japanese? My existence as an avid anime watcher is only just enough to identify that. And I'm mighty proud of that. Don't judge me.

"Shiawasena kodomo" the giantess underneath me cooed. "Uchiha Etsuko. Sore wa kanojo no tame no kanzen'na namaedesu, ne, Nobuo?"

What.

Can you say that again please. 'Cause I think I understood something this time.

I think the giantess just named me. And as an avid anime watcher, there was no way I could have missed that word.

Uchiha.

...

Fucking Uchiha.

And in that moment it all came crashing down on me.

I had died.

I had been reborn.

As a character of the Narutovese.

Right into the midst of one of the most dangerous clans in the Elemental Nations.

This, I decide, is as good a moment to freak out as any.

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It didn't get any better when I was sent away with the giantess and another giant – my new mom and dad.

Upon arriving at some house – excuse me for my vague descriptions but I couldn't see shit from my place in the giant's arms and, yeah, I was busy having a mental break down – I was placed into a crib and they each gave me a kiss on the forehead before leaving the room.

I think they might have been concerned about my sudden muteness that stood in a stark contrast with the mad giggles right after my birth.

Mental distress is quite exhausting and I guess even more so for the body of a baby. I quickly fell asleep, only waking up when the sun was shining brightly into my room again.
So, here I am, staring open-mouthed at the Uchiha banner on my wall.

I'm still here.

Which probably means that this is real.

I, formerly of the name of Elizabeth Wang, have been reincarnated as Uchiha Etsuko into the Hidden Village of the Leaf.

How is this even my life?

Chapter End Notes

Kanojo ga waratte iru! = She's laughing!

Shiawasena kodomo. = A happy child.

Sore wa kanojo no tame no kanzen'na namaedesu, ne, Nobuo? = That's the perfect name for her, don't you think, Nobuo?

Etsuko = joyous child

Japanese directly taken from Google Translate. I have no idea if this is right.

Comment?
A Kick in the Ass Sure Gets you Moving

Chapter Summary

Lying around is simply not that productive, I guess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have always been proud to be able to say that I'm pretty quick on the uptake. And by no means do I intend to sound pretentious with that. It's just that I realized early on that it doesn't take much explaining for me to grasp the essentials of most things.

I did well in academics, had a really good record in both high school and university, was a trained classical violinist and a passionate hobby singer, wrote little stories in my off time and was generally interested in a broad range of topics.

I am by no means a genius, mind you. Most of it was thanks to my awesome mom who taught me that no matter how sharp the mind, nobody amounts to anything without hard work. Which in reverse meant that I was encouraged to make use of every bit of my time, resulting in my many fields of interest.

But unfortunately, this time I think that my ability to grasp things quite quickly was what ultimately broke me. Because I understood the implications of my predicament far too well.

For six months, I'm hardly any more sentient than a zombie.

Everything comes to a standstill.

I don't make any sounds. I stare off into the distance. I don't react to whatever giantess and giant say or do to me.

I don't sleep although I'm not exactly conscious either, drifting in a haze that blurs everything together, down to the most basic of thoughts. Hunger, thirst, the passing of time – everything is inconsequential.

I don't remember much of this time and thinking back, giantess and giant – I know, they're my parents here, but I can't seem to bring myself to think of them as such because I have awesome parents back in my world – must have been worried sick.

I guess naming me joyous child might have been a bit premature on their part. Just saying.

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At some point, from within the midst of the fog my mind is clouded over with, divine intervention finally manages to steer me to some course of action.

And when I say 'divine intervention' I mean that quite literally.

I'm in my crib, busy being my catatonic self when a horrible screeching sound goes off and my
vision turns white.

The whiteness is so bright, it stings my eyes terribly and my tear ducts immediately start working. I clamp my lids shut with a miserable whimper. It doesn't help. At all.

The whiteness creeps through my eyelids and intensifies until I feel physically bleached out from the inside.

In addition to that, my bones are rattling and every cell in my squishy baby body is vibrating with the loud screeching that sears into my ears like the heated blade of a knife. Even with my chubby fists shoved into my ears there's no alleviating the pain.

That's it. I died a pitiful death, lived a pitiful second life and died again. Lovely.

I get the feeling that somebody is trying to prove a point. Or pulling a really tasteless prank. Whatever it is, I'm distinctly not amused.

Suddenly, the earsplitting noise stops.

I lay still for a few heartbeats – scratch it, for a hell of a lot heartbeats actually. But the screeching doesn't come back so I remove my hands from my ears.

The white has stopped trying to burn my eyeballs out as well. The intensity is manageable now and I decide to cautiously open my eyes.

Only, it doesn't make any difference.

Everything is white. There're no walls, no banners, no cribs. No above or below, no left or right, either. I could be blind for all I know.

I'm starting to panic.

It's more action than my body has seen for a long time as I work my breathing up to a harsh hyperventilating pace, my heart racing and sweat moistening my skin.

I haven't seen anything of this world, yet. I know I haven't really been trying, but I'm not ready to give it up anyway. I don't want to go blind.

"Ah, I finally found you" a light voice says.

I whip my head around, in a frantic search for the source of it. Anything to give me orientation in this situation is fine and I don't care that I have never heard this voice before. Nor that I can't make out if it belongs to a male or a female.

"I'm right in front of you."

I blink when I finally spot the owner of the voice. I swear, whoever that is wasn't here just half a second before.

The person has long, straight black hair and wears a simple yukata in a slightly iridescent purple. The face is androgynous and I still can't tell the gender. (It's quite attractive, though.)

He/she – they! – quirk a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

"Finally found your bearings, I see. We can begin then."
"Who are you?" I blurt out before they can say anything else. With a start I realize that my voice sounds … normal. Not like a baby but like a grown person. Like Elizabeth Wang.

I let out a bewildered gasp and cover my mouth with my hands – only to realize that they’re normal, too. I look down at the rest of my body.

A huge wave of relief floods through me.

This whole Uchiha baby business has been nothing but a nightmare. I'm back to normal again. My body, though short still fully grown, with my hands and my arms and legs. "I'm back" I whisper.

"I'm afraid not. This is only the manifestation your soul chose to confront me with in this plane. As soon as I let you go you’ll revert back to your newborn body."

I manage a strangled groan at this piece of information. Of course, that would be too easy. We couldn't have that, could we?

"As to your question. I'm an official in the Bureau for soul transfer affairs and am very sorry to tell you that your predicament is due to an unexpected error on our side. We apologize deeply for that but wish you all the best with your new life all the same. If you have any questions please ask them now for this is your only chance. There won't be any further possibilities to talk to me or anyone else from the bureau after this."

I snort. Duh, which error is not unexpected?

Wait, what.

…

Bureau for soul transfer affairs? What the hell is that supposed to be? And why does that person sound like one of those voices that direct you to mailboxes?

"What … what does all this mean?" I croak out weakly.

"Please specify your question." They say really politely.

I stare dumbly while I try to sort out the mess in my mind and fish for the best question. In the end I come up with an eloquent "Bureau?"

Somehow, I don't feel that quick on the uptake anymore.

"Yes, the bureau for soul transfer affairs. Our field of responsibility is the safe guidance of souls to their destined destination across the wide range of dimensions, from creation to the stage that you call Nirvana in your world if I remember right."

I gulp audibly. If I understood this right … "That means … that means you're from heaven?!"

They smile pleasantly. "I guess you could say so."

"Then why am I here? I mean, this is the Narutoverse! It's not even supposed to be real!"

Uh oh. I can feel myself working up into a frenzy again. Deep breaths. Let that official or whatever explain.

"As I said before, this is due to a simple but unfortunate error on our side. You, Miss Wang, died in a car accident on Earth, following which your soul should have gone to Nirvana. However, a swap of
your case files must have occurred somewhere along our inner workings which led to you being reborn into the world you currently find yourself in. As to the question if this world is real: it is. Otherwise your soul wouldn't have been able to get here."

Hearing my death spelt out so clearly – and in such a polite manner – feels like a blow into the stomach. If there's been any doubt about my former life and any possibility that I was still alive there and only in some kind of coma or whatever, well, there isn't anymore.

And if that wasn't enough there's still the point that my existence here is nothing but a mistake.

I wrap my arms around my torso because suddenly, I'm cold.

"Can't I go back?" I ask with a very small voice.

"I'm afraid not. You truly died there which is final."

There's a short pause in which I try to get myself together. Questions. I have to ask questions because this is my only chance to get them answered.

"Can I leave this world then? I mean, I'm nothing more than a mistake anyway, so …"

"I'm afraid not."

Haven't I heard that before.

Their face takes on an apologetic expression. "Your soul is bound to your body so you cannot freely leave. However, it's entirely your choice if you want to cease the existence of your body. If that is done, your soul will go into Nirvana just like any other soul."

"Cease the existence of my body?" I frown. "You mean, if I kill myself?"

The answer is ever so pleasant. "Or get yourself killed, yes."

Oh, this is just great. Look, I have a choice: Suicide or victim of an accident? Or even murder? The possibilities are eeeendlessssssssss!

"However, if I may express a personal opinion: I wouldn't advise you to do that. In the whole of my existence, which is to say from the beginnings of mankind, there have only been a handful of humans who have been granted the chance for a second life. It's a gift usually only given under exceptional circumstances."

(There goes my theory for reincarnation as a regular thing.)

I am silent as I mull over the information.

So my existence here is a mistake in the first place. But, as my business professor in university used to say, no situation, no problem, no matter how bad, ever only has the risks and bad things. More often, new opportunities would arise with every challenge, new chances to grow and learn and to make things better.

The question is: do I want to take this chance, no matter how it was given to me? The chance to grow, learn and make things better in the Narutoverse?

…

Why the hell not?
Determination surges through me and I look up into the face of the person who can give me the answers to all my questions and see them waiting patiently. Huh, got a saint here.

"Okay. What are the rules?"

As it happens, the rules are rather simple.

1. Do with your life what you want.
2. Nothing.

There. That's it.

It's a whole new life, they reassure me, just like the one I lived before. My choices are my own, as well as the consequences and everything in between.

"Even if I mess up the whole time line?" I ask.

"Your choices are your own" they repeat.

Hell, yeah.

For the first time in forever – and I can actually hear the princess of Arendelle singing this line – I feel excitement and the knowledge that I can do something flowing through my veins. I'm so hyped by the time my conversational partner talks again that I almost miss him.

"However, there is one thing that you should know about."

I go still with that announcement. The air has become thick all of a sudden and I wonder if they can sense this, too. Scratch that, they might actually be responsible for that, seeing that they are definitely more in control of things than I am.

"As your soul is not a fresh one, you do not start with the life force you would usually have, had you been born into this world in the first place. 22 years of your life have already passed in your time on Earth. These will be missing now."

I blink.

I don't think I understood that.

They seem to catch on to my bewilderment.

"Every soul has an individual amount of life force at the beginning. When the soul is bound and born into a world, it is usually assumed that under undisturbed circumstances the respective person lives as long as the life force holds out. When there is a disturbance, though, that means something that cuts the life short before the life force runs out, the soul goes to Nirvana with the remaining life force untouched and is dissolved regularly."

"Which means that it's basically wasted then." I mumble, dumbfounded.

"Unfortunately, yes."
"So, I was one of those whose life was cut short before my life force ran out?"

"Yes."

"And no two souls have the same amount of life force?"

"Yes."

Oh. Well. Good thing my folks on Earth don't know about this concept. Imagine the hysteria.

All men are created equal.

Not so much, apparently. But it's just one more thing to add to the list of what's not equal between humans, I reckon.

An idea pops into my head and festers before I can throw it out of the metaphorical window again. I turn it over and over until I decide that I want to ask.

I make many decisions today.

"Can you tell me how much of my life force is left?"

My counterpart is surprised.

"You want to know?" they ask with eyebrows almost disappearing into their hairline.

I draw a deep breath. "If it's possible, yes please."

They look hard at me for a while. I get the feeling that they're searching for something in my face and apparently they find it because they answer.

"You have 32 years left."

Well … that's not too bad, I guess. Considering that shinobi tend to die early anyway I can probably achieve quite a bit before I have to go. Provided I manage to stay alive until then.

I nod sagely to myself until another realization hits me.

I have never been supposed to live beyond 54 years of age.

Bummer.

That sucks. Majorly.

Arrrgh, is my soul that much of a weakling?!

"If you don't have any more questions, I will take my leave now. I wish you all the best for your new life. From now on, there won't be any interference from our side any more. Live how you think is best. We will probably see each other again when you're ready to depart for Nirvana."

Wait! I still have so many questions left!

I open my mouth and want to prevent them from leaving but it's already too late.

The screeching noise appears again, along with the stabbing intensity of the bright whiteness and I have to shut my eyes and stuff my ears until it's over. It's faster than the first time.
When I open my eyes, I'm back again.

Laying in the crib as a baby and staring at the banner on the wall across from me.

But this time, I don't fall back into that near coma. This time I've got a purpose. And my first step towards it is to make sure that everybody knows that I'm here. That I exist.

As I inhale deeply to let out the loudest scream ever I think to myself:

*I'm gonna be the best goddamn baby this village has ever seen.*

Chapter End Notes

Maybe leave a comment?
A project is defined by a clear beginning and end time wise and a specific goal. Or so my textbooks on project management always told me.

I sit in a baby chair in the kitchen as I'm about to plan the biggest project of my soul span. I feel like there should be some epic soundtrack accompanying this moment but sadly, there's nothing around but the domestic sounds of my new mother – uh, still uncomfortable about that – chopping vegetables for dinner.

Seems like if I want a badass soundtrack I'll need to write one myself. That's an idea, though. I want something in the direction of the *Shingeki no Kyojin OST*. Are there any metal bands in the Elemental Nations?

…

Anyway, back to the grand plan.

I've already decided on a name, too: Operation Uchiha Etsuko, or short OUE.

Ba-dum.

It's fancy. I dare you.

Like a model student I lay down the corner stones of the project, starting with all the important questions that begin with a W.

Who is involved? Me. Simple.

When will this take place? From now until my dying breath which spans over a period of roughly 32 years. Also simple.

What is the goal of the project?

… to make the Narutoverse a better place?

Yeah, well. That's a bit vague, I can at least admit to myself.

One of the most defining characteristics of a true goal, in comparison to a wish, is that the success has to be measurable. (Oh god, if my textbook had a conscience I would totally tell it that it's a big help in this whole reincarnation business.)

So what is the parameter that indicates that the Narutoverse has become a better place? Less dead people? More happy childhoods? A world minus Danzou?
As I mull over this question I come to the realization that this approach is not going to take me particularly far. Mainly because I don't have enough data.

Let's face it. The only things that I know for sure up until now are

1. I'm an Uchiha,
2. I have parents and
3. we're living in a house.

… which is kinda not enough to base your life plan on.

I need to find out more about my situation. Most important: At which point of the timeline am I? Who are the current key players? Of the manga key players, who does already exist? Also, are my parents important people? Do they have political sway within the clan? Can I make use of –

Oh. I could hit myself for my stupidity.

The clan.

The Uchiha clan.

How could I forget this teensy-weensy bit of information?

As it happens, I know loads about the clan history and the Sharingan and Madara and Obito and Itachi and Sasuke, and I'm pretty sure that this knowledge will come in handy someday, but the most important detail right now is: the Uchiha still exist.

Which means that now is some point before the massacre.

Which in turn makes one of my life goals pretty clear.

*Prevent the Uchiha massacre.*

It's not a thing solely born from the goodness of my heart. Thing is, if the Uchiha go down, I'm going with them. I'm not even dreaming of the possibility of being on par with Itachi, because, yeah well, it's Itachi. So it's rather out of necessity. I like to be alive, thank you very much.

But doubts creep up my mind even before the thought is fully spelt out.

Can I do this?

This is not only about my confidence but also about things that are out of my control. If Itachi is to slaughter the clan too soon – and even 5 years from now is definitely too soon – there's nothing I can do about it.

I let out a pathetic whine at that and flail uselessly with my arms. The beginnings of a giant headache are poking at my brain.

It's all no use if I don't get any more information. Fast.

I'm impatient like that.

"Etsuko, sweety? Are you all right?"
I look up into the concerned face of giante- new mom and find her standing right in front of my baby seat.

She is a pretty woman with the typical Uchiha features. Pale skin, large onyx eyes and raven black hair that falls straight past her shoulders. She looks incredibly tired and suddenly I feel guilty for being an unresponsive corpse for the past months. I'm sure she has heard from other women what a joy motherhood was, got real excited when she was pregnant and then – had me.

The poor woman must have thought that she was being punished or something.

I resolve to make that up to her and be a sweet, incredibly adorable baby from now on. I also promise myself to find out her name as soon as possible because although it's still hard for me to think of her as my mom, she deserves to at least be acknowledged in any sort. I am technically her child.

So I blink and attempt a toothless smile, because even if I don't understand what she's saying – yet – I can at least be nice.

That's apparently the right decision, because her face shifts and she beams at me. My breath hitches in my throat as I realize, holy shit, my new mom is beautiful.

I hope I don't come off as totally superficial here, but man, I'd really like it if I got at least some of those genes.

Encouraged, I try for something more this time. I remember the Japanese word for mother – avid anime watcher, remember? – and open my mouth to present her with my first word.

"Okaachan!"

… is what I hope comes out.

Unfortunately, it isn't. I croak something that sounds more like a strangled chicken that's trying to vomit vowels. Exquisite.

I hate untrained tongues and vocal chords immensely.

The beautiful lady who is my mom seems enamored by it nonetheless and makes soft cooing noises.

"My cute little baby girl. Mommy is so glad that everything's alright now."

I understand next to nothing of course but I get the feeling that she's pleased.

This language barrier has to go as fast as possible.

Which brings me to the last point of OUE.

Even if I still cannot pinpoint my exact goal, there're plenty of other things that I have to do anyway.

What is needed to fulfill the project's goal? The removal of the language barrier. Recovery of my motoric abilities.

Among other things.

By the time new mom returns to her vegetables I'm already in the middle of planning the fastest and most efficient way to learn Japanese.
New dad comes home for dinner and my new parents fall into an easy conversation that soon lulls me into a daze. I yawn loudly and the standard Uchiha male that is my dad catches it.

"Look, Kiyomi, Etsuko is tired. We should take her back to bed" he says in a smooth baritone.

Damn Uchiha and their perfect voices. Don't they have any flaws? Aside from the Curse of Hatred, that is.

You're an Uchiha, too, you know? a voice pipes up in my head.

Huh. I tend to forget that at times.

"You're right. I will take her" says my new mom – whose name is Kiyomi if I understood right.

Kiyomi is a nice name. And I rigorously try not to think about that one Death Note character with the same name. I already know that okaachan is much nicer than that.

She lifts me from my baby chair and carries me through the house to my bedroom. I mumble sleepily on her shoulder, trying to get 'okaachan' right.

It doesn't work as well as I want it to but going by the gentle pats on my back, okaachan is pleased with my attempts.

That settles it. I'll be able to say 'okaachan' by tomorrow and I don't care if it takes me the whole night to practice.

What can I say? I'm easily motivated by people who believe in me.

As soon as she has laid me down, covered me with my dark blue blanket, given me a kiss on my forehead – I think I'm falling in love with my new mom at this point – and left the room, I begin to practice.

As I mentioned before, I'm a trained classical violinist. Whilst many people envy musicians for being able to make a living out of their hobby, only very few know that this profession is actually based on hours and hours of hard work.

I started playing at the age of six, at the same time I entered elementary school, with half an hour practicing time every day. After a couple of months I increased it to one hour. This continued throughout elementary school up until graduation from high school, at which point I was practicing 3-4 hours a day. After high school I went to study violin and upped that time again to 6 hours.

In addition to the raw practicing time there were lessons, concerts, masterclasses and orchestra training as well. And it was not just me doing that. Basically every classical music career works like that.

Of course with this thing going on, I wasn't hanging out with peers very much. Training to be an instrumentalist is work that you have to do on your own.

And still so many people do that willingly. Why, you ask.

It's because we want to. Because we thrive on the feeling of being able to hold an instrument and express whatever we want with it.
Why am I telling you all this?

Because I firmly believe that almost every skill is acquirable with methodical practice and dedication. I'm not talking about talent here, and I'm not saying that just because you practice you get to be a pro. Far from it.

But practice opens the game. And I'm a master of practice. So I do what I do best.

I start off with exercises to warm up my facial muscles, accompanied with a low humming that brings the blood in my vocal chords into circulation.

I wrack my brain for the tips my voice instructor – bless his soul – once gave me and thank the program in my university that had allowed me to take singing lessons. Who would have thought that it would come in handy in the rare case of reincarnation?

First, breathing. Then vowels.

I wince when I hear a pitiful wheezing sound that is my voice. So tiny and weak. As Elizabeth, I used to have a powerful alto that went as deep as D3 and as high as A5. I think if I hadn't taken up the violin, I'd have become a singer.

But this is all behind me now. I have to start from scratch here.

I huff and croak my way through the night and reach my first goal, 'mama' in less than an hour. Considering that I haven't made a single sound during my zombie phase I count this as a fast victory, although 'm' and 'a' are the easiest out of the alphabet. I take a short break and proceed with 'papa'.

'Okaachan' is a long way coming.

The faces they make as I burst out the results of my hard work at the dinner table on the next day are priceless.

And with good reason, I dare say. Apart from feeling exhausted and achy around my lips and jaw – can you believe it, I got a muscle hangover from trying to speak – I'm extremely proud that I have not only mastered 'okaachan' but also 'otousan'.

I had practiced into the wee hours of morning until my baby body had me surrendering to sleep, causing me to once again realize that even if my mind was that of an adult, my body was clearly not. Bah. As if I'd needed a reminder.

However, it caused me to realize something else as well: while I had difficulties thinking of my new parents as mom and dad, I had no qualms with 'okaachan' and 'otousan'. Which is kinda silly from an objective point of view, since they mean one and the same, but for me, it did the trick.

The human mind is a strange thing indeed.

Just for good measure, I call them again and wait for the silence to resolve itself with a rather smug grin on my face.

"She said her first words" okaachan finally says with wide eyes and a hand on the lower half of her face.

And then she nearly squeals: "Nobuo, she just said her first words!" She is so excited. A huge smile
spreads across her features as she takes down her hand and laughs, a sound like the soft tinkle of a bell.

I stare unabashedly at her. Did I already mention that okaachan is beautiful?

I'm not the only one staring, though, as otousan can barely take his eyes off her. Although I'm supposedly the main attraction here I cannot begrudge him his apparent adoration for okaachan. I mean, they're so cute like that. Who would ever be angry with a couple that's so obviously in love?

A happy Uchiha couple. Feel these words melt in your mouth.

Of course, there's not nearly enough shown in the manga to say that they don't exist. But I still get the feeling that this is pretty special.

Suddenly I'm very, very glad to have them as the parents of my reincarnation.

Later, after okaachan has stopped gushing over me, an easy conversation ensues. I'm annoyed that I can't understand anything again.

"This is incredible" otousan says. "It almost seems like a switch has flipped somewhere in her head. She's a completely different person from before."

"I know what you mean" okaachan answers. "But let's not question this. I'm so happy at the moment, I want to forget those dreadful months as soon as possible."

"Is that a good idea? I mean, of course I'm happy, too, but what if—"

"Nobuo, please don't. Whatever it was, it clearly is over."

As I follow the discussion, I notice the tone in their voices gradually changing, though it's not enough that I could pinpoint anything. I strain my ears, trying to catch anything.

"It's strange, though" otousan begins after a short pause. "Did you notice her calling you okaa-chan but me otou-san rather than otou-chan? I'm pretty sure that's not something she picked up from me, because I sure wouldn't insist on my own daughter calling me that formally. Did you teach her?"

Okaachan looks surprised. "You're right. I … I didn't notice. But I didn't teach her that. But, I mean, maybe we said it accidentally? Where else would she get that from?"

"You must be right. I couldn't explain it otherwise, either."

)00(

On the next morning, okaachan takes me out to the market.

I'm super excited. Not only is it the first time I (consciously) leave the house, but I might finally get an answer to the question of where I am on the timeline.

I'm packed into a tight bundle and bound in front of okaachan's chest in a device that makes me look like sausage. A light wind blows through my sparse hair and makes the hem of okaachan's dress flutter. In addition to me, she carries an empty basket.

The market is at its peak and bustling with people. It's not long before okaachan is stopped by people who want to talk to her – and see me.

I'm freed from the confines of the device that admittedly keeps me safe and close to okaachan but at
the same time prevents me from seeing anything other than her chest, which is quite annoying.

She takes me into her arms in a lying position so that I can see the faces of my observers.

As they start gushing over me I can't help but feel like I'm an animal in a zoo. They're too loud, too intrusive – several ladies try to pinch my cheek, goddamnit – and most importantly, they keep us from finishing our shopping. I don't even try to hide my annoyance from my face and I'm pretty sure it translates well.

At one point, okaachan finally decides that she has enough and starts to put me back into that holder thing.

*Sorry, but, no. I don't think so.*

I flail wildly with my arms and legs and try to convey this message to her. I'm relieved to see that she understands.

The new holding arrangement has me basically sitting on her arms and my head leaning against her shoulder. Thanks to that, I get to peek over her and can finally study my environment for clues.

The market doesn't offer much, only that it is apparently within the Uchiha district, judging by the Uchiha fan displayed literally everywhere. It's on the stalls, on the walls of the houses and of course on the people's clothes. Talking about clan pride, huh.

I try to find a familiar face, anything to help me gauge where in the flow of time I am, but it's simply too chaotic. In the end, this trip to the market has not helped me anywhere near as much as I hoped it would.

Okaachan finishes with her shopping and makes her way back to our house. Although her basket is loaded now, she still lets me sit on her left arm while her right balances the groceries. That thing must be heavy, as it's filled to the brim with food, but okaachan manages it as if it was nothing.

It's thanks to this and a turn of my head that in the last moment before we enter the house I finally see the clue.

There, looming in the distance, is the Hokage Mountain.

It has three heads on it.

)00(  

So, it's the Sandaime's reign before the Yondaime, huh?

I groan as I realize the implications of this.

I'm somewhere in the middle of generation Kakashi, which means either the Third Shinobi War is yet to happen or it's happening right now.

Judging by the peaceful atmosphere on the market I will take an educated guess and say that it's yet to come.

Which is just peachy.

No, really, it's not.

Because if I want to stay with my (vague) goal of making the Narutoverse a better place, there's no
way of skirting around this.

For the first time since I made this decision I second-guess myself.

What was I thinking, setting a goal like that?

I am not some badass superhero. Hell, in my first life I hated the idea of physical exertion so much that I hadn't even been able to get my ass out for a jog once in a while. I must've been the laziest person on Earth in regards to sports.

Where did I get the idea that I could make this place a better world when every important decision is made by shinobi, whose most defining characteristic is their sheer physical power? Every single one, down to the youngest genin must exercise more in a week than I have in my whole two lives. I have absolutely nothing going for me but a talent for music, an adequately quick mind and … my foreknowledge.

Which, as it happens, is a huge advantage that nobody else has.

Gods.

Does this foreknowledge place me under an obligation to improve this world?

In my previous life, I learned the hard way not to be an idealistic idiot. Just because you worked for something hard it didn't mean you would get it and just because something was unfair, even if direly so, it didn't mean it would be punished.

But I also learned that the greater goal of every decent human being should be to try to contribute to the common good of society.

In my own way, I have always strived to be a decent human being. My parents' fault.

It might still be idealistic idiom. But if so, it's deep-seated idealistic idiom, able to survive the strain of reincarnation.

I sigh.

…

As of now, I'm officially an idiot.

Because, I, the person originally most averse to any kind of physical exercise, have decided that I want to become a shinobi to achieve the (still vague) goal of making this world a better place.

I just hope that I'm not completely useless by the time I become 32.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry if someone didn't catch the Death Note reference, but rest assured, it's nothing too important.

Btw, go and listen to the Shingeki no Kyojin soundtrack. It's awesome and I'm currently listening to it over and over and over ... you get the idea.
I'm a bit afraid I rambled too much in this chapter. Sorry for that. What do you think?
Who Signed me up for this Rollercoaster Ride?

Chapter Summary

I take everything back. I just want a normal, ordinary life. Is that still an option?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My resolve stands firm for a grand total of one whole night. Come morning, it starts to crumble like a cookie gone stale.

My desire to be a decent human being is challenged by a massive beast that's never had the chance to rear its ugly head in my first life. It goes by the name of 'I'm-too-selfish-to-risk-my-life-for-the-good-of-mankind'.

Or otherwise known as cowardice.

At least I'm honest with myself.

But this thought doesn't really help me to quench the rising panic. Because suddenly I realize, really realize what having been born into this world truly entails.

This is a place where children are raised to become killers.

Where the lines between failure and success all blur into one huge nightmare.

Where lives are nothing more than figures on a board, easily discarded and sacrificed for the goals of someone else.

The more I agonize over this, the more I become disgusted with myself. Because I'm quickly losing this battle against plain old fear. Seems like fighting for the common good is not enough motivation for me to overcome it.

I am no Uchiha Itachi. I am no Hatake Kakashi. Hell, I'm not even a Shimura Danzou.

At one point, I start making compromises.

I could still try to gain political leverage as a civilian by intelligent scheming. There's got to be a way to be a person with influence without being a shinobi.

Of course I know that something like this will not solve a single thing in a hidden village – or the impending Uchiha massacre for that matter, as far in the future as it is. I know it and I choose to ignore it because I'm weak.

That's where I have to admit it to myself: I'm nothing more but a sorry piece of trash.

>)00(<

Two years go by within the blink of an eye. They're peaceful times, characterized mainly by the repetitive rhythm of everyday life.
I continued practicing my language as well as my motoric skills, because even though my enthusiasm for lofty goals has cooled down considerably, it's still better than succumbing to the boredom that comes with living the restricted life of a baby.

I might be a coward, yes, but I'm also uncomfortable with idleness. In fact, practicing to become independent helped a lot with getting over the realization-induced depression. It's familiar and I take comfort in it as it is something that I actually feel confident to do.

Talking became easy as soon as I'd managed the articulation part which involved the main muscle work. After getting down the various and tricky consonants of Japanese, I was up for the actual learning of the language.

I started with repeating everything okaa-chan and otou-san said to me. As soon as I had an idea of the meaning behind their words I proceeded to put them into new contexts. I relished the freedom of being allowed to make as many mistakes as I needed to do to get the things right. Grammar seeped into me almost casually and the more I listened in to the conversations between okaa-chan and otou-san, the more gratifying it became.

I wish I had learnt every foreign language like that.

Learning how to stand, to walk and to use my hands in an intelligent way was much harder, though. Unlike language, which is almost entirely based on theoretical foundations that one mainly just needs to understand, activating your muscles is solid work. Just because you know how your legs are supposed to function, it doesn't mean that they actually do.

Methodical training accelerates the process massively, though, and I'm pretty sure that my rapid progress is not common. As petty as it seems, seeing as I'm actually in my twenties and not a toddler, I'm proud of that.

That is, until I overhear one of okaa-chan's and otou-san's conversations this fateful evening two years later.

I have decided to ask okaa-chan to teach me kanji calligraphy as a follow-up on the hiragana and katakana writing and the reading lessons - and let me tell you, children's books in the shinobi world are so not subtle in their attempts to brainwash you, it's not even funny - and stand in front of the shoji screen that leads to our living room when I hear their voices.

"You're teaching her calligraphy today?" otou-san asks. He sounds surprised and I halt in my tracks, curious about okaa-chan's answer.

"Yes, she asked me to. It's amazing, isn't it? Just last week we started reading 'Adventures of the little ninja Keiichi' and guess what she said after we finished it?"

There's a short pause in which I imagine otou-san nodding encouragingly at okaa-chan to continue.

"She said: 'This depiction of shinobi life is completely unrealistic.'"

Oops.

I don't remember saying this aloud. That's … not good. My hands begin to sweat profusely and I'm just short of barreling into the room to stop okaa-chan from telling more.

In hindsight, I should totally have done that.

"She … she said that?" otou-san asks wearily.
"Yes. And Nobuo, she's an incredibly fast learner at everything we throw at her. At first, when you suggested we test her abilities I was suspicious, but now I think you were right all along."

What. What. What!

They've been testing me? What is this? What did I get myself into? How could I have not noticed this?!

And then she says those **words**. Words that, I'm sure, will doom my entire existence.

"I really believe that Etsuko-chan is a prodigy."

Well, shit.

The world has stopped spinning.

No.

No, no, no, no, no!

Anything, **anything** but this. Please.

How could I've been so stupid? So utterly, devastatingly stupid? How could I let myself go that much?

*How could I have not seen this coming?*

My mind is sent into overdrive as I frantically dig through my memories of the last two years. I try to filter every instance in which okaa-chan or otou-san might have given me a challenge to test my abilities.

And now that I think of it, there seem to be quite a few.

The one where okaa-chan talked me into meditation as a cure for the headaches that sometimes accompanied my writing sessions, which ultimately led me to discover my chakra. This in turn resulted in games in which she made me poke at it regularly.

Or the one where otou-san decided that the hours spent on the playground were a good time to try out acrobatics because I wouldn't play with the other kids anyway.

The constant but subtle feed of words that should have been too complex to grasp for a toddler.

I also remember one moment where otou-san had tried to put a rubber kunai into my hands which I had rejected vehemently. It had happened relatively early on and I think that this has been a learning experience for them. Because of my refusal to take the toy when offered outright they had started to disguise their tests as games and challenges.

What I believed to be indulgences in the wishes of a curious child had really been them putting me to a test.

The realization falls like scales from my eyes.

My parents are sneaky, manipulative bastards.
And I ran into their trap head-on.

Goddamnit.

They say I'm a fucking prodigy.

This is so ironic, because if anything, I rather feel like the biggest idiot that ever lived. Because, a mid-twenties woman being beaten by two people who were aiming to outsmart a baby? Haha, joke's on me.

Aside from this there's still the fact that being a prodigy in the Uchiha clan is a failsafe ticket for a ride directly into the realms of insanity.

I definitely don't want that.

The question now is, what can I do to prevent this?

First, I have to create the impression of everything being peachy as usual. It wouldn't do for them to get suspicious.

So I draw in a deep breath, count slowly to ten and push the shoji screen aside.

Calligraphy now, worries about my status as a prodigy later.

"00("

"You did very well on your first try, Etsuko-chan!" okaa-chan says.

I plaster a cheery smile on my face, but the praise doesn't sound as sweet as it might have done before I heard of my parents' scheming.

For the two hours this session lasted, I've barely been able to hold back on my thoughts and anxieties and I feel like a paranoid nutjob, what with the constant fear that anything I say might be used against me.

I'm pathetic like that and I know it.

I need to retreat as soon as possible and make an inconspicuous beeline for the exit, but okaa-chan's voice stops me.

"Wait, Etsuko-chan, stay a bit! Your father and I have something to discuss with you."

I literally freeze on the spot.

Oh god. They're going to come clean to me?!

This is bad. If they confess to me now, my chances of correcting their opinion will decrease massively. Any attempt of mine to get this prodigy image off my butt will be running into a heightened risk to be revealed, because they might actually think of me trying to do that.

I'm not making the same mistake and underestimate them again.

I panic and inch steadily closer to the shoji screen.

"Does … does it have to b-be now?" I stutter. "I-"
"Are you going somewhere, little lady?"

I spin around hastily and nearly trip over my feet. Otou-san is standing almost directly behind me like a big looming shadow. I feel so small. Not only physically, but, you know, like an animal trapped. He's sporting an amused smirk.

*I'd like to wipe that off your face, sir. May I, please?*

I don't know how much of my thought is showing on my face, but otou-san either doesn't see or doesn't care. He just bends, lifts me off my feet and carries me back to the table where okaa-chan is still sitting.

After everyone has gotten comfortable on one of the sitting pillows okaa-chan speaks again.

"We have great news for you, Etsuko-chan!" she begins.

*Oh god. Oh god. Oh my gaawwd.*

"I'm not going to beat around the bush, as it will be something life changing and you'll have to adjust to it."

*Nonononono, I don't want to hear –*

"So what I'm meaning to say is-

*Leave me alone, I'm not gonna be an Uchihaprodigy-*

"- that you'll soon have a little sibling!"

*NOO-

What.

Sibling? Is this a new synonym for 'prodigy'? But that wouldn't make any sense?!

I stare dumbly at okaa-chan. I'm pretty sure my mouth is hanging wide open and that I'm looking like a total moron, but I have other priorities right now.

Like, that prodigy-turned-sibling thing.

After a few seconds of no reaction on my sides, the smile on okaa-chan's face starts to falter and a worried tone creeps into her voice. "Are you alright, sweetie?"

I try to answer, I really do, but somehow my mind is just one blank slate at the moment and I can't think of anything to say.

Okaa-chan shoots a glare at otou-san that clearly says 'Are you just going to sit there and watch?' and hurriedly pulls me into a hug.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, I didn't mean to shock you! Look, I promise, nothing is going to change between us, we'll still do all the things we used to and you'll be able to keep your room to yourself because we're going to make the guest room the new baby's room and-"

Okaa-chan is rambling. I blink and try to refocus.

"I-I'm fine" I croak out weakly against her shoulder. She doesn't notice, though, and I have to say it
again, louder. "Okaa-chan, I'm fine!"

And, I think, in a way, I really am.

After all, my nightmare has not come true – yet – and this is kind of … nice news.

I had a brother in my old life. I wonder what he's up to.

She stops rambling and looks at me with wide eyes. "Are you sure?"

I smile tentatively and am relieved that it doesn't feel forced. "Yes, pretty sure."

I wonder if this new sibling will be a girl or a boy.

I can't remember having a single dream since being reborn here and I'm surprised at how little it actually bothers me. Perhaps it is because dreams are supposed to be an indicator for a person's desires.

I don't remember desiring anything since I've fallen into this black hole of selfish fear two years ago. Grasping for momentary distractions and connecting them with the purpose inherent to continuous practice has become my new scale for the progress of time.

And look where that got me.

Tonight, though, as my head hits the pillow and the customary darkness begins to envelope my mind, I have an inkling that things are going to change.

It doesn't vanish in the morning.

I wonder if this may count as an imprint of a dream.

In the end, I come to the conclusion that there's only so much that I can do in this prodigy situation.

Most of the damage is already done and slowing down my success from now on might not convince them that I'm normal. But maybe I can make them believe that I'm only a smart kid. 'Smart kid' is still miles away from 'prodigy' after all.

Probably.

Right?!

My birthday on the 27th of December comes and goes. Okaa-chan asks me if I want a party for my third and I look at her with one raised eyebrow. She shrugs and organizes a small get-together with a handful of the nicer relatives anyway.

I end up mainly stuffing my face with the delicious birthday cake okaa-chan made me and impatiently waving away the few kids that came with their parents. Since they're older than me they're not too sad about not having to babysit me.
Okaa-chan is *really* big now and eating literally every single minute. I ask her one day if I had blown up her stomach that much, too. Otou-san takes my hand and quietly leads me out of the kitchen. As soon as he has closed the shoji screen behind him he squats down to my eye-level.

He's looking dead serious.

"Never, never again tell your mother that she looks fat."

…

*Oh.*

…

I start to tell him that I didn't mean it as an insult, that I'm really only interested-

He puts a hand on my shoulder and says "Just don't."

Winter progresses and on the 10th of February, her water breaks.

Looking back, this date should have rung a bell. Or three.

As I'm sitting in the waiting room, patiently staying put until I and otou-san are given the go-ahead, I can see that he's nervous. He doesn't pace or fidget in his seat because obviously, he's an Uchiha, but I notice the tense line in his shoulders and the rigidity of his back anyway.

The thought that, although he looks like a standard Uchiha male I have come to know him pretty well by now, comes into my mind. I can't deny the warm feeling that spreads in my stomach whenever I think of either okaa-chan or otou-san.

Suddenly I'm glad that they're both safely employed within the village walls, what with otou-san being a member of the Uchiha Police Force and okaa-chan being a retired kunoichi. I'm already long past the point of feeling nothing if something ever should happen to them.

Finally, a nurse opens the door to okaa-chan's room.

"You may come in now. Congratulations to a healthy new baby, Uchiha-san!"

Otou-san thanks her curtly and grabs my hand to practically drag me through the door.

Okaa-chan lies in the middle of pristine white hospital sheets, looking exhausted but happy. She beams at us as we enter the room and gives us an enthusiastic wave.

There, on her chest, is a little bundle.

A middle aged doctor is standing at okaa-chan's bedside but I don't think otou-san even registers her as he tightens his old on my fingers and approaches the bed.

Okaa-chan smiles. "It's a boy, Nobuo" she whispers and I can practically hear otou-san's breathing hitch. "Come here and hold him."

He lets go of my hand and I step back a bit to allow them a moment. Almost reverently, otou-san touches the little bundle that is my brandnew brother and lifts him off okaa-chan's chest. Okaa-chan's eyes find me and she raises one eyebrow.
"What are you doing there in the corner, Etsuko-chan? Come here and greet your otouto, too."

My otouto, huh. It has a nice ring to it.

So it's to the picture of us three crowded around the new baby that the doctor clears her throat.

"Congratulations from my side, too, Uchiha-san. I'm furthermore glad to say that we didn't meet any complications at the delivery. Both Kiyomi-san and the baby boy are in perfect health."

Otou-san looks up from the bundle cradled against his chest. There is a crease between his eyebrows and his voice sounds just a little weary as he asks "So there was nothing … unusual about him, sensei?"

Huh. Did he expect something unusual? And did I only imagine his eyes briefly darting to me when he said 'unusual'? Is there something I should know about?

The doctor shakes her head and smiles. "No, Uchiha-san. Your son is perfectly fine."

Otou-san almost visibly relaxes with a relieved breath. "Thank you, sensei."

I'm pretty sure that there is something and I'm getting antsy. Why do I keep getting the feeling that this world is constantly throwing things at me that I'm not prepared to deal with?

"Have you thought of a name, yet?" the doctor asks.

"Yes" okaa-chan says. "This time, we already prepared one beforehand."

I can't quite stop the quiet snort that escapes my nose there.

Yeah, you'd better have. Wouldn't want to make that mistake again, would we?

Her answer, said in the sweetest tone of approaching doom, goes off like a bomb in my head.

"His name is Uchiha Obito."

Chapter End Notes

Tadah. Any lingering doubts about her place on the timeline should be removed now, ne?
I wonder if there's a point beyond which it simply is not possible to feel anything anymore.

I don't mean the numb nothingness that comes with having no purpose or relinquishing all efforts, that gradually seeps into the mind like a parasite which is only detectable after it is fully seated and nigh impossible to remove. I also don't mean the blank waste that remains after every sentiment is killed off for the pain they caused and every remnant of them destroyed to protect oneself from repeated overexposure.

Those are all very valid variants of the absence-of-feeling-thing, of course, but my question is so simple that its answer doesn't even deserve to stand on the same ground as them.

What I ask is: Is there some limit to the amount of emotions you can pile up in your body before you keel over and explode? A lid to be screwed on the jar of bubbling feelings? Some numbered shelves on which you can put them and when the space is used up you step back and say that's enough now, I've used up my allowance of emotions for life and leave?

Because, for the last few months, I sure feel like I've used up my account in the emotional bank. I'm surprised that this whole shock thing – internal freeze-over, lack of oxygen due to malfunctioning breathing organs, general stopping of brainwaves – is still available after hearing that name.

Uchiha Obito.

My little brother is Uchiha fucking Obito.

This has got to be some cosmic joke.

My near mental break-down seems to last an eternity but in reality it's over in only seconds and we're still here in the hospital room. Okaa-chan calls out to me and invites me to climb onto the bed to get a proper look on my otouto.

I move sluggishly and my vision is clouded over by a haze that makes the hospital room seem like it's covered with a thin film of dust. The colors are less intense, the edges more blurred and it doesn't go away when I blink. I dimly recognize the click of a door falling shut and some part of my brain registers this as the doctor leaving, but the thought vanishes as soon as it is finished.
Otou-san has put the bundle – Obito – back on okaa-chan's chest. He's making small gurgling noises that don't offer any clue to what he wants.

I crawl over to okaa-chan and, after an encouraging nod of her, peel back the cloth that's hiding his face away from me.

I don't know what I'm expecting to see in this moment. Maybe the adult version of him, with the scar marring the entire right half of his face and his deathly Mangekyou filled with anger and hate. Maybe a much younger face twisted into a grimace of grief and desperation as a steady stream of tears quells from his one opened eye. Or maybe a 12-year-old that has resigned himself to his fate of dying, crushed underneath a rock and offering his rival and friend his left eye.

I don't know what I'm expecting, but when I remove the cloth and see, all the layers of different images soundlessly collapse into themselves.

I see the tiny face of a newborn, still crumpled and red, eyes clamped shut and sucking in breaths through a minute opening between its lips.

There is no trace of the mass-murdering villain of my memories who had his fingers in nearly every disaster that happened in the Elemental Nations, from the attack of the Kyuubi over the purge of bloodline limits in Kiri to the tragic end of the original Akatsuki in Ame and the subsequent rise of the most dangerous criminal organization this world has ever seen. Nothing that indicates the massive power that is going to be in his hands and eyes, nothing that marks him as the tool Madara will form him into.

There's nothing but the name that was given to him by parents who love him more than anything in the world.

My hand is frozen in the folds of the fabric that covers him and I can feel the eyes of okaa-chan and otou-san on me. I move my hand and will myself to touch him, ever so lightly, on his left cheek.

Obito's eyes fly open.

His gaze, of the same onyx as okaa-chan's and otou-san's, of the same onyx as mine, lands directly on me.

I swallow thickly.

He looks at me with unbridled curiosity, trust shining brilliantly from within. I can see myself being reflected in his irises, my own eyes wide open and lips slightly parted.

And with a jolt I realize that here, right in front of my nose, is the blank canvas of the future. Every choice will appear as a stroke with the brush, unique in its color and conduct, and it is not a given whether the result will be the swirling pattern of an orange mask or something else entirely.

This is not about following the plot of a story. This is about the strength to make the right choices.

(I wonder if I can be strong.)

Hours later, after okaa-chan is finally discharged from the hospital and we've all gone home, I'm still winded.

I'm suspiciously silent and I'm pretty sure my parents notice that, but they don't comment on it for
which I'm eternally grateful. I don't think I can handle their concern, their care, right now.

Otou-san tucks me into my bed tonight while okaa-chan is busy with ... with Obito.

Oh god, it's still so hard to believe.

"You are thinking hard" otou-san states matter-of-factly. "Care to share your thoughts?"

I gulp and slowly shake my head no. I can't meet his eyes.

For some reason I feel guilty. I mean, it's not like I could tell him that I'm just worried that my baby brother might grow up to be the worst villain in the entire Elemental Nations, but the feeling of betrayal lies heavily on my chest, slowly squeezing against my lungs and making it hard to breathe.

This is such a mess. *I'm* such a mess.

Otou-san sighs but doesn't pressure me. He gives me a light kiss on the forehead and wishes me a good night before exiting my room, leaving me alone to my thoughts.

Needless to say that I can't sleep.

I toss and turn around in my bed, making sure that my blankets are tangled into a disheveled pile between my limbs. It's so hot in the room that I feel like I'm suffocating.

*I need fresh air. Now.*

I get up and open my window wide. The air that comes in is chilly and I wrap my arms around my body. My night dress is not made for the temperatures of a February's night. But it's easier to breathe.

Damn. I miss my violin so much right now. What I would give for the chance to have it here, violin on my shoulder and bow in my hand, and play like there's no tomorrow.

I don't think the Elemental Nations even produce violins.

For a while, I stand there and do nothing but breathe. Slow inhales and exhaled. I remember okaa-chan's lessons about meditation and try to center myself. It works.

As soon as I have calmed down somewhat, I find my chakra almost naturally. It flows through my body with a low, vibrating hum, pulsating reassuringly in sync with my heartbeat.

I remember the first time I found it. Before I'd overheard my parent's 'prodigy conversation', I had thought that it had been kind of an accident. It had happened during one of my first hiragana lessons, when everything had still been so new and unfamiliar. I had gotten a headache from staring and trying to copy the characters okaa-chan wrote on her paper, being distinctly unamused by my self-perceived slow progress and messy scrawl. Okaa-chan had taken my hands after a while and suggested to try something that would make the ache in my head go away.

She introduced me to meditating and indeed, I felt better within minutes. I relished the feeling of being at peace with myself, the feeling of finding my base and settling on it. I was surprised, though, when I realized that there was something waiting for me at this very same base.

I poked and prodded at this something and when it actually reacted, I broke out of my meditation and told okaa-chan. She told me that I had found my chakra.

Which, as I know now, had been her intention all along.
Now, finding and feeling my chakra during meditation has become something that comes rather easy. I have never tried something else with it, since I was aware that my reserves couldn't be too great and I didn't want to risk chakra exhaustion, but it has become a great source of reassurance.

Right now, I sorely need it.

The feeling of my chakra streaming is strong today and behind my closed eyelids, I can practically see the blue energy winding its way through my body. It reacts faster to my gentle prodding and on a whim, I decide to take it further.

I pool it in my stomach and focus on letting a trickle flow to my fingertips. It's not as easy as I imagined it to be and I lose track of my chakra halfway down my upper arm.

Immediately, my ambition to get it right is sparked.

Minutes pass and stretch into an hour, but finally, I have managed to flood all of my fingers of my right hand with chakra. They tingle with warmth and satisfaction surges through me. I want to do both hands at the same time.

I close the window and hop back on my bed, shoving aside the pile of blankets and arranging myself in a lotus seat. I close my eyes again and for the next hour or so, I'm busy pushing around my chakra into different body parts. I'm getting good at it and I let out a giddy little giggle.

It is answered by a tiny whimper.

My eyes fly open with a start. They move rapidly as I search my room for the source of the sound, but I don't see anything unusual. With bated breath, I wait for it to repeat itself. Maybe I have just imagined it?

There.

It comes from the other side of the wall that is next to my bed. The room that used to be a guest room and is now Obito's.

I wait for a few seconds more to make sure that neither okaa-chan nor otou-san are already on their way to him, but the rest of the house stays silent. They must be really exhausted.

That makes it my duty to check on him, I guess.

I try to be noiseless as I practically sneak out of my room, tiptoe the three steps to the screen that opens to Obito's room and slip inside. He's lying in his crib – my old one, I realize – and up this close, the noises he makes are clearly audible. I walk over to him and peer through the bars.

My baby brother is awake. Somehow, he has managed to kick away his covers, which I imagine must be the reason for his whimpering – he must feel cold.

I try to readjust them for him, but I'm too short to reach into the crib from above and my arms are too chubby to squeeze them through the bars. I huff in annoyance. I don't want to wake my parents for that, they need their rest.

So I climb over the edge and into the crib.

Let me tell you that trained arms and legs with proper motoric abilities are awesome. (Which, by the way, are the reason why my crib had been replaced with a bed relatively early on. I didn't give a damn about bars. If I wanted to get out of bed, I did.)
Obito is so tiny that there's still enough space even with me in there. I mean, seeing that my body is that of a three-year-old it shouldn't be too surprising.

He's whining again and I hurriedly place the covers properly on him.

"Shhh, you're gonna wake okaa-chan and otou-san if you go on like this" I whisper to him.

He obediently lowers the volume of his voice and stares at me with big, inky eyes.

Whooa. It's like, he understood what I was saying?!

I awkwardly pat him on the head. "Good baby. Now go back to sleep."

I prepare to heave myself out of his crib again, but as soon as my weight leaves the mattress, he starts whimpering again. I swiftly drop back and crawl beside him.

"Shhh. Are you alright? Um … do you need something?"

I feel so stupid, talking to a baby, but I have no idea what to do now. I haven't dealt with babies in a long time. Actually, the last time was when my other brother was a baby. But at that time, I was nothing more than a little child myself.

Obito is looking at me again, and, ugh, do I imagine this or does he look like he's expecting something? Is it normal for a baby to be that expressive already?!

He gurgles and flails with his arms. They can't do much, as they're covered by his blankets, but I clearly get the feeling that he wants something.

Gods.

I scoot closer and wrap my arms around him, pressing his soft little body against mine. His movements subside and he lets out a cooing noise that transforms one part of my brain straight into mush.

"It's okay" I whisper back. "If you want me to stay, I'll stay."

We snuggle together and within minutes, my little otouto is fast asleep.

I'm not far behind.

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Okaa-chan finds us like that, cuddled together, in the morning.

Judging by the surprised gasp that awakens me she did not anticipate this.

Well, that makes two of us then.

I sit up groggily and rub my eyes. "Morning, 'kaa-chan" I mumble. The warm bundle that is Obito doesn't stir the slightest bit as I straighten the blankets for him and climb out of the crib.

"He kicked his covers away in the night. I put them back on but he didn't want me to leave, so I stayed" I say as soon as both of my feet are on the ground and I've turned to okaa-chan. She seems to have recovered by now and is smiling softly.

"That was a very nice thing to do, Etsuko-chan. Thank you."
Ugh, are those tears in her eyes?

"Hn" I answer awkwardly. "No big deal."

She chuckles.

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Over the course of the next few days, I make two important observations:

1. Obito is a genuinely happy baby.

2. He has me hopelessly wrapped around his chubby little finger.

Conclusion: It's of personal interest for me to make sure that Obito stays happy forever.

This is important because it wreaks complete havoc with my current plans for the future.

Or, more accurately, it forces me to confront myself with the fact that I actually don't have any plans. The fact that each and every realization up until now has not actually made things clearer, but instead removed me from the things I need to do. The fact that I have been running away from reality my entire second life.

It breaks down every illusion, every wall that I have built around myself and leaves only one thing for certain: Obito's existence changes everything.

I think it's time to bring back the plans for Operation Uchiha Etsuko.

It feels a bit like a déjà vu, what with me standing in the kitchen again, helping okaa-chan dry the dishes. It seems that these days, most of my life planning takes place in the kitchen.

I find the original plans of OUE securely buried under tons of dust and cobwebs somewhere in a dark corner of my mind, but I'm surprised that I don't meet the ugly beast again. It seems way too easy, but I'm not inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As I catalogue the points of my original life plan, it becomes increasingly clear to me why it was destined to fail. Because, although I had done everything as it was dictated in my textbook, none of it had any actual meaning.

Of course some half-assed goal to be a decent human being and save the world would not motivate me. There was no actual link to my person, not a single drop of genuine emotion invested. Every major event in the Narutoverse seemed still so far away that I could comfortably hide in the back, convincing myself that I had all the time in the world and that in the end, everything would work out somehow.

With Obito in the game, though, this has changed fundamentally. Suddenly, I have a lot of things to consider. And they're all filled to the brim with emotions.

It is with this mindset that I begin the mammoth task of recounting every moment of Obito's life – and everything else that is influenced by his actions.

I try to remember the manga scene that takes place in his life at the earliest possible moment and come up with the day of the academy entrance ceremony. Obito had been massively late – of course – and Rin had kindly saved and handed him his entrance documents when he had finally arrived. That had also pretty much been the point at which he had fallen in love with her.
The manga didn't give any indications as to when exactly that scene had happened, though. Kakashi had been there, which would mean that they all had been four years old since Kakashi, Obito and Rin were of the same age and according to the data books, Kakashi had graduated the academy after only one year of attendance at age five. Those same data books said that Obito graduated at age nine – which meant that he had spent five years in the academy.

To be honest, I'm having a hard time believing this. There're some things that don't add up.

Kakashi enrolled in the academy at such a young age because he was a certified genius, but this doesn't explain at all why Obito and Rin would enroll so early. Even in times of near-war – since it was only one year later that it would break out – I doubt that the village would be desperate enough to push children that young into the academy as a regular occurrence.

Or at least I assume that to be the case for the Sandaime. Now that I think of it, Danzou would totally have done it. And he probably did, too. Not in the academy, but in some shady program for ROOT, somewhere in the darkest corners of Konoha.

Related to that matter is another thing: Even if the village had decided to put in all four-year-olds in existence, it wouldn't make any sense to let them sit in there for five years afterwards. I mean, the only reason they would want to get in so many youngsters would be the fast turnout of child soldiers. And no matter how you look at it: Five years is not fast. At all.

And last thing: On the panel that depicted Obito facing the crowd of his new classmates, I distinctly remember seeing the faces of Kurenai, Asuma, Gai, Genma, Hayate, Aoba and Ebisu.

Which throws kids with a wide range of different ages into one pot.

I mean, Hayate was three years younger and Aoba three years older than Kakashi! How could they all have been of the same height and enrolling together?

Already as a reader of the manga, I had been mildly annoyed by this inconsistency. But as a real person in a very real Narutoverse, this is a problem of a whole new magnitude. Because this proves that, even if Kishimoto himself had put it in there, the information in the manga could very well be false and thus, unreliable.

Jesus. As if I'd needed another problem.

I find only limited solace in the thought that at least the narration after Naruto's birth was consistent, because unfortunately, Naruto is still a long way coming.

So, this basically told me nothing but the fact that Obito was apparently so starved for attention that he fell in love with practically the first human being that was nice to him. Seeing that he didn't have a big sister in the manga and that he was an orphan in the Uchiha clan-

Everything suddenly goes still.

Oh god.

Oh god.

Obito had been an orphan.

Which meant that his parents – my parents – had died.

I hear the sound of china shattering into a thousand pieces. With a start I realize that the cup that I'd
been drying earlier has slipped out of my fingers.

Okaa-chan whips her head around. "Etsuko-chan!" she exclaims, alarm coloring her voice. Her eyes widen when she sees me and my broken cup on the floor and she hurriedly comes over.

"Are you alright, sweetie? Did you hurt yourself?"

I can only stare into her beautiful face. I see her lips moving, hear her warm voice, feel her hands on my arms-

"Etsuko? Etsuko, talk to me!"

I look into her eyes. Her beautiful, beautiful eyes.

"I'm sorry" I whisper. "I'm … I'm sorry that I broke the cup."

I cannot let her die.

Chapter End Notes

As always, drop a comment and tell me what you think!
Of Headaches and Muscle Hangovers

Chapter Summary

I never realized that growing up in the Uchiha clan would drag along that much baggage.

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter for Joyous Children up until now. A huge thanks goes to my gorgeous beta, NightsBlackRose13, who edited this in practically no time at all!

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's in the middle of the night. I'm sitting in a lotus position on my bed and trying to remember.

Faces and places flash before my inner eye, anime scenes and manga panels all mixed up in one huge jumble and flavored with bits and pieces of the innumerable fanfictions I've read. The information feels like a load of freezing cold water unceremoniously dumped over my head and it fucking burns its way into my brain like a branding iron.

This is not going to work.

I need a structure if I don't want to drown in my own thoughts, something to orientate myself with.

Sherlock's mind palace would be nice right now.

In the end, I decide that I need to write everything down: my knowledge, my plans and my predictions. I'm determined not to let something like overlooked or forgotten details threaten the lives of my precious people.

I sneak into otou-san's office and grab one of his blank notebooks as well as one of the several pens in his desk drawer. Since he is an officer in the Uchiha Police Force, he needs to make quick notes all the time and always has a veritable mountain of blank notebooks and scrolls ready. I don't think he'll notice that one is missing, even considering his ninja training. He certainly has other, more important things to think of.

Before I write down a single thing, though, I need to think about precautions. Precautions that will make sure that nobody ever finds out about my … special circumstances. Because obviously, I won't be able to protect anybody if I spend the rest of my life locked in a cell in T&I or worse, in the claws of someone like Danzou. Even thinking about this possibility makes me shudder.

I'm fully aware that, with my current set of abilities, I won't be able to grant absolute safety for the documents I'm going to create. Not by a long shot. None of the standard hideouts are worth very much in a village full of shinobi and that's still not considering the fact that I'm in the middle of the
talent-loaded Uchiha clan. I think the only place worse than here in regards to hiding objects would be the Hyuuga clan – who, by the way, must have abandoned the idea of privacy long ago, what with a huge bunch of relatives with all-seeing eyes constantly wandering around.

However, I do have two advantages in this situation.

One, nobody expects a three-year-old to harbor secrets that could rattle the foundations of the world. Also, I've made the experience that it's rather difficult to look for something that you don't believe could exist, even if it's shoved directly into your face. Which, in turn, means that I'll be above suspicion for some years still, provided that I don't behave openly bizarre.

Two, I know more languages than just Japanese. Nothing stops me from writing everything down in English.

So, even if somebody should ever stumble over my notes they would never be able to read them without my help. I'm aware that the Konoha Cryptology Team calls some brilliant minds its own, but I seriously doubt that even the most brilliant of them would be able to decode an entirely foreign language with absolutely no similarities to Japanese from scratch.

Of course, if the village ever finds out that I know such a language I'd be facing a whole new world of probably painful problems, meaning that I still need to find a suitable hideout, but in theory, this solution is as sound as it gets under the current circumstances.

I let out an audible breath. There're so many things to think about in presumably little to no time, because as far as I know, okaa-chan and otou-san could die at any moment.

Stupid, vague manga. I could really use some more specific information here.

Complaining won't change a thing, though, so I sigh and start thinking about how to categorize my knowledge.

I foresee many, many long nights in the near future.

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Trying to write through the whole night without your ninja parents noticing that you're exhausted the next morning would be quite a feat for anybody. I do it once and once only, thoroughly failing at the 'not noticing' part.

At least I manage to convince them that I was only having nightmares on this first night. Hint: Big puppy eyes while holding your baby brother tightly in your arms help a lot.

Sorry, Obito, but it's for your own good, too.

For the following week, I carefully plan the hours I spend awake, the ones I spend pretending to be asleep – which translates into speed-writing – and the ones I actually do sleep. It's a tight schedule, but I manage to pull it off, resulting in not only one notebook full of notes in English, but two.

Ah yes, I may or may not have sneaked back into otou-san's office and grabbed another one.

The first one starts with an outline of the timeline up until Naruto's birth and continues with short, encyclopedic articles about major events. After that comes a list with all the names I can remember, sorted by chronological appearance and adorned with short profiles. Most of them are from Konoha since I know more about this village than any other. Some even get birthdays.
I was quite dedicated to my favorite characters. Don't judge me.

The second notebook contains my goals and plans, even one or two tentative predictions of what might change due to my actions. It's not even half filled, yet, but this is a given, since life tends to be unpredictable even if you're thrown into a fictional world that supposedly already has its plot fixed.

A plot that didn't include my existence, so go figure.

As for the hideout problem: The notebooks are currently underneath my mattress.

I know that this is lame, incredibly so. *But no matter how hard I wrack my brain, I can't think of anything better.* I'm kinda heavily relying on the 'she's-only-three-she-can't-be-hiding-the-future'-thing at the moment.

Good thing to come out of this is: I have a clear goal now.

It reads 'Save Uchiha Kiyomi's and Uchiha Nobuo's lives!' and is underlined twice for emphasis. The lines dig deep into the paper, leaving imprints on several pages after.

This is great and all, but unfortunately it doesn't come without problems. Mainly, the fact that I don't know when and how they died.

I can rule out one thing, though. They won't die on a mission, since they're both employed within Konoha's walls and I thank whoever is responsible for that. It increases my chances of preventing their deaths considerably.

At the same time, that means that I can't do particularly much right now except for keeping my eyes wide open and prepare myself to the best of my abilities.

From there it's only a small step to decide that, yes, I want shinobi training. I've still not quite decided how far I want to go with the actual profession since I'm pretty sure that as soon as Obito has unlocked his top level of awesomeness I'll become redundant – and that applies for if he goes big baddie, too. Not to forget the tiny detail of the heightened risk of *getting killed* while on active duty, which also still manages to dampen my enthusiasm.

However, I do see it as my job to ensure that my baby brother never treads that path of darkness and since there're quite a lot of years between now and then, I have to do everything that carries even the slightest potential of enabling me to protect him and my parents.

Which is the reason why I ask okaa-chan to teach me exercises in chakra control and otou-san to introduce me to Uchiha-style taijutsu.

They don't try to hide that they're thrilled about this. I'm a bit worried that their expectations might be too high because even if I have a good practice morale this is gonna be different from all the things I've done before.

Both are completely new things to me. Chakra control because, duh, *chakra*. Taijutsu because … you remember when I said I might have been the laziest person on Earth? Yeah, exactly.

Practicing things that are unfamiliar is distinctly more difficult than doing it with things you already have a general idea of. Because the crux of practicing is not to repeat certain patterns till you drop. Well, not only. What is far more important, though, is the ability to realize why something is not working and to repeat the thing with the focus on *that particular fault*.

Realizing the 'why' really is the key here, which of course becomes tougher the more unfamiliar the
thing you try to learn is.

So, it's with a certain sense of trepidation that I follow otou-san to one of the training fields within the Uchiha compound on a crisp Sunday morning.

The air smells clean and a light breeze tugs at my clothing and hair. It's a little chilly and I'm shivering slightly in my leggings and high-collared shirt, but this is nothing compared to the winters I had experienced in my first life. Besides, I will probably get warm as soon as I start moving.

The training field is relatively small, nothing like the big expanses of the public ones depicted in the manga. A few wooden poles are rammed into the ground some feet away from where we are standing, with faded targets painted on them that are littered with marks of the numerous kunai and shuriken that have been imbedded there by generations of Uchiha.

"We're going to start with some warm-up exercises" Otou-san announces and I quickly whip my head around to look at him.

With his short black hair and plain colored outfit, consisting of dark blue jounin pants and the obligatory high-collared Uchiha shirt, otou-san doesn't stand out particularly in the crowd of Uchiha. He looks like your typical filler character and suddenly, this thought makes me so angry.

Otou-san is not your typical filler character.

He has a loving wife, a job that he does with dedication and two kids.

He's the man who adores okaa-chan's laughter, whose dark eyes shine with silent pride whenever I accomplish something and who is nervous and worried about Obito's health because he understands what a fragile creature an infant is.

He's a human being with emotions, history and dreams.

He's not a filler character. He's not.

The anger pushes raw energy through my body and by the end of the warm-up, I feel like an overheated steam engine ready to burst through a wall. I can't wait for the katas that otou-san's going to show me and I want to rock it so badly, I have trouble to conceal my excitement.

Otou-san picks up on it and quirks his lips into a smirk. I grin right back.

Bring it on.

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One and a half hours later I feel like a wrought-through piece of cloth. I'm so exhausted that I have to sit down in the shower, my legs as weak as boneless noodles and not much of a support.

I made a discovery today: Otou-san is secretly a slave driver.

No, seriously. He has no mercy.

He made me repeat every kata until it was absolutely perfect. He didn't tolerate any mistakes or, god forbid, sloppiness and when I finally had all of his instructions down, he made me go through every single one again. And again. Without any breaks.

But now, as the hot water relaxes my aching muscles, I slowly give in to a massive, self-satisfied grin.
Because I actually believe that I can do it.

I'm not going to fool myself into thinking that today was the hardest training I'd ever experience. I'm actually pretty sure that it's going to become exponentially harder the longer I do this. But at the same time I feel that I'm ready and able to go through with it.

The thought fills me with determined happiness.

Okaa-chan is surprised that I have no difficulties with directing my chakra wherever she wants me to. I tell her that this is something that I play around with after each meditating session.

So she moves on to the leaf concentration practice. You know, the one where you put a leaf on your forehead and direct your chakra to it until it floats in the air?

Well, I don't mean to brag or something, but I have it down on my first try.

Really, to focus my attention has never been a problem for me. It's a necessity if you want to be able to practice effectively. Or, as a matter of fact, do anything over a longer period of time.

The next exercise she shows me is much more difficult, though.

"I'm going to direct my chakra to my fingertips now. Watch closely, Etsuko-chan, and try to copy."

I watch as her fingers start glowing and a sheen of chakra spreads evenly over her hand, enveloping every finger individually and coating the back of her hand as well as her palm.

*This is so cool.*

"Try!" she nods at me encouragingly.

I draw in a deep breath and center myself. Calling forth my chakra, I let it flow down my right arm into my fingertips. Up to here, everything works fine, but my first try to push chakra out ends in a pitiful trickle that fizzles out of existence almost as soon as it has leaked out of my finger.

I understand. I need to put in more chakra.

My next try results in a chaotic outburst when far too much chakra erupts from my fingertips. The skin on them has violently heated up and with a startled gasp I cut off my chakra stream.

Okaa-chan takes my hand and examines it shortly. She finds nothing, though, and gives me a reassuring smile.

"Everything's fine. Just be careful from now on, we don't want to get chakra burns, do we?"

I shake my head and flash her a sheepish smile.

I try again and again, and slowly I get the hang of it.

I'm surprised myself, but controlling chakra has a lot in common with trying to get a sound out of a string with a bow. If you don't use enough pressure, the note comes out weak and unfocused, but if you press too much, it comes out strangled and scratchy. Getting the balance right is the key to the perfect sound and being able to compare applying chakra to something as familiar as this feeling is immensely helpful.
After barely an hour of practicing, I'm able to cover at least my fingers in a thick layer of chakra. It's still far from okaa-chan's even, thin covering, but hey, I'm just a beginner.

Okaa-chan beams at me and pulls me into a tight hug.

"Well done, Etsuko-chan. We'll stop today before you get too exhausted, but really, sweetie, that was very, very good."

I offer her a dopey grin.

This is exhilarating.

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Six months after Obito's birth, otou-san and okaa-chan throw a party.

Of course, since we're part of the Uchiha clan, it's not really called a party. Okaa-chan tells me that it's a ceremony to introduce Obito as the first male-born of our family to the rest of the clan.

Uh. That's … pretty archaic, to put it bluntly.

Okaa-chan dresses me in a mini kimono that is of the same dark navy color as is typical for the Uchiha wardrobe and wraps a silver obi around my waist. She does my hair, too, and puts it into an elaborate up-do that makes my usually flat straight hair look voluminous. As we near the finishing touches, she asks me to turn around.

I comply obediently and she puts a silvery object into my hand. I look down. It is an exceptionally finely crafted hair pin.

The design is of timeless elegance: Two lily blossoms facing away from each other and worked out in amazing detail. White gems are set in in place of their stamina and as I reverently trace the relief of the jewelry with my fingertips, okaa-chan starts to speak.

"This, Etsuko-chan, is a family heirloom. It means that this hair pin was handed down to me by my mother, who received it from her mother, who in turn got it from her mother and so on. It's very, very old. Traditionally, a mother gives it to her daughter when she thinks that her child has understood the importance of being a member of the Uchiha clan and is ready to become a proper member herself. Usually that happens around graduation from the academy, but although you're still very young, I believe that you're ready."

I think this is okaa-chan's way of telling me that, although today is technically Obito's day, she is proud of me all the same – and I'm touched.

I don't know where she got the idea that I've 'understood the importance of being a member of the Uchiha clan', though, since I don't feel particularly Uchiha-like. Perhaps it's not exactly about feeling Uchiha-like? I'll have to ask her later.

"Thank you, okaa-chan. I promise I'll do my best."

Okaa-chan smiles softly at me and the warm shine in her eyes seems to light up her features. She takes my hands into hers and squeezes them lightly.

"I don't doubt that, Etsuko-chan."
The ceremony takes place at the Naka Shrine. A sudden memory rushes through my brain.

"Go to the main hall of the Naka shrine. Beneath the 7th tatami mat from the back wall, on the right side, is our clan's secret meeting place. The true purpose of our clan's eye techniques and its secrets are recorded there."

I shake my head to get Itachi’s voice out. Now is not the time.

The hall is illuminated by small torches attached to the walls in regular intervals. Seated in front of the shrine is Uchiha Takao, the current head of the clan. He is flanked by his wife Naoko on his left and his sons Fumio and Fugaku on his right.

Otou-san, okaa-chan and I are kneeling before them and behind us are round about twenty other members of the clan. We’re all clad in formal kimonos of the same navy, even little Obito who is cradled in okaa-chan’s arms.

I think he’s taking a nap there. I envy him.

Words are leaving Takao-sama’s mouth, something about the true Uchiha strength being passed on to the male offspring – which makes me really annoyed by the way – but I'm not exactly listening with close attention.

Instead, I’m staring at Fugaku.

Still-teenager-and-not-yet-clan-head Fugaku.

He looks … less severe than in the manga. Solemn, yes, but without the harsh lines around his eyes or the displeased tilt in his lips. Not at all like the model of a strict father but like an actual human being.

It shouldn’t surprise me as much as it does.

What surprises me even more, though, is his brother Fumio. The manga didn't even mention he’d had one.

I can't tell which of them is the older brother. They look very much alike, but judging by the fact that Fugaku is the future head of clan, I'm taking an educated guess and figuratively point my finger on him. Still doesn't explain what happened to Fumio, though.

However, before I can delve deeper into this train of thought, okaa-chan gently nudges my shoulder. Startled, I realize that for some reason, there's incense burning on the shrine and the whole room seems to be bowing. I hurriedly press my forehead against the tatami mat, too.

Oops. Seems like I missed the whole ceremony despite literally having a seat in the front row.

A few minutes later, the ceremony is formally over and most of the people leave immediately. Some linger, though, and so my parents, as the hosts of this whole thing, have to stay, too.

Takao and Fumio come up to my family. Up close, Takao is downright intimidating and I start to suspect that these vibes come with the job of being the head of clan. Fumio appears virtually meek in comparison. Poor lad.

"Congratulations again, Nobuo-san” his deep voice rumbles. I don't fail to notice that he's not addressing okaa-chan and I bristle internally.
I'm sorry to break it to you, sir, but it takes two to make a baby.

"Do ensure that Obito learns to be a valuable member of the Uchiha so that my son can count on him. Turbulent times are coming and Fumio will be in need of every able hand."

Wait, what. Fumio? Not Fugaku?

Otou-san bends his head. "Thank you, Takao-sama. I'll see to that."

Takao nods and turns to leave, but he stops again after one step. "Before I forget, Nobuo-san. Come to my house tomorrow evening. There're things I need to discuss with you."

With that, he's gone, silent Fumio in tow.

I'm incredibly confused. Could there be other changes in the timeline, except for me?

"Oi, Nobuo!" a new voice shouts.

I sigh. I'm not used to so much social interaction and although they're not even talking to me, I already feel exhaustion tugging at my brain.

A man with ash-grey hair and squinted eyes walks up to us. He seems a bit younger than otou-san and vaguely familiar, but I can't put my finger on it.

"Yashiro" otou-san greets back. I can detect the faintest trace of reluctance in his voice. Huh. Not one of his favorite people, I guess.

"So, managed to make a son on the second try, huh?" Yashiro smirks. "Guess he might become a reason for you to boast now."

My eyebrow twitches. I totally get otou-san's reluctance now. What a jerk.

Otou-san's jaw clenches slightly. "You're right, he might become that. And when that time comes, I'll be lucky to actually have two reasons to boast." With that, he reaches down to my hand and takes it in his.

Otou-san is so cool.

Yashiro's eyebrow shoots up as he lets his eyes wander over my features. I'm sorely tempted to stick out my tongue at him.

What? Technically, I'm three.

"Whatever" he finally says with a wave of his hand. "I guess raising a good bride is something you can be reasonably proud of, too. So good luck!"

Wha-

You. Little. Shit!

As soon as he's left, I turn to look at otou-san and okaa-chan. I'm fucking fuming.

"He did not just say that I'd become a career bride, did he?" I drawl. "You wouldn't let that happen, right?"

They both look at me and need a bit too long to answer me.
"Etsuko-chan …" okaa-chan tentatively starts and I'm seeing red.

You've got to be kidding me.

Before I can explode right here, right now, another Uchiha approaches us.

He probably saves the temple from the wild rampage of a furious three-year-old.

Otou-san and okaa-chan sense that, too, and the relief is almost palpable when otou-san exclaims an almost cheerful "Kagami-san!"

I'm left with a dark cloud hanging over my head as an easy conversation ensues.

This is so not over.

)00(

Otou-san works on the next day and okaa-chan is subtly avoiding me with the pretense of being permanently busy with Obito.

My foul mood hasn't lightened up at all and after spending one hour brooding in my room, I decide that I want to hit something.

With a short "I'm out, training!" I stomp out of the house, barely hearing the "Ok, but please be home for lunch!" from okaa-chan.

I run to the training field really fast and soon as I'm there, I start violently warming up, followed by violently practicing my kata and end with violent hits on the wooden posts that are supposed to be used for accuracy practice.

I'm not picky. I take what I get.

I don't do much thinking in these hours and just give in to the urge of relieving my anger. By the time noon arrives, I'm thoroughly spent and slowly trudging home.

"Okaeri, Etsuko-chan" okaa-chan cautiously calls out when I open the front door. She pokes her head out of the kitchen and sees my sweat-drenched self. "Please wash up and join us when you're finished."

I nod and grunt something that sounds suspiciously close to a 'hn'. I'm really low on energy.

When I finally join them at the kitchen table, Obito is already busy smearing his rice porridge all over his face. Okaa-chan exasperatedly tries to stop him and wipes the food from his cheek when she hears me enter.

"I'm sorry we already started, but Obito didn't want to wait."

"Hn" I grunt.

Careful here, I just might turn into a real grumpy Uchiha.

There's a bowl of rice at my place of the table, as well as some miso soup and chicken katsu. I take my chopsticks and mumble "Itadakimasu" before I dig in.

For a long time, we're all busy with eating and apart from Obito's slurping and the occasional clatter of chopsticks hitting china, it's silent.
Lunch has never been so uncomfortable.

Close to the end, okaa-chan sighs.

"I can see that you're still upset."

Duh.

"Your father and I have decided to discuss this with you tonight, Etsuko-chan. We want to explain some things to you that are important for your future and we think that you're ready to hear them."

"I won't grow up just to be married to someone and reduced to a baby-maker" I interrupt her, anger on the rise again.

It's only seconds later that I realize that this must have sounded weird, coming out of a toddler. I'm not sure that can be explained away with the prodigy argument, either.

Uh-oh.

Okaa-chan looks shocked. She's clearly grasping for words and in this moment I think that vanishing into thin air would be a nice technique to own.

I fucked up. Badly.

Obito saves me when he starts to cry. I don't know if he can sense the tenseness in the air or if he just pooped into his diaper. Either way, I don't care, I'm just incredibly grateful.

Okaa-chan hurriedly stands up and takes him out of his baby chair.

"We … we'll discuss this tonight" she says to me. "With your father."

With a last, bewildered look at me she leaves the kitchen.

I'm such a stupid, uber-emotional moron.

)00( 

We don't discuss this thing tonight.

I've barricaded myself into my room for the afternoon and am frantically searching for a reason to avoid dinner when I hear otou-san returning from work. He's later than usual.

"Okaeri, Nobuo." That's okaa-chan.

"We need to talk." That's … not the usual answer.

I wearily stick my head out of my room and watch as otou-san grabs okaa-chan's hand and drags her to his study. The shoji screen slides shut after both have disappeared inside.

Without much thinking, I tiptoe out of my room and press my ear against said screen.

"Is this about something that Takao said?" okaa-chan asks. She sounds anxious.

"Yes. Listen, Kiyomi, this is important." Otou-san draws a deep breath.

"According to Takao, the village has started preparations for a war against Suna and Iwa."
My body jerks like it's been stabbed in the back. All energy leaves me as once again, the world as I know it comes crashing down on me. I lose the feeling in my limbs and fall on my knees with a heavy thud.

Before I know it, the shoji screen is shoved aside and otou-san stands before me.

"What are you doing, Etsuko?" he asks sharply.

I can't answer. I just look up at him, my mouth hanging open, and watch as his expression morphs from surprise over anger to concern as I don't react. His lips are moving again, but his voice sounds distorted, like garbled sounds from underwater.

There are five words, clearly echoing in my skull and dragging me towards a bottomless black.

Konoha is going to war.

Konoha is going to war.

Konoha is going to war.

Konoha is going to war.

Chapter End Notes

As always, leave a comment and tell me what you think! Hearing from you always brightens my day.
Uchiha Nobuo did not have a good day.

It started early in the morning when he nearly missed his alarm going off. Kiyomi had woken him up when she had turned in her sleep, a frown marring her face while the obnoxious signal found its way into her dreams. This had never happened before. He usually turned it off a couple seconds after it activated.

But neither had something like his three-and-a-half-year-old daughter furiously telling him that she was not going to become a 'career bride'.

He hurriedly turned the alarm off and sighed internally.

There it was again. The thought that had kept him sleepless for almost the whole night.

He had known that she was smart from the moment she had called him otou-san, not only because she must've learned it with insane speed considering that only few nights before she had been more or less catatonic, but also because she had consciously chosen to present them her efforts when they were all neatly gathered around the dinner table, thus achieving the greatest surprise effect. He had confirmed with Kiyomi later that she hadn't tried to speak the whole day before. It might have been nothing more than a coincidence, but Nobuo had stopped believing in them long ago. Life as an active duty shinobi in one of the biggest Hidden Villages tended to do that.

He was not going to start on the issue of her calling him otou-san, when he was pretty sure that neither he nor his wife had ever presented himself to her as anything else than otou-chan. It still puzzled him deeply and he wondered if he would ever figure it out.

That, of course, had only been the beginning. In the following years, the little girl they had so thoroughly misjudged in the first six months of her life proved again and again that she was not what was considered a 'normal child' at all. It was not just about the speed with which she picked up practically everything, but also the long periods of pensiveness she could immerse herself in, the selective maturity she showed and the utter lack of interest in any social contact with other children her age.

Also, all the things she did when she thought that nobody was looking.
His daughter had the working morale and the analytical insight of an ambitious chuunin. At age three.

No, he corrected himself. She'd actually had those skills even before she was three.

He wondered how much of this was actually related to the … unusual circumstances of her birth. Circumstances he'd never really forgotten about but conveniently buried in some dimly lit corner of his mind and left alone because they suggested things that he hadn't wanted to deal with.

Obito's birth had brought them back to the forefront of his mind, though, and full force at that.

He vividly remembered Etsuko's diagnosis seven weeks into the pregnancy. It was the first time that the doctor had been able to pick up traces of brain activity and what they had discovered had been … puzzling to say the least.

"Uchiha-san, your child presents a very interesting case. Although it's still in an early stage, the fetus is already showing traces of brain activity, which usually doesn't happen until three weeks later. Besides, it looks like the brain is rapidly growing and advancing in a pace much faster than the other organs. It's nothing dangerous, yet, but we'd like to monitor this development very closely."

Her brain had stopped growing when it had gained the size baby brains usually had which was a huge relief, but instead of stagnating in progress, it developed further, building synapses and connections that approached the complexity of a teenage-brain.

Kiyomi had been eating the whole day at that point.

On the day she was born he had been afraid of what was going to come out of his wife's womb. He wasn't proud of that and he had never admitted it to anyone, not even to Kiyomi, but it was the truth. He'd been terrified of the idea that something monstrous would come crawling out.

Instead, Etsuko had looked like any other tiny child, coming into the world with a giggle and what he could have sworn looked like excitement shining in her onyx eyes.

For a moment she had lulled them into believing that everything was fine.

Only to plunge them straight through a six-month-period of emotional desolation by becoming catatonic five minutes later.

He couldn't describe the relief he'd felt when the doctor had told him that there was nothing unusual about Obito. He didn't think he would've been able to bear another strain like that.

He was also relieved that there had never been another issue of that magnitude with her again. It seemed almost like … her spirit, for lack of a better word, had finally caught up to her brain development and now that both of them were in synch, she was exceedingly mature in everything concerning a certain kind of intelligence that was made up mostly but not only of the skill to learn efficiently.

What stood in a crass contrast to that, though, was the fact that she was severely lacking in all things concerning stealth. It was hilarious how she thought that she was secretive in her obsessive perfectionism to get everything right or how she believed that he hadn't noticed her taking two of his notebooks. While the first issue by itself was something he was truly proud of, the rest was almost worrying.

It was strange how advanced she could be in some areas but at the same time so painfully insufficient in the one that was essential for the survival of every shinobi, almost like she had already lived a life
in which this facet didn't matter at all.

Nobuo shook his head with a short exhale. What a ridiculous idea.

She was still only three, it was natural that she lacked in certain areas. In fact, it made everything else even more impressive.

He swore under his breath when he looked at the display of the alarm clock and realized that he would have to rush through his preparations if he didn't want to arrive late at work. Usually, Kiyomi would be up with him, preparing his breakfast and bento box, but the ceremony yesterday had gone longer than they had anticipated and Obito had slept through it, only to be awake afterwards and demand his mother's attention for another couple hours after they had finally returned home. She must have been exhausted to the bones.

Not to mention the shock Etsuko had given them with her … strange reaction to Yashiro's taunting.

He just barely made it on time into the Uchiha Police Force administrative building, but even while he settled into his office and began the routine paper work for some petty civilian squabble from the other night, he could not stop thinking about his daughter.

Her outburst had been something on a wholly new level.

He was fairly sure that things like marriage hadn't been discussed with her, yet, and that the term 'career bride' never even mentioned. Ever.

So, logically speaking, a three-year-old shouldn't have understood what Yashiro was even talking about, much less deduced the implications.

Implications that she apparently already had an opinion on. A passionate one at that.

*How was this possible?*

"Nobuo!"

If he had been anything less than an Uchiha, he would have jolted from the surprise. As it was, he simply raised his head, his face impassive, and looked at the speaker. It was his partner Tomomi.

"We got a case in" he said. He wore a grim expression, deep lines engraved around his mouth and on his forehead. "There was a murder over at the civilian quarters. Two victims, a married couple. We better hurry up and get there fast."

Nobuo rose abruptly from his chair. "Did ANBU apprehend a suspect already?" he asked while they moved out of the building into the open street.

Tomomi shook his head. "No. It looks like whoever did this got away before ANBU arrived."

Nobuo sighed quietly. Murders were never a pretty sight.

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Nobuo was back at his desk in his office and massaging his temples, his eyes closed.

The investigation had lasted the whole afternoon and it turned out that the dead couple had left a six-year-old daughter behind who had been staying with a friend at the time of the murder. There were no relatives to take her in since her parents had moved here from another village. She would be sent to an orphanage as soon as it was reasonable to say that she was not targeted by the murderer.
The girl, Funahara Yuki, had reminded him of Etsuko. 

They had similar shoulder length black hair and though the girl's eyes had been a shade lighter than the Uchiha midnight, they'd had the same blank look in them as Etsuko in her first six months. 

He had seen this look quite a few times before, both while he still had been on field duty and as an officer, but only finding it on the face of a child had managed to make him realize what Etsuko must have felt back then. 

Horror and shock.

Why, why had his daughter been so terrified just minutes after her birth? Why, if she had been giggling just seconds before? 

Would she remember if he asked her?

"What has you thinking so hard?" Tomomi's voice carried over. 

Nobuo opened his eyes to see his partner standing in front of his desk with two mugs full of steaming tea in his hands. He put one of them on the desk and Nobuo gratefully accepted it.

"I was thinking about the Funahara girl. Another child in Konoha's orphanage."

"Ah" Tomomi nodded. "It got you thinking about your children, didn't it?"

He nodded and began, hesitantly. "I … I know Etsuko and Obito would never go to an orphanage if something should happen to Kiyomi or me and that the clan will take care of them, but I can't help but feel that … that ..."

"You don't want to leave them alone."

Nobuo exhaled. "Etsuko is so mature but at the same time she's so vulnerable and so dependent. She gets attached so easily, it's … I guess it's normal for a child her age, but I believe that it will seriously damage her if she lost someone close. And Obito … she would think that it was her duty to look after him on her own. I mean, it's almost scary how protective of him she is already now." He let out a short laugh. "Forgive me, I'm not usually prone to rambling."

Tomomi sat down on the chair before his desk. "This case got you shaken up, didn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

For a moment, Tomomi didn't say anything. When he finally spoke again, his voice seemed to come from far away.

"There's nothing that you can do about it. You're a father, so you'll always worry. It's only natural. But don't forget what your job as a father is. You have to teach your children how to survive, give them the means to build up their own strengths and believe in them. Leave the doting worry to your wife, she'll do a better job with that anyway. And when the time comes when you and she aren't around anymore, your children will still have all the things you taught them and will shape their lives according to them. That's really all you can do."

Tomomi stood up. "You should go home now. I can finish up the report on my own. Go home and get some rest, you look like you need it."

He nodded at Nobuo and left.
The younger man had a small, grateful smile playing on his lips.

"Thank you, Tomomi-senpai."

The peace he felt from his conversation with Tomomi was only temporary. As soon as he entered the study of Uchiha Takao, he caught up to the tense air that raised the hairs at his nape.

"Takao-sama" he said as he kneeled down and pressed his forehead on the tatami mat.

"Nobuo-san" the clan head greeted him. "Sit up."

He did as he was told and watched as the elder finished signing some paper work until his dark eyes were trained on him again.

"Are you informed about the current situation at the borders?" he asked without preamble.

"Are you referring to the disturbances at the border of Rain?" Nobuo asked back.

Takao nodded. "The Hokage told the Greater Council today that he believes that these are caused by advancing forces from Iwa. ANBU reports support this claim and indicate that additionally to that, Suna is also trying to expand their territory. They already seem to have met on the other side of Rain. If this continues, Konoha will be forced to act. It cannot afford Rain to fall and the borders of either Earth or Wind to approach Fire Country."

Nobuo sat up straight. "What does this mean precisely?"

Takao looked directly into his eyes.

"It means that Konoha has to be prepared for a war against Iwa and Suna. It means that as Konoha's strongest asset, Uchiha will be fighting at the front lines again."

"Okaeri, Nobuo." Kiyomi greeted him when he entered his home.

He didn't waste his breath on an appropriate answer.

"We need to talk." He grabbed her hand and almost dragged her into his study. She followed him with a surprised and worried look on her face but waited for him to slide the shoji screen shut before she spoke.

"Is this about something that Takao said?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes. Listen, Kiyomi, this is important." He drew a deep breath.

"According to Takao, the village has started preparations for a war against Suna and Iwa."

His wife's eyes widened in shock at that, but before she could answer to this piece of news, a loud thud sounded from outside.

Nobuo was at the screen in two quick strides and practically yanked it open.

There, on her knees and looking up at him with big, terrified eyes, was his daughter.
He inhaled sharply as images of the Funahara girl started to layer themselves over Etsuko's face. The same eyes again, filled with *horror and shock*.

"What are you doing, Etsuko?" he asked, his voice much sharper than he had intended it to come out. He heard the shuffling of cloth as Kiyomi moved behind him, but his eyes never left Etsuko.

Who was breaking down right on front of him.

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly as her small body began to shake uncontrollably, her mouth opening and closing as if she wanted to say something but couldn't bring it out.

Her eyes rolled back and she fell forward.

Nobuo caught her in his arms.

"Calm down, Etsuko. Breathe." He repeated the words again and again, cradling her against his chest and rocking her back and forth.

It didn't work.

He gritted his teeth and called out to Kiyomi.

"She's hyperventilating and I can't get her to calm down. Quick, get a paper bag and bring it to her room."

Kiyomi nodded frantically and ran into the kitchen.

He picked up the shaking body of his daughter and brought her to her room. Setting her down on her bed, he didn't leave her side until Kiyomi came in and put a brown paper bag over her mouth.

Nobuo stood up to make place for her and positioned himself at the foot of Etsuko's bed, closely monitoring his wife. He let out a breath when, finally, his little girl started to calm down.

Well. This day had been complete and utter shit from the moment he had awoken this morning.

He had the glum feeling that worse days were coming still.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked that change of POV. Leave a comment and tell me what you think!
The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

The path to mutual respect and trust is a rocky one, but in my case, I'm glad to say that it's paved with good intentions.

Chapter Notes

Previously:

“What are you doing, Etsuko?” he asks sharply.

I can't answer. I just look up at him, my mouth hanging open, and watch as his expression morphs from surprise over anger to concern as I don't react. His lips are moving again, but his voice sounds distorted, like garbled sounds from underwater.

There are five words, clearly echoing in my skull and dragging me towards a bottomless black.

Konoha is going to war.

Disclaimer: I don't own the lyrics that will be cited in the following. You're invited to guess which song it is and I'll tell you at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.

It can't be.

The Third Shinobi War is not supposed to happen until Obito turns 12, 13i-sh. Maybe a bit before, but not too much.

How is it possible for a war to start 12 years early?

Is it me? Did my existence change something fundamental? But how? Barely anybody outside of the clan even knows about me!

My chest feels like it's constricting into nothing more than a gnarled knot. I'm having trouble breathing. My hands and legs, fuck, my whole body is shaking so badly. Black spots appear in my vision as everything starts to spin into a mad spiral.

Somewhere, in a part of my brain that has not yet shut down, I'm dimly aware that I'm
I don't recall what happens next, but the moment I calm down somewhat, I find myself on my bed, a paper bag over my mouth and okaa-chan anxiously stroking my hair. My rapid breathing seems to have slowed down and I feel like resurfacing from deep underwater.

"Etsuko" Otou-san's voice floats to my ears. I lift my head and find him standing at the foot of my bed. He has a peculiar expression on his face that I can't read.

Shit. That doesn't bode well.

"Yes?" I croak meekly.

"You just had a minor panic attack" he says slowly, measuring my every reaction through half-lidded eyes.

Minor?! If that was a minor panic attack I don't ever want to experience a major one.

"Do you remember why you panicked?"

Of course I do. As if I could forget that.

My voice is very, very small when I answer. "You … you said that Konoha is going to war."

Okaa-chan's hand in my hair stills. Belatedly, I realize that I might be in trouble for eavesdropping on their conversation and I hurriedly add a lukewarm "I'm sorry I listened in." It sounds unconvincing even to my own ears.

For a while, nobody says anything. The silence is suffocating.

Right now, I'd give a fortune to know what okaa-chan and otou-san are thinking. Not that I own a fortune, mind you. It's just that I can practically hear their gears grinding.

Otou-san comes to a decision. He looks at okaa-chan.

"Kiyomi, perhaps you should take a look at Obito. I think I heard him right now."

Whoa. If that's not a harsh dismissal I don't know if I ever heard one. Okaa-chan goes rigid and for a moment, I'm convinced that she's going to refuse.

Instead, she gently untangles her hand from my hair and stands up.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Nobuo" she says. Her voice sounds strained and she's visibly struggling to stay calm.

"You'll have to trust me on this" otou-san answers.

Okaa-chan abruptly moves and leaves the room without another word.

What the heck is going on? Is this still about me freaking out over the war? I'm completely out of the loop here and I hate it. It leaves me out of control, though I suspect I never had much of that in the first place.

Otou-san has moved to the window and is standing with his back to me. He doesn't say anything. The silence is driving me insane and I can't stand it anymore.
"What is it that you want to discuss with me?" I blurt out. I blame my childish voice for making the question sound like a whiny squeal. Definitely not my nervousness, nope.

Otou-san turns around and scrutinizes me with a calculating gaze. His face is a perfect mask when he opens his mouth.

"Tell me, Etsuko. What does war mean to you?"

What.

I look at him blankly.

That … was not what I expected.

It takes another moment before it finally clicks in my head.

Oh.

I get it. This is a trap. It's about this prodigy thing again, isn't it?

My first impulse is to try and fake innocence, but one look into the hard, knowing stare that otou-san levels at me and I know that it's not going to work.

He won't believe my cute-toddler-act anymore. Maybe he never has.

Well, damn. I guess at this point, I'm already fighting a lost battle on this issue, what with all the boners that I've pulled time and time again. Might as well go all the way now and try to squeeze some good out of it. So, before I can start second-guessing myself, I decide to launch a counter attack. Head-on.

Questioning my sanity becomes moot at this point, I guess.

Here we go.

"War means countless deaths" I begin with a shaky voice. "It means that because of political games played by a selected few at the heads of the Hidden Villages, hundreds of shinobi will be sent out to fight and die, thousands of civilians will be caught in the crossfire and innumerable people will be left traumatized and homeless. War means families torn apart, lovers separated, children orphaned."

I stop to take a deep breath. I don't dare to look otou-san in the eye because I'm not sure I'll be able to continue this if I do.

"War means that Konoha is going to send out its strongest fighters. It means that the Uchiha, too, will fight. And that scares me. It scares me because there's a very real chance that you'll be sent out and because there's a very real possibility of you dying. I'm scared when I think of the chance that Obito and I will be left alone. I don't know if I can protect him from the fallout of the war, if I can provide him with the family he deserves to have, and I'm afraid of what's going to happen if I can't prevent him from becoming —"

I abruptly shut my mouth.

Oh god. That was way too close.

Heavy breathing fills the ensuing silence and it's only after a few seconds of staring into my hands in my lap that I realize that it's me who's breathing so hard.
I need to get my emotions in check. Because, hell, I haven't even come to the part that really, really freaks me out.

The part where I have to wrap my head around the fact that, somewhere along the line, I apparently have grievously miscalculated the outbreak of the Third Shinobi War.

Which is a disaster.

I mean, if I'm able to overlook the starting point of a goddamn war, what good is my foresight for?

Unfortunately, that's also the part that I absolutely cannot tell otou-san, along with the Obito-might-go-big-bad-villain-because-he's-ostracized-even-in-his-own-clan-and-then-loses-his-most-important-person-thing that I managed to almost spill.

"Prevent him from becoming what?"

I practically jump when otou-san's voice pulls me out of my silence and I jerk up my head to look into his face.

I shouldn't have done that.

Otou-san's eyes are no longer hard and black. Instead, I meet the glare of two fully matured Sharingan. The six tomoe are spinning madly, creating two nearly solid rings of black against the bleeding red of his irises and I feel everything else eclipse into darkness – my bed, the window, the room – until nothing else but his eyes remain.

Prevent him from becoming what?

Otou-san's voice reverberates in the blackness, seemingly coming from everywhere at once. He sounds flat, inflectionless, and it sends uncomfortable chills down my spine.

I try with all my might to rip my gaze away from his Sharingan. It's difficult, so infinitely difficult and before I even get a chance of succeeding, otou-san's voice resounds again, deep and more forceful than before.

Prevent him from becoming what?

It knocks the wind out of my lungs and I can practically feel the vibrations muddling up any thought process in my mind. Funny. I've never entertained the idea that sound could produce bodily pressure, but here it is, pushing hard into my chest and making it even harder for me to breathe.

Try to get a grip on yourself.

I don't know if this is a thought of mine or if it's coming from otou-san, but either way, it manages to pull me back a bit.

The answer. I have to give him an answer as long as I still have somewhat all of my mental faculties together. I can't guarantee that I won't say anything stupid when I've reached the stage of ultimate confusion.

I wheeze at the attempt to get a sound out of my mouth.

As if that was a signal, the pressure lessens considerably. For a few heartbeats, there's nothing but silence, saturated with an air of expectation so potent that it's nearly solid.

My voice is barely a whisper.
"I have to prevent him from becoming broken."

It echoes through the darkness, leaving a void in its wake that screams to be filled.

But otou-san doesn't answer.

Instead, the Sharingan's glare softens and the tenseness in the air is released. A heavy drowsiness creeps into my bones as exhaustion and something else take over, and I give in to my desire to close my eyes. Just before I slip into blissful oblivion, I hear otou-san's voice again. This time, it's nothing but a whisper itself.

Just who are you, Uchiha Etsuko?

\( \Box \Box \Box \)

"You don't understand, Kiyomi! She knows something! I don't know if it is intuition or some kind of psychic ability, but she knows something. And she's spending an enormous effort on hiding it."

"So you thought it was a good idea to put a genjutsu on her?!"

"It was a light one, and I thought it was worth the knowledge—"

"I don't care if you thought it was worth the knowledge! What I care about is that, apparently, you thought it was alright to use an interrogation jutsu normally employed by the Police Force to question criminals on your own three-year-old daughter!"

"On civilian criminals! It doesn't have any long-term effects on her system and she was never in any danger—"

"I don't care! This is a matter of principle!"

"You're overreacting, Kiyomi! We're shinobi, and as such, we can't afford to give preferential treatment to some principle when there's a chance that it might prevent us from seeing important information."

"Pray, what potentially important information did you see that warranted putting a genjutsu on a toddler?"

"But that's exactly the thing, Kiyomi. I couldn't see anything."

"What?"

"I tried, but I couldn't see anything. Because she resisted. Etsuko successfully resisted my genjutsu."

\( \Box \Box \Box \)

I wake up to the afternoon sun shining brightly into my room. I blink groggily.

That's strange. Usually, I'm up rather early in the morning.

I sit up with a loud yawn. My back pops satisfactorily as I stretch my limbs and I feel well rested and light, my mood so good that it can almost be called chipper.

I let out a small giggle. Behold the chipper Uchiha!

I get off my bed with a hop, a song that I remember from my past life on my lips. The English words
feel foreign on my tongue.

He said "Son, have you seen the world?
Well, what would you say if I said that you could?
Just carry this gun and you'll even get paid."
I said "That sounds pretty good."

The house is so quiet. Are okaa-chan, otou-san and Obito out?

Black leather boots,
spit-shined so bright.
They cut off my hair, but it looked alright.
We marched and we sang,
we all became friends,
As we learned how to fight.

I scurry down the hall and peek into the rooms to try and find the rest of my family. But I have no luck. Obito's room is empty, just as otou-san's and okaa-chan's. There's no one in the kitchen, the dining room or otou-san's study, either. Neither are there any notes left for me.

How strange.

A hero of war!

Yeah that's what I'll be

and when I come home

they'll be damn proud of me.

I'll carry this flag
to the grave if I must

because it's a flag that I love

and a flag that I trust.

I snicker at the last few lines. Pity that the Elemental Nations don't even have flags. Really, there's no fun in marching into a war without something to wave around that has all the pride of a nation summed up on a piece of cloth.

But maybe shinobi don't put their pride into something as fickle as nations. The village or the clan always comes before that, I guess. And of course a village can't have its own flag, since it officially belongs to the respective nation.

My musings have taken me back to my room and I prepare myself to sing the last few lines of the song with all the passion I can muster. Sure, my voice still needs a lot of practice since it's all wobbly and squeaky, but I'll have to start somewhere. And since nobody's here at the moment, I won't embarrass myself.

A hero of war!

Is that what they see?

Just medals and scars
so damn proud of me.

And I brought home that flag

now it gathers dust

but it's a flag that I love

and it's the only thing I trust.

It's funny that I should remember a song that was released in the middle of the War on Terror right now. Back then, I had still been in high school and we decided to use this in a musical project. I recall thinking a lot about it, its meaning and the reason why there was war in the world in the first place. I also recall not coming to a real conclusion other than the almost desperate wish for another solution, something that didn't involve all the trauma and suffering that came along with it.

So why am I remembering it, right here, right now?

In this moment, I hear the front door opening and okaa-chan entering our home.

Immediately, my more somber thoughts are forgotten and I dart out of the room into the direction of okaa-chan, ready to fling myself at her and give her a hug. The song continues to play in my head in an infinite loop, though, providing a soundtrack that's a little off to be fitting, but trying to get a catchy tune out of my ear is nigh impossible, so there's nothing I can do.

_She walked through bullets and haze_

"Okaa-chan, okaeri!" I holler.

All I receive is a startled look.

_I asked her to stop_

Um. Do I have something on my face?

She has a basket with groceries in her right hand and Obito in this awful device in front of her chest. So, she's been to the market. I'm a bit peeved that she didn't ask me if I wanted to come along.

"Etsuko-chan! You're … you're up already?" she asks cautiously.

_I begged her to stay._

The song in my head increases in volume.

_Duh, obviously._ Seriously, what's up with her?

I think my face shows my confusion because okaa-chan comes over to me after putting down the basket at the genkan and squats down so that she can talk to me on eye-level. She's so close, there's barely enough space for Obito between us and he's watching the scene with curious big eyes. Okaa-chan puts her hands on my shoulders and has a worried look on her face.

_But she pressed on_

"How are you feeling, sweetie? Headache? Nausea? Anything?"

Now I'm becoming scared. I shrug her hands off and eye her warily.
"I'm fine. I actually felt really good until half a minute ago." I take a step back. My gut tells me that something's not right. "Why are you asking? You're scaring me."

She draws her eyebrows together. "So, you don't remember?"

OK, scratch being scared. I'm going into full-blown panic mode.

So I lifted my gun

"D-did I do so-something?" I squeak.

I'm frantically turning over the figurative drawers of my memory cabinet and with horror, I realize that the one that includes the things that should be saved under the file 'yesterday' is stuck. I pull and tear at it, desperately trying to get it open.

And I fired away.

It yields and the memories come flooding back, knocking the strength out of my legs and causing a short circuit on my sensory organs.

I remember everything.

The gloom from the morning – the rage at lunch – the panic of the afternoon – the shock of the evening.

Okaa-chan's face – my panic attack – the warthewarthewar – otou-san's Sharingan.

My thoughts come to a screeching halt there.

What the fuck did he do?

One moment I had been sitting on my bed, trying to cope with the fact that the Third Shinobi War was coming way too soon, the next everything had vanished except for those big scary Sharingan –

My jaw drops as realization hits me square in the face.

Otou-san genjutsued me.

He fucking genjutsued me.

"Etsuko?"

My eyes refocus on okaa-chan's face. My mouth has gone dry with my realization and my voice sounds hoarse when I speak.

"I remember."

Okaa-chan's gaze softens. "Are you alright?"

Well, that's the one-million-dollar-question here, isn't it?

I wonder if I should be freaked out. I mean, right now, I'm more pissed than freaked out and even this state is fading into something more like annoyance. I wonder if that's normal.

Being put under a genjutsu was … not as terrifying as I thought, after all. In fact, it granted me some hours of solid and sorely needed sleep.
And the thing is, I can kinda understand why he did it.

I mean, I had been entirely out of character, completely abandoning my toddler-cover and sprouting some heavy things on war, and generally being way out of line. One could say that otou-san going gung-ho with a genjutsu was a bit of an overboard reaction, but I can't really blame him, what with all the pressure of the war and the Uchiha-inherent way of handling things as dramatically as possible.

Besides, looking back, even I have to admit that the idea of a frontal attack had not been very thought through, but I had been acting out of the defensive.

Actually, I'm surprised that it's not currently all blowing up in my face.

Judging by okaa-chan's behavior, otou-san has either not told her about our interesting discussion – which I don't believe, because he tells her everything – or for some miraculous reason, she's accepted this.

I need to know what otou-san thinks. There's so much we need to discuss.

I inhale deeply and look steadily into okaa-chan's eyes.

"I'm ok. I need to talk to otou-san, though. When will he come home?"

Okaa-chan lets out a breath and stands up from her crouch. "He's still at work, but he'll be home in a couple hours." She pauses and bites her lower lip. It occurs to me that okaa-chan has a rather expressive face, which is unusual for an Uchiha. But Obito's expressiveness had to come from somewhere, I guess.

"Ok, I'll be in my room then. Call me if you need me."

I turn on my heel and am about to march straight back into my room when I hear her calling me back.

"Etsuko-chan!"

I stop and crane my neck to look at her.

"If you need to talk … you know you can always come to me, don't you?"

And for a moment I consider doing exactly that. I look at her, standing in the hallway with Obito in her arms and think *this is my mother, my beautiful, sweet, gentle mother in this troubled world.*

She doesn't deserve the shit that I carry around with me.

So I give her a soft smile.

"I know, 'kaa-chan. Thank you."

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Now that I have a calmed down I have to tackle this war issue.

I mean, I'm aware that I won't be able to stop this. But I have to make sure that this isn't something completely random. I need reference points to determine the meaning of all the things that are going to happen to me and my family in the near future.
It gets kinda important when their lives are on the line.

I make a beeline for the notebooks hidden under my mattress and pull out the first one with the list of all the characters I could think of. I leaf through them, trying to think of anything associated with these names that can offer me some information on the war.

Most of the Uchiha known to me are not yet born and therefore not much of a help. Generation Obito/Kakashi kids didn't really get their early childhoods fleshed out, so I don't know if there was anything else beside the Third Shinobi War.

That effectively leaves me with the older generation shinobi, namely the future parents of the Konoha 12 and a few selected others like the Sandaime Hokage, his buddies, Hatake Sakumo and the Sannin.

_Uh-oh. The Sannin._

I get the bad feeling that I overlooked something integral in their biographies the first time around. I quickly turn a few pages forward, leaving the section of Konoha nin.

_There._

The bad feeling turns into a fist of steel-hard rock buried deep into my guts.

Three names. It doesn't take more than that to leave me winded once again.

Uzumaki Nagato.

Konan.

Yahiko.

There're no ages besides their names because I forgot, but I don't need them anyways, since I'm pretty sure that I already found what I'm looking for.

I don't know how I've managed to ignore the significance of the information their life stories provide in combination with those of the Sannin's. It's probably related to my fixation on Obito's life and my distorted perception of the time intervals in the Narutoverse, because somehow, I'd always imagined the gap between the Shinobi Wars to be greater than just over a decade.

So, yeah, I was right in suspecting that the coming war couldn't be the Third Shinobi War. What I had failed to take into account, however, was that before the Third, there had to have been a Second.

_The upcoming war is the one that will go down in history books as the Second Shinobi War._

_000(

When otou-san finally comes home, I'm awaiting him on our porch.

I've decided that I can't wait until after dinner for the chance to speak to him. I want to tell him everything he wants to know. If it's going to save his and okaa-chan's lives and prevent Obito from becoming an orphan, I'm willing to pay that price.

I can tell that he's surprised to see me, judging by the way the muscles in his shoulders tense up with a minuscule movement, but his face remains blank.

"Etsuko" he greets me.
"Otou-san. We need to talk."

Otou-san nods as if he's been anticipating this and without another word, we go straight to his study.

"So, about yesterday" I begin as soon as we're both settled on a zabuton, otou-san behind his desk and me in front of it. He's even activated the privacy seals, proving to me that he's taking this really serious. Which is a good thing, I guess.

Then why am I getting nervous all of a sudden?

I swallow thickly, but before I can chicken out, I open my mouth again. "I totally understand-"

"I shouldn't have done that" otou-san says at the same time.

It takes a moment for the words to register in my mind.

"What." Oh yeah. That was quick-witted me again.

Otou-san sighs and rakes a hand through his short hair. He looks exhausted, with big bags under his eyes and an ashen hue to his pale skin. And I don't know if I'm imagining it, but I think I spot some silver glinting in his hair.

He must've been under a lot of stress lately, and suddenly I feel like an asshole for heaping all of my shit on his shoulders.

"I was taken completely by surprise yesterday and I guess I jumped right into the role of a police officer before thinking it through. Your mother and I had a … discussion about this the same night and although I didn't want to admit it then, I can see now that what I did was wrong. I shouldn't have put you under a genjutsu, Etsuko. That was the right thing for a shinobi to do, but not for a parent. I should have trusted you to tell me your thoughts of your own free will, should have trusted you to know what was too important not to tell, but instead I tried to force you. I utterly failed at being a father there. I … I hope you can forgive me this once."

Wow.

Just, wow. I totally didn't expect that. I mean, I've come to terms with otou-san's reaction and actually think that in a ninja-ish paranoid way of thinking, it was kinda justified in that situation. Hearing him apologize to me makes my respect for him soar into immeasurable heights.

"It's ok" I mumble. "I understand why you did it, so I'm alright."

Otou-san lets a small relieved smile on his lips.

"You're so mature, Etsuko" he says quietly. "Smart and incredibly hard-working, too, and although I don't understand how, you've always been. I'd like it if someday, you'd decide to tell me your secret, but I want you to know that I'll never put pressure on you to reveal anything that you don't want to."

He's not just referring to my skills, I realize. He's making me the offer to treat me as a fully-fledged intellectual being, putting his trust in me and asking for the same in return. Which is only fair.

It feels incredibly liberating and it takes an enormous burden off my shoulders.

"Thank you." My voice is all shaky. "Thank you for trusting me."

Otou-san stands up from his zabuton. "We should go for dinner now. Your mother's cooking is too good to let it go to waste."
I hesitate to follow him. "Can I have a moment to myself?"

"Of course. Join us when you're ready."

My eyes follow him as he walks over to the shoji screen. Before he exits the study, though, he turns back one more time.

"By the way, I don't ever intend to marry you off, Etsuko. You're free to choose the path of your life."

I let out a suppressed sob.

*I won't betray your trust, otou-san.*

I'm still slightly dazed by the time I join my family at the dinner table, but at least my tears are not threatening to spill out at any minute.

Okaa-chan gives me a soft smile as I flop down on my seat and hands me a bowl of rice. Obito is happily flailing with his arms and making little cooing noises. I lean over to press a kiss on his soft cheek and receive a bright toothless smile in return.

My precious little otouto. Obito has become the sun of my solar system and I'll be damned if his happiness ever gets clouded.

At the end of dinner, otou-san clears his throat to make an announcement.

"I wanted to tell you this yesterday already as it's part of the conversation that I had with Takao."

I tense and see okaa-chan doing the same from the corner of my eye.

"The war is still in its early stages and it's questionable if it's going to warrant a big intervention on Konoha's side. But in the case that forces have to be sent out, Takao has decided on a plan for the Uchiha. Since the clan runs the Police Force of Konoha, it would be unwise to send out every last one of us. So Takao has designated Fumio as the head of the Police while he himself will fight in the field. Furthermore, I was ordered to stay in Konoha and act as his second in command."

*Which means that otou-san is safe from the war.*

Okaa-chan and I exchange a glance as twin smiles of joy blossom on our faces.

God bless Takao-sama. I take every uncharitable thought that I ever had on him back. Bless him. Otou-san is going to be safe.

Chapter End Notes

Did you guess the song right? It's "Hero of War" by Rise Against. I seriously love this song and I recommend you to go and listen to it. It was a major inspiration for this chapter.

This story has finally arrived the point at which it is now over on ff.net where I posted it
first. The updating schedule will be slower now, since the future chapters have to be written first and not simply posted.

So, as usual, tell me if you liked the chapter and leave a comment. Can you imagine what's gonna happen next? :)

Petty Little Nuisances

Chapter Summary

What's life without a couple of issues?

Chapter Notes

My dear patient readers! It took longer to update than I thought - had some difficulties with this.
By the way, if you want to know the progress of future chapters, have a look at my tumblr blog. I'll post info there.

Thanks to my beta NightsBlackRose13 for the fast proofreading! You make my life a whole lot easier.

Without further ado, on to the chapter! Longest of this story, yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remember when I said I've never dreamt a single dream since being reborn?

Well, tonight I do. It's a vivid one.

I'm standing in front of a house. It's made of red bricks and has two stories, a front garden with climbing roses covering a good part of the left side of the wall and a white front door. A garage is attached to the right side of the building and its door is open, revealing an older model dark blue Volkswagen Passat.

It's a typical western middle class house and most definitely not the house that I currently live in. It's not the one in which okaa-chan taught me how to read and write, how to control chakra and how to make onigiri. Not the one otou-san comes home to from a long day of work. Not the one in which my little otouto is lying in his crib or busy crawling on the ground or eating in his baby chair.

This is not my house. Instead, it's home.

Anticipation bubbles in my stomach along with a light throbbing in my temples as I walk up to the white door. There's a window set in it, but the thick glass doesn't really allow me to look in.

I dig my right hand into the pocket of my jacket and take out a set of keys. They make soft clinking noises when I try to make out which is the right one to open the door. I smile fondly as my fingers brush against a matryoshka pendant, the laughing face of the miniature doll shiny from the varnish applied to the wood. My little brother had given it to me when he came back from his trip to Moscow.

I finally find the key. It fits perfectly and the door swings open.

Everything is as I remember. On my left side there's the shoe rack, stacked full of shoes of different
sizes for the three people still living here after I moved out for university, and on my right the coatrack, equally as full. A full body mirror leans against the wall right across from where I'm standing and I can see my reflection on its surface.

I unzip my jacket and reveal the outfit underneath. I'm wearing jeans and my favorite blouse. It's made of silk and of a deep emerald color, and I don't look half bad in it if I may say so. But there's a strange feeling in my gut, telling me that something is off. And the throbbing in my head is becoming quite insistent.

I'm puzzled. I do a full rotation in front of the mirror, but as far as I can tell, everything fits perfectly fine: from the uncomplicated bob on my head over the pearl-colored buttons on the blouse to the sneakers, nothing is out of place. I grimace at my reflection and observe as my dark brown eyes narrow to slits, my nose scrunch up and my round-ish features contort into a generally grotesque picture.

"Hey Liz, is that you?"

I look away from my reflection and step through another door, out of the cloak room and into the smaller version of an entrance hall. Light floods in from the opposite side that's completely made of windows which go from the ceiling to the floor and reflects off the light blue tiles under my feet. A wooden staircase winds its way up to the second story from which I heard the voice coming.

"Yeah, just came back" I answer. "Are mom and dad in?"

I groan quietly when, suddenly, something in my head goes off like a jackhammer, pounding against my skull with a resounding echo. The voice sounds distorted when it answers my question.

"Nah, they just went shopping, took the other car. Didn't you notice it missing?"

I can hear feet moving, coming down the stairs. First jeans-clad legs, then a baggy sweater comes into view and when the face appears –

My vision explodes into a million flashing stars and my head straight with it.

I abruptly sit up and find myself in a bed. Blinking several times, I try to shake off the dizziness and disorientation that's threatening to send me right back to oblivion. I feel as if the ground has suddenly dropped, as if somebody has pulled away the rug beneath my feet, leaving me crashing into solid nothingness.

I don't remember dreams to be so unpleasant, especially because normally I wouldn't have categorized this one as a nightmare if not for the aftermath.

Deep breaths. Feel your chakra.

I calm down gradually, but even as my head clears, the profound feeling of wrongness doesn't leave completely. It's something that comes from deep within my very own bones and I become scared of this thing that's foreign, yet strangely familiar.

I feel the urge to have something solid by my side, something to anchor myself and to help me will this strange sensation away. Preferably warm.

I get off my bed as soon as I'm sure that I won't keel over when my feet touch the ground and walk to the shoji screen, sliding it open. The hallway is dark and deserted, devoid of even the barest hints of light. My family is probably fast asleep.
I stand there for an indecisive moment, not sure what I actually want.

Is it strange if I seriously contemplate crawling into the bed of okaa-chan and otou-san? Seeing that I've always been exceedingly independent, they would probably think so.

Argh. I vote for the right to snuggle with my parents whenever I want to regardless of age and maturity. Declare it as therapeutic necessity.

Not that I need therapy. Goddamnit, it's just a dream. What am I making all that fuss about?

I turn on my heels and almost go back to my bed, but somehow, my body is reluctant to move. The thought of having to go back and face the darkness alone leaves me trembling and gasping for breaths.

Without further thinking, I move five steps to my left and silently open the screen to the room next to mine. I tiptoe to the crib and climb in next to my baby brother. Obito shifts a bit but doesn't wake up, not even as I carefully hug his tiny warm body and hold him close to me. He smells like baby powder and the cedar-scented shampoo okaa-chan uses to wash his hair. It calms me down like nothing else and as I slowly fall asleep, I'm almost confident that I won't dream anymore tonight.

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In the early morning, I sneak back into my room before anybody can notice that I spent the night in Obito's room.

I'm a bit embarrassed about this whole thing, but at least I'd been right. The sleep after that had been deep and dreamless and I'm pretty sure that this is an isolated case with a slim chance of repeat.

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"Etsuko" otou-san says at dinner three weeks later. "What do you think about the academy?"

I freeze with my chopsticks halfway to my mouth. My eyes go from otou-san's face to okaa-chan's and what I see makes me uncomfortable.

Because both are watching me rather carefully.

Which in return tells me that they may or may not have planned something.

"Um" I mumble. "It's the place where kids go to become shinobi?"

Otou-san almost sighs. "I didn't actually ask you what the academy is, but I guess that's what I get for being so vague. Let me rephrase it then: Would you like to enroll there?"

"N-now?" I blurt out. "Isn't that a bit e-early … I-I mean I'm only three!"

"New classes will start next spring" okaa-chan begins and otou-san seamlessly takes over. "And by that time you'll be four. I admit that you'll probably be the youngest child to enroll, but your mother and I believe you're more than ready."

And then they fucking smile.

My hands start to sweat as I try to come up with an appropriate answer that will make my opinion on this matter unmistakably clear. Because I do have an opinion on this, one that is set in stone and backed up with solid reasoning.
I don't want to go to the academy so early.

And with 'going to the academy' I actually mean 'graduation' because I seriously doubt that attending the classes will pose a challenge for me.

Why is that a problem? It is, because early graduation won't do any favors for my goals to protect my family. First, the time which I spend in class will be time spent away from them. Second, time spent on team training as a member of a genin team will be time spent away from them. Third, time spent on missions will be – yeah, you guessed right – time spent away from them.

Which is completely unnecessary, when tutoring me at home will most likely yield the same results in terms of academia and physical skill since I learn much faster when there's nobody around to drag me down.

I'm aware that I couldn't do anything even if I stayed with them every single minute of the day, but for some reason I'm convinced that I'll know if something is amiss. It's a gut feeling, just like watching a TV show or reading a good book and at some point knowing that drama will descend. I'll know and I'd be able to at least warn them.

Even more important than that, though, is something else still: Itachi's fate serves as a grim reminder of what happens to kids in the Uchiha clan if they reveal themselves to be smarter and faster than anybody else. I know that his case was especially extreme since he was especially talented and the clan heir, but I'm still pretty sure that certain tendencies run through this clan like liquid tar. You know, that hot, sticky-as-hell and poisonous stuff?

Yeah, exactly.

I happen to know how his story ended and as selfish as it sounds, I like my sanity, thank you very much.

My silence seems to last a bit too long because one of otou-san's eyebrows shoots up.

"You do want to become a shinobi, don't you?" he says. His voice is laced with genuine surprise which gives me the impression that he didn't mean to pose this as a leading question. Surprise because he probably never expected me to answer with anything less than enthusiasm, because, let's be honest, I never gave him reason to doubt that I'd want to be a shinobi. If anything, I had always been the one to push both of them to teach me.

"Yes?" I answer timidly.

I think I want to be a shinobi but at the same time, I don't want to be one.

What I want is being able to protect my precious people, which in this world means that I have no choice but to become a ninja, but I never wanted to be one for the sake of being one. I don't want to go on shady missions that could end my life. I don't want to kill people I don't know and who've done no harm to me. I don't want to dirty my hands. In this sense, I'm being incredibly selfish again.

It is at this moment that I realize with startling clarity that I've never been anything but selfish.

In my past live I had believed that I belonged to the sort of people who would put the greater good before my own needs. I believed in honor, as archaic as this word is, but the concept appealed to me more than any meaning modern terms could convey. I believed I was one of those who acted honorably, chipping in my two cents into university politics and volunteering for social institutions. I believed I was a decent person.
Three and a half years spent in this life, with half a year being practically comatose and two years in a fear induced depression, and I realize that I'd been successfully fooling myself. I realize that I've never really gone out of my way to improve the world as I had so pretentiously thought. Every good deed that I'd ever done had been conveniently lying right in my way and never demanded much of an effort. True, other people thought I was dedicated since there were far more people doing much less, but just because I was interested in the happenings of my immediate environment it didn't make me a better person.

It's also true that in my old life, this kind of involvement had been enough, considering I'd been young and at the beginning of my professional life. I had been living inside the standard bubble of a standard university student, leading a comfortable and privileged life in a wealthy country during peace time, so there'd been no real reason to move beyond my comfort zone.

But here, in a world where losing your life is a workaday risk, those tiny little things mean nothing. Here, trying to improve the world means sacrifice in sweat and blood. It requires idealism and selflessness the size of tailed beasts. The kind of which Jiraiya, Itachi and Naruto are and will be capable of, that's true.

But what is also true, is that out of these three, two had ended up dead.

I know I'm not them, that I could never be. Grand goals crumble to ashes in my mind because they forever lack base. The only things that effectively matter to me are myself and my family, the latter in turn being an extension of myself.

I am but a despicable person.

"I … I need more time to think" I choke out to otou-san and okaa-chan. I can't meet their eyes. "Can I decide this later?"

"Of course you can" Okaa-chan says. She sounds worried. "In fact, you have time until early spring since the academy won't take new students before that. Are you alright, Etsuko-chan?"

I nod. "I'm fine. I just want to go to my room. Please excuse me."

I stand up and practically flee from the room, barely dragging along my dignity and self-respect.

This is going to take some time to sort itself out.

There're four chairs in the room, positioned in front of a piano. Before each of them is a music stand made of wood and metal, the kind which you see in almost every music college.

It's a quintet rehearsal. We'll be rehearsing Schumann's piano quintet, I suddenly remember. But if this is a rehearsal, where are my fellow musicians?

"I can't play with this music edition."

I know this voice. It sounds whiny and it's giving me a headache.

"It's shit. The bowings and the dynamics are all wrong. This is not the urtext edition. I refuse to play out of material that isn't urtext."

"Then why the hell did you get this edition in the first place?"
Another voice. I know this one, too. My headache is getting worse.

"I needed something to practice with and I thought Elizabeth would give us the right material!"

"I did" I say. "I put a copy in your locker one week ago."

Where're the people?!

"You should have told me!"

"Don't you ever check your locker?"

"Of course I do, but I didn't see any sheet music in there."

A new voice behind me tunes in. "I had enough of this. I'll take the original and make copies now, so –"

*Oh! That's my brother's –*

My head explodes.

Well, not literally. But the pain certainly leaves that impression.

I sit up, wildly gasping for breath. It takes a few seconds until I'm coherent again. My bed. My room. My dream.

I feel terrible.

Fuck this.

Obito doesn't complain as I crawl beside him and under his blanket. He's asleep, but he subconsciously turns his head to me. He's soft and warm and all the reassurance that I need. I fall asleep pretty quickly with him by my side.

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Otou-san apparently thinks that giving me one night and day – which I spend mostly moping around in my room – should be enough to deal with whatever problem I have. I hear him approaching and halting before the shoji screen that leads into my room.

"Etsuko, I'm coming in."

And then he's standing in front of my bed, presumably looking down on my sorry self as I lie curled up on the sheets, with my arms wrapped around myself and facing the wall. The dream didn't do me any favors, what with all the self-loathing that I'm busy doing.

Otou-san probably wants to know why I'm not telling him anything – again. Despite the deal we made. Despite the mutual trust we promised to each other. He's justified in feeling wronged, I guess, but that doesn't make it any easier for me.

"Do you know what my job entails, Etsuko?"

Ah. So he's trying to get in through the I'm-your-father-you're-my-daughter-we-both-have-responsibilities-let's-have-a-grown-up-conversation-door. I don't have any comments on that. As I said, I can totally understand his point.
I feel the mattress dip under the added weight of otou-san sitting down.

"I'm sure you know I work as a police officer in the Konoha Police Force. You may know it as the Uchiha Police Force since it's run entirely by our clan, but it is in fact an institution of the village. Every officer is a trained shinobi who has served at least as a genin on active duty once but the overwhelming majority is chuunin or above. It's a career option only open to us Uchiha and a show of trust between the Hokage and the clan."

The more I listen, the more I wonder what otou-san is getting at exactly. Is he not going to read me the riot act for behaving like a mopey brat? Why is he telling me about the Police Force?

"I don't really understand why you need time to decide if you want to enroll in the academy because frankly, your mother and I both are confident that you'll have no difficulties with the classes and we're fairly sure you know it, too. However, we can clearly see that something's bothering you and preventing you from accepting. We can't determine what it is and until you actually talk to us we can't do anything on that front. But since you haven't given us an outright 'no' either, we take it as permission to give you further encouragement."

That catches my attention. Otou-san is so open and sincere about his intentions that it's outright suspicious. But then again, he might actually honor the deal we made, unlike a certain bratty someone. I turn around to see his face. His expression is serious – and honest.

"What kind of encouragement?" I ask.

Otou-san doesn't miss a beat. "Come with me to the Police Force tomorrow."

Uh … ok?

"I want to show you how the organization works. I want you to see the purpose of it and to realize that it serves as an important pillar of Konoha's inner workings. Would that be agreeable to you?"

How can I refuse when he's asking so nicely?

"O-okay."

"Very well. I have a day off tomorrow, so we can go after training and a quick lunch when the afternoon shift starts."

He stands up from the mattress and evens out the folds in his yukata. His ink-black eyes land on me, his gaze thoughtful and tinted with something – softer.

"Sleep well, Etsuko" he says and exits the room.

)00( I readily admit that I'm impressed.

The manga showed the building of the Uchiha – no, Konoha – Police Force only once, namely when Itachi gave lil' Sasuke a piggy-back ride because the boy had managed to twist his ankle during training. They had passed it on their way home and Itachi had explained why there was a big fat Uchiha fan on a building that was supposedly a village institution.

What the manga didn't show, however, was the fact that the headquarters are right in the middle of Konoha, located closely to the Hokage's quarters. Which makes it the first place I've ever visited that is not in the Uchiha district.
It is a complex consisting of half a dozen buildings, each for the separate branches of the Police Force. The flashiest one is three stories high, built with more glass in the sand-colored walls than one would expect from a building made by a paranoid bunch of people such as ninja and obviously the main building. The style is decidedly western, which surprises me a great deal since Uchiha tend to feel more comfortable with traditional styles.

Otou-san marches straight up to it and we enter the reception hall.

Although it's spacious, it's not particularly inviting. Windows, though not really scarce, are small and thick, making it necessary for a small army of fluorescent lamps to provide enough light. There is a reception desk to the left and a double row of seats on the right, leaving the back with lots of doors and a stairwell. The dominant colors are dark blue and white, and if there's the occasional speck of crimson, I'm not too surprised.

I almost roll my eyes. As if it wasn't clear that this is an Uchiha-run business.

It's not particularly crowded in here, though I spot a few very busy looking relatives darting around.

"This is the main administrative building" otou-san explains. "The offices and archives are in here, as well as all the things concerning civilian cases. There in the back are a few interrogation rooms."

"Only civilian cases?" I ask.

"Yes. For crimes committed by shinobi we have another building. Two actually, if you count in T&I."

A shiver races down my spine at the mention of T&I. I didn't know it had formerly belonged to the Konoha Police Force, but thinking about it, this actually makes sense, since the Konoha Police Force is above all a military force tasked with maintaining the security of the village. It must have become an own branch when the whole thing had to be reorganized in the aftermath of the Uchiha massacre.

I guess it's difficult to maintain an institution when the personnel specialized for it is … absent. I wonder how ANBU dealt with the sudden influx of additional duties.

I suppress a shiver. *This time around, it mustn't come to that.*

"Here is where all the new recruits start out" otou-san continues. "They're tasked to handle the civilian cases until they have proven themselves to be proficient. The Police Force demands from its officers to be absolutely diligent and in top shape at any given time to be capable of restraining and bringing shinobi to justice. Only the strongest can do that and as I said before, it's a sign of respect and trust from the Hokage to the Uchiha clan. He knows that the strength we wield is unrivaled. Etsuko, do you know the origins of the Konoha Police Force?"

I know, but of course I can't show since nobody officially told me, yet, so I shake my head and listen dutifully as otou-san launches into a narration of how the Police Force, whose full name is the Konoha Military Police Force by the way, came into being.

One question is nagging at the back of my mind, though: Does he … does he really believe what he just told me? All of it?

I watch his face as he talks and leads me through the building and realize that, yes, he completely and genuinely believes it.
Nearly four years living in the middle of an Uchiha family and it's the first time in my acquaintance with otou-san and okaa-chan that the superiority complex of this clan is thrust bluntly into my face.

Okaa-chan is all about traditions, true, about understanding what it means to be an Uchiha – the hairpin is in a small wooden box in the last drawer of my closet, hidden under a pile of neatly folded sleeping gowns, by the way – and during training with otou-san there has always been this strong undercurrent of highest expectations flowing through his regimen. But to hear it so directly is kinda … stunning.

I think this place is partly to blame for it, too.

What his explanations also show me, though, is that the Uchiha still seem to be on relatively good terms with the village administration. Tobirama must have been a particularly persuasive talker when he offered them the control over the Police Force to have successfully disguised his true interest of channeling the Uchiha rage into something productive for the village and Hiruzen must have carried that on rather admirably.

Hah. Who am I trying to fool? Tobirama, a persuasive talker? That was Hashirama's strong suit, not his.

… which only leaves the solution that the Uchiha wanted to believe whatever he fed them as long as it brought peace.

Apparently, even the strongest grow tired of never ending fights – with the exception of dear old Madara of course.

"Nobuo! What a surprise to see you here. It's your day off, isn't it?"

Otou-san and I both turn around to look at the person who has addressed him. We're inside his office by now and there, leaning against the doorframe is a middle-aged Uchiha. His tall form is clad in typical jounin wear, green flak jacket over a dark shirt and pants, though the flak jacket looks kinda … strange. Its color is lighter and it lacks the scroll pouches on the chest leaving it plainer than the version I'm used to. Is this some kind of special Uchiha jacket?

His face has some deep lines at the corners of his mouth, giving him a default serious look, but his eyes are surprisingly expressive as he takes us in with an interested gaze. His dark hair has wide silver streaks in it and sticks from his head in wild spikes.

"Tomomi-senpai! I was wondering if we would run into you today. This is my daughter Etsuko and I'm currently showing her our work place. Etsuko, this is my partner Tomomi."

I bow quickly. "A pleasure to meet you, Uchiha-san."

Tomomi smirks at that. "My, if you call me Uchiha-san here, every single person will turn their head. Call me Tomomi, Etsuko-chan. And it's a pleasure to meet you, too."

"Alright, Tomomi-san" I reply like the well-behaved little girl I am.

"So, are you going home now?" otou-san asks.

Tomomi nods. "My wife has prepared a feast for our 25th anniversary, so I'm leaving. I think the people can handle themselves just fine."

"Congratulations, senpai!" otou-san says and I'm almost shocked to see a real smile flash across his face. I catch the movement of his left thumb as it tenderly rubs against the silvery band on his ring.
I giggle internally and have to bite my lip not to let it bubble out. *Otou-san is secretly a sap.*

"Thank you. Well, I'm on my way now. Have a nice evening!" Tomomi gives otou-san a nod, me a jovial wink and leaves.

Otou-san turns to me. "We'll leave soon, too. Do you have any specific questions? Anything you want to see?"

Well, I am curious. "Would it be ok to show me what you're currently working on?"

"Unfortunately not. Current investigations are strictly confidential. But I can show you some cases in the archive if you want."

"Yes, please!"

For that, we have to go to the basement. We make our way downstairs, but before we have even entered the reception hall, we can hear agitated voices.

"… want a real officer, not some rookie who doesn't understand the importance of this!"

A woman stands before the reception desk, yelling at the person manning it. She has a little girl at her side. Both of their attires practically scream 'wealthy civilian'.

The desk officer valiantly tries to pacify her. "We assure you, all officers working here are fully capable of handling your case-"

"I refuse! I refuse to let this be busted by some stupid mistake made by a bloody beginner! If you don't bring me a professional in the next five minutes I'm going to talk to-"

Otou-san is there with three quick strides. "Excuse me, can I help you?"

My relative at the desk practically sags with relief. Poor guy.

"Are you an officer here?" the woman asks. She's not particularly tall, but she's doing her best trying to look down on otou-san. "You don't look like one."

"As a matter of fact, I am. I'm not wearing my uniform at the moment so that might be confusing for you." Otou-san is markedly polite. "I heard that you're refusing to let our regular officers on duty handle your case. May I inquire as to why?"

The woman sizes him up for a few seconds and is apparently satisfied with what she sees. "I'm Yanai Emiko, wife of Yanai Tadashi, the richest man in the village. I am here to file a report concerning a family heirloom of great value that was stolen from me and I want an experienced officer to lead the investigation."

Otou-san patiently waits until her rant is over. "Is this all?"

Yanai Emiko screeches in indignation. "You clearly don't understand –"

Otou-san's left eye has developed a tick in the last approximately 30 seconds, but the rest of his poker face is remarkably well maintained. "I understand very well, Yanai-san" he interrupts her. "Although I'm currently not on duty, I'm willing to take over. Please follow me to one of the interrogation rooms. I'll file your report there."
Yanai sniffs dramatically. "At least there's one sensible person around." Then she turns around to the little girl at her side – that I had honestly long forgotten about.

"Akiko, you stay here and wait until I'm finished."

"Yes, okaa-san" Akiko answers meekly.

Otou-san dips his head apologetically in my direction and leads Yanai to one of the rooms at the back of the hall.

Left alone in the reception hall, I'm at a loss at what to do. The desk officer has returned to his paper work in the small room behind the desk, door almost shut, and suddenly, I'm aware that it's rather quiet. I decide to sit down and walk to the row of seats. Akiko is already there, sitting on the dark blue covers like a princess and watching me with an expression that says something along the line of clear disdain.

Whoa.

Forget the Uchiha superiority complex. This is on a whole new level.

Up close, I realize that the little girl actually isn't as little as I thought, at least age wise. Although she's not much taller than me, I can see that she must be actually several years older, maybe by six or seven years. She has light brown hair like her mother, falling in curls past her shoulders, very pale skin and a face like a doll, even though it's kinda pointed.

She reminds me of someone, especially her arrogant expression, but I can't put a finger on it.

I settle down on my own chair and have just gotten comfortable when I hear her voice again. This time it sounds decidedly not meek, more commanding and – dare I say it – bitchy.

"Uchiha!"

Even her voice tugs at something in my memory, but for the life of me, I can't seem to recall a name. I look up from my legs that I'm currently busy tucking into a neat lotus position and look in her direction.

"Yeah you, little girl!"

Oh, the audacity.

I don't deign to give her an answer, simply raising my left eyebrow instead.

"I'm thirsty. Go and fetch me some water."

Excuse me?!

'I can't play with this music edition' a similar voice echoes in my mind. It's completely out of place, so I ignore it.

I snort. "Go fetch your own water if you want to drink. I'm not your servant."

"My feet hurt" she whines. "It's too hard to stand up."

'It's shit. The bowings and the dynamics are all wrong.'

"Tough luck" I answer breathily. "Looks like you won't be getting water anytime soon, then."
"You're younger than me. You have to do what I say!"

'This is not the urtext edition.'

This voice is getting annoying. It's hard enough having to deal with one wanna-be princess, I can live without having a second one in my head, thank you very much. And could you please turn down the volume? You're starting to drown princess Akiko over there.

Which reminds me, she just said something, didn't she?

"Sorry, what was that?"

That irritates her. "You have to listen when I'm talking!"

'I refuse to play out of material that isn't urtext.'

"You insolent brat!"

'I needed something to practice with –'

"Bring me water! Now!"

'– and I thought Elizabeth would give us the right material!"

"SHUT UP, Amanda!"

Dead silence greets me.

I have to open my eyes to realize that I have clenched them shut. My hands are curled up into fists, nails digging into my palm, and it costs me conscious effort to release them.

"What?"

My head snaps up again and I see confusion on Amanda's face. No, she's not Amanda – her name is Akiko – Amanda is someone else – I don't know – who is Amanda?!

"How should I know? You called me that!"

I must've spoken the last question out loud because she – Akiko – is looking at me like I'm some deranged hyena.

A deranged hyena. Hysterical laughter bubbles up from my stomach and I double over from the exertion of expelling it. Deranged hyena indeed! Just like Shenzi, Banzai and Ed from the lion king. Quick, where is Scar to rein me in?

I nearly tumble from my seat as the three start dancing in my mind, their movements jerky and out of sync. It's hilarious to watch them.

Now a drum has started playing, too. Its rapid beat meets the grotesque dance of the hyenas, taking control of their movements and rising steadily in volume. Faster and faster the rhythm goes, faster and faster the hyenas dance and as they all spiral into one gigantic blur of bodies and sounds, I tumble with them into an abyss of swirling colors.

Chapter End Notes
So, how did you like it? I'd love to hear your thoughts! And by the way, for all fans of good classical music, check out Schumann's piano quintet. It's a thing of beauty.
When It All Goes Down Part 1

Chapter Summary

Dream a little dream for me.

Chapter Notes

Hiya guys, I'm back with an update! I know I promised to be back to my old writing speed and I swear I've been writing every day but damn, that chapter was no easy ride.

My gorgeous beta and accomplice in crime in everything concerning the plot, NightsBlackRose13, has given their blessing, though, so here it is for your reading pleasure!

Warning: Unpleasant dreams and angst ahead. And, as the title says, it's part 1 one of a two-parter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wake up in my bed.

It's still dark and I can barely make out the shape of my hand as I hold it in front of my face. The digital alarm on my nightstand tells me it's 7.30 in the morning and I groan. I am usually a fairly early riser, but today, this feels entirely too early to be right.

I pull my blanket back over my head, but just as I'm about to make myself comfortable again, the door to my room swings open, letting in a sudden influx of glaring light.

"Liz, you awake?" a voice calls out tentatively.

"No" I mumble from underneath my blanket. "No, I'm deeply asleep, go away."

"Oh sorry" the voice answers. "Well, just wanted to tell you that I'm out now."

Despite everything, I have to smile. I let my head poke out from my blanket burrito and see him standing in the doorway, sporting a sheepish look and rubbing the back of his neck. My brother Link is a very tall boy who moves a bit awkward because the growth spurt hit him too fast and out of nowhere. He has black hair and features that greatly resemble mine as we have often been told, except that his skin has a darker tone. We used to joke that we were actually twins and explained our age gap of three years with him being late to his own birth, seeing as he has a habit of being late to literally everything.

Of course, his real name isn't Link. It's Lincoln, but we thought that nicknaming him after the dork with the green hat from the Zelda games was appropriate. At times, they even have the same lost puppy look to them.

"Ok, duly noted" I answer him. "Have a fun day."
Link grimaces at that. "Yeah, because having to write an exam is so much fun."

I cackle gleefully at that. Really, it doesn't take much for me to get into a ridiculously good mood when I'm talking to him.

"You know, exams don't stop when you get to university. They're just all piled up at the end of term and trust me, it's even less fun to prepare for all of them at once than just preparing for one in the middle of the school year."

"I know" Link sighs. "Anyway, gotta go now, I'm gonna be late as it is." He gives me a wave and disappears from my line of sight.

"When are you not late?" I holler after him and laugh loudly when a grumpy "Be quiet!" comes back.

I love my dorky little brother dearly. Even after he's managed to get me fully awake, the chance of getting a bit of more sleep floating away on a fluffy cloud of sweet and unfulfilled promises.

*Sigh.*

I get up and ready for the day, descending the stairs that lead to the entrance hall and meet my mom who is already up, too, because she never fails to make breakfast for us, no matter when we have to rise. After three and a half years of living in a dorm and fencing for myself, occasionally coming back for that kind of service is a luxury I gladly indulge in. My mom is the greatest person on Earth and I'll fight anyone on that.

She's currently putting laundry on the drying rack, her hair bound back in a tidy bun and every strand perfectly in place. They shimmer in a dark read tone near the roots, originating from the dye she puts in there to cover the fact that they've begun to turn gray.

"Morning, mom!" I chirp.

"Morning, Liz" she answers. She looks up from her work and gestures in the direction of the kitchen. "Breakfast is ready."

My "thank you" is stuck dead in my throat when I look into her eyes.

They're a bright crimson, three black commas swirling lazily in each orb.

A sudden pain stabs me right through my chest and – *oh god I can't breathe* – my knees suddenly go weak, leaving my legs unable to support the weight of my body. I'm falling, *falling*, through the stairs and the floor, swallowed up by a crack in the world that has opened right under my feet.

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I wake up in my bed, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. My chest hurts badly, as if someone has grabbed my heart with both hands and started squeezing.

And I know why. I remember the dream.

Not the details, but enough to know that something went horribly wrong, that my brain engineered something that is entirely impossible. Dread crawls up from my gut, bottomless and terrifyingly familiar, and I wrap my arms around my middle section. A whimper escapes my lips as I bend over and rest my forehead on my drawn-up knees.
I don't want it. Neither the dread nor the dream.

My desire to get rid of it burns with an intensity that rivals Amaterasu, one part of me screaming *Shove it back! Destroy it! It never happened!* while the other stubbornly clings to it. *Find the meaning in it,* it insists, *find it, it's important!*

I don't care. I don't want it.

What I want is to be out of this darkness, out of this room and to be with someone solid and real and *not wrong* to forget this whole nightmarish affair.

I want to see my family.

*Which one?* the annoyingly persistent part asks, but I push it into a steel-reinforced vault and lock its door. I didn't even know that my mind has these in stock, but I'm not going to question it right now because, frankly, I'm much too relieved about its existence.

The tatami mats on the ground are cold when my feet touch them and I make a detour for my closet, grabbing a pair of socks and putting them on before moving out into the hallway. There's light pouring out from underneath the shoji screen that leads into the living room and I can hear hushed voices. I inch closer.

"… said that she's physically alright" I can hear otou-san say. He sounds incredibly exhausted.

"Does he have any idea what it could be then? Another panic attack?" Okaa-chan's anxious voice asks. I think they're talking about me. I crouch down in front of the paper screen, my ear pressed tightly against it.

There's a muffled response that I can't make out clearly. Then a pause.

"What do we do now?" Okaa-chan sounds so lost. I think I've never heard her in so vulnerable a state and my chest clenches at the thought that I am responsible for that.

"There's always the possibility to call on the Yamanaka, I guess" otou-san suggests wearily.

I feel the bottom of my stomach drop.

*No.*

You can't do that. You can't. Please don't do that to me.

My hand is already at the frame of the shoji screen, just short of ripping it open when I hear the noise of a porcelain cup being forcefully placed upon the table top.

"No!" okaa-chan cries out enraged. My hand stills as does my breathing. "I will not hand my child over to those mind crawlers! She's an Uchiha, not a goddamn war criminal and I refuse to let them break into her and violate her mind!"

"It might be the only way, though" otou-san tiredly counters. "Don't think for a minute that I want to do this. But if this continues I'd rather see her be examined by one of them than let her go any further than she already is."

Go further than I already am?

"You didn't see her, Kiyomi. I … I didn't see the beginning, either, but I saw the end. She was on the ground, writhing and screaming and … it was – it was terrifying. She wouldn't calm down until I
made her look into my eyes."

Oh.

I don't think I can take this anymore. I stand up, my legs wobbly and barely strong enough to carry my weight, and stumble down the hall, keeping close to the wall lest I should stumble and fall. My shoulders are shaking with silent sobs as I put one foot in front of the other, leading me past the shoji screen to my own room and into Obito's.

Obito won't judge me. Obito is safe.

As I climb into his crib and lay down beside him I see that his eyes are wide open. He's watching me with a curious, open expression, legs wiggling beneath his covers and one tiny fist halfway stuffed in his mouth. It makes me smile.

"Hey Obi" I greet him with a disgustingly shaky voice. "'Sup?"

He removes the fist from his mouth, instead reaching with both hands for my face. When his fingers connect with my cheek, he lets out a soft cooing noise. He pokes and prods lightly at me, making me giggle, and I lift my own hand to catch his. I'm surprised to feel moisture on both of them and I touch my face to see if there's anything on it. My fingertips come away wet, too.

It takes a moment until realization dawns. I must've been crying.

Obito coos again and I look back to his face, just in time to see a smile bloom across it. It's genuine, trusting and comforting in a way that I desperately need. What's even more important, though, is the assurance that it's entirely meant for me.

Right here, right now, it's the most beautiful and encouraging thing in the world.

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The next few weeks go by in a blur of recurring dreams by night and the careful attempt to keep it together by day.

Otou-san and okaa-chan treat me with extreme caution, worry etched deeply into lines on their faces that have only recently developed. They've apparently come to the conclusion that as long as my situation doesn't worsen they won't take any action. In reaction to that, I'm putting all my energy into maintaining the illusion of a stable status quo which in turn has led to the current situation in which our every interaction feels like we're walking on eggshells around each other. I've come to hate it with a fierce passion and I'm fairly sure they hate it, too, but we're all at a loss of what to do.

I'm not sure if it counts as a consolation when the tension bleeds into something habitual over time. I've read somewhere that latent chronic stress is not particularly healthy, but at the moment it makes it far easier to bear.

I can tell that they are especially afraid to bring up the incident at the Police Force, but that's at least something I can be glad about. It also makes things easier to manage.

What doesn't get easier to manage, though, are the dreams.

They happen every few nights. While I dream them, they're incredibly vivid and detailed, but as soon as I'm awake, they fade into nothing more than a feeling of profound dread deep in my gut, sometimes accompanied by that clenching pain in my chest. With every added dream, I feel myself getting sucked closer to a void, tendrils of darkness intertwining themselves with my very thoughts.
and emotions. They pull at me with a persistence that slowly but surely pushes me to my limit and the only thing that prevents me from simply giving in, that allows me to raise the energy for at least an ounce of resistance, is the existence of Obito.

He's the beacon of hope that sends a ray of light into my personal darkness, the lifeline I cling to with the desperation of a drowning man, my sanctuary. He's the one I think of when I slide back to my habit of stomping over any unease with the familiar concept of practice, improving my taijutsu in leaps and bounds and viciously attacking the walls of my room with chakra-infused feet.

And you know it's bad when your baby brother is the only reason why you're not going insane.

While interactions within the four walls of our home float more or less in a state of stasis, the world around us – not so surprisingly – keeps moving on.

It's palpable in the rising tension in the air, conversations more hushed, mouths drawn tighter and eyes grimmer on the faces of the people. There are whispered rumors of discord among the village leaders which I translate for myself as disagreements between the Sandaime and Danzou, of a possible pre-emptive strike against Iwa and Suna on Ame territory and I think of three children who will soon taste the bitter pain of loss, one of them even by the hands of Konoha nin.

It's a sobering thought for me, who is sitting safely within the walls of one of the biggest Hidden Villages, and I realize that there're things out there that dwarf all of my petty little problems.

It's still not enough to make them go away, though.

Neither this nor the public announcement of the Hokage that it's time for Konoha to take action in the war on a sunny day at the beginning of November.

I stand with my family at the gates of the village when the first batch of Konoha shinobi prepares to march out towards Ame, bidding goodbye to the few Uchiha that are leaving with them. Among them are Takao-sama, the commander of this vanguard, his second son Fugaku and Tomomi, and I think of a smile seen just a couple of months before, fond in anticipation of a feast to honor 25 years of marriage.

Otouto-san is standing with him, his partner in the Police Force since the day of his recruitment, their hands tightly clasped and eyes interlocked. Their faces are nigh unreadable but their lips moving, words murmured too softly for me to hear and then, without forewarning, Tomomi draws outou-san close for a hug that lasts long enough for him to relax in the embrace. The elder releases his hold and turns to give okaa-chan a lopsided grin and me a wave, before he steps to a middle-aged woman that has patiently waited her time. She, too, is enveloped in a hug, though longer and more tender.

And then time is up.

There's a signal and without further delay the shinobi leave.

They're gone so fast that, even after the last figures have left, the people staying behind don't move. I see dazed faces and wayward tears and I think – nothing.

My blank stare is mirrored by the middle-aged woman standing across from my family, her stance frozen in a mere half of a hug since that's all that one body alone can manage.
It's thankfully on a more cheery note when I discover a few days later that Obito has started teething.

I can't wait for brilliant smiles and cheeky grins that will light up even the darkest shadows. I expect nothing more and nothing less.

Applause roars up like the battle cries of a hundred lions as soon as the last tunes have left the strings of my violin. Calls of "Bravo!" cut through the sound of a sea of clapping hands and I'm getting drunk on euphoria. Adrenaline is racing through my veins, leaving me as high as a kite and practically glowing.

This is my reward.

Hundreds of hours of practicing, liters of ice-cream consumed in phases of total discouragement and half a dozen motivational speeches from my teacher later and I'm finally here, having successfully played my solo recital and so damn ready to receive my artist's diploma.

I totally owned it and it feels nothing short of amazing.

My blood is still boiling from my performance of Ravel's "Tzigane" when individuals start to separate themselves from the mass of people that made up my audience to congratulate me on my achievement.

The first one to come up to me and give me a crushing hug is my professor. He's bursting with pride which makes me incredibly happy, since he's the number one person who had to suffer through the various ups and downs of my artistic development in the last four years.

Behind him are mom, dad and Link. The latter one tackles me with a huge dorky grin and lifts me off my feet after making sure that my violin is safely put away.

"That was awesome, Liz!" he yells right into my ear.

Usually, that would have earned him a solid smack on the head and a rant on how our ears are our most precious assets, so be a bit more considerate, dumbass! – which he already knows since he's a musician himself – but tonight, it's alright. I laugh brightly and tell him that I know.

Dad pats my shoulder after Link has let me back down and mom beams at me.

"I'm so proud of you" she says, eyes shining and laugh lines deepening from her smile. "I knew I was right to give you that hair pin."

I stop in the middle of the process of hugging her.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"Don't you remember, sweetie?" she laughs.

Something is wrong.

Her hair has suddenly grown longer and the color at the roots has darkened to a black so deep, it's been years since I'd last seen it there.

"You know the one! Silver, two lilies, family heirloom? The one I gave you before Obito's introduction ceremony?"
No.

My body reacts before my mind has decided on what to do and I screamscreamscream – only to wake up, amid the tangled sheets of my bed and bathed in sweat.

My heart is pounding wildly, my breath coming in abrupt bursts that are completely out of rhythm. There’s no time for waiting, because I’m fairly sure that I’m going to drown here in the darkness of my room any minute now. So I jump out of my bed and practically run into Obito’s room, almost tripping over something that lies on the ground between the shoji screen and his crib, and climb into it in a matter of seconds. I press him so tightly against me that he wakes up, letting out a short distressed noise.

"I'm sorry, Obi" I sob against his forehead, loosening my hold on him enough to let him breathe. "Sorry to disturb you."

Obito croaks something that sounds suspiciously like a sob himself and it's enough to rip me out of the suffocating tunnel that the dream has driven me into because Obito is not supposed to cry, ever.

"Ohmygod, I'm so sorry, Obi, so sorry! Please don't cry, please don't! I'm sorry!" I whisper frantically as I pat his back, trying to be soothing and not entirely sure if it's working. I count it as a victory when his sobs die down to hiccups and he snuggles closer to my embrace.

Victories are hard to come by these days and I know for sure, have known for a while now, that I won't be able to keep up doing whatever I'm doing right now, that I'm bound to break at any given moment.

But then I remember my goal, thickly underlined in one of the notebooks hidden under my mattress, and remind myself that I need to hold on, at least until it's reasonable to assume that otou-san and okaa-chan will stay alive and Obito won't become an orphan anytime soon. I cling to it and will it to turn into the glue that keeps my world together.

In the silence of the room, the steady beat of Obito's tiny heart feels like the only thing that's not about to shatter.

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"It's beautiful outside" okaa-chan says cautiously. "Sunny and warm for November."

I look up from my breakfast with bleary eyes. I'm pretty sure I look like a zombie who's freshly crawled out of a rotten casket, but I'm relieved I managed to get out of Obito's room earlier – and no, I didn't mean Obi's room to be a rotten casket – without being caught. It was a close call, though, as I'd been able to hear the shoji screen to okaa-chan and otou-san's bedroom sliding open.

"Hn" I answer non-committally.

Okaa-chan looks like she's waiting for something more, but I have absolutely no idea what I can offer her, so I simply stare back and wait for her to continue this conversation. She sighs.

"I thought about having a picnic. Your father has the night shift today and it's been a long time since we've done something as a family, apart from dinner. What do you say?"

Her eyes are hopeful as she watches and I already feel guilty for planning to shoot her suggestion down, albeit politely. But I'm so utterly drained of energy that I count it as some kind of achievement that I got out of bed at all.
Before I can open my mouth, though, otou-san beats me to it.

"That sounds wonderful" he comments. "I was going to train with Etsuko anyway, so you can join us for lunch."

Jesus Christ. Apparently I'm the only one who doesn't think this is a good idea.

"No need" okaa-chan chirps. "I'm curious about her training anyway, since I've never seen her progress with my own eyes. I'll come with you two."

I hide my face in my hands and groan. Why is nobody even pretending to be interested in what I might have to say about that?

Despite my earlier reluctance I admit that this is … actually not so bad.

Both okaa-chan and otou-san's eyes shine with pride and approval as I show them my katas and throw a handful of shuriken dead in the center of the wooden poles, even though I'm not as good with kunai. Otou-san and I spar, too, and in these couple hours I am free from the burdens that threaten to crush me beneath their weight, free in the flurry of movements that spell out strike-block-punch-block-block-kick, free to let myself go and put all my emotions out into the open. It's as close as I'll ever get to the feeling of letting loose on my violin without being suspicious and I grab this opportunity with both hands.

Lunch is delicious, rich in flavor and filling and it's the first time in a while that I don't have to force the food down my throat. Conversations are light, though mostly between otou-san and okaa-chan since I'm busy with Obito who's sitting on my lap. He seems to have found the world's most interesting thing in the grass that we're sitting on and tries to sneak blades past my watchful eye and into his mouth.

"Nope, Obi, I won't let you feed on grass when there's okaa-chan's fantastic cooking to be eaten."

When we finish eating, okaa-chan packs all the boxes back into the basket and suddenly, I feel the need to prolong the moment. I'm afraid that as soon as we enter our house, all the shadows will fall back into place and I desperately want to hold on to this and not let go.

"Wait!" I exclaim and both okaa-chan and otou-san look at me. "I … I want to show you something else!"

Otou-san raises an eyebrow. "Ah? What is it?"

Good question indeed. What can I show them that they haven't already seen? Taijutsu is all I've learned until now since I lack chakra reserves for ninjutsu and the knowhow for genjutsu and I already showed them that. The only thing that they've not seen yet is the full extent of my chakra control.

Time for some tree climbing then.

I beckon them to follow me to the group of trees at the edge of the training field and they do me that favor, with Obito sitting on okaa-chan's arm and eyes shining bright with glee. I think he loves being outside.

I make sure that they're watching as I stand in front of the trunk of a relatively young tree and I wonder shortly how often the plants on the training fields need to be replaced, but I shove the
thought back into a corner of my mind and gather chakra in my feet.

Only to realize that I'm still wearing my sandals, which massively alters my sensory perception down there. Well, shit. But I'm too proud to step back and chuck them off now, after all the suspense I've been building up.

Here goes nothing, then.

With baited breath, I put my right chakra-infused foot on the bark, followed closely by the left – and am incredibly relieved to see that they stick. It feels different with the sandals between my soles and the trunk, and the tree itself responds differently than the wall in my room. I wait a bit to steady the flow of my chakra and when I'm confident enough, I start walking, up an up into the green. Once or twice I almost slip, but I'm fast to correct my mistakes and half a minute after I've made first contact with the tree I'm sitting on one of its branches at least 50 feet from the ground.

From up here, otou-san and okaa-chan seem really small. They're looking up, both faces sporting a decidedly proud expression and I wave at them before I jump down.

Which is something I clearly didn't think through, because in the middle of the fall, I realize that I'm coming down from 50 feet of height.

Without any idea of how I'm going to land and not end up like a smashed potato.

Oh god.

Now might be a good time to ask for help.

I open my mouth to let out a graceless screech, but any sound that I make is swallowed up by fabric on something solid and half a second later I've stopped falling.

I blink.

I'm cradled in otou-san's arms who stands firmly on the ground and is sporting an amused quirk in his lips. It's warm and safe and I realize that he must have picked me up in the air.

"Oops" I grin sheepishly.

He almost rolls his eyes. "Oops indeed."

He lets me down on my feet again and I look at okaa-chan who's beaming excitedly at me. "When did you learn this, Etsuko-chan? I wasn't aware that you have moved on to expelling chakra from points other than your hands!"

"Uh … I just kinda thought, why not?" I answer carefully. No need to tell her that I'd needed the challenge to drown my nightly problems.

"I'm so proud of you" she says, eyes shining and smile radiant. "I knew I was right to give you that hair pin."

Wait. This is … familiar.

"What?" I ask out loud, confused and with dread crawling up my spine.

"Don't you remember, sweetie?" she laughs.

Oh god, no.
"You know the one! Silver, two lilies, family heirloom? The one I gave you before Obito's introduction ceremony?"

I freeze on the spot.

*How is this possible?*

And even more important:

*Why do I remember? Why is there something to remember at all?*

A croak escapes my throat and the sound reverberates in my conscience with the power of a Chinese gong. Ripples expand from the focus of my vision until the edges fray into bare threads of grey, the faces starting to swim, bleeding into –

*Slap.*

Suddenly, I'm looking to my right and my cheek is burning.

"Focus, Etsuko" a firm voice commands.

It is the only thing that stands unwavering at the moment, so I obey. The color rushes back into my vision and I turn my head to the speaker, realizing with no little surprise that it's okaa-chan. She has a no-nonsense expression on her face, eyebrows drawn together and lips pressed into a thin line. It softens a bit when she sees that I have my mental faculties back.

"How do you feel?" she asks quietly.

"Umm, dizzy?" I answer, uncertainty soaking my voice. I look over to otou-san who's watching us closely. His face is perfectly impassive, which tells me that he's upset. Or at least not entirely calm.

Was it that bad? Did I have another screaming fit? I wish I could remember.

Asking them is out of the question. They would realize that I've had a lapse in memory which would lead to them interrogating me and I definitely don't want that.

"I want to go home" I say with a very small voice and hope that they don't ask.

For a moment none of them move and I'm afraid that I'll have to face their demand for answers right here, right now. Okaa-chan looks over to otou-san who is staring at me.

And then, almost imperceptibly, he nods.

Okaa-chan turns back to me. "Etsuko, we'll go home now. And we both hope that when we're there, you'll have decided that we're trustworthy of knowing what's going on. We don't want to pressure you, but we want you to know that we're very worried because it's clear, has been for a while, that you're not feeling well."

I swallow thickly and nod. What choice do I have?

On our way home I have just enough time to let my internal organs freeze over, rendering me almost paralyzed when we arrive. By the time we make it to the living room I feel like fainting. I don't know how I'm supposed to present the case without them calling a Yamanaka as a result, because, frankly, dreams that cause this level of stress and leave no memories except for dread are a pretty solid reason to call one. Even I can see that.
While otou-san and I get seated, okaa-chan puts Obito into his crib. He's already fallen asleep in her arms on the way and I can't help but feel even more helpless with him gone. She comes back and theoretically, we're ready to begin.

With emphasis on 'theoretically'.

The three of us sit in an awkward circle, neither of us knowing how to begin. It's made even more terrible by the fact that, not half an hour ago, we had been as close to the perfect happy family as humanly possible. How could everything have gone awry so fast?

"So" otou-san finally says. He doesn't continue, though, instead looking at me with expectation written clear on his face.

"Soo" I say at length. I guess that time's up. Might as well get it over with. I take a deep breath and blurt out "I kindahavethosereallyweirddreams."

Okaa-chan arches an eyebrow. "Weird dreams?"

"You see, I don't really remember them, but they make me feel really uncomfortable and I … ah … today there was this really weird thing when something you said felt like it came straight from one of those dreams and that's really really weird because I usually don't remember details and –"

My elaborate explanation that has probably caused more confusion than anything else up until now is interrupted by the sound of a messenger hawk landing on the window sill. There's a yellow band around one of its claws with a tiny scroll attached to it and otou-san motions me to stop.

He retrieves the message, allowing the hawk to leave and unfurls the scroll. A crease appears between his eyebrows as he reads.

"Fumio is calling me to the main building" he informs us.

"But you're on nightshift today" okaa-chan says. "Has something happened?"

"I don't know. It says something about the village barriers, but there're no details."

Okaa-chan blanches. "They – they have not been breached, have they?"

"I don't think so. Fumio would have sent code red instead of yellow in that case. But I still have to leave."

He looks at me. "We'll continue this when I'm back."

I nod, ridiculously relieved that the interrogation has been postponed.

I watch as he leaves the room to get himself ready. Okaa-chan does, too, and when she starts biting on her lip I realize that she looks worried. It makes me antsy in turn.

I hope this barrier thing is nothing too serious.

Chapter End Notes

Ok guys, that's it for this time. I hope to bring you the next chap real soon and I'll try not
to take longer than one week. My longterm goal is something like at least once a week as long as I'm not in the middle of some crisis.

By the way, check out Rave's "Tzigane" (which means "Gypsy", but I wouldn't take it too seriously), it's a really fun piece. I'm playing it now and having a blast.
When It All Goes Down Part 2

Chapter Summary

And then hell broke loose.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mild violence and gore. You've been warned. Plus, the content in this chapter has been planned since chapter 3. Just sayin'.

It takes a moment until it sinks in what ‘something with the village barrier’ actually means.

And by ‘a moment’ I mean the whole afternoon.

To be fair, I wasn’t thinking about it too much because I was busy fretting over the imminent exposure of my nightly problems. The only reason I’m doing so now is because Otou-san hasn’t come back, yet.

The sensing barrier had not been majorly featured in the manga, only getting a passing mention during the invasion of Pein because it was in fact the only warning Konoha got on his arrival. I think it’s supposed to detect intruders or something – because, sensing barrier – and it’s based on some huge sealing deal curtesy of Uzumaki Mito, Hashirama’s wife, but I’m not too sure. It could very well be that I picked this up from one of the numerous fanfictions I’ve read.

The most important thing, though, which is most definitely canon, is that it’s supposed to be the first line of defense for the village.

Suddenly I understand why Okaa-chan is so anxious and I’m fervently hoping that ‘something with the village barrier’ doesn’t equal ‘trouble’.

By the time she suggests going to bed to me it’s already evening. Otou-san’s regular shift must have begun by now, so there is no chance for him to get home before sunrise.

I wake up with a start.

It’s still dark, but my heart is galloping wildly. I’m not too surprised about this whole scene, because frankly, if one has this kind of experience every other night it kind of loses the shocking momentum. I patiently wait for my body to calm itself down, my feet ready to carry me out of bed and into Obito’s room if necessary, and it takes much too long until I realize that I haven’t actually awoken from a dream.

I think there was something like a really loud BOOM. I sit up straight and am about to scurry over to the window when I hear another sound incoming.
There are frantic voices outside.

I instantly recognize one of them as Okaa-chan’s but not the other one. It’s female, though, and distinctly distressed.

“… let them handle this!”

“No, this is something else, Chieko! I know that I’ll be able to do something there, so I’m going.”

Chieko? Okaa-chan is going? Where? Why?

“What about your children?” the other voice, presumably Chieko’s, asks.

“They’ll stay with you. I’ll go wake them up and you’ll take them to the Naka Shrine. They’ll be safe there.”

A short pause.

“Please, Chieko.”

Another pause, and then the shoji screen to my room is shoved aside.

Light floods into the darkness and I have to shield my eyes to avoid being blinded. There’s a blur and suddenly Okaa-chan is before me.

“You were awake, Etsuko?” she asks, obviously seeing me in an upright position.

“Only just” I answer truthfully. My eyes have adjusted a bit to the light and I finally get a look at her.

I freeze internally when I see dark pants, a dark shirt and a green flak jacket, the same strange light green one that I’d seen on Tomomi that day at the Police Force. A Konoha hitai-ate is at its place on her forehead and her long hair is bound back in a ponytail.

She’s in shinobi gear.

Which means she’s expecting a fight.

“Listen closely, Etsuko. I have to go and join your father at the Police Force.” Her voice is calm but there’s an undercurrent of urgency in there that makes the words as heavy as lead. She gestures at the figure that has appeared behind her. “This is Chieko-san. She’ll take you and Obito to the Naka shrine and you have to listen to everything she says. Can you do that?”

I look at this Chieko person and realize that it’s the middle aged woman that Tomomi had hugged on the day he left for war. So, to summarize this, I am to leave with Obito and Tomomi’s wife and let Okaa-chan run to Otou-san to battle whatever it is that brought trouble.

Can I do that? Yes.

Do I know what exactly is going on? No.

Am I okay with this whole thing? No.

There are definitely more arguments for fighting this plan or at least for finding out what’s happening than for agreeing to it and I really want to object her suggestion, but one look into Okaa-chan’s dark, serious eyes and I am stunned into silence. Instead I nod.
“Good. Get dressed. I’ll get Obito.”

Numbness has settled into my bones, making my fingers clumsy and my vision hazy. My clothes seem to have developed a mind of their own and when I finally manage to dress myself and stumble into the hallway, Okaa-chan and Chieko are already at the genkan. Obito is wrapped tightly in a white blanket, with only tufts of black hair peeking out at one end.

Something insanely huge surges in my chest at this sight, easily overwhelming the numbness, and suddenly, my surroundings appear as clear as crystal. It practically screams protect and prompts me to stretch my arms.

“Let me carry him” I demand.

Okaa-chan, who’s in the middle of handing him over to Chieko, looks taken aback. “Etsuko?” she asks, unsure.

“Let me carry him” I repeat. “I can handle his weight.”

Okaa-chan looks at me for a long moment.

“Kiyomi, you can’t seriously be thinking about …” Chieko begins to argue.

Her stare intensifies.

And then, she abruptly turns to me and puts Obito into my arms. My focus automatically zooms in on him. He’s still peacefully at sleep, his little face squeezy and eyes tightly shut. Quite a resilient sleeper, huh? I think fondly.

“You’ll protect him, won’t you?” Okaa-chan’s quiet voice floats into my ear.

I look up from the little white bundle. “Always” I promise.

She nods and puts her hand briefly on my head.

Obito feels heavy in my arms, but not crushingly so, and I’m sure I can carry him until the end of time. I will push any amount of chakra into my limbs if needed, even if it scorches my coils to charred meat.

Chieko has a disapproving frown on her face, her lips pressed tightly together but thankfully, she doesn’t comment. With a last cursory glance into our home we exit through the door. Outside, Okaa-chan is almost ready to leave and as I watch her adjusting her kunai pouch at her right thigh, I can’t hold it back anymore.

“You’ll be alright, won’t you?” I blurt out rather loudly.

She turns to me and gives me an eye-squeezing smile. I’m sure it’s meant to be reassuring, but it’s a bit too bright, a bit too deliberate to achieve that effect. Deep down I’m not fooled, neither by this nor by the fact that she didn’t actually answer, but my desire to believe her reassurance is stronger. It drowns out any doubts about her sincerity that might have lingered.

Okaa-chan takes off in the direction of the Police Force with a chakra infused leap. She’s gone so fast that by the time I have finished breathing in, she’s nothing more but a blurry dot at the end of the street. Even that vanishes soon after.

She leaves a profound silence behind that lasts for a few heartbeats and feels as long as half an
eternity.

“Let’s go” Chieko says and marches off in the other direction.

I reluctantly follow her, constantly looking back to where I’d last seen Okaa-chan.

We have to walk for a while since the Naka shrine is quite a distance away from the Uchiha district, what with the believe that the spiritual thing works better in nature or something, and almost the whole way we stay silent. Once I try to ask her what is actually happening but she dismisses me with an answer that more or less says that I should mind my own business “since you’re too young to understand anyways”.

Which is plain rude. But before I frustrate myself with silent indignation, I remind myself to breathe and remember that everyone is on edge, especially those who have a family member at the frontlines of the war.

So we keep on walking in silence.

That is, until we meet another Uchiha.

He’s rather old and I don’t remember seeing him before, but that’s beside the point. What strikes me is that he’s in full shinobi gear, like Okaa-chan, with the emblem of the Police Force emblazoned on his shoulders and there’s blood running down his temple.

*Injured* my mind helpfully supplies and I would have rolled my eyes had the situation not been so serious.

He lands a few feet in front of us, having leapt down from one of the rooftops on either side. His gaze is sharp and his face set in a grim expression as he calls out to us.

“Identify yourself and state your business!”

“Uchiha Chieko, escorting two children to the Naka shrine!” Chieko answers.

The man briefly activates his Sharingan, presumably to check if she’s lying about her identity. It apparently gives him enough of a confirmation and he nods sharply.

“Oh, but be careful and don’t stray. We’ve just disarmed one bomb near the Nara lands. It seems like the central buildings are not the only targets.”

“Near the Nara lands?” Chieko asks sharply, but her voice is already fading into the background.

All I can hear are *bombs* – *central buildings* – *targets* –

Bombs would certainly explain the loud boom that woke me up.

And then another realization hits me and for the second time tonight, I freeze all over.

Central buildings as in the Hokage Tower and the *Police Force main building*?!

Okaa-chan and Otou-san are there.

*Obito grows up as an orphan in the manga.*

Chieko and the man are still discussing when I turn around and walk away, slowly at first but continuously accelerating, until I *run*. 
I run faster than I ever have, fueling my muscles with chakra, and the wind blows so sharply into my face that my eyes start to tear. Houses and trees in my peripheral vision blur into one huge smear of light and shadows and my vision of the street in front of me doesn’t fare much better.

Hovering over all these images, though, is a sentence, a goal, written on the page of a stolen notebook and underlined twice for emphasis, its words glowing like heated metal in the night sky.

*Save Uchiha Kiyomi’s and Uchiha Nobuo’s lives!*  

Although I’ve only been to the Police Force main buildings once, I have no problem finding my way. It’s hard to miss the blazing flashes of detonating bombs and the subsequent highlighting of four-storied-ruins after all.

At first I’m just glad for the distinct landmark it makes, but now, standing before it, the entirety of the destruction sinks into my mind.

The Konoha Military Police Force main administrative building is burning.

Orange-red flames are flickering along broken walls into the black of the sky, so searing hot that I can feel the heat on my face even standing more than 100 feet away. The fire is so intense that it seamlessly envelopes the whole building. I have never seen anything like it before, neither here nor in my previous life, but I’m sure that it’s definitely not natural. Jutsu-induced, more likely, and by a mighty one at that.

There’re Konoha shinobi scattered around the area, spewing out streams of water at strategic points in groups of four or five, but even so it’s barely enough to douse the flames. That is, until I see a group of three at one far end. Their hands move in complete synch at an insane speed, forming seals for some huge water style jutsu, and just before their figures disappear behind a veritable wall of water, I can make out shocks of white, blonde and black hair.

I think I just spotted the Sannin.

Well, not yet Sannin since they still have not battled Hanzo, so he couldn’t have named them, but still. Team Hiruzen. As in Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru. Oh my.

It’s a bit surprising that they’re not fighting at the frontlines, though. Is the Sandaime holding them back?

A deafening hiss rips me out of my brief awe-induced daydream and a fraction of a second later I see steam rising from where their water front has hit the flames. It looks almost solid and up close, the temperatures must be insanely high. At least sauna-level, probably more. I hope there’re no shinobi cooking alive in there.

Like, Okaa-chan and Otou-san.

This thought ultimately jolts me back into reality. I whip my head around, trying to find my parents in between the shinobi.

I can’t find them.

Panic rises from my stomach as my feet start running again. Rational thought is shoved into the back of my mind as I head straight for the melee but I don’t make it very far. When I come to an intersection a glint of metal catches my eye and I turn my head just in time to see a figure with long dark hair
vanishing into the dark alley.

_Okaa-chan._

I turn on my heels and dash after the person without a second thought.

“Okaa-chan” I shout, my voice carrying the relief I feel like a dish on a silver platter.

She doesn’t answer, though. In fact, she has vanished.

I’m confused. Why would she run away from me?

I still advance a few more steps, because there’s a bend at the end of the alley and maybe behind the corner – but again, there’s nothing, just a wall that marks this alley as a dead end. I let out a discouraged sigh and turn back around.

Only to stumble right into something solid.

Before I have registered what I’ve hit with my face a hand comes around my neck, grabs the collar of my shirt and lifts me right off the ground.

“What do we have here?” a snide voice cuts through the air like the blade of a very sharp knife.

I’m being held only inches from the face of the person and when I see, I go very, very still.

This is not Okaa-chan.

Steel grey eyes stare right back at me. Apart from the long black hair falling straight down their back they’re the only part of the face that I can see, because the rest is hidden by black cloth. No Konoha hitai-ate. In fact, no hitai-ate at all.

“Looks like a rat to me.” the voice says, sounding bored. I think it’s male, but I’m not too sure. And truth be told, I have other priorities right now.

Like, literally getting out of the grasp of a presumably hostile ninja. While being paralyzed by fear.

“Well, since rats are a nuisance to the world I’m going to do it a favor and exterminate the beginnings of an infestation. Aren’t I a generous person?”

There’s the glint of metal at the edge of my vision.

Forget _presumably hostile._

I think I’m going to die.

My arms reflexively tighten around my chest which makes a whining sound.

Wait.

What?

My gaze drops down to confirm that my chest couldn’t have been the source of that sound. What I see instead is a little white bundle that triggers mayhem in my head.

Obito.

_Holy shit, I’m still carrying Obito!_
Suddenly, all my survival instincts kick in. I let out a high-pitched cry and put all of my energy and chakra into a double-footed kick aimed right at my enemy’s face.

My feet connect with a satisfying crunch. The person screams, there’s the clatter of metal hitting the ground and the hand at the back of my neck releases its hold on my collar, causing me to fall. I, too, hit the ground none too gently, but there’s no time.

A quick check that Obito is fine and I’m running again.

Running.

And running.

The alley is so long, fuck, had it been that long when I walked in here?

There’s a swift whizzing sound coming from behind me and I instinctively throw myself to the side. Pain explodes in my right arm with which I have caught my fall and I let out a harsh scream. For a moment, I can see stars dancing in my vision, but when it clears, my gaze falls on a kunai a few feet in front of me. It’s deeply embedded into the ground.

_That thing was intended for me._

I feel sick.

Another whizzing sound and I realize that I’ve hesitated too long, stayed too long in one place, that I should have kept moving – that there’s no way to avoid that one.

I still try, hoping against hope that I’m fast enough to dodge, and I roll over so that at least Obito is safe, because even if that kunai is going to kill me I still have hope that they didn’t even notice my baby brother and that they will leave when my corpse is slumped over him –

- There’s the clank of metal against metal, an outraged cry and one second later, I’m astonished to discover that I’m still alive.

I can see a pair of feet rushing past me, more sounds of weapons clashing, and then I’m grabbed by my shoulders and put on my feet, directly in front of another man in shinobi attire, this time with a Konoha hitai-ate glinting on his forehead and Sharingan spinning.

It’s Otou-san.

Relief washes through me like a tidal wave and a sob tears through my throat. _Thank all the gods of the universe, Otou-san is here, I’m safe, I’m not going to die._

Otou-san looks shocked, though, when he realizes just who it is that he has rescued.

“Etsuko?!” he yells frantically. “What are you doing here?! And – is that Obito?!!”

_Yelling doesn’t suit him_ a giddy little voice in my head remarks, still drunk on the achievement of surviving and preventing me from giving a sensible answer. Otou-san doesn’t wait any longer, though. Instead he lifts me on his arm so that my face is pressed against his shoulder and I have to loop one of my own arms around his neck to keep from falling. He turns his head in the direction of the fighting shinobi, hesitation showing, and it occurs to me that he’s thinking about leaving his partner to bring me to safety.
The thought sobers me up like a bucket of ice-cold water dumped over my head.

_Those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash._

I guess that counts double for the ones who force others to abandon their comrades.

I refuse to be the reason Otou-san becomes trash.

I open my mouth to tell him to let me down, to go and help his partner, when said partner summersaults backwards and lands a few feet before us to avoid being skewered by a katana. He turns his face briefly to us and I recognize him as Fumio, the Uchiha clan heir.

“Take her away from here and come back when she’s safe. I’ll be fine.”

And then he’s gone again, clashing with the enemy nin in a flurry of deadly moves. Otou-san, too, moves fast and we’re on a nearby rooftop in practically no time.

“Etsuko” he says through the wind that blows against his speeding form and I have to strain my ears to hear him. “Where’s your mother?”

“She came to find you. Have you not seen her?” I answer.

“What? No, I –“

BOOM.

That came from the direction we had just left.

Otou-san stops dead in the middle of the run and fluently drops down into a defensive crouch. “Hang on tight” he presses out. And not too late, either.

There’s this familiar whizzing sound again, multiplied by a factor of at least ten, and Otou-san moves.

He’s so fast that I can’t do anything but hold on to his neck and Obito, hoping that I’m not crushing either. When it’s over there’s a lot of metal on the roof and four figures around us, all dressed the same as the one in the alley.

Otou-san sets me down and steps in front of me in one fluid motion. His hands are making seals and when I’ve finished blinking there’re fireballs shooting out of his mouth. Again, he doesn’t wait around to see if they hit their targets but instead he grabs me, throws down a smoke bomb and then something happens that feels like I’m squeezed through a tube that’s at least three sizes too small to fit me in. I clamp my eyes shut and concentrate on not throwing up.

When I open them again we’re in a calm side street and I’m back on my feet. Otou-san crouches down before me and puts both of his hands on either side of my face, forcing me to look him in the eye.

“Listen, Etsuko. You have to stay here, protect Obito and are under no circumstances allowed to leave, do you hear me?”

I nod.

“Promise me, Etsuko. Say it!” His voice sounds so urgent. It frightens me.

“I promise to stay!” I hurriedly comply.
“Good.” He stands up, letting his hands drop. My cheeks suddenly feel so cold.

He gets a kunai out of the pouch at his hip and pushes the weapon into my right hand. He doesn’t comment further on it, but I’m not stupid and he knows it.

“I’ll come get you when I’m finished and then we’ll look for your mother.”

With that, he’s gone.

))))

I don’t know how long I sit there huddled up in the dark with only Obito as company, listening to battle sounds from more or less far away and waiting for Otou-san to return. Obi has had a crying bout at some time, but I’ve managed to calm him down again. Currently, he has his little fingers tangled in strands of my hair, randomly tugging at them and trying to shove the ends into his mouth. I let him because it reminds me that I’m not alone.

And then, finally, I can hear footsteps.

I stand up from my crouched position, but I don’t dare to walk out of this side street onto the main street. I’m holding Obito with one hand and the other is buried in the folds of my shirt, tightly clutching Otou-san’s kunai.

The steps come closer, rounding the corner and halting at the entrance of the street. The light is blocked out by the person’s body, and I’m denied a proper look.

I don’t need it though.

“There you are, rat.”

My insides grow cold. I know that voice, and after almost getting killed by its owner I’m sure I’ll never forget it. Fear races down my spine and my limbs become heavy.

Why are they here? Where is Otou-san?

“It’s all because of you” they spit out, and with every word, they come closer. “Because of you I was detected. Because you didn’t want to die we had to fight. Because of you WE FAILED OUR MISSION!”

They’re so close now that I can see that the fabric of their clothes is drenched in blood. Their mask is torn, revealing a badly burned face with an oddly angled nose, and stuck to him are bits of flesh and … oh my god, is that brain matter?

“Because of you, my comrades died and I will have to kill myself because there’s no chance to get out of here alive. But I will take you with me. I will end your miserable life here and now, just as I’ve ended the lives of your pathetic protector.”

They raise their arm, bloody katana in hand.

You’ll protect him, won’t you? Okaa-chan’s voice floats in my head.

Protect Obito! Otou-san’s echoes.

“DIE!!!” the enemy nin roars.

I plunge forward and ram the kunai deep into their gut, again and again as the person screams and
my vision becomes as sharp as it has never been before. I can see every drop of blood that is spilling from their wounds and when they attempt a last ditch effort at striking me I can see their movement, predict it with laughable ease and swat their arm away like an annoying bug.

They stumble a few steps to the side until their legs give out underneath them and they crumple into a heap. I walk over.

Red is flowing out from the corner of their mouth and their eyes are wide open as they look at me. They’re choking on their own blood.

I feel no pity when I slash their throat and walk away.

I walk long and straightforward on the main street, the startling clarity in my vision still present and providing me with a constant of stream of information that I let flow through my conscience with mild interest. My head feels like it’s wrapped in cotton, not unlike a fever dream, but I know I’m awake and alive because Obito is here, crying and thrashing with his tiny arms and legs, and it’s okay because there’s a strong and healthy fire burning inside of him, like it’s burning inside of me.

Have I always been able to see these flames? I don’t remember.

I walk until I stumble against a body lying on the ground. It’s still and with its back turned upwards, so I drop on my knees and roll it over to look at its face.

It’s achingly familiar, with its short black hair and it’s even features so typical for members of the Uchiha clan, ink black eyes open and staring motionless into the sky, but Otou-san has never looked so cold and he’s always seen me when I was near and he is a whole person, not a body that’s torn in half and missing its complete left side and why is there no flame burning for him, inside him, like it does in me and Obito?

We have to go looking for Okaa-chan, so why is he just lying around?

Why isn’t he moving?

Why is there no flame?
Fallout Child

Chapter Summary

I'm falling, falling, falling.

And this time, Otou-san isn't there to catch me.

Chapter Notes

My lovely, patient readers!

I apologize profusely for the massive delay for this update but there actually were reasons - mainly that I've gotten really, really sick for almost a whole week, spending a lot of time in bed (Easter holidays were ... not so cool). So, writing was kind of close to last on my list.

A great many thanks to my beta NightsBlackRose13 for listening to my rants and assuring me that the following was not complete garbage.

Also, for everybody who wanted to check out my tumblr and found a link that WASN'T WORKING: It does now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Uchiha officer, dead. The entire left side of his body looks like it was blasted off, probably due to direct contact with the same strange kind of explosives that we found over at the Police Force buildings. Major physical trauma on the rest of his body, too.”

There’s another person, crouching on the other side of Otou-san. I don’t know how long they’ve been here, if they’ve been here the whole time, if they’re enemy or ally, but none of that matters. All I can see is the razor-sharp picture of Otou-san, every single detail of his torn, burnt and gory body branded into my memory with the merciless iron of devastation.

By now I have understood what this and the lack of a flame means. But it’s a sterile kind of understanding, abstract and too far away to fully grasp. It leaves me hanging in nothingness, held up by transparent threads of uncertainty and condemns me to stay, unable to move neither forth nor back.

“There’s a child beside him, conscious, but clearly in shock. I tried talking to her, but she doesn’t respond.”

I press Obito, who has exhausted himself with crying and has now proceeded to soft whimpers, closer into my chest, grasping for the reassurance his presence usually provides me with. It doesn’t work.

“Seems uninjured, although there’s a lot of blood on her clothes and skin, maybe from the officer.
I’m going to – shit, is that a real baby?”

Even when I close my eyes I can still see Otou-san clearly at the back of my lids, although the general sharpness in my vision has fizzled out some time ago. I know with certainty already that this picture will haunt me until I die.

“Correction – two children at the corpse’s side, one an infant, the other a toddler. I’m going to take them to the hospital. Send the clean-up team over for the corpse. Over.”

A big, pale hand appears over Otou-san’s eyes and gently pushes them shut. It disturbs the sense of eternal standstill that has descended upon me and I abruptly look up. The first thing that my brain registers are serious grey eyes – not unkind, though – quickly followed by the shock of distinct silver hair on top of the head.

Gravity-defying, I think. An afterthought appears along with this description, thought so often and already harmonized so well that it comes as naturally as breathing.

Kakashi.

And without his mask, too. Somehow, though, I can’t muster the energy to get excited over this. He’s looking straight back at me.

“Hey” he says cautiously. “Can you hear me?”

I want to affirm, but my throat is having difficulties letting any sounds past it and after opening and closing my mouth twice without getting a word out, I resort to a mute nod.

His expression softens considerably at that. He lifts a hand and runs his fingers through his hair and I can make out specks of blood on his fingerless gloves. I want to prevent him from touching his hair, tell him that he’ll get the blood in there, but just as before, my tongue doesn’t move.

“I’m sorry I have to ask you this” he murmurs. “But do you know who this person is?” He points at otou-san.

I nod again. And this time when I try to give a verbal answer it actually works.

“Otou-san” I whisper.

The way his face falls is almost funny. The expression flickers over only briefly, but it’s more than enough for me since his quickly recomposed face isn’t hiding it very well anyway. His voice sounds hoarse as he proceeds to talk.

“Did you see what happened to him?”

I shake my head and he exhales audibly.

“Is this your little sibling in your arms?”

“My brother Obito” I answer much faster than before. Speaking about Obito comes easy to me, and with that, my trust in my ability to express myself grows. I can feel myself getting the tiniest bit more confident as I consider the next step. Introducing myself. Which is easy, too. I can do that. “My name is Etsuko.”

“Hello, Etsuko-chan. My name is Sakumo, Hatake Sakumo.” He’s smiling tentatively.

Explains the missing mask. And now that I think of it, the wrong age, too. Kakashi was a few months younger than Obito in the manga. He should be a newborn right now, not a grown man.

“I’d like to bring you to the hospital now. Will you allow me to carry you?”

The hospital? But I’m not injured. And I have to find Okaa-chan. So I tell him that.

He thinks shortly. “I still think the doctors should have a look at you. I promise you that they’ll look well after you and your little brother.”

I hesitate.

I want to see her so badly.

Sakumo senses my reluctance. “How about this: You tell me your mother’s name and I ask my friends to look for her while we go to the hospital. I’ll come and inform you as soon as they find her. Does that sound good?”

“What if they don’t?” I ask with a very small voice. What if a name isn’t enough because she couldn’t answer even if she was called?

“My friends are very good” he gently replies. “They’re all jounin. Do you know what a jounin is?”

I nod.

Sakumo smiles warmly. “Then you know that you can trust them. Because we Konoha people stick together, right?”

He sounds sensible. Nice. Solid. It’s something I can latch on to, something that’s not threatening to float away at any given time. So I give in.

“Her name is Kiyomi. Uchiha Kiyomi.”

“Okay” he says and moves his hand to a pouch at his hips. He retrieves a black, clunky device with a thick antenna and starts speaking into it.

“Hatake here. Please look out for one Uchiha Kiyomi. She’s the mother of the two children I found. Over.”

“Understood” comes a voice that’s heavily distorted by static.

He puts that medieval bit of technology away and comes over to me from the other side of Otou-san. He crouches down again and extends a hand. “May I?”

I nod and let myself be lifted into the air.

My head is at his shoulder and one of my arms looped around his neck while the other holds Obito. It feels familiar, so much like being carried by Otou-san that, when I close my eyes, I can almost imagine it.

Sakumo smells different, though, like sweat, dogs and sandalwood. It’s oddly comforting.

Together with the steady rhythm of his run it lulls my exhausted body into a deep sleep.
Shrill screeches pierce the air, the sound waves amplifying themselves until they’re more than pointed spearheads, developing into broad hammers that come down on and crush my eardrums. I can feel blood leaking out of my ears and the world is spinning in blurry shades of crimson and white.

**DIE! DIE! DIE!**

There’s a kunai in my hand and without further thoughts, I stab everything in my immediate vicinity just to get the screeching to stop, but I can’t pinpoint the source because it comes from everywhere. My arm gets heavy with the repeated motion, but I carry on, hitting something solid every single time, even if I can’t see anything.

The wet thud of metal ripping through flesh accompanies the gradual appearance of a body, roughly outlined with strokes that emerge like it’s painted by a thick brush. It crumbles to the ground under my assaults and I kneel down with it, renewing the vigor of my stabbing because the screeching still won’t stop.

**DIE! DIE! DIE!**

The body rears up, convulsing in its effort to cling to life and the head is thrown right into the focus of my vision. I zero in on the face and rage sweeps through me because it’s them, with their cold grey eyes and the black mask, their long dark hair falling into their face, and I hack at them like I’m possessed by a demon.

My throat is raw and burning by the time the body finally goes still, and when my lips stop moving long after the animalistic sounds have ceased to escape my lips, I realize that it has been me. All the screeching, the continuous mantra of diediedie, it’s truly been me all along.

But now there’s blessed silence and a bleeding body before me and my hand reaches out to take off the cloth on its lower face. I pull the fabric down, push the hair out of the way and get a good look.

Directly into Otou-san’s deathly pale face.

*Oh god.*

That’s not right.

I didn’t kill Otou-san. I killed them, because they were threatening Obito and me and this is not fair because Otou-san has opened his eyes now, so accusing and madly black, and his mouth, too, with blood running down his chin and a death rattle rushing out and I screamscreamscream –

- -

I’m upright in a bed, chest heaving, ears still ringing from my screams and my chakra is buzzing through my body like the distressed inhabitants of a bee-hive. There’s an insistent pounding behind my eyes, the pressure so strong that with every beat they feel close to bursting. I almost choke on some hastily gulped down air and have to force it past my throat which feels like it’s made of sandpaper. Nausea makes me want to vomit and I struggle to get out of the bed, instinctively trying to avoid dirtying the sheets.

My surroundings have a strange kind of sharpness to them, making the focus of my vision as clear as if I was looking through a magnifying glass. A sink at the corner of the room catches my eye and I head for it on wobbly knees. I grip the edge of the basin as tight as possible when I arrive and I’m
finally able to let loose.

For a while, the sound of retching fills the air.

I dry heave for a bit even after the contents of my stomach have left and my arms are shaking. I have to consciously bend back every single digit of my hands to release my death grip on the china and get some water running to rinse my mouth. When I finally manage to lift my head, I find myself staring into a mirror mounted on the wall.

I blink, startled.

There’s a girl that I don’t recognize.

She’s sickly pale, her childish face much too haggard to fit her age and there’re heavy bags underneath her eyes.

Which are crimson.

With one tomoe lazily spinning in each pupil.

Slowly, ever so slowly I bring my face closer to the glass and the girl in the mirror does exactly the same, until my breath starts fogging it up, covering her face with a layer of fine white film. She disappears almost completely, leaving only those sharp eyes and a budding realization that feels almost too big for me to grasp.

I have awakened my kekkei genkai. I have unlocked the ultimate weapon of my clan. I’m in possession of the most infamous and coveted doujutsu in the whole of the shinobi world.

I have Sharingan eyes.

*But at what price?*

The mist on the mirror has vanished again and I watch as the girl in the mirror lifts her left hand, covered in bandages that reach up to the short sleeves of her hospital gown, and brings her index and middle finger close to those precious eyes, the tips hovering just short of poking the organs.

Would it change anything if I gouged them out? Could I go back to how it was before if I denied that the results ever existed?

Because I don’t want them. Not like this. Not ever, if these are the conditions.

My fingertips feel icy cold when I close my eyes and bring them down on my right lid. I try to recall if there’re any pain receptors on eyeballs, try to calculate how deep my fingers will have to go to properly sever the optic nerve and I feel oddly calm thinking about these things. Even my chakra has quieted down now, and my eyes have stopped throbbing.

I’m pretty sure that it’s going to hurt but not even that can faze me. I’m ready for the pain if it will make things go back to the way they were before. And right now, I’m holding on to this thought, wanting to believe it so desperately, that in my mind it becomes solid truth: I will get Otou-san back when I make the Sharingan disappear. Return the bought article and get the price you paid back. It’s simple as that.

I tentatively increase the pressure on my eyelid and let a few heartbeats pass before I finally open my eyes and position my fingers over the hollow in which my eyeball rests. Dimly, I note that they have turned black again, but that changes nothing.
Or at least I’d like to believe that. My breathing is speeding up, though, and my hand is trembling.

*Calm down. If Shisui can do it without a flinch you can do it, too, even if you end up screaming.*

So I press down.

Down.

*Down.*

There’s a startled shout and my hand is abruptly being ripped away from my eye. Hands grip my shoulder and spin me around and suddenly, I’m looking at Sakumo’s face.

He looks upset.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

“Getting a purchase refund” I mumble.

“What?” he asks, confusion thick in his voice.

I look down to my feet and consider telling him what I was about to do, but something prevents me from actually doing so. It takes a moment for me to figure out why, until I realize that it’s because I feel relieved.

I am relieved that he stopped me from gouging my eyes out.

Does that mean that I didn’t really want to do it?

“Etsuko?”

Even if it held the possibility of returning Otou-san to me?

“Etsuko!”

How much pain does it need to eliminate selfishness?

“Sakumo-kun, let me talk to her.”

Suddenly, there’s a hand under my chin and I’m looking up again. But this time, I don’t meet Sakumo’s gaze. Instead, dark brown eyes in a tan face are looking at me and something within me tells me that I should know this person.

“Calm down” a deep, gravelly voice commands and the gravity in it instantly pulls me back from wherever my mind has wandered off to. My eyes focus and finally, there’s a click somewhere in my head and recognition floods in.

“Hokage-sama” I say, my voice coming out shaky and breathless.

It’s unmistakably him, even though he looks much younger than I’m used to. But what is the Sandaime doing here?

“Are you back with us?” he asks, firmly but not unkind.

I nod mutely.

“Good” he says simply. He points at the bed from which I have woken a few minutes – or was it
I comply with a weary nod. The air seems kind of sedate now that I’m not on the verge of poking my eyes out. Sakumo is watching me with a worried expression. He’s surprisingly open and easy to read and right now, it helps me getting back my sense of reality.

When I’m finally seated on the sheets of the bed, I notice for the first time that I’m in a hospital room. I vaguely remember Sakumo asking me to let him bring me here and myself only agreeing after he’d promised me he would look for Okaa-chan.

**Okaa-chan.**

He and his friends were going to look for her, but now he’s back and she’s not here, and instead there’s the Hokage and *ohmygod, where is Obito?*

Suddenly my energy is back and my spine shoots up straight. My eyes are darting wildly through the room as I search for my baby brother but there’s nothing but an empty second bed and I feel sick because I can’t take the thought of losing him after what … what happened to Otou-san and oh god, what am I going to tell Okaa-chan? I promised her that I’d protect him and now he’s missing and I –

“Obito” I press out between rapid breaths. “Where is Obito?” I’m about to jump out of the bed again but the Sandaime intercepts me and puts his hands on my shoulder. His gaze bores into mine, pinning me to place without a word,

“Sakumo, bring the boy” he says, his eyes never leaving me.

My eyes follow the silver haired man when he walks over to the second bed and takes a small white bundle with black hair that I somehow missed into his arms. He comes back and I impatiently stretch out my own, the need to hold Obito too strong to bear. He’s gently handed over to me and I press him tightly against me. We litter his cheeks and forehead with kisses until his eyes fly open and I’m not sorry because if he’s able to do that it means he’s alive and well and that’s all that counts.

He lets out a small protesting whine, but I can’t help but smile and press him even tighter against me.

“Etsuko-chan.”

“Yes?” I answer, voice still hoarse with relief, as I look up into the face of the Sandaime. Upon seeing his expression, though, my smile freezes over.

He’s looking at us with grief barely hidden in his eyes and I know that something is so very wrong.

**No. Please not again.**

“Etsuko-chan, I know Sakumo-kun promised you that he and his friends would look for your mother.” He takes a breath. “And they found her.”

“Where is she?” I immediately ask, denial already beginning to strengthen my voice and adding something shrill around its edges.

“Your mother was an admirable and brave woman. She saved a lot of people’s lives last night”

**Oh god.**

“I’m so sorry, Etsuko-chan. She died as a protector of Konoha.”
Dead silence descends and with it – darkness.

This is not fair. This is not fair.

I had gone back to save them.

I was there, Otou-san was right with me and we were going to look for Okaa-chan who surely had been waiting for us already. We would’ve gone home together after we found her and they would’ve berated me for not following Chieko and I would’ve listened guiltily.

It should’ve been like that.

It should have, but it didn’t.

Why did it not work? Why did my presence change nothing? Why didn’t anything I’d done have any effect at all?

This is not fair.

Okaa-chan, Otou-san and I had been in the middle of sorting our problems out.

Just last afternoon, I had finally been about to tell them about my dreams. They had still been waiting for me to agree to enroll in the academy. I know they’d had other plans for me, too, even if they hadn’t told me, yet.

And Obito. There must’ve been tons of Obito-related plans.

They didn’t get a chance to finish the things that they wanted to do, were in the middle of doing.

This is not fair.

This is not fair.

And it hurts. So badly.

I feel like I’m drowning in a sea of shards, the cold glass cutting every inch of skin and working its way into my body, slashing me up from the inside. There’re edges everywhere, razor-sharp and paper-thin, slicing down my throat, choking me, and proceeding further down, down, into my chest. Searing pain erupts in waves as they tear at my heart, digging into the flesh to make place for a sphere of swirling black agony that leaves me open and empty like a gutted fish.

It hurts so much.

It’s a miracle that I can still feel it through all this pain when a warm hand is placed on the back of my head and my face is softly pressed into white fabric.

“It’s alright for you to cry, Etsuko-chan” the Hokage tells me and I remember that I’m still here, in the hospital room, and that I still have Obito in my arms. The pain doesn’t go away, but tightly clutching my little brother helps me purge my body from the shards in my throat and I draw in a shuddering breath. Again. And again.

I’m sobbing.

My whole body shakes violently with every sob. The Sandaime pats my hair and when the first tears
soak into his robe, Obito starts wailing, too.

The Sandaime murmurs soft nothings as we both cry into the beginning of a new day.

\( \text{\(000\)} \)

The sun is shining brightly into the hospital room by the time he leaves and I fall asleep, Obito still beside me, but the place I’m in right now is dark, dank and decidedly unfamiliar. There’re long rows of steel-enforced vaults on either side of me, set into alcoves and connected by cold, black stone. It’s eerily silent.

I’m acutely aware that I’m dreaming. But … it feels different somehow.

Before I can even decide to find out about this strange environment, I hear voices behind me, accompanied by erratically flashing lights that make my shadow waver and bend into surreality.

I turn around.

"It's all because of you" they spit out, and with every word, they come closer. "Because of you I was detected. Because you didn't want to die we had to fight. Because of you WE FAILED OUR MISSION!"

Oh no. Not again. Not this.

I watch as the enemy nin advances, his body flickering and buzzing like an unstable black-and-white holograph, coming nearer and nearer until he comes to a halt in front of a tiny figure.

"Because of you, my comrades died and I will have to kill myself because there's no chance to get out of here alive. But I will take you with me. I will end your miserable life here and now, just as I've ended the lives of your pathetic protector."

Again, they raise their bloody katana, and the figure before him makes a minuscule movement.

The scene bursts into colors and in that moment, I realize two things.

1. That tiny figure is me.
2. I’m watching myself kill a human being.

Nausea creeps up my throat, the amount of acid burning at the back of my mouth proportionate to the number of stabbing motions my alter ego is performing on the enemy. There’s a lot of blood and when a particularly vicious blow rips their stomach open and things start to spill out, I can’t take it anymore.

I bend over and vomit on the black stone floor.

I did this? I killed them?

No, not a simple kill – that was practically slaughter!

My body is violently shaking again and when I bring my hands into my field of vision they’re stained with blood, the red liquid dripping from my fingertips and splashing with a deafening noise on the ground. I look down at my clothes and see that these, too, are drenched in blood.

No.
This isn’t me. I don’t kill people.

I’m a simple university student, living a simple university student life. I’ve just received my artist’s diploma and am now looking forward to four semesters of business studies in a master program I had worked hard for to be accepted into.

I stumble a few steps back and look up, just in time to see the little black haired girl ruthlessly slash the throat of her victim. The sound of ripping skin and flesh reverberates loudly in the air and her hand falls limply back to her side, the kunai in her hand dripping with blood.

There is so much of it. Everywhere.

And then she turns around.

Burning crimson eyes pin me into place and there’s no little girl anymore. All I can see is a monster.

And I scream.

I scream as I scramble to run away from her, running and running, breathing already labored because oh god I forgot how out of shape I am, through the space between the vaults and when I’m about to pass the first one, there’s the metallic screeching of an opening door. I don’t pay it any heed, though, and keep running until –

“Liz!”

I stop dead in my tracks.

I know that voice.

“Mom?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

I turn around.

A figure steps out from behind the now opened door of the first vault and I freeze.

Long dark hair bound in a ponytail – pale skin – onyx eyes – a metal plate glinting on her forehead – Nonono, this is wrong, Mom didn’t wear something like that –

A pale green flak jacket – weapon pouch at her thigh – red-white fan on her dark shirt –

“Liz?”

“NO!” I scream. I walk backwards, willing my legs to move faster, but they’re so heavy, I wish I had exercised more –

“Liz, please don’t run!”

I bolt.

My run is more of a mad stumble now, but as long as it takes me away from whatever it is that crawled out of that vault I’m going with it. But only a few feet further and I can hear the next vault door opening, long before I’m even near. And again, a figure comes out.

This is not funny. If this is a dream, I want to wake up. NOW.
The person’s build is familiar and when they turn around enough that I can see the complete right side, relief floods through me. It revitalizes the muscles in my leg and I’m able to run again. I stretch out my arms as a sob escapes my lips and I fly through the air to close the distance as fast as possible and finally, when I reach him, I embrace him in a fierce hug.

“Thank god, Dad, you’re here! I thought I was all alone with that monster that killed a person right before my eyes and then that thing that spoke with Mom’s voice came and it all got even worse, but now we’re together, we can get out of here and go home!”

Dad doesn’t answer and it’s only when I squeeze him tighter that I realize that something is wrong.

My arms shouldn’t be long enough to wind around his body that easily.

_Drip._

Something is soaking into the material of my sleeves. They make a wet squelching sound when I loosen my hold.

_Drip._

Dad falls when I take my arms off him, crumpling into a heap on the ground. His legs are bent in a grotesque angle and his torso falls on its back with a loud thud.

A torso that’s missing its complete left side.

_Oh my god._

The sound that I want to make is stuck in my throat. My body won’t obey my orders and when I try to take a step back, my weight shifts without my legs moving and I fall on my butt. I don’t even notice the sting.

This is not real.

A shrill laugh echoes through the place and I gasp for air when the next bout is about to come out. Because I figured it out. I figured it out.

This is not real.

“This is not real” I pant between laughter. “This is not real.”

I repeat it, each time louder than the last until I’m yelling and my vocal chords burn with the strain. I don’t stop, because I’m sure it will all disappear when I scream it loudly and often enough, so I continue, with eyes clamped tightly shut and lungs near bursting.

Until the shock of a hand slapping my face silences me.

“Get a grip on yourself” a childish voice commands.

My eyes fly open at that sound and at the same moment, I see that my deepest fear has become true. It’s the monster girl from before, standing directly in front of me and probably ready to kill me. Her crimson eyes have turned black now and bizarrely, she almost looks like a normal little girl, but I’m not fooled. I’m not going to fall for that.

I scramble to get up on my feet again, but I don’t make it particularly far when she lifts her hand and slaps me. Again.
“I’m not going to kill you. Now calm down. We need to talk.”

My mouth is hanging wide open, my eyes as wide as saucers and they widen even further when she rolls her eyes at me and lets out an impatient huff.

That’s … uncannily expressive for a monster.

“You’re … not going to kill me?” I manage to wheeze.

She draws her eyebrows together in confusion. “Why would I?”

I stare blankly at her. “Umm … maybe because you just viciously murdered that person over there?” I suggest, gesturing weakly at some vague point behind me.

Now it’s her turn to stare at me, albeit more incredulous than anything else. “Are you serious? Don’t you know who you’re talking to?”

I blink. “No?”

This is surreal. Did I manage to break out after all? Only to get somewhere even worse?

“She doesn’t know” the girl mumbles, exasperated. “She’s talking to herself and she doesn’t even know.”

Wait. What.

She waves a hand at me which, rather morbidly, is still stained with blood. “E-tsu-ko” she says, very slowly, as if she’s talking to a retarded child. “Me is Etsuko. Me is you.”


“I – I’m not you!” I yell. “I’m Elizabeth!”

When the last words leave my mouth, something strange happens. There’s a ripple in the air and suddenly, a weight settles down in my gut. I can’t shake the feeling of foreboding that starts climbing up my spine.

It’s not lessened at all when the girl’s face becomes serious, too.

“So it came to that, huh?” she says quietly. “You couldn’t deal with me – us – killing that enemy nin, so you retreated completely to your old you, didn’t you?”

What – what is she even talking about?

“I guess that’s not too surprising, considering we have a tendency to separate ourselves from the things that we don’t want to deal with and prefer to shove them into dark, isolated places. Like, here, for example.”

She sighs.

“But you know that we can’t go on like this, don’t you? In fact, we mustn’t go farther than this. Having to talk to my separated self about my mental state defines ‘disturbing’ on a whole new level.”

I make a strangled, squeaking noise.

She nods approvingly, like I’ve made some meaningful contribution to this whole bizarre exchange.
“I know, right? I’ve already thought about this situation and truth be told, I was afraid at first that we’ve gone multiple. You know, as in multiple personality disorder? But then I remembered that people who are multiple aren’t supposed to be able to communicate with their different personalities, or at least not until they’ve undergone extensive therapy. And since we are talking with each other so early on, I simply took an educated guess that we’re not.”

Oh my god. This is worse than talking to that official from the Bureau for soul transfer affairs. If this is really me over there – and I’m still in vehement denial – I must come across as terribly insensitive. Like, a terrible jerk. No consideration for the feelings of my counterpart at all.

“Listen, I don’t know how much time we have here, but I’d like to solve this before we have to go back and appear like a sane person to everyone else. It would be really helpful if you could open your mouth and talk, ’cause, even if you’re technically me, we’re still separated right now, so there obviously must be something that sets us apart. I figure that I got the more analytical and rational part of us, whereas you incorporate the … well, the rest. So, anything to add to that?”

Can it be true?

Despite everything, I find myself slowly opening up. There’s a sense of familiarity in the way she talks, the way she gestures and grimaces that feels like looking into a mirror. A really, really weird mirror with a twisted sense of humor, but still. It gives me enough courage to play this strange game.

I try a simple question first. “How do you know all this?”

She immediately brightens up like a kid on Christmas day and I get the feeling that I won’t get a simple answer.

“Glad you asked! First of all, you gotta know that I’ve mainly been the one to handle the reincarnation business up until now. You know, the whole planning and plotting stuff? Plays right into my field of expertise. That’s why it’s mainly me who’s identifying as Etsuko now.”

Suddenly, she leans closer to me and before I know what’s happening, she’s poking my forehead.

“You, on the other hand, have been pretty passive for quite a long time. Not entirely inactive, since we do seem to have a thing for regular bouts of self-loathing, but not really working your ass off, either. At least, that was until recently. I have no idea what made you go all gung-ho, but the dreams are definitely several touches of too much.

“So, how do I know all this? I didn’t, until you dragged us down here and I saw that we were like this. And with this I mean that I look like Etsuko-us whereas you look like Elizabeth-us. Since that’s two facets of the same soul, I assumed that we’re not really two entities, either. Add to that that I don’t feel much different than normal but you practically are a blubbering mess about things that we factually did out there, and you come to the conclusion that we’re representing the ‘analytical part’ and the ‘not-so-analytical-rest’.

“That’s the farthest I’ve come until now with an explanation in the short time we’ve been here together, and it would be really nice if we could figure out the rest in cooperation since you obviously have a part in this.”

I’m speechless.

Not because of the messy and frankly awful explanation that was given to me. Not because of the craziness of the things that I managed to understand, either.

I’m speechless because from deep inside me, something tells me that this is the truth.
And god help me if that doesn’t already sound trashy as hell.

“OK, so I have a plan for how we’re gonna do this. You tell me what you remember best from either life and what’s most important to you and we can go on from there. Sound good?”

I stare at her. Really hard. “Is that gonna get us out of here?”

She stares back. “Probably.”

This might be the best I’m going to get. I grimace at that thought, but really, what can I do? I’ll just have to bite the bullet and see what comes after, I guess.

“OK, so … break a leg, maybe?”

Her answering grin is almost feral.

“You better bet on that.”

Chapter End Notes

Please do continue telling me what you thought about this chapter. Your comments motivate me like nothing else :) Till next time!
Nothing Stays Buried Forever

Chapter Summary

Talking to myself is kind of ... terrifying. But hey, anything that helps the case, right?

Chapter Notes

Yo, I'm alive.

... and a terrible person for making you wait so long. I'm really really sorry, but real life has decided to throw some rocks into my path that I would've had to drag away with a forklift only that I don't own one, so that kind of took priority.

But here it is, the final chapter of the first arc!

You can always check out my tumblr for chapter progress and other stuff - sometimes, if you look really hard, there're clues for the coming plot. Also, you can talk to me there, so don't hesitate to send an ask! I love to hear from you!

Two girls are sitting on a black stone floor.

One of them is a young woman, somewhere in the middle of her twenties and dressed casually in dark blue jeans and a red sweater. She's on the shorter side of what's considered the average height for Caucasian people and although most people wouldn't say she was overweight, she clearly is no stick either. She has a dazed and slightly terrified expression on her face.

Across from her, talking animatedly and generally a whole lot more self-confident, is a child barely out of her toddler stage. She's wearing a dark, high-collared shirt with a stylized crimson-and-white fan on her back and leggings that are cut off just underneath her knees.

They both have black hair, Asian features and blood on their clothes.

They make for a rather curious sight, especially when one adds their conversation to the overall picture.

"Okay, so let me get this straight" the little girl says. She has a scowl on her face that does funny things to the distribution of her baby fat, making her appear like an adult stuffed into a midget body. She points a tiny finger at the young woman who flinches at the jerky movement.

"You remember the things we do, but you think they're figments of a very active imagination. Is that right?"

The woman blinks. She looks distinctly unhappy which is pointedly ignored by the little girl, but she's trying, So hard.

"That sounds so stupid if you put it like that. I mean, somewhere inside of me I think I know they're
real, but they feel like … dunno, kind of transparent. Kind of like something that's pulled over the real thing and … argh, it's so difficult to explain!" She exasperatedly rakes her fingers through her hair.

The left eyebrow of the little girl shoots up. "Pulled over the real thing? What do you mean?"

"Like a plastic film, I guess?" Her counterpart scratches the back of her head. "Still see-through but airtight?"

"No" she shakes her head vehemently. "I meant the 'real thing' part! I don't understand why the things we do wouldn't be the real thing?"

"Because, duh, clearly, they're not!" The woman shoots a look at the little girl that says something along the line of 'I can't believe you never figured that out and, god, how is this situation even real and why am I discussing this'. "Didn't you notice that it's ridiculous to even think that Mom or Dad could be ninja? And not even real, pre-industrial, Japanese ninja, but those unrealistic superhuman beings from Naruto?"

The little one huffs at this. "Of course that's ridiculous! But I don't see why you have to bring Mom and Dad into this?!

"Huh?" A confused blink. "But this is about them, isn't it?"

"What?" Another huff, this one definitely more annoyed. "No, it's not! I don't understand what you're getting at! Of course Mom and Dad aren't ninja, because Okaa-chan and Otou-san are, so could you please stop swapping their identities because it's confusing as hell!"

There's a short pause in which the woman's brows manage to come so tightly together that they look line one single line. "What?" she says, almost swallowing the word that's trying to make it out of her mouth. Louder then, she adds "Swapping identities? What?!"

"Oh come on, don't play dumb with yourself!" the girl cries out. She's squirming with impatience and something entirely too close to desperation. "There's no way you didn't notice that you're calling their names synonymously because that would mean you think they're one and the same, which I can't actually imagine."

The woman stares, mouth agape and eyes wide as saucers.

Realization dawns on the face of the child.

Her jaw drops, too.

"Unless – unless you actually do think that they're one and the same?!"

For a few heartbeats, dead silence hangs between them as they digest the meaning of the revelation, both coming to conclusions that are set miles apart from each other.

It's not really surprising when they both start to shout at the same time.

"I REFUSE TO BELIEVE –"

"ARE YOU SERIOUS –"

"- THAT NARUTOVERSE IS REAL –"

"- WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK –"
"- AND I DARE YOU TO PROVE IT TO ME!"

"- HAVE WE BEEN DOING THE WHOLE TIME?!

They're breathing hard by the time they've finished their little outbursts and glaring at each other with blazing eyes, either waiting for the other to give in.

Which doesn't happen.

Instead, they both open their mouths at the same time again, only to clamp them shut when they see what the other is about to do. The little girl rolls her eyes.

"You first" she grumbles.

The woman purses her lips. "I believe that this whole second life or whatever you wanna call it is a load of crap in our head. We're probably sleeping or something and only having a really weird dream. It must be like that because we managed to involve our whole family in this, too. Didn't you ever think it funny that we would have a mother, a father and a little brother again, an exact mirror image of our actual family?"

"But they're nothing alike!" the girl interjects. "Dad and Otou-san couldn't be further apart personality wise and the same goes for Mom and Okaa-chan! And what about Obito? He's a baby, for heaven's sake, not even close to a full grown teenager approaching the twentysomethings like Link has been!"

"That's not true! They're one and the same! I can see it! I can see that all the characteristics are present, even in Obito!"

Long strands of black hair go flying when the girl shakes her head agitatedly. Her eyes have turned desperate and she grips the woman by her shoulders, her small hands barely managing to do so. "No, Elizabeth, it doesn't work! Don't you understand? Just because you want to see Mom and Dad's traits in Okaa-chan and Otou-san, it doesn't mean they're there! You're forcing your concepts on them and you refuse to acknowledge the things that make them different. You have to stop perceiving them as something that they aren't!"

The woman, Elizabeth, has clamped her eyes tightly shut sometime during the rant. Her face is distorted into a mask of pained denial, lips pressed into a thin line and corners turned downwards, eyebrows pinched together creating a deep crease at the base of her nose and skin as pale as chalk.

Predictably, she doesn't answer.

The air is tense, loaded with expectation and the moment of silence stretches into an uncomfortable sort of eternity that raises the hairs on the nape of the neck and makes lesser beings squirm.

Elizabeth does a lot of almost-but-not-quite-squirming.

It's enough, apparently, for the little girl to come to yet another conclusion. Her grip on Elizabeth softens, along with her glare, and she takes a small step back.

"You know, don't you?" the question not really a question and more of an observation. "You and me are essentially one person, so if I know, you do, too, of course. The knowledge is buried deep down inside of you and I see that it makes you afraid. So you lash out, trying to prove that Okaa-chan, Otou-san and Obito are really just Mom, Dad and Link and –"

Her eyes widen with another realization.
"- and that's where the dreams come in. Dreams in which you merge them together, dreams about the things we did and liked to do back then. And when the opportunity strikes, you let them leak into our conscience, resulting in us stumbling over the crash of two worlds. Because that's what happened with Akiko/Amanda that time at the Police Force, am I right?"

Onyx eyes appear as bottomless pits when the girl lets her gaze rest on her counterpart who has buried her face in her hands. She's making small whimpering noises, shoulders shaking with silent sobs, and her devastation is nearly palpable.

The little girl's intense scrutiny cools down a few degrees and when she begins to speak again her voice, despite being soft, carries through the air and bounces back off the black stone.

"I'm beginning to understand what you did. What I don't understand, though, is why. Why are you so averse to the idea that our life in Narutoverse is real? Why are you so afraid?"

Elizabeth peeks from the space between her fingers.

"Becozidhurzomuch" she mumbles.

"What?"

She takes her hands from her face and draws a shuddering breath. "Because it hurts so much."

Tentatively, she looks the girl in the eye, expecting a derisory reaction of some sort but when none comes forth, she continues. "Remember our first six months here?"

The little girl scrunches up her nose. "Not really. I remember being reborn, getting really enthusiastic upon realization, then getting really upset when I figured out where I've been reborn to and the next thing is the guy from the Bureau for soul transfer affairs. Everything in between is kind of like a big black hole."

"I thought so. Do you know why?"

"Dunno … if there's an explanation, I haven't seen it around, yet. Or maybe I have in that big black hole, but, uh, are you supposed to retain memories from a coma? Because I certainly don't."

Elizabeth looks the girl firm in the eye and says with a calm voice "Who said we were in a coma?"

Said girl blinks, taken by surprise. Her brows shoot up, leaving her eyes wide open. "We – were we not?"

Never breaking eye contact, Elizabeth slowly shakes her head. She holds her hands up when the girl opens her mouth to burst out a hundred questions. "Hold on, let me explain!"

A jaw snaps shut.

"Ok, so you might remember the moment we fully broke down. It was the morning after our birth when we saw that banner and realized that we were still here, right?"

The girl nods.

"So, what happened then was that, basically, all kinds of different emotions came crashing down on us. Things like incredulity and denial, fear, anger and most importantly, the agony of loss. With the realization that we'd truly been reborn also came the realization that we'd lost everything: our skills, our friends, our family. Which hurt a whole fucking lot and then some. It rocked the core of our
being and we had massive problems coping with it." And then, added in an unintelligible mumble: "We still have, actually."

A distraught expression has appeared on the face of the little girl. She's visibly struggling when she opens her mouth to speak with a shaky voice. "So what you're telling me is that our 'coma' was a result of us being unable to deal with ... everything?"

Elizabeth nods.

"OK, then ... what happened to make us suddenly be alright? I mean, the guy from the Bureau answered a few things but he actually left us with more questions than before. And he didn't directly do anything for our emotional stability, did he? But somehow, we still became capable of acting after that."

Elizabeth averts her gaze from the little girl. "You're partly right in that we finally became capable of acting" she says softly. "But we have never been completely alright. After the conversation with the Bureau guy something happened that laid down the foundation for what we have now: you, Etsuko-us and me, Elizabeth-us."

The little girl aka Etsuko's eyes widen and her lips take on the shape of perfect little 'o'. "We split! So we are multiple after all?!"

She receives a firm shake of the head.

"No, not really" Elizabeth says matter-of-factly. "As I said, it was only the foundation. What we did was basically getting rid of all the unwanted emotions by creating this place." She makes a gesture that encompasses the space around them.

"We created vaults and locked the painful emotions and all memories linked to these emotions away. What was left was the starting capital for Etsuko, and because it was mostly comprised of rational thinking and our analytical skill since we locked our heavy emotions away, you were right to conclude that we as Etsuko have handled our business mostly in a rather logical manner – which you are currently representing."

Etsuko groans softly. It's her turn to put her face in her hands and with a dejected voice she mumbles "This is some heavy stuff right here."

Elizabeth shrugs. "And we're not finished, yet, so tell me when you're ready for more. Because now comes a part that I can't quite figure out. I'll need your help."

For a while, there's only silence as Etsuko mulls over the information. It's an almost comfortable one, miles away from the tension of the beginnings, or at least it feels like that from a relative stance. Because there's still enough uncertainty in the air to drown them both in.

Finally she inhales and looks up. "OK, I think I got it. Now, there's just one question: even though you say we locked our emotions away, I can still remember quite distinctly that we've been through various stages of cowardice and self-loathing. How did that happen?"

"Good question" Elizabeth concedes. "But you are forgetting something. The emotions we locked away were only those of intense pain originating from the memories of our past life. We're no robots and Etsuko has always been a complete person in her own right. We just chose to shut some things out to help us live. And we were quite successful with that approach."

"Until the dreams emerged" Etsuko pipes in.
"Until the dreams emerged" Elizabeth agrees. "I still don't know why they broke out, though, and it's driving me crazy."

Etsuko shoots her an unimpressed look. "You know, for someone who didn't even want to admit our identity half an hour ago you're suddenly awfully invested."

Elizabeth shows a smile that consists of at least 90% teeth. "What can I say? I don't do things half-assed."

She receives a huff but no rebuttal. Her grin widens a fraction. "Glad we're starting to get along."

"Well, we are one person" the little girl retorts. Her expression goes back to serious immediately after, though. "I'm sure we'll be able to figure this dream thingie out, too. You know, now that we're both focusing our energy on solving the problem."

She draws a deep breath. "OK, so let's start by thinking of the first time one of those dreams started."

"But that's already part of the problem!" Elizabeth cries out. "We can't say for sure when exactly they started because for a really long time, we don't even remember having them!"

"Okay, okay, no need to panic" Etsuko says in a placating voice. "We can make it easier then. Let's take the first time we do remember having one, okay?"

Elizabeth pauses to think. "That would indeed be the incident at the Police Force. That was the first time one of our suppressed memories worked its way into our conscience and managed to blend with reality. Which reminds me, there is something I was going to say before when you first mentioned it: I didn't let this memory through on purpose."

Etsuko's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "You didn't?"

She receives a tired sigh. "No, I didn't. I'm only a manifestation of our defensive mechanism to lock painful emotions away. And like the name defensive mechanism already implies, I'm here to protect us. I would never willingly let anything past me of which I know it would hurt us. But somewhere along the way, I've become fallible. I'm no longer a fail-save system and I don't know why."

"With which we've gone full circle again" Etsuko takes over. She pinches her nose in frustration. "We're not moving any further with this. I think we need another approach, since this one is clearly not working. Let's not take the first time we remember a dream, but focus on things we did and thought that have a connection to our past life's memories. Really, any connection will do."

Elizabeth snorts. "Good luck with that. Remember when I insisted that Otou-san, Okaa-chan and Obito were the same as Dad, Mom and Link? Any memory with them in it is somehow linked to our past life's memory."

Etsuko's face contorts into an unhappy grimace.

"So basically, we have two and a half year of interaction with Okaa-chan and Otou-san alone until Obito joins the party" Elizabeth continues. "From then on it's another half year before the Police-Force-incident. This gives us a time frame of three years which we have to comb through. Brilliant."

"Actually" Etsuko says slowly. "I don't think we need to look at all of this time. I have a feeling that this thing really started when Obito joined the fray because from then on, our family was 'restored'. What exactly happened between his birth and the incident?"

"Um, there was the party for Obito a few days before, I guess, but nothing else too exciting. One day
after that we flipped over hearing that Konoha was going to war because we mistook it for the massively misplaced beginning of the Third Shinobi War and were put under a genjutsu by Otou-san as a result. Only two days after that —" 

"Wait!" Etsuko suddenly exclaims. "I think – I think I got it! Remember what happened after we were genjutsued?"

Elizabeth crinkles her nose in thought. "We had a real good night's sleep? And after that … we were really disoriented? We even started to sing that song … what was it again … ah yes, Hero of War! I really don't understand how we could've been so careless, I mean if we had been caught -"

"But don't you understand?!" Etsuko interrupts her. "It's the song! The song is that earliest link to our painful memories!"

Elizabeth's eyes widen in understanding. "Oh – oh my gosh, you're right! But if the song …" And then, if possible, her eyes go even wider and her voice cracks in excitement. "Oh god! It means that it was Otou-san's genjutsu! The genjutsu was the catalyst that set the dreams into motion, the foreign body that didn't fit with our internal system, the grain of sand that sabotaged our defensive mechanism!"

Etsuko nods rigorously and gesticulates wildly with her hands. "Exactly! Now we only need to find out how to counter this whole thing and we're ready to go back!"

They beam at each other like athletes who managed to bring back Olympic gold, triumph written all over their faces and eyes sparkling with accomplishment.

Until they realize that 'finding out how to counter it' is easier said than done.

"So, our real problem is the existence of our defensive mechanism" Etsuko says. "It used to do its job, but now it's causing more problems than relief. As I see it, we have two options now: One, we seal our memories again, this time really tight. We'd need to find a way to make it fail-save so that no genjutsu in the world will make it past it again. Or two, we deal with them. Which would be more sustainable. But it'll most definitely hurt, too. Probably like a bitch."

Elizabeth grimaces. "I don't think we'll ever be able to create something that can withstand any genjutsu. I mean, the thing about genjutsu is that it targets the brain via your chakra stream. I'm not sure about the strength of Otou-san's jutsu, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't the strongest in his repertoire since he wasn't primarily out for our blood. And when I start thinking about people who give no shit about our wellbeing and know their stuff around illusions, I'm getting really bad vibes."

"True" Etsuko sighs. "That leaves only option two."

There's a short, uncomfortable silence.

"Remember what Mom told us once?" Elizabeth asks with a lopsided grin. "There's still enough time to be afraid …"

"… after the deed is done. Yeah, I remember." Etsuko takes in a deep breath. "Lucky that we're just at the right place for that, right?"

"Yeah" Elizabeth answers weakly. "So, shall we just open the vaults one after the other?"

The woman thinks, nervously chewing on her bottom lip. "I think" she starts hesitantly. "I think I know the ideal starting point for it. But – it won't be easy."
"Nothing ever comes easy. But I trust you on this."

Elizabeth lets out a short laugh. "Of course you would. I'm just another you after all."

)

Two girls are standing in front of a massive vault door, which is reinforced with steel chains doubly and triply wound around.

The size of the whole affair is quite impressive – and impressed the two are indeed.

"So, that's it?" the smaller one asks. She's trying to sound casual although there is no mistaking the nervousness in her voice.

The taller one rolls her eyes but doesn't comment further on it. She's tightly strung as well.

Amid the maze of chains on the black vault door, there's a pad made of smooth black stone set on eye-level. It has the outline of a hand drawn on it.

The tall girl takes a step forward and lifts her hand. She guides it towards the pad, but stops short when there're no more than two inches separating her hand from the surface. Her head turns back to look at her small companion.

"Um, so before I access this memory." She takes a deep breath. "You should know that there is quite a high possibility for us to wake up after this. So if there's still something that we need to discuss before returning I guess now would be a good moment to spill."

The addressed thinks a bit before slowly shaking her head. "I can't think of anything else to sort out. I guess – I guess we're good to go."

The tall girl smiles tentatively. "That's good." She stretches her other hand out, offering it to the other girl who takes it without hesitation.

"One last thing. This memory will be painful. And with painful I mean paralyzing painful. The first time we fell into complete shock, after all. But this time around we can't let that happen. We'll need something to focus on, something that prevents us from falling."

"Oh I'm aware" the little girl answers. With a smile, she adds "And I already have something, or better, someone, in mind for the job."

"Good" the taller one says. "I guess we're as ready as we'll ever be then. Etsuko?"

"Bring it on, Elizabeth."

She brings her hand to the pad.

As soon as her skin touches the smooth stone, lines of white light come to life. Lines lead from the tips of her fingers to various points in the maze of chains and suddenly, where there had only been chaos before, there's a logical system of retreating metal, the sliding creating a cacophony of sounds that all builds up into a grotesque symphony. The light begins to shine from between the cracks until the vault door bursts open and everything is bathed in searing white light.

Etsuko rolls her eyes. "Overkill" she mutters.

And then the light swallows them both.
"… and if we change the color of the walls, the room will seem so much brighter. What do you think, Liz?"

"Yes" I say absentmindedly, scowling at the screen of my laptop and the displayed e-mail. Annoyance takes over when I realize what the content actually means for me and my efforts to apply for an exchange semester in London and the more I think about it, the angrier I get. It's been two months of chasing after people and reminding them that it's actually their job to be available for my questions and now –

"Liz, are you even listening?" comes Mom's voice from the phone that's still at my ear and I wince. I have no idea what she's been talking about.

"Uh, not really? I'm sorry Mom, but I got an emergency here and I need to speak with the lady from the International Office. It's about London. I'll call you back sometime, 'kay?"

I hear Mom sighing from the other end. "Do that. And tell me how it went, okay?"

"Sure. Bye, Mom. Love ya!"

"Love you, too, sweetie!"

The line goes dead and I hurriedly punch in the number of the International Office of my university. I hold my breath while counting the rings on the other side.

She has to pick up.

After the seventh ring, I finally hear the lady's voice. I impatiently wait for her to finish her default greeting and ask her if it'd be alright if I came by now because she has to put a stamp on every single page of my application documents.

She hasn't even finished spelling out her consent by the time I'm out of the door of my dorm room.

I set a brisk walking pace and make my way to the subway, cursing when I realize that the next one is going to leave in three minutes. Which means that I'll have to run if I want to get it.

I decide that I do want to get it and head directly for the next traffic light which has just sprung to green. I'm still a distance away, but I decide that if I run real fast I'll make it. Which is why I end up in the middle of the street long after the light has gone red again.

There's a loud screeching sound as tires leave a trail of burnt rubber on the asphalt and suddenly I'm flying. Pain explodes as I hit something with my head.

Everything goes black.

There's the sound of a tape being fast forwarded and the next time I open my eyes, there's a constant beeping sound and blinding lights in a white room.

I recognize this. I'm in a room of my local hospital. There's a doctor at my bedside. Oh, and Mom and Dad, too.

"… brain trauma when you got hit by that car" the lady in white explains. She's looking at me with a strange expression. I recoil when I realize what it is.
Pity.

"Its result is that a vein has started swelling in your brain. We call it a cerebral hemorrhage. It's very serious."

My parents have started to cry and my own voice sounds morose when I ask her "Am I going to die?"

"When the vein bursts, yes."

"How long?"

"Two months, maybe. I'm very sorry Ms. Wang."

Fast forward again. I catch various glimpses of the following two months, pictures, sounds and emotions.

My head aches a lot. Mom cries a lot. Dad and Link, too, especially Link. He must be feeling terrible.

My friends come to visit me. Fellow students. My violin professor.

The five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I witness them all. In the people around me, in myself. Though the thought that none of this is fair never really leaves me.

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Then … I died.
Grown-Ups' Talk

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

This following chap is titled 'Interlude', but contrary to the last one, it's no filler. In fact, it's essential to the plot and attentive readers will find lots and lots of foreshadowing in it to get you all psyched up for the future. So, have fun reading and agonizing over it!
*evil laughter*

A huge thanks to my beta NightsBlackRose13 for making this chapter so much better than it had been in the first draft! Seriously, there would be a lot of half-assed things in this story if it wasn't for you.

Oh, last thing: Of course, tumblr users knew this was coming - so you might want to head over there every once in a while if you like some extra content.

Not for the first time, Hiruzen doubted if his sensei had really made the best choice when he'd appointed him as the Sandaime Hokage.

He gently closed the hospital behind himself, avoiding any noise that could wake up the little girl and her brother from their much needed sleep.

Two children who had lost both of their parents just a few hours ago. Two more orphans in Konoha.

And he knew it was his fault.

The tall silver-haired man that had followed him outside turned to him with conflicting emotions in his eyes.

"What is going to happen to them, Hokage-sama?"

Hiruzen headed towards the stairs that led away from the children's ward of Konoha Hospital and motioned for the man to follow him. This part had been added to the hospital thanks to his student Tsunade only three years ago when her little brother Nawaki and his teammates had returned from a mission that had ended in every single one of them being poisoned. Since the metabolism of children differed greatly from that of an average adult, the usual treatment hadn't shown much effect.

Before it all could end in a catastrophe, Tsunade had barged in, saved the children and loudly demanded a children's ward. Which, since then, had already saved many young lives.

Although it did little for the two small Uchiha he'd just left.

"Their clan will take care of them" he answered the other man's question. "Knowing the Uchiha, it
would take nothing short of complete annihilation before they would leave a child of theirs in the custody of a third party."

His companion remained silent at that. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Are you worried about them, Sakumo-kun?"

"Of course I am" the tall man said levelly. "Aren't you, after what you've just seen?"

Hiruzen knew that Sakumo wasn't referring to the little girl's breakdown, although that had been heartbreaking in its own right. What he meant was the sight they had walked in on: her small body, standing rigidly on a stool in front of the sink, a hand hovering over her right eye with two fingers curved like the talons of a raptor.

He had lived too long not to know what that had been about.

"Sakumo-kun, you know about the Uchiha's doujutsu, don't you?"

"Who doesn't" Sakumo said. Then, much quieter, he added "You think that she has awakened it."

Hiruzen nodded. "It's said that to awaken the Sharingan, special circumstances are needed. Although I don't know what she saw yesterday night, I suspect it was enough to count as a 'special circumstance.'"

They were crossing the entrance area of the hospital now and by the time they had arrived at the main door and taken a step outside, four ANBU had emerged from the shadows and formed a diamond shaped formation around them.

"When I asked her what she was doing she said she was 'getting a purchase refund'" Sakumo remarked. "I think she's aware of what she got. And she doesn't want it."

Hiruzen sighed.

For a while, they walked in silence.

Konoha was buzzing with life now, the morning having fully developed and the sun shining brightly on the streets and the colorful buildings. People were milling about, civilians and shinobi alike and a warm glow seemed to emanate from every surface, making the horrors of the night appear like nothing but a nightmare.

Until they arrived at the Military Police Force main administrative building. Of which there was scarcely anything left.

They jumped on a nearby rooftop and watched various genin teams carry off the rubble and debris, with a few Uchiha directing the process.

There were so many questions left from yesterday.

What kind of explosives could have caused such destruction? The usual kibakufuda didn't have enough power to tear the reinforced structure of the Police Force building down, assumed they hadn't been deployed in massive amounts which they didn't appear to have been.

What had produced those hideous wounds that had been found on every single victim? After the first estimates, it looked like they were caused by some kind of explosives, too. And if so, had it been the same as the ones that destroyed the building?
And then there were the victims themselves: All six of them had been skilled Uchiha shinobi. Not only little Etsuko's parents, but also Fumio, Takao's son and heir to the clan. The news of his death would have to be carried to his father soon.

It was no easy feat to trick a Sharingan. The ability to copy every jutsu usually meant that even if the user didn't have a perfect counter jutsu to an enemy's attack, they'd always have the possibility to beat them with their very own techniques. The only exceptions were bloodline jutsu and Hiruzen had the sneaking suspicion that the explosive jutsu was just that.

"The girl is technically a witness, too" Sakumo interrupted his musings. "Are you going to interrogate her?"

"I'd rather not" he replied. "If she can't supply any new information it won't be necessary anyway. I doubt very much that she'll be able to provide new insight."

He threw a last glance at the reconstruction site.

"I'll return to the Tower now. Write a report on everything you witnessed yesterday night. I expect it on my desk by tonight. You're dismissed."

The silver-haired man bowed and turned to leave.

"Oh, and one other thing, Sakumo-kun" Hiruzen added. "If Etsuko wants to keep it a secret, it would only be fair to heed that wish for now."

Sakumo nodded. With a blur, he vanished from the rooftop, leaving the Sandaime alone with his ANBU guards.

Danzou was standing at the windows in his office, back turned towards the door even after he had entered. He had been awaiting him.

Of course he had. Hiruzen had expected nothing else.

"This is a disaster, Hiruzen" Danzou said as soon as the door had closed and the privacy seals had flared to life. "And a completely avoidable one, too. Only a few weeks ago I had suggested for Konoha to administer a pre-emptive strike against our enemies to gain the upper hand with one move. You prevented it. Instead, they have gotten the chance to strike first, and they took it. Do you see what you and your foolish attempt at appeasement have done to the village?"

"We don't even know if it was Suna or Iwa" Hiruzen responded, slowly nearing the man at the window.

"And who are you trying to fool now, Hiruzen? Look around yourself: it doesn't matter which of our enemies was responsible, the results are clear! The sensing barrier has been breached, the Police Force has failed and the village is close to turmoil. Konoha has lost the chance to stay in control even before fully entering the war."

Hiruzen had no answer for that. Maybe, if he'd known how to put the feeling of crushing guilt into words, he would have said something. But then Danzou would have crushed him, too, so he stayed silent.

"This mess needs to be cleaned up. Luckily for you, your council consists of capable people."
His oldest friend finally turned around, letting the light fall on only half of his face and leaving the other in the shadows. Danzou had always been like that – even standing in the light, he seemed to be shrouded in perpetual darkness, gloom preceding him even before he himself had entered the scene.

"On your desk are proposals for the restructuring of the Police Force, mainly the outsourcing of the sensing barrier section. We recommend you to staff the new team with non-Uchiha since they've proven themselves to be unable to handle a crisis. I've included a list of trusted men who would be perfectly suited for the job, all of them handpicked from my own ANBU division ROOT."

Hiruzen walked over to his desk. Indeed, there was a neat stack of paper on it titled with 'KONOHA MILITARY POLICE FORCE REFORMS'. He leafed through them while Danzou continued to speak.

"It will be for the benefit of the village if its inner security doesn't lie in the hands of one single clan. A second, neutral party will be more reliable and less prone to possible corrupting currents within the clan."

Hiruzen looked up and narrowed his eyes at the other man. "Are you implying that the Uchiha have been somehow involved in last night's incident?"

"At this stage, we can't rule this possibility out. You can't deny that it was somewhat fishy how easily the perpetrators infiltrated the village."

The Sandaime set down the papers. "This is a heavy accusation, Danzou! And it's hard to believe if you consider that the Uchiha have been the only ones to suffer losses."

Danzou looked him in the eye. "I believe the security of the village is worth the precaution offered by this solution. We're at war, Hiruzen. Are you going to let another act of carelessness damage Konoha if it would be so easily preventable?"

Hiruzen didn't answer. For half a minute, there was only silence as the two men stared at each other, neither of them willing to back down. The tension was almost palpable.

Finally, Hiruzen relented.

"This will be a measure of war and immediately become ineffective when it's over."

"Of course" Danzou replied.

"Also, I'll man the team with shinobi who have earned my trust and proven themselves loyal to the village. I appreciate your list, but it won't be needed."

Danzou clenched his jaw. "As you wish" he said through gritted teeth.

Hiruzen sighed. "Is there anything else you suggest?"

"Other than that, the council proposes that the rebuilding of the Military Police Force's main building should be relocated to near the prisons. That way, the Military Police will be able to perform their duties more effectively and the current location of their office will be free for other needed institutions."

"I'll consider this." Hiruzen rubbed his temples and sat down in his Hokage seat. "You're dismissed."

But Danzou wasn't finished. "Not yet. I have another matter to speak to you about." He walked around the desk and planted his hands on the top.
"The enemy corpse that was found stabbed in an alley. I heard that the only living person that's been sighted near it has been a little Uchiha girl. You visited her this morning, didn't you? Have you interrogated her, yet?"

Hiruzen's face was hard when he answered. "She just lost her parents. She's in no condition to be interrogated and I don't believe it to be necessary either way."

"You're aware that there is a possibility that she killed him, aren't you?"

"And if it were the case, what would you have me do? I doubt that any information that she could provide us with would outdo the results of the autopsy."

He narrowed his eyes when no answer came forth and his voice became as cold as ice. "And if you're looking for an addition for ROOT: I forbid you to touch her until she has at least graduated from the academy. Am I clear on this, Danzou?"

Fury clouded his former teammate's eyes and for a split second Hiruzen thought that Danzou was going to attack him, but the moment passed as quickly as it came. The man removed his hands from the desk and bowed.

"Crystal, Hokage-sama."

Hiruzen didn't move until Danzou had exited through the door, darkness already swallowing him even before he disappeared out of sight. When he finally did, he slumped back into his chair and exhaled slowly.

"So" he said into the empty room. "Did you have fun listening in?"

A quiet chuckle answered him.

"You could have easily thrown me out if you'd wanted to, sensei."

A man started to materialize from the ground, growing like a muddy brown plant until standing fully upright and returning to his usual coloring. He had long silky black hair that fell straight past his shoulders to the middle of his back and wore standard Konoha shinobi gear. His slim, almost delicate features were set in a boyish grin, golden pupils flashing with amusement and making them stand out even more from his pale complexion and the purple markings around his eyes.

The words that he spoke, with a voice that sounded like a blade hidden beneath a thick layer of velvet, came out in a lazy drawl. "But this jutsu indeed is very useful. I was skeptical at first if a spying jutsu could ever merit an A ranking, but seeing that not even Danzou sensed it, I'm willing to make an exception."

"Well, I didn't show it to you so that you could come spy on my meetings, Orochimaru." It was meant as a reprimand, but Hiruzen knew himself that it lacked all bite, not least because he could feel the corner of his lips pull into a small smile.

"Does it really count as such if you were letting me?" his student retorted smugly.

"Not really" he admitted.

Orochimaru chuckled again. "I am curious, though. These reforms of Danzou's seem rather thought-out for being mere reactions to yesterday night."

Hiruzen grimaced. "It wouldn't surprise me if these plans had lain in a drawer of his desk long before
today, just waiting to be whipped out. He can say it was a unanimous decision of the council as much as he wants, but this bears his handwriting from start to finish. I wonder what he's trying to achieve. One could almost assume he has a grudge against the Uchiha in general."

Orochimaru's answer was pensive as he tilted his head to look past his sensei and out of the window. "Well, the Uchiha are quite something, aren't they? A child that might have killed one of the invaders – I have to say, that clan just keeps churning out shinobi younger and younger."

There was an almost dreamy quality to his student's expression that Hiruzen noted with a tickle of unease, but before he could address it, it had vanished.

"Only if it was true, of course" Orochimaru said with a casual wave of his hands. "Rumors tend to be awfully unreliable, ne, sensei?"

For a moment, Hiruzen wondered what had really compelled his student to make that comment, but that tiny voice in his head was quickly silenced by everything else he knew about Orochimaru.

Orochimaru – the orphan boy, the genius of his team, his prized student and son in everything but name. It would take a lot to shake the trust he put in the man and he wasn't about to begin with it over some petty comment.

So he let it go.

"I trust you know the meaning of activated privacy seals even so?" he said with a serious expression.

"Have a little faith in me, sensei" Orochimaru answered. "My lips are sealed."

Hiruzen laughed silently to himself. "Good. So, what was the original intent of your visit, Orochimaru?"

As Orochimaru began talking, he allowed himself to relax the slightest bit. At least he hadn't failed with his students, making sure that the Will of Fire was burning brightly in every single one of them.

Maybe that was what Tobirama-sensei had seen in him. He prayed that it would be enough.
Where Art Thou Go, Little Girl?

Chapter Summary

Trying to get your feet back on the ground after being knocked down the abyss is hard work. Crying might help. Or not.

Chapter Notes

I'm back with another update!

A tumblr user asked me how I imagine Kiyomi and Nobuo to look like. The result is a doodle. You can head over there if you want to see it, just search under the tag 'Uchiha Kiyomi'.

Huge thanks again to my beta NightsBlackRose13! We had a really productive brainstorming session the other night, and, my dear readers, the future is gonna be exciting, if I may say so. Also, this chapter has become much better after being read by them, as always.

But without further ado, on to the next chapter! I've made you wait for long enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wish I didn't have to wake up.

I slowly open my eyes to the afternoon sun shining into the hospital room. Everything is bathed in a soft golden light, creating the kind of glow that usually has people commenting on the perfection of the weather and the goodness of life, but to me it seems like nothing but cruel mockery. Memories of my death lie heavy on my mind, the taste of tears and the sounds of muffled sobs fresh on my senses, and my desperate yearning to see Mom, Dad and Link is amplified by the added grief over the loss of Okaa-chan and Otou-san, tearing at my heart and flooding my chest with unbridled anguish.

For four years, they'd been the people I'd seen every day, the people to guide me through this world that is familiar and strange at once, the people that had showered me with attention and love. And although our relationship had been rocky at times, there was no question that they had well and truly become parents to me, even with my subconscious trying to merge them with my old parents – which wouldn't have worked if I hadn't come to regard them as such in the first pace – filling the aching emptiness in my heart that had been caused by the shock of dying and being reincarnated without the people I had known and loved my whole life before.

Four years of learning and coming to love them. Four years of something as close to happiness as I was able to get with my baggage. Four years of being accepted without questions.

All murdered, ripped away from me in one single night.

And as if that wasn't enough, I just had to tear down the walls to the memories of my first life. Right
now, there's nothing I regret more than this decision. I regret it from the bottom of the hole where my heart used to be and soon I realize that regret isn't strong enough a word. Regret doesn't even begin to cover it.

I curse my decision not to reseal my memories to hell and back. If I could, I'd shove all those pictures and emotions back into the deepest recesses of my mind, right along with this new pain that's rendering me immobile, paralyzed not only in body but first and foremost in mind.

That would require energy, though. Energy that's currently being sucked out of my system as soon as it's generated.

I close my eyes, half-heartedly trying to shut everything out and – naturally – failing miserably. I let out a weak groan and shift, preparing to roll over and bury my face in the pillow, possibly, hopefully, smothering myself with it, until I bump into something small, warm and solid.

Oh.

I reopen my eyes to the picture of a little white bundle with black fluffy hair, fast asleep and snuggled closely to my left side.

I guess I managed to forget about Obito. Again. Seriously, what kind of crap sister does that make me?

I watch as his chest gently rises and falls with every breath, steady and unwavering in its rhythm and I remember, remember from where I took the courage to confront myself with my past and the present, because I hoped, trusted, Obito to pull me back to the ground, to keep me rooted and to show me where to go from here.

Yes, Obito is only a baby. Yes, I'm placing a huge burden on his shoulders. Yes, I know I am incredibly selfish.

But I need him.

I need him more than he needs me, because changing diapers, cooking meals or bathing him and washing his clothes are things that other people can do just as good as I can, probably even better, because I have never been able to get beyond 'mediocre' in all things even remotely resembling chores. But what I expect from him is nothing less than for him to become my sparkling lifeline, for him to rescue me.

I'm aware that the love that I can offer him in turn will not even be close to enough because I can't hope to replace Okaa-chan and Otou-san, but if he doesn't hate me at the end of it all, I can count it as a victory.

If in the end, he's not too repulsed of being my sibling, it'll be okay. I can live with that.

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Obito is awake and being fed by a nurse when the Sandaime comes in a couple of hours later. I look up from my bowl of rice porridge, the food untouched and the spoon lying uselessly in my limp hand, and I see that the nurse does the same. She sits on a chair in front of Obito, who is seated in a wooden baby chair himself and wiggling with his arms and legs. He whines impatiently at the interruption of the steady food income, but quiets down again when the nurse resumes after a nod and a murmured greeting to the Hokage. He watches the newcomer with big, curious eyes.

"Hello Etsuko-chan" Hiruzen greets me warmly.
"Hokage-sama" I mumble. My voice sounds tiny and fragile, and truth be told, I'm hardly in the mood for any conversation. If I could've had it my way, it would only be me and my baby brother in this room, which is what I actually tried to suggest when the nurse came in with the food, but that didn't work. She probably didn't trust me to feed Obito without messing up the room or something.

Hiruzen sits down in the chair between the two beds and smiles at Obito. "And little Obito, is it?" My baby brother lets out a loud coo and flails excitedly with his arms, preventing the nurse from giving him his next spoonful and the Hokage laughs.

"Quite a lively little lad, hm? He reminds me of my own boy, Asuma. Say, Etsuko-chan, how old is he?"

"Nine months, almost ten" I answer without having to think.

"Ah, just a few months younger than Asuma then. Maybe they'll become friends one day."

I'm almost certain that in canon, they didn't. Obito's academy class was mostly busy looking down on him for not being the perfect ninja, after all.

Hiruzen continues making amiable one-sided conversation with me, and I feel myself slowly relaxing to the sound of his deep, gravelly voice. As I observe him during his talk, I notice again how young he is. With Asuma just a few months older than Obito he's probably only a bit older than Otou-san and Okaa-chan.

I flinch at this thought. It hurts to think about them.

Finally, the nurse finishes feeding Obito. She stands up, puts the dishes on the little wagon she came in with and turns around to take mine, too. She frowns when she sees that I haven't even touched the food.

"Leave it here" Hiruzen says. "She might be hungry later."

The nurse nods, puts Obito into his bed, takes her stuff and leaves.

There's a moment of silence in which the air shifts ever so slightly. Whatever it is that the Hokage came for, it's going to happen now. I'm not delusional enough to think that he's here for the sake of a nice chat.

What he says next surprises me, though.

"How are you feeling, Etsuko-chan?"

There's genuine worry in his eyes and something squeezes my chest painfully. I hastily look away, my breathing coming in ragged pants and my hands moving to clutch the fabric of the hospital gown over my heart.

"I'll manage" I choke out miserably.

The Sandaime sighs. I don't dare to look into his eyes again, because I'm afraid I might find something terrible like compassion which would not help my current impulse to simply lie down and cry, so my stare stays fixed on the white hospital blanket.

"I'll manage" I choke out miserably.

Until I hear noises from the other bed. I look over to see that Obito has managed to roll onto his stomach and is now experimenting with different positions for his head, alternately laying it on his left and right cheek. Every time his head touches the mattress, he coos happily, and he seems to think
it particularly funny when he tries to lie down flat on his nose, arms and legs wiggling and a small muffled giggle coming out before he lifts his head again and looks at me. A broad smile is set on his face and I can't help but smile in return, my chest warming and easing the pain. He rests his head again, never breaking eye-contact, and stretches his left arm in my direction. He waves enthusiastically and the intention is clear.

**Come over!**

Who am I to defy this command?

I quickly get out of my bed and climb into his. We snuggle closely together and Obito lets out a content gurgle

"I think your parents would be very proud of you, Etsuko."

I jolt, having completely forgotten about the Sandaime sitting right next to the bed. I look at him guiltily, my face probably as red as a tomato, but he just smiles kindly.

"You're a strong girl. You did everything you could to protect your brother, didn't you?"

Pictures of myself plunging a kunai into them and slicing their throat flash before my eyes.

I swallow thickly. I guess you could say that.

"Etsuko, what happened last night was terrible. I've not seen everything with my own eyes, so there're things that I still don't know, but I'm resolved to find out every last detail and to deliver justice to the people who did this. You have been at one of those places where I couldn't be, so you know things that I don't. Will you tell me about them and help me with my goal?"

So, that's it then.

This is an interrogation. Not that surprising, really, when I think about it. They've probably figured out that there is a relatively high chance that I've killed that person.

I'm surprised that I'm not scared shitless by this discovery. There's doubtlessly a mountain of things that are problematic about this whole situation, but somehow I can't help but feel relieved. An interrogation is something with a pattern, something which has a certain structure with clear roles assigned. There is the one who asks the questions and there is the one who answers them. It's really simple and nothing like the convoluted mass of emotions that I've been wading through for the past hours.

I feel detachment creeping up my spine as I slip into a state of cool analysis and logic. With a nod, I signal the Hokage that I'm ready.

)00( I tell him everything.

From the moment that falcon came to the window of our living room, bearing a yellow coded message for Otou-san over Okaa-chan leaving me and Obito in Chieko's custody to assist Otou-san to me finding myself in the grip of the enemy. I leave nothing out, describing the details of their appearance and everything I remember of their fighting style – which, unfortunately, isn't much, since I'd been busy hanging on for dear life while Otou-san did the fighting – and finally come to the part where I become a murderer.
Well, not everything. The awakening of my Sharingan isn't something I'm ready to share and I figure it wouldn't help him that much anyway.

I finish my report with Sakumo's appearance and when the last words have fallen from my lips, they leave a heavy silence behind. Obito has gone quiet, too, but with a quick glance I can determine that he's not fallen asleep. I pull him closer to me.

"Thank you, Etsuko-chan" Hiruzen finally says. He sounds very, very tired. "This is a big help."

I look up to see the Sandaime rubbing his temples with closed eyes. I don't know if it's the lighting or something else, but he suddenly looks way older. Not canon-old, but maybe ten years older from just half an hour ago.

This whole thing, I realize with a start, is as hard on him as it is on me.

He takes his hands down again and exhales slowly. Opening his eyes, he directs his gaze at me. "I'm sure you're very exhausted now. Somebody of your clan will come shortly to bring you to your new home, so I'll say goodbye for the time being. Unless you have any questions you want to ask?"

Well. As it happens, I do have some.

During my recounting of the events, several have arisen, poking at my brain and demanding to be asked. They aren't trivial and I wonder why I haven't thought of them before, especially since they present a way to find out who is responsible for the disaster, a way to focus my energy without depending on Obito to pull me from rock bottom, a way to move forward.

They have the potential to be the base for a life-mission.

I take a deep breath.

"Only if you don't mind, Hokage-sama."

We're finally discharged from the hospital when an elderly Uchiha comes to fetch us later in the evening after the interrogation-turned-question-and-answer-session.

The Sandaime has been surprisingly indulgent with my queries, never once turning me down or belittling me. Granted, there wasn't much I could ask without appearing to be miles out of a nearly-four-years-old's mental league, and of the questions I could ask, there weren't many with definite answers since the investigations had just started and a lot of the things were classified. Which meant that, ultimately, I didn't get a lot of information.

Or, to be precise, practically none at all, except for the bit where I'm assured that the Clan will take care of Obito and me.

In the end, the only certain result of this whole thing is that I feel exhausted again, the energy of cool logic depleted and once again replaced by listless apathy.

I'll have to find a way to make it last longer if I don't want to become perpetually depressed.

"I'm Usui" the Uchiha introduces himself gruffly, startling me out of my gloom. "I'll bring you to the place where your new guardians live."

The man is grim-faced, has quite thick white hair and wears angular glasses without a frame that
make his eyes appear squinty. His voice is a deep basso that's clearly used to giving out orders and the scathing glare that he shoots at the nurse when she doesn't immediately hand him over the necessary paperwork after requesting it tells me that he's also used to them being followed.

Thankfully, though, he doesn't comment on my stubborn insistence to carry Obito myself.

We walk in silence, him always three steps in front of me, and for the first time, I'm wondering what exactly is going to happen to Obi and me. Again, I'm astonished that this question didn't occur to me earlier, but I suppose that, considering the emotional turmoil I've been going through, it's not really that surprising that my foresight has been stretching less than two inches away from me.

I consider asking the Uchiha in front of me because I suspect him to be one of the clan elders and if anyone knows my immediate fate it would probably be them since Takao-sama, who as clan head usually handles such things, is currently leading the vanguard. Of course, there's still Fumio, but he's young and inexperienced and is likely to rely heavily on the counsel of the elders, so it all comes full circle again.

That is, if I'd have the energy to care.

At the moment, though, I'm sorely tempted to just let whatever is coming happen. Let them decide and do what seems fitting. As long as Obito and I stay together, it'll be alright.

So I trudge behind him, past rows and rows of houses and through street after street, letting Obito, who's unusually subdued, play with my hair, until we come to a stop at a traditional looking building with an Uchiha fan plastered on its front.

I don't recognize the neighborhood. Are we even still in the Uchiha district?

Usui turns around to look at me. "This is Yashiro-san's house and your new home. He has a wife and a son who is just a couple years older than you. They have taken on the duty of raising the both of you despite the circumstances surrounding the death of your parents. Remember their kindness at all times and repay them when you're able to."

Through the sluggish lump that's currently my brain, a reaction works its way up to daylight and I look up sharply.

What.

Circumstances? What is he talking about? And why despite them? He makes it sound like Otou-san and Okaa-chan did something wrong!

I open my mouth to ask him directly, but before I can let a sound escape my lips, he's already turned around again and heading for the front door. He knocks twice on the wood and a few seconds later the door swings open.

A woman emerges. She's shorter than Usui and wears her hair, colored in the darkest shade of chocolate, in a bun. Her face is round and her features soft as they form into a nervous, eye-squeezing smile. She bows and murmurs Usui's name in greeting, her voice high-pitched but gentle.

"Naoko-san" Usui says. He gesticulates behind himself at me. I'm still standing three steps behind him, shoulders hunched and anxiously biting my lip because what did that comment mean, why does the name Yashiro sound so familiar, this is not home, I want to go home. "These are Etsuko and Obito. Come here, Etsuko, and meet Uchiha Naoko, one of your new guardians."

I reluctantly do as I'm told and step forward. "Please take care of us" I mumble as I bow for Naoko-
Usui clears his throat. "When is Yashiro coming back?"

"He'll come in any moment now." Her voice sounds just like her face looks. Soft. Meek, even.

"I'll leave them in your care then, Naoko-san. Fulfill your duty to the clan. Have a good night." With that, Usui turns on his heels and marches off.

It takes me seeing Yashiro to actually remember that his name sounded familiar because I've met him before. It's not a particularly pleasant memory, which is probably the reason I nearly forgot about it in the first place, and it makes me feel something else besides pain, grief and apathy. The pressure at the back of my throat and the heat that's suddenly infused in my bloodstream strongly suggest anger.

I've met him, with his spikey, ash-grey hair, squinted eyes and a faint, perpetual sneer edged into the corner of his mouth, at Obito's introduction ceremony. He's the one who dismissed me as nothing more than 'career bride'-material.

Way to go to make yourself unpopular.

And he wastes no time to cement that first impression tonight.

We're all set for a late dinner. The right side of the low, square table from my point of view is occupied by Toshiro, Yashiro and Naoko's son, who's staring at me with narrowed eyes. He resembles his father a lot, having the same hair and face structure, which is only accentuated by his glare. On the left side sits Naoko, currently having difficulties handling Obito. He's wailing his tiny lungs out, pushing impressive amounts of air past his vocal chords, and I'm sure that he knows. He knows that something is wrong, that the arms that are holding him are neither Okaa-chan's nor Otousan's and he's unhappy.

My hands are itching to take him from her, to press him to my chest and to kiss his cheeks and forehead until he calms down, but Yashiro's glare pins me to my place. He makes an impatient jerking motion with his head that prompts Naoko to stand up and leave the room. Without the food.

My jaw drops as my eyes follow Naoko's retreat.

He.

Did he just.

Did he just ban my baby brother from dinner?!

I don't care if his wife is ok with it, she's an adult and able to fend for herself, but OBITO IS A BABY WHO NEEDS HIS NUTRIENTS and I –

"They'll eat somewhere else. I'm not in the mood to listen to the noise he makes."

White-hot anger shoots through my veins, leaving a blazing trail of simmering energy and rendering me unable to sit still. I whip my head around to glare at Yashiro.

"You can't do this!" I yell at him. My whole body is shaking, my shoulders heaving erratically and my fingers digging deep, painful ridges into the palms of my hands. A small voice in the back of my head tells me that I'm overreacting, urges me to get a grip on myself before things happen that I can't
take back, but something huge rolls over it, smashing it to bits and pieces and absorbing everything
to turn into something unrecognizable. Something that contains all the pain, frustration and rage that
has been adding up inside of me since the day I was reborn.

"He's a baby! He makes noises because he's goddamn hungry! He needs the food!" I screech like a
fury unleashed from the depths of Tartarus. My chakra is buzzing wildly, prickling, swirling power
just underneath my skin and I can feel it flooding every smallest corner of my body, the pressure
intensifying at my fingertips and behind my eyes.

I blink a few times and flex my fingers to alleviate it, impatiently batting away a few dust particles
away that are hovering just before my eyeballs – goddamn, is this house never dusted or why is it
possible for me to see every single grain –

I freeze.

I can see every single dust grain in front of me.

"Sit down and deactivate your Sharingan, NOW!" a harsh voice cuts through the air.

I flinch and look over at Yashiro. I didn't even realize I'd stood up during my rant.

He's pale, his face all sharp lines and hard edges, barely containing an emotion that I can't identify. In
his eyes I can see myself staring back, with two bright red orbs sporting one swirling tomoe each
instead of the usual onyx.

The rage that has powered my body until now ceases abruptly along with the chakra stream, causing
my sharp vision to fizzle out and my legs starting to tremble. I collapse on the zabuton.

I screwed up. Badly.

In more ways than one.

"Toshiro, take your dinner and eat it somewhere else" Yashiro commands. The boy stands up hastily
and backs out of the room without questions, leaving only me and his father in it. I cannot look at his
face.

There's a short, strained silence.

"When did you awaken it?" Yashiro demands icily.

I gulp. "Yesterday night." My voice comes out feebly, barely above a whisper.

"Did you kill one of the enemy nin?" he presses on relentlessly.

I nod, still not able to meet his eye.

Again, there's silence. When I finally gather the courage to lift my head, I find his piercing stare on
me. His jaw is flexing tensely, telling me that he's thinking hard.

"Hn" he grunts at length.

He stands up and comes to me, and before I can even understand what is happening he backhands
me with enough force to send me tumbling on my right side. The sound of the slap echoes loudly in
the room, leaving a sharp sting blooming on my left cheek.

"I will not tolerate such behavior in my house" he intones flatly. "I don't care what your parents
allowed you to do, because as long as you're living under my roof, you will follow my rules and my rules only. Have I made myself clear?" The last question takes on a menacing quality.

I can only nod, thoroughly intimidated.

"Good. I'll think of an appropriate punishment later."

He then turns abruptly and leaves the room.

I lie there for a moment longer before I find the energy to sit up again. The skin on my cheek is hot to the touch and when a tear starts rolling down, it feels soothing.

The single tear is quickly followed by others.

I start when the Shoji screen slides open and Yashiro walks in again. He has a wet towel with him. He comes to a stop before me and I half expect another blow. Instead, he hands me the towel.

"It's wrapped around some ice. Put it on your eyes to alleviate the pain."

I take it, my hands visibly shaking.

"Now get out of my sight" he says harshly.

I scramble to get up and out, my body not nimble enough to match the urge to get away from him as fast as possible.

I stumble down the hallway and into the room that Obito and I are going to share and curl up in the bed assigned to me.

I want to go home. God, how I want to go home.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the first chapter of Etsuko's new life. By the way, Yashiro is canon, you can check him out on Narutopedia.

What do you think? As usual, I'm happy to read anything that crossed your mind. So don't hesitate to leave a review! Until next time!
Chapter Summary

With everything that I used to know gone, there really is no other choice than looking forward. Even if it's hard to swallow.

Chapter Notes

Yo, I'm back!

Thank you for your patience and generally being awesome! Your reactions to the last chapter were so great, I've thought about doing some extra as a reward: An omake, a missing scene, whatever. And the best thing? You get to choose.

So start thinking, dear people, and let me hear your ideas! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My punishment, as it turns out, is being grounded for a week.

Which is surprisingly lenient. And, to be honest, not something that crushes my whole world.

I mean, I have never been the social type since being reborn as Etsuko – since, you know, me being technically a grown woman and my peers all being, well, babies, I honestly didn't see the appeal. And that was when I wasn't suffering from several traumas. Not consciously, at least. Besides, I'd been happy with Okaa-chan and Otou-san's company and I'd never felt the need to meet anyone else.

So, it's not like there're tons of people waiting for me out there.

On any other day, I would stop to think about this sobering fact and probably come to the conclusion that I'd maybe benefit from having a few friends. Since it's anything but any other day right now, though, I don't particularly care. Actually, the isolation suits me just fine.

I'm only required to be present at breakfast, lunch and dinner and the rest of the day is at my free disposal. When Obito is not being handled, he is at my side and when he is, I spend my time grieving alone in our shared room, remembering Okaa-chan's bell-like laughter and Otou-san's proud smiles, and being generally depressed. Oh, and not to forget the nightmares in which I repeatedly stumble over Otou-san mangled corpse, occasionally twisted into the variation where I kill that person only to find out that I ultimately killed Otou-san.

Charming and incredibly productive, I know. However, I still can't seem to find the energy to move forward.

Speaking of Obito, though, he's not making it easy for Naoko to take care of him. He cries a lot and won't calm down until I am with him. I notice this with a kind of satisfaction that's admittedly petty, but I can't help it. It makes feel less lonely in my grief, knowing that he misses Okaa-chan and Otou-
san just as much as I do.

So all in all, I'm mostly sitting or lying around, sometimes with and sometimes without Obito, and it takes me five days into the week to realize that I'm left completely undisturbed. And not the 'neglected' kind of undisturbed, either. Not at all. I and Obito are always tended to, him naturally more intense than I, but none of my small, occasional requests are ignored or denied. Granted, it's always Naoko who answers our calls and I get the feeling that she does it more out of a sense of duty than of love for two orphaned children who recently moved into her home, but it's decidedly more involvement from that side than I'd expected after the display of abjection that first night.

Even more surprising, though, is Yashiro's behavior.

I don't see him very often during the day since he's at work then, but I'm seated opposite of him every dinner without fail. The first time after the disaster, I'm too afraid to even look at him and when Naoko reports to him that I've stayed in my room all day, I expect at least a scathing remark. Only, it doesn't happen.

No rant on how I am supposed to be contributing to this household in a productive manner, how I should act like an Uchiha and get my ass moving already or on my being weak because I'm a girl. Instead, he just makes a nondescript "hn" and drops the subject.

Looks like I've been putting more thought into beating up myself than he did.

Another sobering thought to ponder.

And it continues over the next few days. Naoko dutifully looking after Obito and me, Yashiro being thankfully ignorant of my uselessness and Toshiro … well, I don't see much of Toshiro to be honest. I have no idea what he is doing the whole day.

So, after five days of no interruption in my gloom whatsoever, I come to the conclusion that they actually must be giving me room to grieve.

Which, again, is surprisingly considerate.

I don't know what to do with that realization. It doesn't fit into the mental picture I have made of them based on their very first impressions and it makes me feel uncomfortable. Unsure. Because that means I might've done them injustice.

I … really don't like this thought.

Have I already mentioned that I hate being wrong?

In the end, I decide to dedicate the last two days of my grounding sentence to some active observation. Because if reality truly proves to be better than the idea in my head, I might not mind being wrong so much.

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As if my decision was some secret signal that I wasn't informed about, the pattern breaks the following day.

Yashiro comes into mine and Obito's room, which is a first. He's never entered the room before, at least not when I was in it.
"Etsuko" he says without preamble. It's the first time that he's talking directly to me after that night and I look up from where Obito is sprawled over my lap. He's getting bigger every day and I suspect that his first words will come out soon. The thought sparks excitement in me and suddenly, I can't wait. What his first word is going to be, I wonder. Maybe I can point him in a certain direction. Like, 'Nee-chan' for example.

Yeah. That sounds nice.

"The day after tomorrow, there will be the funeral for your parents and the other Uchiha that left their lives in the attack" Yashiro says stiffly, interrupting my Obito-centered train of thoughts. My excitement dies down as abruptly as a candle light eclipsed by a bucket of ice-cold water.

Right. Funeral. Of course there would be one.

"It's going to be an official affair – as in, very big – with not only the whole of the clan attending, but also very important people of the rest of the village." He speaks very slowly, as if I'm retarded or a very small child.

Um.

Which I basically am, in his and everybody else's eyes.

Oh god.

I never realized that Okaa-chan and Otou-san speaking to me like they would to an adult is obviously not considered the normal treatment of an almost four-year-old.

What have I been trying to invalidate again? Right, the thingy with the prodigy.

Gods, I'm so bad at this.

Yashiro continues, unaware of my inner debate. "Fugaku is coming from the front as the clan head's representative and of course the Hokage and his inner council will be present, too."

At this, his jaw tenses briefly and my mind automatically translates this as intense distaste.

Well. Seems like living as an Uchiha for nearly four years has sharpened my ability to perceive the smallest indicators that reveal the mood of my otherwise blank-faced kin. Not that I'm an expert already, but, you know. Baby steps.

And then something else hits me.

"Fugaku as the clan head's representative?" I blurt out. "What about Fumio? He's here and he's the clan heir, isn't he?"

Yashiro levels me with a blank stare. And then he says with a flat voice "Fumio died during the attack."

The sensation of blood draining from my face is instantaneous and I feel as if I have been punched in the gut.

Fumio had been there that night.

He'd saved Obito and me by engaging the enemy and giving Otou-san the time to bring us to safety.

Otou-san had left him alone because I had run away from Chieko and gotten myself into trouble.
I also remember what happened after Otou-san took off from that alley. Remember the explosion that shook the ground and made my eardrums go wild. Remember the shockwave pushing Otou-san in the opposite direction and the distant smell of burnt flesh.

And in the midst of the cacophony of memories, there's a new certainty budding inside my mind, slowly becoming as clear as a crystal, with edges so sharp they cut me up from the inside once again.

I have Fumio's blood on my hands.

"Did you see him that night?" Yashiro's voice intrudes upon my haze of guilt and I jerk my heads upwards, meeting his eyes with a loud gasp. He's watching me, expression as blank as ever but his obsidian orbs lit with the vivid flame of alertness. I swallow thickly.

"He saved me" I say, voice shaking so badly that the words become hardly anything more than a wavering mess. "He … he died because I was in trouble … I-I 'm the reason-"

"He did his duty" Yashiro cuts me off. "He would have jumped in to save anyone in this village, especially a clan member. Because this is what he swore to do when he first became a shinobi and then again when he became an officer of the Police Force. Had he not done it, he would've been a poor excuse for an Uchiha."

I stare at him wide-eyed while he takes a deep breath.

"And this is what you're also going to do in the future. You have awakened your Sharingan even though you're a girl. This gift of our clan is only given to the strongest and you will honor it by doing your duty as a true Uchiha shinobi, proving that you're worthy of it, and when the time comes, as the bearer of strong sons that will continue to carry on the legacy."

He narrows his eyes at me.

"Wallow in self-pity and you dishonor everything the clan stands for, not to mention Fumio's sacrifice. I will not allow that. I will not stand for a disgrace, for weakness within the walls of my home, and even though softness is only natural since you're female, there is a reason for your Sharingan and I will see to it myself that any trace of feebleness will be eliminated. Have I made myself clear?"

I'm so flabbergasted, I think my eyes have long exceeded the size of saucers. Leaving aside the fact that this is the longest I have ever heard any Uchiha talk, this is actually creepily close to an Uchiha-style motivation speech and I get the distinct feeling that this might just be what he intended.

It hits somewhere close to my heart and I can sense a shimmer of truth, honesty and determination peeking out from under the barrage of harsh words that sets something in my mind alight with tentative sparks of positive energy.

Well, if you take out those derogatory remarks about girls that is. It puts a damper on things of course. And I won't forgive him for that.

But.

I can't ignore the basic message of his whole rant. Because, if I understood his point right, he's promising me to help me become strong. And I need to become strong if I want to protect Obito until he is strong enough to protect himself. Which is non-negotiable.

Looking into Yashiro's eyes while holding Obito in my arms, I realize that I'm not going to give myself a choice in this.
So I'm going to trust him.

I straighten up and take a deep breath. My voice comes out with a residual hoarseness due to the weeklong lack of use but it doesn't matter, because there is a budding determination that audibly seeps into it, making it firm if not loud, rolling over the hoarseness like the sun announcing a new day.

"Clear as crystal, sir" I answer him.

Yashiro blinks, the only sign of his surprise, but he catches himself swiftly after that and nods once in acknowledgement. Also, there might be just a hint of approval in the lines at the corners of his mouth.

"Good. Now, back to what I was going to say in the first place."

)

One day before my grounding sentence actually runs out, I'm out on the street and mentally preparing myself to enter through a door that hasn't been opened by its usual owners for a week now.

Yashiro is on the porch, key in hand and going through the motions of unlocking the door and deactivating the traps. It swings open and he turns around to look at me, scowling when he notices that I have frozen in place a couple of feet before the porch. I'm pretty sure that words of scorn are already on the tip of his tongue, but thankfully, he holds them in. Instead, he "hns", turns his back on me and walks into the house.

The house that's been home to me for my whole second life.

I can practically see Okaa-chan in her shinobi gear, hair in that unusual high-bound ponytail, giving me that eye-squeezing smile that should've set off every single alarm bell in my brain and standing on the exact same spot I'm standing on now before sprinting off into the darkness of the night.

I can see her, wearing her apron and carrying the basket which she always takes with her to the market.

I can see her, with Obito in her arms and a bright, real smile on her face, ready to leave for a long-overdue family picnic.

God. Had that really been only one week ago?

I blink furiously when I feel my eyes starting to moisten and shake my head as if the motion could send the pictures flying.

*Focus.*

I straighten my shoulders.

*Forward. Right through that door. Better sooner than later.*

I start walking before the blurry edges in my vision have completely vanished, afraid that I might change my mind again, up onto the porch and finally into the house.

In the end, it all took only seconds. Kinda anticlimactic. Well.

I slow down considerably as I walk down the hallway, past the kitchen, the living room and Otou-san's study, every room triggering sweet memories and bitter regret that I didn't properly appreciate
all the good things I had here with my second family. It's all too true, the saying that you never know how happy something makes you until you lose it.

It's a hard lesson to learn.

My bedroom is untouched, everything in the place as I'd left it that night, and I have no issues finding the things that I came for. My first stop is my bed and lifting the mattress, I'm relieved to find the two notebooks, stashed close to the wall and undisturbed. I leaf through them briefly to make sure that there's no page missing, but when I come to the second notebook, the one with predictions and goals, my fingers freeze just after a few pages.

*Save Uchiha Kiyomi's and Uchiha Nobuo's lives!* screams at me in bold black scripture, the twin lines for emphasis mocking me with their firmness and the inscribed echo of naïve confidence.

What a fool I have been.

To think that they would be safe within the village walls, that the only thing I had to do was to keep a close eye on them and never leave their side. To think that I would sense the danger beforehand, likening it to the dread I feel while reading a story that's headed for disaster.

And *of course* I didn't.

Who would be so stupid as to compare life to reading a story anyway?

Me, that's who. I've been so stupid, it physically hurts. Or maybe that's the grief. I dunno.

I hurriedly shut the notebook and put both of them on my bed to pick them up later. I walk over to the dresser and pull the lowest drawer open, sifting through my nightwear until my fingers touch cool metal.

The two lilies glint in the light that's streaming in from the window as I hold it up, the beautiful white gems glittering like they did on the day Okaa-chan handed this hairpin to me. The embodiment of a promise, as she explained it to me, the promise to shoulder the responsibility of being an Uchiha.

If I equal this promise to 'protecting Obito', I'm in for the rest of my life. I hope it makes her proud.

"Do you have everything you came for?"

Yashiro's gruff voice interrupts my reverie and I turn around with a start. He's standing in the doorway and upon noticing what I'm clutching in my hands, something minuscule in his eyes changes.

"Meet me on the porch when you're finished" he says abruptly, voice strangely husky, and walks away, leaving me completely confused.

Um.

Did I do something?

I look at the hairpin as if it holds all the answers that I don't know if I want to seek and scratch my head.

Well.

I'll figure it out another time, I guess. Maybe.
I head over to the bed again and open the bag that I brought with me. There is more than enough space for the two notebooks and the hair pin and when I finish stuffing them in, I take a final glance at my room.

I wish there was something of Otou-san's that I could take with me. But then again, my bedroom might be the wrong place for that. So I trudge out of my room and over to Otou-san's study.

Just like my bedroom it looks completely untouched and upon entering, I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the desperate wish to see him sitting there at his desk, left eyebrow arched and dark onyx gaze trained on me.

I'll take everything, him being mad at me, him beating katas into me, hell, even him genjutsuing me. I'll tell him everything he wants to know, tell him that I'm a soul reborn, that I know what's going to happen to Obito and maybe how to prevent it.

Anything to bring him back. Anything.

I let out a mirthless chuckle.

Foolish thoughts, again. The dead don't come back.

Except – when they do. Narutoverse is notorious for bringing its dead back after all, be it via Edo or Rinne Tensei.

*If I'd go and find Orochimaru, would he do it for me?*

I gasp and clamp my hands on my mouth.

I *did not* just think that.

I did not.

...

GREAT GOD, I ACTUALLY THOUGHT ABOUT ASKING THE CREEPY SNAKE TO EDO TENSEI MY PARENTS!

Seriously, what the hell is wrong with me?!

How could I even consider this idea? And not just the using-edo-tensei-part, but even worse, the *asking-Orochimaru-part*?

I close my eyes and put my face in my hands, trying to get my wildly galloping heartbeat down to a normal frequency.


When my urge to run in circles while screaming my lungs out is reduced to merely wanting to laugh, *loudly* and *hysterically*, I look up again.

*Just grab something of Otou-san's and get out of here.*

I move over to the desk and eye the contents warily. There're stacks of papers, neatly arranged along the edges of the wooden surface and one notebook in the middle. Nothing interesting. I hesitate shortly before pulling the first drawer open.
Bingo.

There, lying among other miscellaneous utensils, is his sleek, black pen.

It's nothing as emotionally laden as Okaa-chan's hairpin, but as something that he used daily, it'll do.

I hurriedly take it out, put it in my bag and practically flee out of the room.

In the hallway, I take a few seconds to close my eyes and calm myself down again. It wouldn't do to meet Yashiro all distraught and teary.

When I finally rejoin him on the porch he watches me intently for a few heartbeats. "Ready to leave?" he finally asks and I can't help but notice that his voice is carefully controlled.

I nod.

"Let's move, then" he commands and heads out onto the street.

"What are these?" Yashiro asks when he sees me taking out the notebooks later that day.

"Diaries" I answer without thinking.

He looks at me for a moment, contemplating.

"Hn" he finally grunts and leaves.

"We're here today to honor the brave shinobi who gave their lives to protect the village in the attack one week ago" the Sandaime's gravelly voice reverberates through the air the next morning, amplified by some jutsu that puts every microphone to shame if only because it doesn't need any speakers.

Konoha cemetery is crowded with mourners, a mass of black clad bodies standing in respectful stillness as every person listens intently to the words of their leader. Obito and I are right in the first row, Yashiro and his family at my back, and I have a perfectly clear view on the platform with the coffins.

There're six of them, each one adorned with an Uchiha fan and a framed photo set on the lid. Apart from Otou-san and Okaa-chan, I can only identify Fumio and I feel marginally relieved about it.

For anyone who only knows approximately ten-ish people, the deaths of three of them would be harsh even without their parents' being among them.

I'm feeling light-headed and strangely removed from everything that's going on as I let my gaze wander while Hiruzen is speaking, only listening with one ear to the solemn praise for the fallen, and take in more of the scenery. It's cool and windy today, with the sun looking like a dulled coin stuck to grey-blue fabric, the weather a herald of the approaching winter and I remember that it's almost December now.

I'm going to turn four years soon. It'll be my first birthday without Otou-san and Okaa-chan.

"They did not only fight as members of the Police Force, but also as members of the village, individual minds alight with the Will of Fire. Let's remember their names, so that nobody forgets that
they were not only shinobi but, first and foremost, people of Konohagakure.

Uchiha Fumio
Uchiha Nobuo
Uchiha Daiichi
Uchiha Kou
Uchiha Kiyomi
Uchiha Suzu

May their souls join our ancestors' and guard us from beyond."

There is a long moment of collective silence as the living dedicate their thoughts to the dead.

I wonder how many really knew any of the deceased. I mean, obviously the entire Uchiha clan knew them, but how many of the other people standing on this cemetery truly did? How many lives did Otou-san and Okaa-chan directly touch? Or were they just another stern faced Uchiha officer, another Uchiha housewife seamlessly blending into the collective face of the clan?

I still can't bring myself to concentrate on mourning, mainly because I fear that if I did, I'd start bawling with no end in sight. So I observe the other mourners, let my glance skim over the Sandaime, his council including Danzou and all the shinobi who don't belong to the clan. It seems that everyone who is not currently at the front is here and a stray thought wonders if this would be a good or a bad moment for an assault.

What a strange thought to have, I muse detachedly.

Fugaku is standing a few feet to my left, his body rigid and face schooled into an impassive mask. He's staring straight ahead, looking for all the world as if he's about as personally touched as an government official who is only here because it was impolite to decline the invitation. Something tells me, though, that this is not the truth, that I need to look underneath the underneath and suddenly, as a wave of intuition rolls over me, I can see.

I see his stare and know that it's not directed at the air but at the photo of his brother Fumio. I see his rigid posture and know that underneath, he's shaking. I see his face and know that the pallor is several shades too wan to be considered normal Uchiha complexion, that the deep lines on his face are only recent and that behind the thin, pressed line of his mouth his teeth are clenched.

I see and know that he loved his brother deeply. That he's putting on a strong front because it's expected of him. And most of all, that the grief is killing him.

The Uchiha, a voice in my head says, treasure love above all else.

I feel immediately that this is the truth, although I can't match the voice with a face. The certainty is bone deep and resonating with my very being, something rooted so profoundly in my existence that I never even start to question it.

I am Uchiha Etsuko.

I have awakened the Sharingan while protecting my baby brother.

I am susceptible to the Curse of Hatred by the unconditional love I feel for my precious people.
And, for the first time, as I lift my head to look at the faces of my clansmen, I can feel a bond connecting me to every single one of them. We're all together in this.

For we love until it becomes our most powerful strength and our greatest weakness at the same time.

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The funeral ends with a declaration of war that comes as a surprise to exactly nobody.

How could it, considering the vanguard already stationed at the border for weeks even before the attack? 'Standby' and 'Strategy of defense' only work as prerequisites of inevitable active war it seems, never as end stages of their own.

But war needs a direction, as fickle as it might be, and with the attack from one week ago, Konoha finally has enough incriminating material to point at one: Iwagakure.

Apparently, me killing that person had been essential in uncovering that point, at least according to Hiruzen – even though he's careful not to reveal my involvement – and I wonder if that's going to change something big in the long run. It has to give an edge to your efforts if you know precisely who to fight, right?

The villagers latch onto this information like a pack of grim wolves, all focused energy and angry determination. For now, they're unified in the same endeavor, prepared to fight for the same goal.

How much blood will it take to reach it?

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"Etsuko."

I look back, one foot already over the threshold of Yashiro's house, and see him standing a few steps away from the porch. He stiffly motions me to come over and I obey after throwing a last glance at Obito who has been carried inside by Naoko already.

I stand before him, awkwardly shuffling my feet and avoiding looking into his eyes, instead staring at the ground. It's true, he's proved himself to be something else beside the insufferable jerk that I have exclusively pegged him as before, but it still doesn't make me comfortable around him. And his mute glaring really doesn't help the situation, either.

After a few more seconds he finally breaks the silence by thrusting out his hands to me with a gruff "Here. Take them."

I look up to see that he's holding two stripes of dark cloth in my direction and I reach up to take them without too much thinking. As soon as I have them in my hands, I feel the metal sewn onto the cloth and realization hits me.

"They were your parents" Yashiro says, his voice sounding distant through the blood that's suddenly rushing in my ears. "The Hokage gave them to me at the funeral."

My hands tremble slightly as I stare at the leaf emblems engraved into the metal, the smooth surface dashed with tiny specks of blood that continue as permanent spots on the cloth. I let out a slow, shaky exhale.

"Thank you, Yashiro-san."
That night, Obito doesn't stop crying.

Naoko thrusts him into my arms as soon as he starts whining and I do what I usually do when he does that – so, I gently rock him, kiss him on his forehead and tell him that he's not alone, that I'm here, basically – only this time, it doesn't work.

He keeps on wailing and I have no idea what to do.

When another ten minutes pass without any improvement in the situation, I'm starting to get desperate. I try to think of things which I heard would calm a baby down, but my mind draws up blank because of exhaustion after the long day, panic and goddamn, I'm technically four, why am I the one left alone with this?!

"Shh, calm down" I say, more to myself than to Obito by now.

*Could I please just lie down and cry with you?*

Actually, that's an idea. The lying down part, I mean.

So I do that, pulling my baby brother close to me and letting him hear my heartbeat. I stroke his head, his soft hair against my fingers like a gentle breeze, as I whisper into his ear.

"Just close your eyes, Obi. Everything's going to be okay. Nee-chan is here. I'm going to protect you so that nobody can hurt you."

I repeat these words again and again, until I start to believe them myself, and at some point, they evolve. My voice starts out soft as I remember the almost exact same words from a song that I first heard in a movie, a lifetime ago.

*Just close your eyes*

*The sun is going down*

*You'll be alright*

*No one can hurt you now*

*Come, morning light*

*You and I'll be safe and sound*

*Don't you dare look out your window darling*

*Everything's on fire*

*The war outside our door keeps raging on*

*Hold on to this lullaby*

*Even when the music's gone, gone...*

*Just close your eyes*

*The sun is going down*
By the end of it, Obito is fast asleep, his little chest steadily rising and falling, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

When I turn around to switch off the bedside light, my gaze falls on the two hitai-ate on the nightstand and my fingers stop just short of pushing the button. The metal plates, now free of blood, glint in the soft light.

"Don't worry, Okaa-chan, Otou-san" I whisper as I finally let the smile bloom.

"I'll protect Obito. I promise."

Chapter End Notes

As always, don't forget to tell me what you think. And more importantly, tell me what you want to have as an extra! Anything goes, really, and it doesn't just have to be something written *wink wink*

And oh, I don't own the song. Taylor Swift does.
New Game - New Chance

Chapter Summary

Who in their right mind says no to free food?

Chapter Notes

Hellooo, welcome to the new chapter!

This time's update finally has the one person that has been listed as a featuring character since forever but never made an appearance up until now. I hope you'll find them to your liking ;)

PLUS: I wrote the special! It's become the first chapter of a whole spin-off by the name Joyous Children: Kiyomi Gaiden. Yes, you guessed right, it's gonna be about Etsuko's parents. Since so many of you liked them and were kind of upset when they died, I thought it would be a nice idea to flesh their pasts out a bit. Have a look at it if you can spare some time and tell me what you think of it! I'm excited to read your reactions.

On to the main attraction now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Sharingan is such a ridiculously overpowered hack, it's not even funny.

My vision is sharpened to incredible heights along with my ability to process the impressions, enabling me to react so much faster and to push my body to as of yet unknown limits. Combined with the instant in which I can predict any movement based on the twitch of a muscle, my fighting prowess has practically shot through the ceiling.

Hell, I've not even tried out the copying feature, yet. And I only have one measly tomoe in each eye. I don't want to know what the fully matured versions can do because it's gotta be terrifying.

OK, maybe I was lying about 'not wanting to know'. I do imagine it to be thrilling.

But also still terrifying.

Anyway, what I want to say is, switch on your Sharingan and boom – training time is reduced to half. At the very least. It's so not fair for any hard-working person who does not have the privilege to be born into the Uchiha clan that I feel kind of guilty. Especially since, usually, I'm a die-hard advocate for that kind of people.

The reason I'm having this epiphany right now is sitting squarely on the ground and glaring daggers at me. Toshiro apparently doesn't take well to being punched in the face. Twice in a row.

"Get up" Yashiro bellows at his son, his voice cutting through the air like a whip.
"Again!"

Toshiro scrambles up with a snarl and lunges at me viciously. He's positively livid, and as I dodge his attacks, I have to admit that I can't even resent him for that. Because just half an hour ago, when we started training – or, "assessment of skills", as Yashiro calls it – I was only a barely four years old, with limbs too short to do real damage, unexperienced and generally no match for a boy two years my senior.

And then, suddenly, I am. All because of two crimson eyes.

I mean, it's not as if my taijutsu itself has suddenly improved. On the contrary, my techniques and speed have stayed pretty much the same. But being able to predict my opponent's moves has done a great job at simultaneously giving me the slightest edge as well as unsettling Toshiro, which, along with a bit of luck, was all it took to get in my first hit.

The second one came soon after, when I'd started to see the pattern of his attacks and him still reeling from the shock of being hit – and now, as he reveals more and more of his style to me, I'm preparing for the third.

His fury is making him more vicious, yes, but also sloppy, and it's almost like an afterthought when I dive under one of his attacks and casually slam my palm into his solar plexus. I'm too weak to knock him fully out, but it's enough for him to hit the ground with a loud "oomph".

Heh.

I try not to look too smug as I crack my knuckles in satisfaction.

To be fair, I probably couldn't fight anybody else and win. Had Toshiro even been just a tad bit faster or smarter, not even the Sharingan would have helped. And I don't mean to say that he's stupid, not at all.

It's just. Ya know.

He's six. And even a smart six-year-old can only go so far against someone mentally more than four times his age.

Even knowing this, though, I can't deny that my success is doing pretty things for my ego and I don't even try to smother the feeling.

"Get up" Yashiro barks at Toshiro, again, and I can see the boy's face heat up in humiliation. I get ready for the next exchange of blows, my body easing into the Uchiha-style fighting stance as easily as if I'd done it my whole life – which, uh, is technically true, I realize.

My Uchiha body has received training in shinobi arts since I was able to move. And I don't only mean training in the strict sense. I'm including the 'tests' Okaa-chan and Otou-san ran on me to see if I was a prodigy.

It's scary how much I didn't realize it until now.

As my opponent gets ready to fight, too, Yashiro turns to me.

"Deactivate your Sharingan!"

My stomach drops.
Well. Goodbye then, bruiseless body.

I have no illusions. Without my Sharingan, Toshiro is so going to beat me up.

I exhale slowly as I let the chakra in my eyes recede, already longing for the sharpness in my vision as soon as it fizzles out. It's becoming addictive alarmingly fast. No wonder the Uchiha feel so superior compared to every non-Uchiha – I mean, even I have to admit that, with this kind of power, it's hard not to.

Let's see then how much I retained from the short trip to the realms of invincibility.

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At least, I muse as I lie on my back and watch the clouds move one hour later, I didn't make it too easy for him.

My body feels like as if at least a dozen angry rhinos have trampled on it, dragged me through a forest of thorns and trampled all over me again. It hurts in places that I never even knew could hurt and the thought of moving in the near future makes my muscles cramp in dreadful anticipation.

Well, if anything, it was effective. I learned a few important things today:

1) My taijutsu is fairly decent.
2) My throwing aim on moving targets is garbage, with kunai more so than with shuriken.
3) Toshiro positively hates me.
4) The Sharingan puts one hell of a strain on my body.

The last point is kind of worrying. I'm an Uchiha. Aren't I supposed to be attuned to my doujutsu? Or is it because I'm still unused to it? I grimace. Maybe it was not that good of an idea to awaken it so early. How old was Itachi again when he did it?

I huff quietly. Well, it's not as if I'd had a choice, anyway.

"Get up!"

Ah, yes. I think I've heard Yashiro yelling these two words so often today, I'm gonna be dreaming about them. On the other hand – I think I prefer dreaming about him yelling at me than about me stabbing Otou-san to death.

Seriously, it's gotten so bad that I consciously have to remind myself that I did not, in fact, kill him. It'd be nice if my guilt complex could just shut the hell up and let me continue with my life. Because I'm trying. I really am.

Just as predicted, my muscles scream when I sit up with a pitiful wheeze. My legs feel like jelly as I make my way over to my guardian with something more akin to a wobble than a walk.

Yashiro sounds distinctly unimpressed when he launches straight into his evaluation of me.

"Your footwork is lacking. Your blows are weak. Your movements are slow."

Ouch.

And here I thought my taijutsu was decent.
"Your throwing aim is a disaster. Your stamina is abysmal."

Jeez, cut me some slack, my body is barely four years old!

"You show a basic understanding of tactics. You learn fast. You take full advantage of your small size."

Huh. Did we move on to the positive things already?

"You're stubborn. You have an instinctive grasp on the workings of your Sharingan."

It's amazing how he can rattle these things off like they're items on a shopping list. There's not even a hint of a change in intonation to separate the good things from the bad – or any other sort of recognition, for that matter. Amazing.

He narrows his eyes at me.

"There's a lot of work for you to do. The way you are now, you won't graduate anywhere near the top of your class."

My internal commentary stops abruptly.

Wait, what.

We haven't talked about this, yet. I mean, it's not like I don't want to go to the academy or that I have a problem with him wanting me to graduate at the top of my class, because I planned to do this anyway. I am quite ambitious when I set my eyes on something.

It's just.

It wasn't his decision to make.

Maybe I sound childish right now, but I really wanted to tell him myself. I wanted to feel this important decision coming out of my mouth, out of my own free will, and I can't help but feel like I've been robbed. The disappointment is so intense, I'm surprised myself. Because objectively speaking, it shouldn't be a big deal. I mean, he wants me to enroll, I want to enroll, our interests match – there shouldn't be any problems.

But still.

Maybe it's because I wanted to tell Otou-san and Okaa-chan myself.

I know immediately after thinking it that this is true.

I also know that this is a foolish thought.

Yashiro is not Otou-san. It would never have the same meaning even if I'd have managed to tell him about my decision first. Because he doesn't care the same way Otou-san does. And Otou-san is gone. Gone. Gone.

There's the short, sharp sound of air being displaced and suddenly, my head jerks to the side and a light sting blooms on my cheek. My gaze snaps back to Yashiro's face, his jaws clenched in cold anger and his eyes blazing.

"You listen to me when I talk." His voice is dangerously low as he grounds out the words.
I nod hurriedly. "I'm sorry, Yashiro-san. It won't happen again."

No need to antagonize him yet again over something as trivial as spacing out.

For a short moment, he doesn't say anything and I'm afraid that it wasn't enough, that he's still angry at me, and I prepare myself for his next outburst.

He exhales.

"From today on, you'll train hard. Every day. I'll make you a schedule that you'll follow in minute detail. I will train with you occasionally and only for Sharingan training purposes, but most of the time you'll be training with Toshiro for the basics."

At that, there's a strangled noise that surprisingly doesn't originate from me, but from a place a few feet to my right instead.

"Is there a problem, Toshiro?" Yashiro asks flatly.

A short pause.

And then, reluctantly -- "No, Tou-sama."

I watch him from the corner of my eye as he clenches his jaw. Toshiro is not a particularly good liar. But he doesn't need to be as long as he intends to be obedient.

Really, Yashiro isn't all that hard to figure out in this regard.

"Good. It'll help your training, too."

Yashiro turns his back on us and is about to march off, expecting us to follow him, when Toshiro bursts out "Tou-sama! Will you let me enroll at the academy, too?"

His father looks over his shoulder. "If you train hard and manage not to be beaten again by a girl two years younger than you, then yes." With that, he walks away in earnest.

_Uh-oh._

That was a bit too provocative to be taken in stride by a boy as proud as Toshiro. As any Uchiha, really.

As I cast a weary glance to my side, my fear is immediately proven right. The look in Toshiro's eyes as he glares daggers at alternately his father's back and me promises some painful training sessions in the near future.

I let out a quiet sigh.

Oh my. Here is to fun days comin'.

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True to his words, Yashiro hands me my training schedule the same evening. It marks the beginning of an intense regime that doesn't leave me much free time, but it's a price I'm willing to pay, even though my time with Obito is also reduced. I resolve to make it up to him by making sure that every minute we spend together is as meaningful as possible.

It doesn't take long for me to realize that it's a rather poor trade and by the time a couple of weeks
have rolled around, I'm thoroughly annoyed with it. Not only do I get to spend less time with my brother, but I'm also made to spend most of my days with Toshiro, who thinks of this as a punishment and believes that only making me miserable will make things better. Granted, I'm not happy with this assignment, either, but at least I'm not venting my frustration on him. Not yet, at least.

The only reason I don't turn on my heels and quit is because I know that there's no alternative.

On one December night I wake up in the wee hours of morning, my sleep interrupted by particularly nasty nightmares of Otou-san's gory corpse. The same moment I open my eyes, I know that I won't be able to go back to sleep. A glance at the clock on my nightstand tells me that it's just past five in the morning.

Great. What am I going to do now?

Of course, everybody else is still deeply asleep. The silence in the house has a suffocating quality to it and after approximately five minutes of restless squirming, I decide that I can put this time to better use. Training at least promises to drain away this anxious energy that's making me antsy.

I get up and dress myself as quietly as possible, careful not to wake Obito and the other inhabitants of the house. After a few seconds of contemplation, I decide to leave my practicing kunai and shuriken at home since it's still pitch black outside and my aim isn't even properly working in broad daylight. Besides, it's not as if I don't have anything else to practice.

I move through the house, dropping a note about the reason of my absence on the kitchen table in passing, out of the main door and in the direction of my usually frequented training field. It's cold but thankfully not too windy as I dart through the streets, passing the occasional street lamp that provides a little pool of light in an otherwise rather dense layer of darkness. It occurs to me that the silence and stillness lends a certain kind of beauty to the village that's only perceivable due to the knowledge of Konoha by day. At least for me. Something about the combination of contrast and current mood, I reckon.

I arrive at the training field without meeting any other soul. It's not the one that I used to go to with Otou-san but rather the one I train on now, with Toshiro and Yashiro, although it looks pretty much the same. It's not too spacious, with a plain, flat ground and a few wooden posts at one end. I don't know if that's the standard set-up for clan training grounds or if it's specifically designed for beginners, but since I can easily admit that I don't need any advanced features anyway right now, it doesn't matter.

I sit down in the middle and plunge myself into meditating, the first activity of every training session since starting my new regimen.

Three hours later, I'm thoroughly spent.

The sun has gone up not too long ago, its weak light valiantly trying to suffuse the air with warmth and not fully succeeding. I don't feel the cold anymore, though, haven't felt it since I started working on my taijutsu, even though I'm sitting down again for my cool-off-meditation.

I don't feel much of anything, in fact.

I had hoped that training would calm me down and clear my head, but instead, I just feel exhausted,
my emotional landscape victim of a clearcutting that leaves me too numb to care about anything.

Well. That didn't go as planned.

I slowly open my eyes to let them readjust to the incoming light – and nearly jump out of my skin when I see a man standing just a few feet away from me, his form covering the sun and preventing me from properly seeing his features.

I let out a whelp that very much sums up my feelings of holy shit, where did he come from, is he watching me, oh shit he is, why am I being watched and is entirely undignified for an Uchiha.

Wait. Did I just think that?

The man puts up his hands in a placating manner.

"Ah, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you!"

His voice is light, pleasantly so, and most importantly, strangely familiar. I squint to get a proper look at him.

Imagine my surprise one second later when I identify him as none other than Sakumo Hatake.

"Hatake-san!" I splutter awkwardly, suddenly in a hurry to get up. I stumble in the attempt to make a decent bow and nearly fall over as my tired muscles decide to give out under me.

Ugh.

Disappearing into the ground would be really practical right now. Or vanishing into thin air. Or both.

Two strong hands grip my shoulders and steady my fall before I can plant my face in the dirt. I'm on my feet again an instant later, blinking from the sudden change in my field of vision from the brown, hard ground to the pale green of that strange flak jacket that seems to be in vogue right now.

"Easy there, we don't want you to get hurt now, do we?"

I look up. Sakumo's face is set in a concerned expression, his brow slightly furrowed and gaze trained solely on me. I'm momentarily stunned by the intensity and sincerity that emanate from the dark grey pools, not used to this attention since Okaa-chan and Otou-san, and stiffen up on reflex.

Sakumo blinks once in alarm but quickly recomposes himself. He takes his hands from my shoulders and squats down.

"Are you out here alone?" he asks cautiously, watching my every reaction as if he fears that I would bolt like a terrified animal at any given moment.

Which is ridiculous, of course. I'm totally calm and collected. No such annoying things as flashbacks or the likes. Nope, none at all.

"Etsuko-chan?"

I realize that I haven't answered his question, yet, and immediately proceed to give him a jerky nod, even though I have to admit to myself half a second later that I forgot what he asked in the first place. I really hope it doesn't show.

Sakumo's gaze softens again, though the concern doesn't waver. It's fascinating how expressive his face is. So easy to read.
"May I ask why you were training at such an early hour?" he asks after a short pause. "It was training, wasn't it?"

I nod again and avert my eyes to the ground. My voice comes out as a timid mumble when I tell him that I couldn't sleep.

It's strange. I'm pretty sure that Sakumo is one of the nicer guys in Konoha, even though his life is barely mentioned in the manga and I unfortunately don't remember much from what he did on the day we met, but his willingness to sacrifice the success of a mission for the life of his teammates speaks for itself. Even now, his questions show that he feels nothing but genuine concern for me.

Then why is it that I'm so hesitant to interact with him?

Undeterred by my behavior, Sakumo and smiles an open, friendly smile. "You must be really hungry after all this hard work then. I was just going to get some breakfast. Do you want to come along?"

My first immediate reaction is that no, I'm not going to get breakfast with a stranger, quickly followed by well he isn't actually a stranger and then but Obito is still at Yashiro's.

I almost hit myself in embarrassment.

Jeez, Etsuko, he wasn't inviting you to an all-out family picnic!

Meanwhile, Sakumo interprets my lack of answer differently. "Of course I'll pay" he says good-naturedly.

I guess that settles it. Who in their right mind would say no to free food?

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On our way to the next restaurant and also after sitting down and ordering, Sakumo makes friendly conversation with me. I catch myself speaking easily to him after just a few minutes of constant exposure to his genuine kindness.

He talks a lot about Kakashi and it's heartwarming to watch. His whole face lightens up with joy and pride as he details his son's progress in various areas – and he has every right to, if what he says is true and the boy is already able to sit up without help and discern the different people in the household, because Obito has just begun doing that a few weeks ago and he's more than half a year older. I mean, even knowing that Kakashi is a genius, the speed with which he seems to learn appears freaking amazing to me.

Sakumo also asks me things about my training – without trying to pry secret Uchiha techniques or something like that out of me – about Obito and about what I want to do when I grow up. When I tell him that I'm going to become a shinobi, I can see that he's taken aback, although he tries to hide it.

It puzzles me.

Isn't becoming a shinobi what practically everybody expects from me anyway?

Before my brain has properly caught up with what I'm doing, I'm already calling him out on his reaction.

"You seem surprised about my choice, Hatake-san?"
I wince after hearing myself. I don't think any child sounds like that.

If he notices – and of course he does, he's an elite ninja – he doesn't show.

"Ah, no, not at all, Etsuko-chan!" he exclaims with waving hands. After putting them down again, he adds after a short pause "I just wasn't expecting you to be so sure about it already. But that's a good thing. You will never stray from your path if you know what you want."

Again, my stupid mouth opens without consulting my brain. "I just want to protect Obito."

At that, Sakumo's face melts into a soft smile. "That's a very, very good reason for wanting to become a shinobi."

We finish the rest of our meals in companionable silence after that. Sakumo pays and exchanges some friendly banter with the waitress until we leave the shop where I turn to him and bow down.

"Thank you for the meal, Hatake-san. I enjoyed it very much!"

And I mean it. I feel significantly better than just one hour before.

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine! I'm glad I ran into you today." He smiles a closed-eyes smile and lifts his hand to scratch the back of his head in a manner that is so Kakashi that my jaw almost hits the ground.

Jeez. The apple really doesn't fall far from the tree.

"Are you going home now, Etsuko-chan? I can walk with you, if you want."

I blink a few times to get grown-up-Kakashi's picture out of my head and shake my head. "Thanks for offering, but it's really not far. Besides, Yashiro-san is probably already wondering where I am and halfway to the training ground."

"Oh, is he going to train with you?"

"Yes, probably. It's been a week since the last time after all."

A slight frown appears on his face. "Be careful, Etsuko-chan. Don't overdo it." His voice suddenly sounds very serious and my eyes widen in surprise.

I haven't heard words like these since I've been living with Yashiro and his family. On the contrary, with him it is always train more, train harder, you'll never make the academy if you laze around like this and – I've grown used to it. I've grown so used to it that I literally thought it was a good idea to come training at five in the morning after going to bed close to midnight the day before.

Objectively viewed, even I can admit that it doesn't sound particularly healthy for a child.

"You know what? If you decide you want to have a break today: I'll take Kakashi to the playground near the Naka Bridge this afternoon. You can come, too, if you want. I'm sure there're lots of children to make friends with and that it will be fun. How does that sound?"

He's smiling again, gentle and warm, and I can only stare at him.

Why does he care so much?

I swallow thickly to get the big lump in my throat out of the way. I sound timid again when I open my mouth to speak, but it's another kind of timid than before and I think Sakumo notices it.
"I have to ask Yashiro first, but I think I … I'd like that."

"That's great Etsuko-chan!" he exclaims delightedly. "So then, I hope to see you again later today!"
He lifts his hand for a wave.

I mirror his action and feel a tiny smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. "See you, maybe!"

I'm still not sure how I even got permission to come, but here I am, standing at the edge of the playground, with Obito practically hanging from my neck. It's a novel experience.

It's not like I've never been to a playground. I've been to some in my first life, though I don't remember the majority of them because I was so small, and even here, as Etsuko, I've been to one with lots of Uchiha kids, perched on Otou-san's shoulders and showing no interest for them at all.

But.

There're so many people here.

The place is bustling with children and their parents, alive with buoyant energy that seems to vibrate in the air. It's such a stark contrast against the perpetual gloom that seems to have taken over life in Konoha since the beginning of the war that I'm momentarily overwhelmed.

How the hell am I supposed to find Sakumo in this crowd?

I'm starting to doubt if it was a good idea to come here after all. He's here to spend time with his son anyway and I'm probably intruding. I mean, he must be so busy being an elite jounin and all that, he probably doesn't see Kakashi as often as he wants. Besides, he certainly doesn't expect me to bring Obito along, oh my god what was I thinking, I'm going to make such a big nuisance of myself –

"Etsuko-chan!"

My inner tirade abruptly silenced, I whip my head in the direction from where the voice was coming from.

Lo and behold, there stands Sakumo in all his tall, lean, gravity-defying-silver-haired glory and smiling the biggest – may I add dorky – smile I have ever seen. There literally is a halo around his head.

Or maybe I'm imagining things.

I think I may or may not be on my way to develop a huge puppy crush on one Hatake Sakumo. It's – ugh.

So.

Embarrassing.

Before I can turn around to run and hide, said person is already jogging over. Up close I can see a tiny person perched on his left arm, just the way Okaa-chan used to carry me when I started whining about that horrible strap contraption.

Something in my chest contracts painfully.

"Etsuko-chan, I'm glad you made it! Ah, and I see you brought your little brother, too!"
He squats down so that we and, most importantly, Kakashi and Obito are at the same level. Seeing baby Kakashi is a shock of the most surreal kind.

Of course, he's without mask or Sharingan, his dark grey eyes having a slight bluish tinge to them that I never noticed in the anime, his gaze surprisingly attentive. He doesn't move, doesn't make any sounds – instead, he simply watches and takes in Obito and me while clutching the sleeve of his father's jounin shirt.

He looks so baby-ish.

I mean, yeah, he is a baby, but in the series he'd always been a soldier, even in his childhood – and thinking about that suddenly makes me so very, very sad again – and I can't seem to find it in me to merge that adult with this baby. There was never any softness or vulnerability in chuunin- or jounin-Kakashi – and certainly not in ANBU-Kakashi, either – just the certainty of innocence lost.

"So, this is my son Kakashi. Kakashi, meet Etsuko and Obito."

Kakashi doesn't react too much and I don't know if that is because he's shy or if he doesn't like what he sees. Or he simply doesn't understand. He is only around four months old, after all.

Obito, however doesn't have any such reservations.

As soon as Kakashi is in touching distance, he loosens his grip on my neck, trusting me to carry his weight on my arms, and reaches out to poke the other boy on his cheek with a happy coo. That gets a startled reaction out of Kakashi who turns to bury his head in Sakumo's shoulder.

Sakumo laughs heartily.

"Ah, I already see a beautiful friendship forming!"

I feel my own lips quirk in amusement, particularly at the pout that Obito is sporting now as he watches Kakashi ignore him in favor of his father's shirt.

"Yes" I say with a smile and the certainty of a person who knows the future. "I'm sure they'll become the best of friends."

And if they need help, I'll be there to watch over them.

This day has had the worst beginning and the best ending possible, I think with a sated kind of exhaustion as put I put a sleepy Obito into bed. Tonight, he won't need a lullaby to sleep.

He spent the whole afternoon in the sand box with Kakashi, both fiercely building something like castles in a competition and trying to outdo each other until Obito's … pile of sand collapsed and became even more pile-y. I don't think I'll ever forget that smug look on baby Kakashi's face after that or Obito's indignant cry.

Or the way he gleefully yelled "Nee-jaaaa!" when his heap of sand was finally bigger than Kakashi's and, most importantly, not collapsing after trying for the umpteenth time.

I think my heart just might have stopped there.

His first word. His first word and it was solely for me. I can't imagine something that makes me more happy, a million times happier even than me meeting toddler Genma, Aoba and Raidou or the
lengthy chat with Sakumo.

I'm so happy. Have I mentioned that I'm happy?

I'm so drunk on this pure, positive feeling that I don't even notice the small parcel on my bed until I'm lying on it and something quadratic digs uncomfortably into my back. I take it out from under me and notice that it's wrapped with white wrapping paper, a note scribbled on one corner that simply says 'Etsuko, Dec 27th'.

It takes a moment before realization hits.

Today is December 27th.

Today is my fourth birthday.

Does this mean that this is a gift? From … Yashiro?

I don't know what I'm feeling as I slowly start to unwrap the parcel. It feels flat on one side and a bit bumpy on the other, and what I finally hold in my hands after the last bit of paper is removed exceeds everything that I could've hoped for.

It's a photo frame, the picture showing Okaa-chan, Otou-san, Obito and me.

We're all dressed in formal kimonos, Okaa-chan holding Obito and Otou-san having one arm wound around her waist and the other carrying me, and when I notice the sourpuss expression on my face, I get an inkling on when this must've been taken: Obito's introduction ceremony, probably sometime after Yashiro made his infuriating comment, which explains my face.

I don't remember it being taken or displayed anywhere in our home – and I would probably have been vehemently against that anyway – but right now, it seems like the most perfect photo in the world.

My hands are shaking when I prop up the stand to put the frame on the nightstand next to the hitai-ate and a small piece of paper flutters to the ground. It must have been held in place by the stand. I pick it up and fold it open. It's another note.

'Etsuko,

this was found in the remains of your father's office.

Happy Birthday'

My eyes are all watery when I put the paper away.

Yashiro is so emotionally awkward, it's almost painful. But thanks to him, Obito won't have to solely rely on my narrations of Okaa-chan and Otou-san anymore.

He'll just have to look at this picture and know that they loved him from the bottom of their hearts.

Chapter End Notes

That's it for this time. How did you like our new silver-haired addition(s)? As always, I
love to read your thoughts!

And don't forget to check out Joyous Children: Kiyomi Gaiden. It would make me insanely happy to see you there.

Peace out.
Transitions

Chapter Summary

The time interval before the scale tips from one side to the other, the short moment of perfect balance - it’s the phase of transition.

Chapter Notes

I'm aliiiive and back!

I'm so sorry for taking so long, but here it is, Chapter 15 of Joyous Children. Thank you all for staying with me until now, for favoriting, following and, best of all, reviewing it! This fic wouldn't be what it is without you and I would be even happier if those of you who haven't said something yet, did.

To make up for the long wait there is not only this new chapter but also an omake! I've opened a new series with the name Joyous Children Side fics which will be filled with the things that didn't make it into the main story, e.g. POVs that didn't fit as Interludes, AUs and missing scenes. First up is Sakumo's POV of what happened in the last chapter. So, go, check it out, and tell me how you liked it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I don't see Sakumo for weeks, even months after my birthday.

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New Year comes and goes, and for the next weeks, the days blur together into one endless string of tajjutsu training, honing my Sharingan, weapons training, honing my chakra control and more tajjutsu training.

Yashiro is as relentless as ever, driving me to my very limits and beyond as I clench my teeth and work myself to the bones. I can't say how many hours a week I spend on the training field, but I can sense that it's starting to pay off: the intervals before exhaustion settles in become longer and longer and even though I have no absolute certainty, I'm confident that I'm getting faster and stronger with a constant pace.

Toshiro continues sulking, but I can see that he, too, is steadily improving. Negative encouragement does get you somewhere, apparently. I'm just not sure how screwed up our relationship will be after this is over, but I freely admit that I simply don't care at the moment – which is probably highly inadvisable, I know. Had I more time – and energy – to think about this, I would possibly try to find a way to make things work because I happen to know how petty sentiments in the Uchiha clan tend to lead to huge disasters. But even my attention span can only hold out for so long, so I delay this problem for now.

We're still young, after all.
As to Naoko … well. Ever since that messed up competition with Toshiro has started, I can't help but feel that she takes his "defeats" really personal. The air between us, not particularly warm and comfy to begin with, has cooled down even further.

Yeah. So.

She is his mother, I guess. Thus, another file added to the "problems-that-can't-be-helped-right-now"-cabinet. I sincerely hope that it stays the last one of that kind for a while.

In between all this, there's barely enough time to spend with my baby brother, but I try to keep up a few constants. I never let him go to sleep without a lullaby – and I think my skill for translating English songs into Japanese has slowly become award-worthy, by the way – play with him for an hour after lunch and tell him about my day. I don't imagine him to understand everything I say, of course, but besides the nice feeling of somebody listening to me without any expectations of hearing something in particular, I reckon that it's good for his speech development, too.

And it works. I'm very proud when one day, after I've finished the obligatory lullaby, he tugs at my sleeve and asks "Sing me another song, nee-jaa?" with big, hopeful puppy eyes. He receives an excited squeal, a proper cuddling and – naturally – the requested song.

I'm also pleased to say that it doesn't stay a single occurrence.

Somewhere in this flow of everyday business there's some sleep and eating, too, but they're such small variables of the equation that it hardly counts towards the end product. Besides, sleep is something that I try to avoid. I still get too many too colorful pictures of one particular corpse blending in with my first kill.

I wish I could just turn them off.

On February 10th, I take the whole day off. It's Obito's first birthday, after all.

After breakfast – bland Uchiha faces and the occasional meaningful grunt as usual – I wait for Naoko to clear the kitchen. I don't want her there for my first attempt at cooking.

Because here is the thing.

I've never made anything even remotely resembling a bento box lunch. It's not that I haven't ever cooked. I have, really. But it has never been anywhere near the almost artistic creations that are presented as meals here. Call me prideful, but I don't want her to witness the less than elegant way with which I'm going to prepare Obito's and my lunch. Beside other difficulties, I'll probably have to climb chairs a lot to reach the working space, thanks to the shortness of my body. So, Obito is the only one allowed to stay. He watches me with unbridled curiosity and occasionally demands to know the name of the kitchen equipment that I'm currently using.

Before long, I'm in the middle of boiling rice in a pot and trying to figure out what to do next. I quickly have to admit to myself that I have virtually no clue about what to put into an onigiri as a filling or how I get the rice to stick together and that this is usually the point at which I would grab my smartphone and browse through my favorite cooking app or Google. Or, even more often, call my mom.

Obviously, neither of this is going to work here. Man, how I miss the comforts of my old life.

"What are you trying to accomplish?"
I nearly fall off the stool when Yashiro's voice suddenly cuts through the void of helplessness that presently occupies my mind and I whip my head around so fast that my own hair smacks me in my face. Yashiro is standing in the doorway, eyeing me and my efforts with a deep scowl that leaves no doubt about his judgement on my skills in the kitchen.

\textit{Hmph.}

Sneaking sneak doing that sneaky ninja thing again.

I really need to find a way to prevent myself from jumping out of my skin every single time someone approaches me with less noise than a horde of elephants.

"I'm cooking" I say defensively, tightening the grip on the wooden spoon in my right hand. I have developed a habit of becoming really tense in the presence of Yashiro. Which, \textit{uh}, is kind of a constant thing since I'm living in his house.

Said person's scowl deepens even further, leaving veritable trenches on his forehead and at the corners of his mouth. There is a rather long moment of awkward silence, only interrupted by the bubbling sound of boiling water. Even Obito has gone still, his fist stuffed into his mouth and smothering the slightest peep that tries to leave his throat.

It makes me pause.

Is this something that he was made to learn? While I've been away, training? Here, in this house?

\textit{Which is supposed to be his home?}

Before I can make more sense out of his behavior or, more probable, build up a rage first, Yashiro clears his throat. His gaze sweeps over the workspace and me again and I expect him to let out some kind of scathing remark – but he doesn't. Instead, he turns around and leaves.

I blink.

That's it?

I shake my head, blink again and lo and behold, he's back and coming towards me with purposeful strides. "Your hand" he grunts when he's only one foot away from me and I do as I'm told.

He reaches out, too, and I feel a leathery object being put into my hand.

It's a purse.

"Lunch money. Don't spend it all on sweets."

My jaw literally drops to the ground.

"I … this …" I stammer.

\textit{Smooth. Smoothest 'thank you' of the century, Etsuko.}

Yashiro just grunts again and turns to leave. He stops in the doorway.

"Clean up the mess here before you leave."

And then he's gone.
„Nee-jaa, look!” Obito crows excitedly, pointing with one chubby finger at something in the trees. I squint in an attempt to make out what he wants me to see from the bench we’re sitting on and notice something small, grey and furry darting through the branches.

„That's a squirrel, Obi” I tell him sagely. "They're mammals that live on trees and eat seeds, bark, nuts and sometimes other stuff as well. I think they're omnivores, though that might only be the case for the red squirrels from Euro- … err, that I read about. Somewhere. Like, in a book."

I grimace. Oh man. Good thing that he doesn't understand too much, yet. I would have been bad if he'd started asking about red squirrels that don't even exist here.

Obito ignores my glaringly obvious slip-up and scrunches up his nose in concentration. „Squi-well” he says slowly, chewing on the syllables as if to make sure that every bit of linguistic value is properly squeezed out.

"Yup" I nod.

"Squi-well" he repeats. "Is fast!"

"Yup. Now let's try and finish this ice cream before it melts and drips on the floor, shall we?"

"Ice cream!” he agrees, flailing happily with his arms while I try not to accidentally smear the treat into his face.

I think he likes it fair enough.

I mean, of course he does. Who doesn't like ice cream, really?

In general, I think that the day has gone pretty well until now. We'd been exploring the village the whole morning, gotten ourselves lunch at Ichiraku's – yes, I did it, I had to, don't judge me – and since there was some leftover money, I'd bought Obito his first ice cream ever. You know, since Yashiro only said not to spend all the money on sweets. Besides, I don't categorize ice cream as that. I firmly believe that it's something more in the direction of 'basic foods'.

Anyways.

Currently we're sitting on a bench near Team 7's bridge. Our next destination is the playground, as soon as Obito has finished eating.

On the way there, Obito entertains me with a constant stream of cheery babbling. It doesn't all make sense but that's beside the point. I feel as if this is the first time in forever that we're both able to relax completely and just enjoy being siblings. I almost feel sorry when we finally arrive at the playground, but that feeling of disappointment quickly makes place for surprise when Obito spots something, or rather someone, interesting.

There, on a bench at the edge of the playground, is an older lady with a little boy on her lap. A boy with silver-grey hair of a shade that I have only ever seen twice until now, namely on the head of that exact same boy and his father.

Fancy seeing Kakashi here. And I'm totally not looking for him, but, you know – where is Sakumo?

Obito tugs at my shirt, demanding to be taken over there since he apparently remembers his sandbox buddy from the last time. I comply since I don't have any better plans anyway.
The lady is talking to Kakashi who seems to be listening intently. As we get closer, I can make out her low, soothing voice.

"… but the village chose Hashirama-sama, thus making him our very first Hokage. They chose him because he was the strongest shinobi of his time, maybe even now. He earned his moniker ‘God of Shinobi’ already when he was still alive. In addition to that, he was kind and wise and laid down the foundations which make Konoha the strong village that it is today."

I come to a halt a couple of feet before the bench, just when she finishes with what seems to be a recounting of Hashirama's life and both of its occupants direct their gazes on us. I make a small bow.

"Good afternoon, obaa-san. I'm sorry if I interrupted you, I didn't mean to."

The lady smiles kindly. "Don't worry, dear. I had just finished talking anyway. So, what are your names?"

I adjust my grip on Obito who has started squirming impatiently as I reply to her question. "I'm Uchiha Etsuko and this is my brother Obito. I am pleased to meet you."

"So am I, Etsuko-chan, Obito-chan. My name is Takahashi Ume and this –" here she gently nudges Kakashi, "is Hatake Kakashi. Kakashi dear, say hello."

Kakashi, verily much unimpressed, doesn't. Ume chuckles, though it sounds a tad too resigned to be mistaken for pure humor.

"He actually can" she says in apology. "He just doesn't always want to."

"It's alright" I assure her. "We know each other already anyway."

Ume-san's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, is that so?"

"Sakumo-san introduced us."

"Whoa, calm down there, Obi!" My baby brother stops squirming just long enough to let me set him down on the bench, directly next to Ume and Kakashi. He then proceeds to casually invade the other boy's private space by reaching up and poking him in the cheek, the action strongly reminiscent of their very first encounter.

"Kashi!" he exclaims triumphantly.

"Oops. I might need to explain to him the basic principles of socially acceptable behavior soon. Like, don't go around randomly poking other people's faces. Especially in a shinobi village. They tend to react unfavorably."

On the bright side, he did just prove that he remembered Kakashi's name. Impressive, considering that the day they met was actually the day he uttered his first word.

"Kashi!" he exclaims triumphantly.

Kakashi, meanwhile, has adopted a slightly horrified expression. His voice sounds tiny when he reacts to Obito's enthused straightforwardness with a quick scramble deeper into Ume's lap and a moderately loud "No!"
To be honest, I'd probably react the same. Only Gai could be more head-on.

Two seconds later I realize that Kakashi has spoken a proper word. How old is he again?!

Obito looks not so much surprised about Kakashi’s linguistic prowess but crestfallen. He has been rather harshly rejected, after all. His eyes have gone into full-blown kicked-puppy-mode as he lets out a sorrowful „No?“ that's giving its best to pierce directly into the heart.

I smirk inwardly.

He's starting to show signs of becoming a master manipulator.

Um. Which is what actually made him one of the most dangerous villains, if not the most dangerous villain, in canon Narutoverse. I quickly wipe off my inner smirk.

Blessedly unaware of my sudden discomfort, Ume lets out a hearty laugh. She turns to Obito.

"You'll have to be patient with him, Obito-chan. Kakashi-chan is very shy."

Kakashi-chan, huh? I snort quietly. I don't deny it, as Elizabeth, I used to be a huge Kakashi fan and seeing him now, not only as a baby but also being treated like one, is bizarrely funny.

It is also quite adorable. I could get used to that.

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The rest of the afternoon plays out like this: We leave the bench after Obito convinces me to build castles in the sandbox since Kakashi doesn't seem to be interested in him at all. At some point during a rather convoluted attempt of mine to try and teach him the secret to my amazingly advanced castle-building-technique, there is a light tug at the back of my shirt. I turn my head to see who is behind me.

It's Ume. She is in a crouching position, with Kakashi in her arms, his hand already on its way back from where it has touched the fabric of my shirt.

"Excuse me" she says with a smile. "Do you mind if Kakashi-chan joins you? He wants to learn what you're teaching your brother."

Obito perks up visibly.

"Sure" I say, shuffling a bit to the side to allow a tiny bit of space between my brother and me. Kakashi crawls in effortlessly.

Hours pass and when the sun is near the horizon, both boys are able to build passable sand castles.

"I'm going to be here with Kakashi-chan twice a week" Ume says when we get ready to leave for or respective homes. "Maybe you want to join us sometimes?"

"Gladly" I reply.

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It's exactly what we do. Play dates, twice a week, without fail. We quickly move from building sand castles on to other things and I witness both of the boys taking their literal first steps. I have no idea what kind of pace is normal for the motoric development of babies since I myself haven't exactly been an normal case and I lack any kind of experience, but I'm pretty sure that bringing the both of
them together has made an accelerating impact.

I also learn things.

I learn that Ume is a retired kunoichi, a good friend of Kakashi's mother, who babysits Kakashi as long as Sakumo and Sayu, Sakumo's wife and said boy's mother, are out and fighting a war. That Kakashi doesn't bother very much with other kids his age, except for Obi. That the Sandaime is negotiating an alliance with Suna and that he's probably going to succeed since Suna has far more to gain by siding with Konoha than by standing against it.

And finally, that Nara Shikaku without his facial scars looks almost like a carbon copy of his future son.

What appears to be a random observation is, in fact, just that: completely random.

I quite literally run into him on my way home from one of the play dates. Deeply involved in a mock game of tag with Obi, I'm not too observant of what might be walking around on the streets and suddenly, there is something solid in my face and a muffled "oof". I unceremoniously fall on my butt and when I look up, I have to keep my jaw from dropping, because, as I said – boy, the likeness. He also seems to be around 12-ish.

"Oi" he says, and, oh gosh, even the voice – "You alright?"

He stretches out his hands to help me get up, but before I can grasp it, there is a second "oof" and the dull thud of another behind meeting the ground as something small barrels into him with a loud war cry.

"Nee-jaaaaaa!"

Ah, that's Obito, then.

Shikaku mutters something suspiciously sounding like "troublesome" from where he is sitting, with my little brother clutching at his leg like a monkey, and the picture is just too precious.

I break out into unrestrained guffaws.

Obito turns to look at me, probably startled by the strange spluttering noises coming out of my mouth, and releases his hold on Shikaku. He trudges over to me and I embrace him in a hug, still laughing so hard that tears are threatening to spill from my eyes.

When I finally calm down, still hiccupping and stifling silly little giggles, I see that the other boy as stood up again. I don't wait for him to offer his hand again and stand up on my own.

"I apologize for that, Nara-san" I say with a small bow.

He doesn't reply immediately after that and when I get back up with a raised eyebrow, I notice him quickly rearranging his expression into something neutral.

My amusement dies down as suddenly as it appeared. What was that?

"No harm done" he says. "Though I admit that you have me at a disadvantage here. What's your name?"

Aaand here it comes – the realization that I've made a huge mistake.

We have never met before. I am therefore not supposed to know who he is.
Damn. And with a Nara nonetheless. I could hit myself.

"I, uh … Uchiha Etsuko" I say as I plaster a nervous grin on my face. "And this is my brother, Obito. Nice to meet you!"

Something strange happens then.

For the fraction of a second, his eyes widen in surprise and something else, but before I can identify what it is exactly, they have recovered to their normal state. Though they seem a bit more guarded now.

I frown. Surely, the name Uchiha can't be that intimidating?

"Nice to meet you, too" he says, voice sounding as unperturbed as before. "Are you heading somewhere?"

"Ah, no, I was actually on my way home from the playground."

"Ah. Well, it was nice speaking to you. I'm sure we'll meet again." He tips two of his fingers at his head in farewell.

I mimic him. "Yeah, see you around!"

When he's left, Obito tugs at my shirt and I scoop him up into my arms. On the whole way back to Yashiro's, I can't stop thinking about the encounter with Shikaku, especially his last sentence. He sounded so sure about us meeting again.

I wonder why that is.

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"Are you ready, yet? We mustn't let Takao-sama wait."

"Yes, Yashiro-san. I'm ready to go."

Yashiro gives me a once-over, face set in a scowl, and finally deems me fit for presentation.

It's one week before the start of the academy. The afternoon is cold but sunny, heralding the fast approach of spring, and I'm on my way to … I actually don't know what. I only know that Takao-sama, who's come back at some point and sent Fugaku back to the front again, wants to meet me, but knowing the tendencies of my clan I'm going to hazard the guess that this is going to be about honor and duty to the clan.

Sometimes, my folks are predictable like that.

I am clad in a formal dark blue yukata, embroidered with a big Uchiha fan on my back, calf length leggings and proper shinobi sandals. It is definitely more practical than the kimono outfit I had to wear for Obito's induction ceremony, but practicability hadn't been the point then.

On our way to the house of the clan head, we don't exchange any words. It's only when we're standing before the door that Yashiro turns around to give me a curt instruction. "Show Takao-sama due respect."

I can only nod.

He knocks and the door slides open, revealing Takao's wife – what was her name again? Yashiro
bows down briefly and I mimic him.

"Yashiro-san" what's-her-name-again says. "It is good to see you. Takao is already in his study."

Yashiro nods. "Then we better not let him wait. Thank you, Naoko-san."

Ah, right. That was her name. Funny that it is the same as his own wife's. Though I'm not particularly surprised that 'docile child' is such a popular name for female clan members.

Takao's study looks more traditional than Otou-san's. There is no desk and no chair but instead a few zabuton scattered around a kotatsu. Takao himself is seated at it, the surface nearly free of everything except for writing utensils. Directly behind him is a shelf that is divided up into several boxes, all carefully labeled and full with scrolls. Everything looks incredibly orderly and well-organized.

We fall on our knees, foreheads pressed against the tatami mats upon entering.

"Yashiro, Etsuko" Takao drones by way of greeting. "Sit up."

We do as we're told and immediately, Takao's focus falls on me. There is a short moment in which he assesses me, intense scrutiny and all, and I fight to keep the eye contact. I don't know why, but suddenly the fact that I don't look away is very important to me, so I concentrate on his face in return, notice the dark circles under his eyes and the lines around his mouth that only seem to have gone deeper since the last time I've seen him.

Which is hardly surprising. He's had the death of his son to mourn, after all.

"Uchiha Etsuko" he begins at length. "You will be the youngest Uchiha in the history of the clan to attend the academy. Your guardian brought forth his request to enroll you with considerable confidence in your abilities. Are they justified?"

Um.

I guess that a simple 'yes' is not quite appropriate – apart from the fact that it's probably not true – but I don't think a 'dunno, maybe?' will be taken favorably, either. And anyway, why am I being asked if Yashiro's assessment of me is true? Honestly, why is he even talking to me? I'm bloody four years old. How would I know?

"Um …" I could hit myself. *Great start. Pray, go on. "I, uh … I do not claim to be a better judge than Yashiro-san. If he says that I am ready, then … then I will try my best to satisfy his expectations."

Takao's eyes narrow just a tiny bit.

*Oh, right.*

"And I will strive to honor the clan by being on top of the class."

I eye him carefully. Did I lay it on too thick?

Takao's expression smooths over.

*Apparently not.*

Sometimes, it is a good thing to have some fixed points for orientation. It helps, too, that 'clan pride' stands out as bright as a supernova on the otherwise pretty blank how-to-handle-Uchiha-feelings-map.
"As you should" Takao says matter-of-factly. "You will go there not only as Uchiha Etsuko, but rather as a representative of the Uchiha. Everything you do, all your achievements and failures, will reflect immediately on the clan. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

*Oh, I do, perfectly well actually, thank you very much. No pressure here.*

This is probably what Itachi had to go through, too, plus the weight of being the clan heir, which I fortunately don't have to deal with. Small mercies, right?

But if this is the only way to protect Obito, I'll do it.

So I, outwardly calm and composed, respond with a solemn "Yes, Takao-sama."

That pleases both Takao-sama and Yashiro.

From then on, the clan head pretty much ignores my presence. He tells Yashiro how he wishes to be kept informed about my progress and how he thinks it would be best to keep me motivated. Yashiro listens with a stony face. I wonder how he's feeling about the fact that all these special circumstances are made for me, the adopted child, and not for his own son. Wonder, if his sense of duty to the clan is really so big that he's willing to overlook that Toshiro is practically ignored in favor of me.

It can't be easy.

Finally, Takao-sama comes to an end and his gaze settles on me again.

*Umph.*

So. Intense.

I feel like the weight of a thousand boulders has dropped on my shoulders, almost enough to elicit a bodily reaction from me. There's a whole world of expectations in that gaze and suddenly, I'm becoming aware of how real things are going to become as soon as I enter the academy.

I'm going to be a shinobi.

I'm going to be considered a full adult, complete with the corresponding responsibilities and duties to the village and the clan.

I'm going to learn how to kill people.

"Go, then, Uchiha Etsuko" Takao-sama says, voice pregnant with meaning, as we stand up to leave. "Make your clan proud."

This then, as I bow down once more for my clan head, is when I ultimately realize: My life here in Narutoverse is about to start. For real.

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(Meanwhile, somewhere at the frontier.)

"Sakumo-senpai! Long time no see!"

Jiraiya's boisterous voice sounded over the whole campsite, making it impossible not to notice him. Sakumo looked up from where he was sitting and saw the man approaching, gait careless and a huge grin on his tan face. A second figure was trailing behind him, pale and noiseless and so different from the first that they seemed like polar opposites.
Jiraiya flopped down beside him and Sakumo smiled. "Good evening, Jiraiya-san, Orochimaru-san" he greeted them. "You have just arrived, I assume?"

The other man nodded, his white mane waving wildly from the motion. "Yeah. Sensei sent us here to help keep an eye on Iwa's movements. Now that the alliance with Suna is finally secure, we can focus fully on the main front. Or something like that." He stopped to throw a curious glance at the piece of paper Sakumo was holding in his hand. "Is that a letter from Konoha?"

Sakumo nodded.

Jiraiya's expression turned lecherous at that. "Oh-ho, is it from a woman? Is she pretty?"

The older shinobi laughed good-naturedly. "Oh, it is from a woman, a pretty one, too. She's a family friend of my wife, Kakashi's babysitter and old enough to be my mother."

"Well, that doesn't have to mean anything, you know? Women are like sake, the older they are, the more exquisite – ow!" Sakumo blinked and saw a blur where Orochimaru's hand was withdrawing from a blow to the back of Jiraiya's head.

"Orochi-teme!" said man cried out. "What the hell was that for?"

Orochimaru's eyes were narrowed in annoyance. "Just shut up. Nobody is interested in your perverted opinions."

"Hah, no appreciation for the fairer sex at all. See, teme, that is exactly the reason why no woman ever talks to you."

"Tsunade talks to me just fine."

"Hime is your teammate, she doesn't count." With a last indignant huff, Jiraiya turned back towards Sakumo who had been following the whole exchange with an amused smile. "So what does it say? Any good news from home?"

"Ah, this and that. It's mainly about my son, Kakashi."

"Ah, your little lad! How is he doing?" A pensive scowl appeared on Jiraiya's forehead. "It must be difficult for him, with both you and Sayu at war."

Sakumo exhaled. "He's still so young, maybe it doesn't affect him too much. We'll - hopefully - be back home before he knows it."

There was a short, uncomfortable pause.

"And besides, Ume writes that he has made friends, so he isn't too lonely."

Jiraiya, recognizing the straw for what it was, grasped at it. "Friends? Anyone we know?"

"I don't know about you, but I've met them before. They're Uchiha siblings, by the names of Etsuko and Obito."

Jiraiya's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Oho? I never I thought I'd see the day that clan released its children to the public."

Before Sakumo could reply to that, Orochimaru's voice cut in. "Uchiha Etsuko?"

The silver-haired man turned to him. "You know her?"
"No," Orochimaru's face was unreadable as he spoke. "Though I seem to recall that sensei mentioned her once or twice."

"What about her?" Jiraiya asked, his curiosity piqued. "Did she do something?"

Orochimaru didn't seem inclined to answer that question, so Sakumo did. "She's remarkably talented. Actually, Ume writes that she's going to start attending the academy this spring term."

"How old is she?" Jiraiya asked in between opening a bottle and taking a swig from it.

"Four."

Jiraiya spluttered, making whatever he was drinking splash all over. Orochimaru made a disgusted noise through his nose.

"Four?! Bloody hell, are they nuts?"

"We were five when we started the academy" Orochimaru commented drily.

"Yeah, but that was us and … and she is four!"

His teammate rolled his eyes and chose to remain silent.

"I don't think she was forced into it, if it helps keep you sane, Jiraiya-san" Sakumo intervened. "When I spoke to her, she did seem very determined."

Jiraiya was still scowling. "She did?"

Sakumo nodded, pensively. "Quite adamant, actually. She had a strong motivation."

He remembered, as clear as day, the way she had said I just want to protect Obito. In that moment, she had been more than a little girl. She had been a person hell-bent on keeping her precious person safe.

And Sakumo had known in that precise moment that she would do whatever it took to accomplish her goal.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you were pleased to get a bit of Sakumo goodness in the end. I know that I had fun writing it at least!

The next chapter is going to start with a time skip and it shouldn't take too long to be up. As always, don't forget to tell me your thoughts and also, have a look on Joyous Children Side fics! See you soon!
Out of the Bubble, Into the Crowd

Chapter Summary

Know the so called 'Comfort Zone'? Yeah, I stepped cleanly out of that one.

Chapter Notes

New Chapter! Hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I step out of the examination room into the hallways of Konoha's shinobi academy, the door falling shut behind me with a gentle clicking sound. In my hand, I'm holding a piece of dark blue cloth with a metal plate stitched on it. The stylized leaf lies heavy on my palm, making me acutely aware that, even though it is made to be as light as possible, it's still steel. A subtle but constant reminder of my new status.

I'm not sure how I feel about it, yet.

For the past year, I always believed that it would fill me with a sense of accomplishment when I finally graduated, but presently, having just done that, my mind feels kind of blank.

I'm a genin of Konoha now.

I mean, genin, as in 'shinobi with the rank of genin'. I am still a bit overwhelmed by this tidbit of information and the longer I think about it, the more daunting the thought becomes.

I've come a long way from being a simple business postgrad with a musical background and almost no interest in physical exercise whatsoever. And I have no idea where my journey is going to lead me next.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadow materializing out of perceived nowhere and approaching me. I know it's Shikaku even before I properly see his face or hear his voice, simply recognizing him by his gait and the way he purposefully drags his feet along. I wait for him to catch up to me.

"Yo, Etsuko" he greets me with a drawl. His shoulders are slouched and his hands in the pockets of his pants, projecting to all the world a picture of casual carelessness that only lasts so long when you know that he is a Nara. "I suppose congratulations are in order?"

"Did you doubt me?" I ask back.

"Nah, would've been a waste of energy" he replies. "Though it is troublesome to think about the fact that you ended up in the same graduating class as I."

I smirk at that. "You could have graduated when I hadn't even started attending if you hadn't been so lazy."
He smirks right back. "Heh. Probably."

We proceed in amicable silence and I slowly start to feel comfortable again. He has that stabilizing effect on me.

Actually, this is a good summary of our whole relationship.

Since entering the academy, he has been sort of a constant companion to me: at first, as the only acquaintance I had here in school and then, when I was transferred into another class at the beginning of the second half of the year, as a classmate. His presence was unobtrusive and he never stepped out unless he felt that there was any kind of need for that and most importantly, he didn't treat me any different because of my age/gender/clan.

Which was actually something that happened. Because, in case you didn't know, kids can be frickin' mean.

You'd think that the mind of a mid-twenties woman trapped in a child's body could handle a bit of pre-pubescent bullying no problem. But either I underestimated the might of kids raised with shinobi morals or I am more on a wavelength with my physical age than I thought I was since I don't feel like a twenty-something at all at the moment.

That … might actually be a point worth investigating, now that I think of it.

Anyway, back to what I was saying: mean kids. Obviously, the first point of attack was my age. There was that one obligatory jerk that seemed to feel the need to validate himself by picking on the perceived weakest and I swear, it was so cliché it wasn't even funny. It didn't get any better after I beat him in a spar, either. His defeat only served to shift his douchbaggery towards a more general hatred for the Uchiha. Still, I made a point by proceeding to beat him in every single spar after that. It had become a matter of pride on my behalf by then. Eventually, I even learnt to remember his name through that. It's Akio.

Besides, it was kind of fun.

The other kids were subtler about their apprehension with my age and lineage, but subtle eight-to-nine-year-olds are still not particularly graceful. They resorted to means of marginalization and isolation, and even though I loathe admitting it, that hurt.

See, I had come to the academy with the intention to build a network of social contacts – or friends, if you want to call it like that – because I know for a fact that my clan could work a bit on their public relations.

Because I meant it when I promised Takao-sama to do my best for the clan, I really did. And for me, that also included thinking further into the future, thinking about what I want the Uchiha to be seen as. What good does it for me, after all, if I become a passable shinobi only to be mistrusted, avoided and ultimately massacred? What good does it for Obito when I manage to keep him from Madara only to have him and us all potentially annihilated because someone within the village decided that we were a menace?

So, I was actually ready to communicate. I was ready to bring up the patience needed to deal with children, was willing to talk to them and answer whatever they wanted to know, heck, I was even motivated enough to help whoever needed help with training etc. All that to adjust the Uchiha image in the public eye.

Apparently, I had severely misjudged just how bad their situation – our situation – was. Is.
Because.

Nobody likes us.

Literally.

Of course, nobody said it directly to my face, but it was obvious in the way they avoided any kind of interaction with me - or Toshiro for that matter. It also didn't help that he himself was unwilling to open up, instead preferring to join the Uchiha clique already present in academy. Which, needless to say, was and still is very much exclusive, too.

It's a disaster.

At least it's one step better than everybody hates us, but it's also just that - one step away. Not exactly edifying.

And before I had decided what to do about it, the second half of the year had come – and with that, my advancement to the class scheduled to graduate next since I was doing so well.

I would like to say that from then on, everything got better, that I managed to polish the Uchiha image and that I became widely respected. And of course, that's not what happened, though the few added years on the average age of my new classmates did contribute to higher levels of maturity. Mostly.

But the thing that did make a rather big difference, at least for me, was the presence of the Ino-Shika-Chou-formation. And with that I mainly point my finger on one Nara Shikaku.

I confess right here that I couldn't help but take a practically immediate liking to the seemingly languid boy.

The reasons are rather simple: besides the qualities I already mentioned, he's obviously smart, has a dry, ironic sense of humor that I miss so frickin' much in my clan and the ability to listen. He does the latter so well, actually, that it's probably dangerous – but I can't help but appreciate it with my whole heart. He doesn't put me under any kind of pressure, either, which is incredibly refreshing. I didn't know that I'd needed that so badly.

"Shika, what took you so lo- oh, Etsuko! Hiya!"

My train of thought is interrupted by Chouza's exclamation. I see him standing right in front of the main door of the academy with a mandatory bag of crisps in his hands. At his side is Inoichi, his long blonde hair up in a ponytail and a brandnew hitai-ate on his forehead. His face is set in a calm expression as he gives me an acknowledging nod.

"Hi Chouza, Inoichi" I say as Shikaku and I close the distance.

"So you passed the exam?" Chouza asks excitedly. "That's awesome! I think you're the youngest genin that Konoha's ever had. Your family must be really proud!"

"Uh, yeah" I say with a slight grimace.

I don't doubt that they are. And that's probably the start of the problem. But I chose this, so I'm not gonna start complaining now.

Inoichi frowns a bit but before he or Chouza can comment on my less than enthusiastic response, Shikaku intervenes.
"Let's get out. If I keep my parents waiting for any longer, kaa-san is going to think that I failed. That would be troublesome."

The others nod in agreement and together, we step out of the academy's halls into the sunny afternoon of Konoha.

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The space before the building is crowded with parents and newly minted genin. Chouza runs as soon as he spots his father and Inoichi excuses himself shortly after. I can see Yashiro, too, standing a few feet apart from the main crowd. I look up at Shikaku.

"Ok, so – see you tomorrow, right?"

He eyes me for a few seconds before he replies. "Yeah. See you tomorrow."

I give him a lopsided grin and turn away.

As I get closer to Yashiro, I am pleasantly surprised that he does actually have the Uchiha-equivalent look of content on his face – which is to say, a minute upward curve at the corners of his mouth and a slightly warmer shine to the eyes than usual.

I come to a halt before him and bow down in greeting. "Yashiro-san."

"Etsuko" he greets back. His gaze falls on the cloth in my hand. "I see, you have fulfilled our expectations. Of course you did."

Well. That's something, I guess.

"Well done. Takao-sama will be pleased, too. The rankings will be published tomorrow, I trust?"

I nod.

"Good."

With that, he turns around and signals me to follow.

We haven't made more than ten steps when I hear someone calling my name.

I look over my shoulder to find Ume waving at me, her other hand holding little Kakashi's. Something warm and fuzzy spreads in my chest as I see them and I jog over without thinking.

"Ume-san! This is such a pleasant surprise!"

Ume smiles. "We did promise to come, didn't we? It's a very important day for you, after all."

I'm smiling myself as I hold up the hitai-ate to show her. "Yeah. I made it."

"Of course you did" she says and suddenly, this same phrase sounds a hundred times warmer than when Yashiro said it. "I didn't doubt you for a second."

"Thank you!" Positively beaming now, I turn to Kakashi. "Hi Kakashi! I'm really happy you came."

The boy smiles back. "Hi, Etsuko-nee" he says, his little voice clear and without hesitation. And just like every time, I'm touched by him calling me that.
He's started doing that not too long ago. It happened on one of the playdates, one after a rather long break of not having them since I wasn't as flexible with my timetable as before anymore after starting the academy. Kakashi had seemed somewhat down on that day and Obi had caught on to that. So he had decided to cheer his friend up by convincing me to sing for them – Michael Jackson's 'Heal the World', his favorite lullaby.

It had worked.

On that same day, just before Obi and I left, he came up to me with a very serious look in his eyes. I remember being worried, asking him if he was alright and him going really quiet for a few seconds before bursting out with the question if he could call me Etsuko-nee.

The tips of his ears had been adorably pink then.

"Is Obito-chan here, too?" Ume asks, successfully bringing me back to the present.

I shake my head. "No. Yashiro left him at home with Naoko."

"Oh well. Tell him we said 'hi'!"

I nod. "Will do!"

After a couple more exchanges, I bid them goodbye and get back to Yashiro.

"The Hatake boy?" he asks with an impassive face. He knows about the playdates Obi and I have with Kakashi and though he'd not been very amused by the idea of us consorting with anyone outside the clan at first, he came around eventually. It helped that I could convince him that Obito's development benefitted from spending time with 'The Hatake Boy'.

I nod.

"Hn" he grunts and we continue our way home.

)00(  

"Etsuko, come into my study."

I look up from where I'm sitting on the ground with Obito, sheets of paper surrounding us since I'm showing him how to write his name in Hiragana. Yashiro is standing in the doorway, scowl in place, and moves his head in a manner that reveals the unspoken now.

I get up. "I'll be right back, Obi!"

He nods and gives me a cheery grin. "I'll be able to write my name when you're back, nee-chan! Watch me!"

I ruffle his hair fondly. "I can't wait to see it."

My smile stays in place until Yashiro and I settle down in his study. The air of seriousness that is practically inherent to it makes my face adopt the standard Uchiha face that I've learnt to mimic so well by now.

Yashiro launches straight into the conversation.

"Takao-sama is very pleased with your development. You have performed well above our expectations. Although we don't know about your ranking, yet, your graduation as the youngest
shinobi within the shortest time of attendance in Konoha's history already contributes greatly to the honor of the clan. You have proven that you're more than able to carry out your duty."

Oh.

I feel my cheeks heat up under the praise. It feels good to be commended like that, I don't deny it. Even though one might say that I had it easy due to not having to start from scratch in the non-shinobi subjects – and with that I mean the likes of reading, writing, math, history, which, by the way, was more an indoctrination of Konoha shinobi values leaning heavily to the side of historical whitewashing, etc. – like the other kids, I did put quite some effort into the physical training, especially the use of chakra.

And if one says that that must've been easier, too, because of my Sharingan, they're totally right. I'd also add that I was often forbidden from using it and that the bodies of the other children were in average several years older than mine so that my kekkei genkai's advantage, if allowed, mainly served to compensate this imbalance.

Besides, it's not as I haven't paid the price for it.

"But this is only the first in a long line of duties that you'll have to fulfill from now on. By becoming a shinobi, you've become a full adult and are thus expected to act according to your status."

He stops and looks at me expectantly.

The resulting silence is deafening.

Because here. Right here, it comes. Everything that's wrong with this universe.

I've known it before and gotten duly horrified, but getting it thrown into my face like this really drives the point home.

I gulp. My throat feels like it's been roughened up with sandpaper and my voice is hollow when I answer him.

"I understand."

What else can I say, really?

Yashiro nods in approval. "Good."

I get up and ready to return to Obito, thinking that this is over.

"I haven't dismissed you, yet."

Well, apparently I thought wrong.

I quickly sit down again. "I'm sorry, Yashiro-san."

He stares at me intensely for a few heartbeats and I'm starting to feel slightly creeped out when he finally opens his mouth.

"I understand that you're on good terms with the Nara heir?"

What. Does this feel as abrupt to anybody else as it does to me?!

"Uh, Shikaku and I are … friends, I guess" I stammer, completely bewildered. "So yeah?"
"Good. This will raise the chance of a successful commitment."

Wait, what?!

"Commitment?!" I squeak.

"The clan's legacy must be carried on no matter what. Usually, the elders would not consider a marriage outside of the clan to keep the blood strong. However, they have recognized that there is currently no eligible candidate within the clan to match your skill and thus to ensure the best possible outcome for your offspring. There were long discussions to find a solution and it has been decided eventually that securing a connection to the Nara clan would be beneficial in every regard."


My brain, having had a short circuit at the word 'marriage', prevents me from hearing the rest of what he is saying.

This must be some really bad joke. Or a nightmare. Either way, it can't be real.

"Tomorrow, the Nara will give us their answer and if it turns out favorably, you and their heir will be betrothed until you are of age, at which point you will be married to each other. I expect you to fulfill your duty in this just as you did with the academy."

I feel as if every organ of mine has been replaced by one single block of ice. I cannot move, cannot think.

This is not happening.

"You're dismissed."

Yashiro doesn't wait for me and leaves the room. As soon as the shoji screen slides shut behind him, all hell breaks loose.

Marriage? *Marriage?! I am five years old! Why is this even a thing?!!*

And to Shikaku?

Now, don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against Shikaku, but this is not the point. Besides the question if I want to spend the rest of my live as his wife, this situation has other, far deeper implications.

Shikaku is supposed to have Shikamaru with Yoshino. I am not Yoshino. Therefore, no child of ours - I wince - could be Shikamaru.

Which would screw so heavily with canon that I can't even begin to think about it without having a seizure.

How could this happen? How could I fuck so much up by simply existing? *What else have I changed without knowing?*

)00(

I don't know how I got out of Yashiro's study and into Obito and mine's room. I only know that I somehow ended up in my bed, my whole body shaking and my arms tightly wound around Obito. His head is still resting against my collarbone even now and his even breathing gives me some semblance of calm.
It's the morning after the Yashiro's revelation of the clan's marriage plans for me.

And I've decided that I'm not going to sit on my butt and wait for whatever outcome there might be.

"Nee-chan?" Obito's sleepy voice comes from under my chin. "Are you alright now?"

My chests constricts almost painfully under the onslaught of affection that floods me right then. "Yeah, thanks, otouto." My fingers run through his hair and I give him a peck on his cheek. "Now go back to sleep. It's way too early for you to be awake."

"'S ok. I just don't want nee-chan to be sad anymore."

_Oh, Obito._

I hug him even tighter. "Thank you, Obito."

)00( As soon as Shikaku enters the classroom, I step into his way and grip his forearm.

"We need to talk" I hiss through clenched teeth.

He sighs but doesn't resist when I steer him back through the door, down the hallway and into a currently empty classroom. I release him after the door has fallen shut and cross my arms in front of my chest.

"Ok listen" I say, my voice hoarse with suppressed anger. "This might sound crazy to you right now, but I found out yesterday that our families are trying to marry us off. To each other."

Shikaku doesn't react the way I expect him to.

He sighs again. "So they finally told you?"

"You knew?!"

A profound sense of betrayal envelopes and quite possibly succeeds in suffocating me because the edge of my vision is starting to turn black and fuzzy and my ears suddenly feel as if they're stuffed with cotton. Also, my inner me might or might not be busy running in circles and _screaming bloody murder._

"How long?" I manage to squeeze out through the mayhem that's currently raging inside me. "And why didn't you tell me?!"

"Since our first meeting. You know, when you ran into me with your little brother?"

"That … that's more than a year ago!"

Oh my god. Suddenly, his behavior from that day makes so much sense. The way he reacted to my name. Or how he had been so sure that we would meet again.

"I had just eavesdropped on my parents a few days ago. They'd been discussing an offer from the Uchiha elders involving a possible marriage between our clans and your name came up. I …"

He pauses to rub the back of his neck and turns his gaze to the windows with a deep frown. It's the
closest to a state of distress that I've ever seen him be in.

"Coincidentally, my parents told me about the marriage plans the same evening. I wanted to refuse outright, but they persuaded me to think about it since the match could be good for clan relations. They renegotiated a timeframe to consider the proposal and the Uchiha agreed to give me time until your graduation. I had to tell my parents yesterday how I'd decided."

Yesterday.

Am I too late already?

"What" My throat closes up and I need to clear it before I try again. "What did you say?"

"I told them that it was obvious that you didn't know anything about this arrangement and that I didn't think it was fair to decide something that would shape both our lives considerably on my own."

I exhale slowly.

"Thank you. That … was considerate."

At that, he gives me a lopsided grin. "Anytime. I can't help but wonder, though, would it be that bad to be married to me?"

I roll my eyes and manage a tired smirk. "Worse. More in the direction of 'troublesome', I guess."

Before he can reply to that, the door swings open, revealing Inoichi. He stops in his tracks – probably startled by the air between Shikaku and I, which, though distinctly less strained than just seconds before, still remains positively awkward – but regains his bearings quickly enough.

"Shikaku, Etsuko, not to interrupt something, but I thought you might want to know that Jurou-sensei is about to explode. You know, since you're not there while he is announcing the genin teams."

Look who is feeling sassy today.

Shikaku grunts in annoyance. "I'm going to be on a team with Chouza and you anyway, so I don't see why I have to show up at all. Troublesome."

He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jacket and tilts his head. He seems as unruffled as ever, but when he looks at me I can see a spark of uncertainty in his eyes. "Shall we go then?"

I take a deep breath to pull myself together. One step at a time. Nothing’s been decided, yet. "Seems like we don't have a choice anyway. Let's move."

)00(

"I congratulate you all to your successful passing of the exams. You've taken your first step on your way as a shinobi of Konoha. Whenever you put on your headband, remember that it is the village that you serve above all. From now on, you're fully qualified fighters as well as protectors of the Leaf."

Jurou-sensei pauses to draw a breath. It seems a bit hesitant, the way he says the next sentence. As if he had wanted to say something else entirely. But the notion is too fleeting to give me certainty.

"I will now announce your genin teams."
The children before him fall into silence, anticipation shining in their eyes and even I get infected with it. I'm sitting on the edge of my chair, leaning slightly forward and as soon as Jurou-sensei starts reading out, I begin to count.

I quickly come to the result that all in all, we're 25 graduates.

...

25 is not exactly divisible by 3. At least, not without leaving the realm of natural numbers and therefore giving up on the concept of putting whole people into a team.

One by one, the kids around me are being called out, until everyone else is sorted and supplied with the names of their jounin sensei.

Notice that I said 'everyone else'.

Why am I not surprised at all to be the odd woman out?

"Uchiha Etsuko, you come with me."

24 pairs of eyes follow me with various expressions as I make my way to the front of the class. Chouza gives me a thumbs-up when I pass him and I manage a half-hearted grin in return. Shikaku's face is set in a frown and I can feel his gaze on my back when I follow Jurou-sensei out of the room. Apparently, our conversation from before weighs heavy on his mind, too.

We both know that it's not over, yet.

Our walk is silent as Jurou-sensei leads me to the roof of the academy. Once we're there, he turns to me. "Your jounin-sensei will take it from here. Good luck."

And then he leaves. Just like that.

Well.

He did wish me luck at least.

From where I'm currently standing I can't see anybody on the rooftop. It's oddly quiet up here, as if all the noises of Konoha have decided to keep their business to the ground level and as I walk to the middle of the platform, I idly activate my Sharingan to check for hidden chakra traces. It's become a habit of mine, encouraged by Yashiro's training and my desire to minimize the energy that I need to spend on my doujutsu.

It's also probably the only thing that saves me from being skewered by three kunai, speeding at me in different angles and rapid succession.

As soon as my eyes register their movement, my body moves almost on its own. Hours and hours of bone-crushing training have started to translate themselves into instinct and by the time my mind has caught up with what's happening, I have executed a quick backflip and a jump to my right. I am currently crouching low, shuriken in hand, and eyes focused in the direction from where the attack must've come from. Every muscle in my body is tense, my blood thrumming with adrenaline and my chakra ready to be drawn upon.

For one heartbeat, there is absolute silence.

But silence is not enough to trick the Sharingan.
My attacker's greenish-blue chakra betrays their exact location – there, behind the second of the two water tanks and ready to launch something new.

There's no time to lose.

I sprint into the opposite direction, targeting the door leading back to the stair case and into the academy. I'm not trying to run away, not yet at least, but as long as they're behind cover, it's not prudent to charge at them head-on. That's something that Naruto would do, but there's a reason why not everybody is Naruto. Instead, I need some cover of my own and some seconds to think.

Only, my attacker apparently doesn't agree with my plan.

I'm still running when suddenly, I sense the pull of air being displaced. One quick check with my Sharingan affirms that the displacement comes along with a body of chakra and I have just enough time to twist my torso away from a blow that would have knocked me out cold had it connected.

*Shunshin* my mind helpfully supplies while I'm trying not to get my ass kicked.

Which I'm spectacularly failing at, by the way.

That blow was only the first one in a series of relentless, rapid-fire strikes from both arms and legs and less than ten seconds after the onslaught has started, a kick to my abdomen sends me flying straight across the rooftop.

I hit the ground quite a distance away from the starting point.

*Hard.*

Pain explodes and spreads like wildfire in my whole body and for a moment, my vision goes white. I can't say how long I'm incapacitated like this, but when I blink and finally get my eyes to send sensible signals to my brain again, I can see my attacker crouching just a few feet away from me.

It's a woman.

Her eyes are cold and mocking as she stares me down, lips twisted into something close to Natalie Dormer's famous duckface. And hey, nothing against that duckface. I loved that duckface. I'm all for that duckface.

I might not have all of my faculties together, yet.

The-woman-with-Natalie-Dormer's-duckface has her right hand held up and I can see something dangling from it, a stripe of blue cloth with metal glinting in the sun –

I slowly lift my hand to touch my forehead.

No hitai-ate. I'm pretty sure that it was still there before I had my short trip to dreamland.

Which means that the one in her hand is *mine*.

"Back in the land of the living, brat?"

My gaze goes back to her face. She has narrowed her eyes at me and all of a sudden, the air around me feels heavy, almost leaden, and my aching muscles freeze up in fear.

I know that sensation.
Flashes of a dark alley and a face, half-crazed and hungry for revenge appear before my eyes. A bloody katana, the sound of a kunai ripping through skin and flesh, blood –

"No" I press out through gritted teeth. I close my eyes and when I open them, the world is again as sharp and crystalline as on the day I first activated it. I bring my hands together and go through the seals that I memorized just a few weeks prior – tiger, ram, monkey, boar, horse, tiger – feel the pressure of chakra building up in my chest, travelling through my throat, burning hot, and into my mouth.

"Katon: Goukakyuu no Jutsu!"

A sizeable fireball roars into life and I can see a look of surprise cross the features of the woman before flames engulf her, swallowing her whole. My arms fall uselessly to my side and my body slumps over even more than before as a huge chunk of chakra leaves my body.

There was probably a reason why Yashiro only showed me the seals and not the whole technique is my last thought before everything around me goes black.

)00( I open my eyes, for the second time of my second life, to the sterile white of a hospital room.

I feel sluggish, as if my energy was sapped out of me and replaced by something thick and syrupy, and I have only a vague idea of how I got here.

Oh.

Yeah.

There was a fight.

With me in it.

And I might have overestimated my abilities a bit.

I groan quietly. I should probably be thankful that I'm still alive.

By the way, why am I still alive? Why was I even attacked in the first place?

…

Why didn't this question occur to me sooner?

It is at this precise moment that I can hear voices approaching the room.

"… just graduated? We get a complete newbie?"

"She did graduate at the top of the class, though."

"Shh, shut up, boys. She might still be asleep and you wouldn't want to wake her. Unless you really want to get roasted by a grand fireball."

Eheheh.

Oops.
The door opens and three people enter the room. One of them I immediately recognize as the woman from the rooftop. She's wearing a jounin vest and a Konoha hitai-ate now and you wouldn't believe how relieved I am to see that. The two others are boys of ca. 12 years of age, though I find it hard to guess. One of them has hair the color of black coffee while the other is lighter colored, more in the direction of honey.

Look who gets poetic when suffering from chakra exhaustion.

"Oh, so you're awake?" The woman says. "Perfect timing. We can have team introductions then."

Hi, I'm fine, thanks for asking.

"So, I'm Mitarashi Hanako and I'm going to be your jounin-sensei. This here -" she gives the dark haired boy a smack on the back of his head which is accompanied with a muffled 'ow!' "- is Sarutobi Regashi."

"Hi, nice to meet you" Regashi says.

Whoa, wait.

Did she just say Sarutobi?

"And this -" Hanako proceeds to give the other boy the same treatment she gave Regashi, "is –"

"HANAKO!"

All four of us wince collectively as a furious blonde woman with an impressively big rack stomps into the room. We wince again when she turns to Hanako and opens her mouth.

"I swear, if you are going to upset my patient just after you've pushed her to almost complete chakra exhaustion I'm going to beat your ass to Suna and back!"

Hanako puts her hands up in a placating manner. "Ah, Tsunade-chan, I'm wounded! Do you think so lowly of me?"

Whoa, wait.

Tsunade as in super-awesome-Sannin-and-future-Godai-Tsunade?

"Hah. It's not as if you haven't done it before."

Tsunade turns away from Hanako and focuses on me. The seal on her forehead is unmistakable which means that, yes, this is the Senju Tsunade.

"You alright kiddo? You were pretty out of it when she brought you here."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm ok, I think, just a little bit woozy."

"A little woozy?" Tsunade echoes with a raised eyebrow. "You had quite a severe case of chakra exhaustion. I would recommend you to be precise in whatever you feel is out of normal."

"Really" I assure her. "I'm fine. I'll only need some rest now and I should be completely fit by tomorrow!"

"That's what I like to hear" Hanako cheerfully comments. "So, team training starts tomorrow at 7 a.m. sharp. Be on time. Oh, and congratulations for passing the genin test, by the way. You caught
me by surprise out there."

Oh. Well, that makes sense. Had a feeling that the attack on the rooftop wasn't random.

"Genin test? You've just graduated from the academy?" Tsunade frowns, suddenly much more sober than before.

"Yeah" the light haired boy affirms. "She's going to fill in for Akemi-chan as long as she's out of commission."

Tsunade's frown only deepens at that. She aims her next question at Hanako. "Are you sure this is a good idea? Regashi and Nawaki are used to certain dynamics."

Wait, did she just say Nawaki? This name rings a bell somewhere at the back of my mind.

"Hokage's orders" Hanako says with a shrug.

And then, Nawaki chimes in. "Don't worry about us, Nee-san. We're going to –"

The rest of what he says is drowned out by the sudden swoosh that rolls over my mind and flattens anything else that's currently occupying space in there.

_Nee-san._

As my mind pieces everything together, _agonizingly slow_, horror starts creeping up my spine.

_Dear god._

If I understood everything right …

…

If I understood everything right, I'm on a genin team together with Senju Nawaki.

_Senju._

_Nawaki._

_!_

_God help me._

Because I have the feeling that nobody else will.

Chapter End Notes

_Ba-duhm, and here it is. Tell me if you liked it! Also, if not._

_See you in the next chap!_
Socializing with the Dead

Chapter Summary

What a mess.

Chapter Notes

Yohooo!

I'm terribly late again, I know, and I sincerely apologize, but I do have reasons. Mainly a shitton of essays to write for uni, but I still chipped off some time to work on this. Also, I GOT MY FIRST FANART! Go check on my profile for the link or look on my tumblr under the tag 'fanart', it's totally awesome and I've been squealing with joy ever since.

So, have the longest chapter ever as a little pre-Christmas present. I don't know if I'll be able to do something before the actual holiday, though, because essays, so that might be all for the moment. But don't worry, I'll definitely be back.

Enjoy!

I still haven't calmed down when Tsunade finally decides to discharge me later in the afternoon – of course not without reminding me to get a good night's rest. I don't remember agreeing with her, but I must've been convincing enough for her to let me go. She probably mistook my numb state of shock for compliance.

As I make my way to Yashiro's house, I can barely feel the slight drizzle that's coming down on my face. I feel sluggish, sick and cold. My feet are leaden with weight as I drag them along one step at a time, and I'm pretty sure that it's not all attributable to chakra exhaustion. More like, 50-50 maybe.

The other 50% being one Senju Nawaki.

Gods.

I've been teamed up with a dead person.

Dead, dead, dead.

As dead in canon as Otou-san and Okaa-chan. Dead. Dying. Going to die. Soon, again. And close to me.

Again.

I don't think I can handle this.

Again, again, again.
Over the last year and a half, I've managed to get by just so. Because of Obito. Because of the distraction that first training with Yashiro and then the academy provided me with.


I know it didn't work well the last time I did this.

I know this is going to come back later and bite my ass big time.

But.

I just.

Can't.

Even suppressed like this, they're always so close to the surface that sometimes, I imagine I can feel the memories kicking, like pebbles thrown against a thinly glassed window. And every time it happens, I am so close to breaking, I-

I still see Otou-san's destroyed body when I dream.

And on that roof today, I proved to the whole world again that I can't be considered anything close to 'stable' when confronted with mortal fear.

I – I don't know what to do. Shit, what do I do? Why do these things keep happening to me? Does somebody up there or wherever they sit think this is funny? Do they think of it as one big joke, a game of "let's-heap-infinite-shit-on-the-one-misplaced-soul-and-see-how-much-she-can-take"?

Because.

At my sides, my hands ball into fists as suddenly, anger born out of an overwhelming sense of helplessness and desperation builds up with burning pressure.

Screw them and their fucked up humor.

This is enough. I'm done with this game. I'm not playing.

I have just enough of a sense of self-preservation not to want to get myself hurt like that ever again. Once already nearly killed me.

I'm going to find a way out of that team configuration as fast as possible. Or die trying.

)00( I haven't even fully entered the house when the next thing comes blasting into my face.

Yashiro is already waiting for me. He grips my arm and proceeds to drag me through the hallway to his study. The way he slams the shoji screen shut after entering can barely be called civil and when I finally catch a look at his face, my general anger at the world makes place for instant shock.

I've never seen him so livid.

He practically throws me on the zabuton that's positioned before his desk and only the fact that I have been training saves me from an embarrassing face-plant. I quickly scramble into an upright position.
"What have you done? What did you tell the Nara boy?" he bellows.

The Nara boy? What?

It takes a few seconds before I realize that this has nothing to do with Nawaki and my new team, that Yashiro probably doesn't even know about my assignment yet, and it leaves me with a profound sense of confusion. I'm so bewildered that I forget my Uchiha manners, blurting out the next best thought that enters my mind.

"What? Shikaku? What did I do?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Etsuko," he spits out. "You and he are friends, you said so yourself. So what did you do that made him all but reject the marriage offer?!"

Oh.

Right. Haha.

Because the whole thing with a dying teammate is not enough.

How could I forget something as trivial as my impending marriage?

I can already feel the sensation of hysterical laughter bubbling up inside of me, threatening to drown the line that marks the border between me and complete and utter panic.

Oh my, the universe truly hates me.

"Nobody rejects an offer from the Uchiha clan. They know better than that, especially the so called clan of geniuses. They've already had the audacity to ask for time to consider and we granted them the demand out of good will, but this! This is unacceptable!"

On another note, seeing Yashiro on a ranting rave is kind of hilarious. Maybe I should just start laughing. Humor can solve nearly any situation, right? And if you actually think about it, it's quite ironic that the Uchiha should be so riled up because of the laziest clan in Konoha.

None of the hysterical humor or irony helps me though, when Yashiro comes in two fast strides and grabs me by my shoulders. His voice is dangerously low when he speaks.

"What. Did you. Tell him?"

I go still when Yashiro's words belatedly register in my mind.

Wait.

What did I tell him?

"I didn't tell him anything!" I protest weakly. "I've only known about this since yesterday!"

"Yet you stay away from home for the whole afternoon, only coming back after the announcement from them that they, I quote," – Yashiro's mouth twists into something ugly here – "'feel the necessity to wait until the girl feels ready to decide for herself!'"

My eyes widen in surprise.

He thinks I didn't come home because I was engineering my grand escape from the arranged marriage?
This … is certainly something.

I have to admit, I'm kind of flattered that he thinks of me as capable of the boldness needed to try to do something like that. I almost wish that it was actually true. It's definitely more badass than what really happened.

"I wasn't voluntarily staying away this afternoon," I say in a deliberately slow and measured tone, partly in an attempt to calm him down and partly to cover up my embarrassment over the incident. "I was away because I was in hospital. I had my genin test and accidentally used up all of my chakra. Via ninjutsu. So – chakra exhaustion. There."

Oh well. Nobody said I had to be elaborate with my explanation.

Yashiro narrows his eyes. "Are you getting bold with me?"

I shake my head. "No. It's the truth. I didn't say anything to him. Shikaku decided this on his own."

Surprisingly, he believes me.

I feel him release his grip on my shoulders as he takes a step back. "This doesn't make sense," he mutters, more to himself than anything. "We are the most powerful clan in Konoha. They would benefit greatly from an alliance. The boy is pleased with you and even if he wasn't, it shouldn't matter since you still are a more than suitable candidate."

Excuse me?!

As if I'm no more than a useful commodity.

Something icy crawls up into my chest, a hand made of frozen steel and blunted thorns that closes in and squeezes and – and I think I'm going to be sick.

"Duty should be the only motivation needed in a situation like this. They can't afford to turn this offer down if they want to stay one of the more important clans in Konoha."

I've never heard Yashiro speak so much in such a short time and I wish I didn't have to. In fact, my only desire right now is to be as far away from him as possible.

Or.

The air seems to shift as fury slams back into me with the force of a meteor.

To get up and punch him in the face.

I look up and lock eyes with Yashiro. My mouth opens and when my voice comes out, it sounds abnormally cold even to my own ears.

"It must be hard for you to imagine that other people might have values other than duty that are just as important in their lives." I pause to take a breath. The next words line up in my throat, dripping with intent, and I release them with the measured tension of a drawn bowstring.

"I pity you."

Stunned silence is my only response.

Good.
I decide not to wait for Yashiro's recovery. The noise my feet make while I walk out of his study is just loud enough to be heard, as is the sound of the shoji screen opening and sliding shut behind me. It's deliberate.

I'd like for him to hear me, after all.

)00(

As soon as I've stepped out of the study, my bravado leaves me and I know that I won't be able to deal with Yashiro should he decide to come after me. My knees feel like butter, I'm still cold and my hands have started to shake violently.

I need to get away.

But I can't be alone right now.

What I do next requires no active thinking and can be considered almost instinctual.

Obito is lying on the ground of our shared bedroom, stomach-down and propped up on his arms, before him several sheets of paper and a look of concentration on his face. He looks so tiny, a little bundle with a mop of spiky black hair on top and I'm reminded again that he's only just turned two years old a few months ago. He has a pencil in his right hand and judging by the scrawling on the paper that – with a lot of good faith – can be faintly identified as hiragana, he's trying to write his name again.

Right, I taught him the characters only yesterday.

Today doesn't feel like one day after yesterday. More like one slice of eternity later, sprinkled with events worth decades of history.

He looks up at the sound of the shoji screen sliding open and when he sees me coming in, his face lights up with a huge, cheerful smile. He quickly scrambles onto his feet and launches himself into a full body tackle.

"Nee-chan! You're back!"

It might be irrational, but I can't deny that I feel better almost instantly as I hold him and press a kiss on the top of his head. He looks so happy at the simple presence of me that I can almost believe that my existence has value on its own again, that I'm not just a chess piece in clan politics or some experiment for the amusement of a supra-human audience.

"I missed you, Obi."

He snuggles closer in response and I tighten my hug.

We stay like that for a little while until I remember what I was intending to do when I first entered.

"Say, Obi, are you tired of seeing those characters? Do you want to join me on a walk to the playground?"

Obito looks up at me excitedly. "Yay, playground!"

I chuckle and give him another kiss on the forehead, just for good measure.

There should still be a couple hours of sunlight and who knows how often I'll have time to spend with my brother when this whole genin-team-mess starts tomorrow. Better take what I can get.
“Did you hear? Konoha’s forces, with a bit of help from Suna, managed to inflict a great deal of damage to Iwa with their last offensive. They say that the enemy has retreated behind the borders of Earth for the first time since we have entered the war.”

“Finally! I hope that it will all be over soon and that Mamoru can come back.”

My gaze is steadily trained on Obito and the game of tag that he’s playing with a few other kids as I eavesdrop inconspicuously.

Without TVs – they do exist, it’s just Uchiha traditionalism/Yashiro striking again – news apps and sites or newspapers, updates on the general political situation are really hard to come by, especially since nobody sees my diminutive five-year-old existence as fit for conversations like this. Prodigies are all well and good until they actually want to know things. It’s just not in line with the principles of a militaristic governance system that aims to methodically train child soldiers. Since, you know, uninformed young minds are easily impressionable, fertile grounds for manipulations and – whoa, I really need to calm down before I think myself into a rage again.

I’m extremely volatile today, for anybody who hasn’t noticed.

Ahem. So.

It’s nice to hear something positive for a change. Something removed from all my personal drama.

When the two ladies that have been conducting this conversation shift their focus to other things than the war, I drop out. It’s impolite to listen in on private discussions, after all. Instead, I fully concentrate on the kids.

Obito’s open, friendly nature has made him some fast friends today. At first, he’d been at a loss of what to do since Kakashi wasn’t here, but that changed when three children, two girls and a boy, approached us. I didn’t recognize them, not even after they’d introduced themselves, but that’s hardly surprising. Naruto was about Naruto and his friends, not some random kids of the generation before him.

Anyway, they’re Ayumi, Kenta and Yuki, probably from civilian backgrounds. The first two are siblings like Obito and me, Yuki is a playground acquaintance of theirs and they’re all between three to five years old, with Yuki being the youngest and Ayumi being the oldest.

Technically, the same age as me.

In reality, no two persons of the same age could be more different.

Ayumi is a child. An authentic five-year-old. Whereas I …

... Well, I’m not.

It’s part of the reason why I’m currently not involved in their game anymore, but I don’t mind as long as Obito has fun. Which he seems to be having loads of and I’m really glad about it. His positive energy is infectious, amplifying the joy of the other kids as well, and I can practically feel its magnetic power. It’s amazing.

He’s two years old, charismatic and already better at this PR thing than I will ever be.

I chuckle. Figures.
Of course, it doesn't stop there.

Looking at him and the other children, I realize that although he is the youngest one in the bunch, his motoric ability is at least on par with those of Kenta, the four-year-old brother of Ayumi.

As I said before, I have no clue what kind of speed is normal for the development of babies, but I've always suspected that since meeting Kakashi, Obito's has shot through the ceiling. And right here, I have proof. Obito is as advanced as a civilian kid twice his age.

So, I'm gonna fight anybody who says that Obito is slow and untalented. Because he so obviously isn't. And to be honest, I'm not surprised at all.

That kid that was made fun of and always portrayed as inferior to a certain genius?

Sure, that was canon Obito. A neglected Obito who'd had no one to care for him, no one to nudge him in a direction. Besides, anybody who is constantly compared to Kakashi, who isn't only a genius but had his legendary father to train him from the moment he was born, is bound to end up on the shorter side of the bargain.

That kid that trained tirelessly with the goal to finally be a worthy rival to that same certain genius?

Also canon Obito.

The mastermind behind a generation of catastrophes throughout the Elemental Nations? The Uchiha with the arguably most powerful Mangekyou variant in history? The teen who in a few months mastered a rehab programme for artificial limbs in a goddamn cave shortly after being nearly squashed to death?

Yeah.

See, my point is, Obito might have been a late bloomer, but he'd always been genius material. And this time around, with me and Kakashi present practically from day one, things … will become completely different.

In a positive way, I hope.

"Ayumi! Kenta! Time to go home!"

I'm startled out of my thoughts when a young woman approaches the playing children. The addressed siblings run to meet who I assume to be their mother halfway and proceed to grab her skirt and pull her in the direction of Obito and Yuki. I hop down from the bench I've been sitting on and make my way over, too.

"Okaa-chan, look, we met new friends!" Ayumi exclaims.

The woman laughs and lets herself be pulled. Her daughter releases her hold to point to Obito. "That's Obito," she says as my baby brother waves cheerfully. "And that's his sister … uh …"

That's my cue, I guess. I greet the woman with a little bow.

"My name is Etsuko. A pleasure to meet you."

She blinks. "Ah."

Ah? I cock my eyebrows.
Kenta tugs at his mother's skirt and points his finger at me. "Look, okaa-chan, she's a real ninja!"

Her gaze falls onto my left arm.

Right. I'd fixed my hitai-ate there after leaving the hospital. Also, there's an Uchiha emblem right over it.

Well. No need to hide my origins, then.

I don't know what kind of reaction I expect, but I know it's not the one that I'm getting next. Her eyebrows go up and her face takes on an uncertain look that has a tendency to tip over into reproving-mother-territory. Her glance darts nervously from my hitai-ate over my face to her own children and back and seriously, this is starting to feel bizarre.

"So Etsuko-chan," she starts slowly. "Where did you get this? A ninja headband is not a toy, you know? You … you should give it back."

Uh. I don't mean to be rude, but did the lady not understand what her son said? What part of "she's a real ninja" did she not get?

"I know that this is not a toy, oku-sama" I answer her very politely. Okay, okay, I might sound just a little bit miffed. "But as your son said, I am a genin. I graduated from the academy only yesterday."

The woman's shocked response to that is very physical. Her body jerks abruptly, as if she has burnt her hand or something, and her face reddens at a frankly amazing speed.

"Oh – I – I didn't mean to …" she splutters. "I apologize, Etsuko-cha- uh, Uchiha-san, or … or … officer-san?"

What? Officer-san? Does she honestly think the Police Force would take on a newbie as an officer? Hilarious.

…

… About as hilarious as letting a five-year-old graduate, I suppose?

Oh. Eheh. I get it now.

Oops.

This must appear somewhat disturbing to her, I guess.

The poor, spluttering woman has proceeded to gather her children now and is about to make a quick exit. Before she turns around, she plasters a nervous smile on her face. "A pleasure to meet you, Uchiha-san. Have a nice day." And then she's off.

Ayumi turns her head as she's pulled away by her mother and gives us a farewell wave. "Bye Yuki! Bye Obito! Bye Etsuko!"

Kenta, too, waves shyly at us.

We wave back and I can't help but wonder if I'll ever see them again. Probably not, since I'm pretty sure that I managed to scare any idea of potentially letting her children become shinobi clean out of her system.
I'm walking down an alley. It's dark except for the occasional flickering shadow, caused by the infernal flames over at the Police Force main building. There is a kunai in my hand.

I already know where this is going. No matter what kinds of variations are thrown into the setting, the characteristic feeling of my favorite nightmare is always unmistakable. I grip the kunai tighter and clench my teeth.

This dream is only going to end when I kill \textit{that person} again. If I'm lucky, they will die without transforming into Otou-san.

I walk and walk, constantly expecting them to show up at some point, but – it doesn't happen. Instead, I reach the end of the alley, coming to a halt right in front of a gate.

This is new.

It looks like the gate to the Uchiha district as it is depicted in the manga. Which is strange because I haven't actually seen it in person, yet. Why would I dream about it?

I take one cautious step forward, then another. A third one, and I'm through that gate.

What greets me here blows my brains straight out of my skull.

I'm standing on a street lined up with traditional houses. There are Uchiha banners spread across the walls, a sweet stand decorated with Uchiha fans and in the distance, I can make out the clan head's house.

Also, the place is \textit{burning}.

Flames are everywhere, walls of angry red and orange, shooting up high into the night sky. I can feel beads of sweat evaporating as soon as they appear, the intensity of the heat on my skin, threatening to sizzle and burn right through me. Panic rises and I whirl around in a frantic attempt to get back into the dark, fire-free alley.

Only to realize that the gate, along with the alley, is gone.

What the hell, I just stepped through it!

\textit{Where is that frickin' gate}?!

I turn around again and find that the scenery has changed again. Not the fire, mind you. It's still burning merrily, only this time it's busy consuming a lone house. I hope nobody is in there because they probably wouldn't survive –

"Nee-chan!"

I freeze.

\textit{Obito}.

My body moves before my mind has started working again and I hurtle myself head-on into the burning house that I recognize as Yashiro's only now. My Sharingan is activated as I stumble over debris, plunging deeper and deeper into the inferno, and I'm scanning the interior for that tiny but
healthy flame that signifies that my baby brother is alive and well.

"Obito!" I shout, immediately choking on smoke and toxic fumes which are probably going to kill me if I inhale any more but it doesn't matter because *Obito, Obito, Obito*.

So I continue to scream my lungs out, to struggle through the rooms that seem to be multiplying every time I enter a new one until finally, finally, I arrive at our shared bedroom. A figure is standing in the middle of it, back turned to me and long hair bound in a ponytail. It's achingly familiar.

"Okaa-chan?" I hear myself ask weakly.

The figure turns around and – it's her. It's Okaa-chan, clad in her shinobi wear, like on the day I saw her last.

A sob tears through my throat.

"Etsuko-chan," she says with a sad smile. "Look at what you've done."

What.

"Look around you. The world is burning. Your home is burning. Look at what you've done. Look at what you've done to me."

I look at her, really look at her, and suddenly I see the blood trickling out of her mouth, her nose, her ears. She's crying tears of blood and the sad smile turns into a vicious snarl that transforms her whole face into somebody that I don't know.

*Okaa-chan has never looked at me like that.*

"Why didn't you listen to me? Why didn't you just take Obito and follow Chieko, like I told you to? Do you see what you've done? You killed your father. You killed Fumio. You killed me. It's all because of you! And now you've killed Obito, too."

What?! I – no, I didn't –

My breathing speed is quickly approaching hyperventilating levels and all I can think of is that I need to get away. So I turn on my heels and run.

Or at least I try to.

I've not even made three steps when I feel a hand grip my shoulder, spinning me back around.

"It's all your fault! They're dead because of you!"

This voice – it's no longer Okaa-chan's. And when I look up it's confirmed.

I've been looking for them the whole time. And now they're here.

I know what to do.

The kunai finds its mark in their stomach, like every time, and the vibrations of ripping flesh traveling up the kunai are almost comforting in its familiarity. As is the sensation of bile rising in my throat, the acid etching a trail that makes it feel like it's being ripped out.

They slump into a boneless heap, blood pooling around them and my kunai still buried into their body. I summon new energy from the hope that this is going to be over soon and prepare to yank the
kunai free.
Only to be stopped by a hand that closes around my wrist with bruising force.
"Etsuko-chan."

*Oh no.* I'd hoped to skip that part. I refuse to look up and see his mutilated body.

"Etsuko, look at me. Look at me! Won't you look at your father?"

As if guided by an invisible force, my head snaps up and I meet the one-eyed gaze of what's left of Otou-san.

No matter how often I see him in my dreams, I can never stop the panic that engulfs me as a result. It doesn't help that my Sharingan recorded every single detail of that last time I saw him and like always I jerk away. Otou-san doesn't release his grip on me, though.

"Are you repulsed by me?"

"No," I sob. "Otou-san, no! Please, stop!"

"But you need to face what you've done, Etsuko. Look around you."

Helpless as before, I do exactly that.

The room is still burning, but suddenly, there're more people in it. Or, more precisely, more bodies.

There's *that person*.

Okaa-chan.

Fumio.

"Do you see? Do you see what you've already done? Do you want to see what you are going to do?"

*Nonononono, please stop* –

He grabs my shoulders and spins me around.

More bodies.

There's Yashiro, Naoko and Toshiro, glassy eyes still open in shock.

Nawaki, crystal necklace glowing as he lies on an examining table of the mortuary.

Sakumo, curled up in a pool of his own blood, tanto still embedded deeply into his gut.

And, with half his body crushed underneath a rock – *Obito*.

I howl in agony as a very physical, searing pain rips through my body and *I can't, please stop, why me, why why why* –

"Nee-chan! Nee-chan, don't cry!"

I feel a tiny hand touching my face and my eyes fly open abruptly.
"Nee-chan?"

For a moment I'm completely disoriented. I'm blinded by the dark and my skin crawls from the lack of fire and heat. It takes a few seconds to realize that I am in my bed, that I've been dreaming and that Obito is standing before my bed, scared beyond shitless. The terrified look on his little face is what ultimately jolts me awake. I gently take his hand from my cheek and sit up.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, Obi," I whisper. I pull back the covers and pat the space right next to me. "Come here."

Obito doesn't need to be told twice. He eagerly climbs in and before long, we're snuggled closely together in a firm hug. I activate my Sharingan briefly to confirm that yes, he is indeed my little brother and yes, he's fine, before I allow myself to close my eyes again.

Right now, falling asleep to the steady beat of his heart seems to be the most comforting thing in the world.

\[00\]

It's still pitch black when I wake up again.

I let out a quiet groan and roll on my side, fully intent on falling asleep again, when my mind decides that today is a good day to skip the slow, drowsy morning phase and go directly into high alert.

Nothing better than the reminder of a 7 a.m. training session with your new-but-soon-going-to-die-teammate to start the day. Add the picture of said teammate's corpse on a table and stir. Perfect mess right there.

An undiscernible noise escapes my throat and goes straight into the pillow.

On the bright side, the leaden-weight-feeling from my chakra exhaustion yesterday is nearly gone. Also, Yashiro has not attempted to do anything after I came back yesterday and today I'll be gone so early that I'm going to miss him again. Truly tragic.

Another resigned sigh, some careful maneuvering around my baby brother who is still soundly asleep and a lot of clumsy groping in the dark later, I'm up, dressed in my training clothes and ready to take off. The clock on my nightstand says it's only 5.40 a.m., but a good warm-up has never hurt anybody.

Twenty minutes into mindless warm-up exercises that I execute with needless violence, Regashi approaches.

"Good morning, Etsuko-chan," he greets politely.

"Good morning, Regashi-kun," I greet back, the honorific leaving a strange taste on my tongue. I've never had to call someone 'kun'.

He comes to stand a few feet away from me, close enough to still have a conversation without having to shout but far enough that I don't feel threatened. Up close, I can see that he's really young, at least of the same age or even younger than Shikaku. At first, I'm surprised by that, since the latter only graduated a few days ago – until I remember that the same person is incredibly lazy and doesn't care about the chance of an early graduation.

Sarutobi Regashi apparently does. And so does Nawaki, for that matter.
He's looking at me pensively now, expressive eyes making him look older than he is and giving off a vibe uncannily similar to that of the Hokage. I wonder how exactly they're related and if it's too easy to assume that he's Hiruzen's son. That would make the Hokage much older than I previously thought, though.

"How do you feel? I wish Hanako-sensei hadn't been so hard on you, on your first day."

I shrug. "I ended up in hospital more because of my own carelessness." Which was triggered by mortal fear, but meh. Details. "I'm fine now."

"That's good to hear. You're really early for training, too."

I shrug again. "The same could be said about you."

Regashi smiles at that. "True."

It's an open, earnest smile, tempting me to read more into it than it can possibly mean – but then again, shinobi are masters of hidden meanings. Call me paranoid, but I can't shake off the feeling that he's actively trying to make me feel comfortable. I wonder briefly if the Hokage has put him up to that.

Regashi starts his own warm-up routine after that and within seconds, both of us are working side by side in companionable silence.

Another quarter of an hour later, Nawaki joins us.

I don't even notice him at first. He blends in effortlessly and it's only when Regashi quietly asks him if he knows what Hanako is planning and he replies with a voice as quiet as his teammate's that I'm startled out of my training haze.

Strange.

I'd somehow had that preconceived notion that he must be as loud as Naruto; something about the fact that his vocal expression of determination reminded Tsunade of her little brother. I eye him warily, half expecting him to fall over and lie dead at my feet.

Which does not go unnoticed.

"Oi, why are you staring at me like that? That's creepy, you know?!" he nearly shouts at me.

Ah. There is the anticipated upturn in volume.

I'm about to roll my eyes when a sudden idea strikes me.

Let's see what happens. Might be fun.

I keep staring. Hard. And long.

I'm delighted when his face flushes a shade of red closely resembling an overripe tomato.

Eheheh. Hilarious.

"OHAYO MY CUTIE BABIES!"

Nawaki and I both jump out of our skin while Regashi grimaces violently. Before any of us have a realistic chance to properly register what's going on, I feel an arm going around my neck and roughly
capturing me in a headlock that clamps down rather tightly on my windpipe. A strangled wheeze from not too far away tells me that the same fate has befallen Nawaki.

"I am very excited, my little dumplings! First day of team training and I already have SO MANY IDEAS FOR US!"

Asdfghjkl.

Can't … breathe … think …

I can still faintly hear Regashi's concerned voice, though. "Sensei, you're suffocating them."

The pressure on my windpipe is released and the sudden influx of clean, fresh air sends my head into a dizzy spin. My legs feel wobbly and I stumble back a few steps in an attempt to regain my balance.

"Ah, my bad!" Hanako's raucous laughter echoes across the whole training field, making my skull buzz with the vibration, and I'm pretty sure that she did something with her voice. Chakra amplification, probably.

Right. Why being stealthy when you can be flamboyant?

I lift my head after I'm finally reasonably sure that I'm not going to vomit.

Hanako – sensei – is ruffling Nawaki's hair while said boy pouts. Her face is set into an entirely unapologetic expression, Natalie-Dormer-lips stretched into a feral grin and eyes twinkling with mischief. Her short hair is an unruly, purple mess, with spikes sticking out in every direction, and I get the feeling that perfect hair is not something that she bothers with.

Abruptly, she moves away from Nawaki and claps her hands.

"Ok, sugar buns, I have decided that since today is your first day as a team, I'll go easy on you to let you get to know each other."

Yo. Makes sense.

"So I got you a mission!"

What.

"Nawaki, Regashi, you should be familiar with the target. I trust you to explain the details to Etsuko-chan. I give you lot, hmm, let's say, two hours! Two hours to complete the mission. We'll meet back here. Buh-bye, my twee little mochi-patochies!"

Mochi-patochies?! She tosses a scroll to Regashi and doesn't wait for him to catch it. With a cheerful wave and a poof of smoke, she's gone.

For a short moment, the boys and I are still, paralyzed by the silence that's left by Hanako's departure.

Regashi is the first to shake it off. He unfurls the scroll without a comment.

"C-rank," he informs us after a first glance.

I blink in surprise. My first mission is already a C-rank? Is that what I get for being assigned to a pre-
existing team? No gentle easing-in? I gulp. Hopefully, it's nothing too terrible. I mean, it is only a C-rank, right? Slightly better than menial tasks.

Right?

Another couple seconds later, Regashi gives Nawaki a pained look. "It's Kawaii."

Cute? What?

I raise one eyebrow and am just about to ask what he means with that when I register Nawaki's reaction.

His whole universe practically crumbles into a heap within the fracture of a second and his face takes on a faintly greenish hue.

My other eyebrow shoots up as well. I mean. His reaction seems crassly disproportionate in relation to the trigger to me. Regashi literally just said something was cute. I narrow my eyes as my gaze flits between my two teammates.

What the hell is going on?

I hate this mission.

I hate the issuer of this mission.

I hate Hanako-sensei for making us take this mission.

And I completely agree with Nawaki's earlier reaction.

"EEEEK!"

I let out a very un-Uchiha-like screech when that monstrosity of a dog comes after me again, snapping at my leg and slobbering all over my leggings in the process. Again.

Yes, that's right.

The mission is the retrieval of a dog, with utmost importance put on the fact that it remains unhurt. The creature itself is huge, ugly and aggressive, with burning eyes, a penchant for garbage dumps and enough stupidity to make the sun set in order to never have to shine in its face again. In fact, its lack of intelligence is only rivaled by its brute strength.

It's Tora as a hound, only ten times worse.

And yes, its name is Kawaii.

"Etsuko, duck!"

A split second after Nawaki's shout I'm down. There's a loud whizzing sound as Regashi's kusarigama flies through the air and coils around the beast's neck. Kawaii howls.

"Quick, someone pull the bag over his head!"

I'm currently the one closest to Kawaii, but Nawaki has the bag. The hound is busy shaking away at the chain of the kusarigama, the moment it frees itself rapidly drawing near, and I only have the blink
of an eye to decide on my next action.

So I decide.

I hear Nawaki's voice behind me the same instant I launch forwards.

"Etsuko, catch the b- what are you doing?!"

No time to answer.

I am at the side of the creature, nimbly avoiding its thrashing extremities, and catch the weighty end of the kusarigama, the fundo, in my left hand. With my right, I grab a patch of fur on its large nape. A jump and a pull later, I'm on its back.

Kawaii is not amused.

The thrashing becomes rabid and I'm having an increasingly hard time to simply hold on. I clench my teeth and force enough chakra through my right hand to keep staying stuck, my left hand still clutching the fundo.

*Shit, shit, shit. What now?*

"Grab the kama, Etsuko!" Regashi yells.

*Kama?*

Ah yeah, the sickle end of the kusarigama.

Easier said than done. It's dangling from the neck of the beast and swinging wildly in response to its movements. I flood my eyes with chakra, letting my Sharingan predict the ideal moment to unstuck my hand, and go for it.

As soon as my hand closes around metal, I can feel a considerable weight attach itself to the weapon. The chain is pulled taut and Kawaii's whole torso goes down.

"Nawaki, now!"

A honey colored blur rushes towards me and one blink later, the meat chunk that is Kawaii's head has disappeared inside a black bag. Not severed, mind you. Unharmed retrieval, remember?

The effect is instantaneous.

Kawaii freezes in his tracks. He lets out a muffled whine, high pitched and pleading, and it's in that moment that I know that the dog has given up.

*Oh thank the gods.*

Or not. I'm currently not on speaking terms with them.

I hop down from Kawaii's back and watch as Nawaki attaches a collar, carefully tucking in the seams of the bag. He finishes after a few practiced hand moves and Regashi nods.

"Ok. Let's go to the mission desk."
The whole way to the mission desk, Nawaki keeps sending me glances.

We're walking in no particular formation, Regashi leading the way while Kawai, Nawaki and I trot behind him. The dog has gone as tame as a sheep since the bag went over his head, so guiding it isn't difficult. It's been oddly silent, too. Not that I mind silence.

It's just that I didn't peg them as the silent types. And I have the feeling that I'm somehow to blame for this.

Also, *the glances.*

…

*Oh, for the love of everything that's holy –*

"Do I have something in my face?" I say in a dry deadpan.

Nawaki recoils with a guilty look. He blinks a few times while damning redness creeps up from his neck over his whole face. "I – no, I –" he splutters and I'm suddenly reminded of Ayumi and Kenta's mother.

"What he means to say is," Regashi interjects, "that you're really quiet."

*Oh.*

"I was just picking up on the general mood" I reply cautiously.

"It's just – we know nothing about you!" Nawaki bursts out. "And you haven't introduced yourself properly."

I scowl.

I don't know why, but Nawaki – the boy just rubs me the wrong way. OK, no, I know *exactly* why he rubs me the wrong way, but anyway – indignation flares up and before I can stop it, my stupid mouth is already snapping back at him. "Well, you didn't exactly set a good example."

*Oh man.* I can't believe it. I'm having a petty argument with a twelve-year-old. Really mature, Etsuko, well done.

Nawaki reacts like every twelve-year-old would.

"I'm not the new one here!" he retorts, complete with a finger pointing at me.

My turn. "You're all new to me."

This is so going nowhere.

It's also the conclusion that Regashi arrives at and he turns his head to look at Nawaki.

"Nawaki, she's right," he says with a distinctly placating voce. "We're as new to her as she is to us, and we are in the majority." Here, he turns to me. "I apologize, Etsuko-chan. Maybe we can start over after finishing training today?"

I blink.

Regashi has people skills.
Omg.

"OK," I answer, a little late. "Sure."

He smiles. "Great. We can try out that new tea house by the Naka, I hear they have really good green tea ice cream mochi."


_Ah._

Aren't we off to a fantastic start.
Tipping Scales

Chapter Summary

Throw a stone in a pond and it makes ripples, I know that. I just didn't really know until now.

Chapter Notes

The long awaited update is finally here!

Thank you guys for being so patient and encouraging this entire time, your support has meant a lot to me during these last few weeks. I won't go into detail, just know it's been a rough patch and that I'm so happy to be posting again. It makes me all warm and fuzzy when I think about all of your awesome contributions, from reviews to new fanart (check out the tag 'fanart' on my tumblr, tokibun and tricneu have outdone themselves!).

Also, some of you might know already, but I uploaded another chapter for JC side fics a few weeks ago. It has Shikaku's POV from his last academy year and of course, our Uchiha girl is featured, too. Have a look at it if you want, I'd be happy to see you there!

For this chapter, it's really important to know that a huge part of the content wouldn't have ended up as it is if my awesome beta NightsBlackRose13 hadn't been so insistent on bringing out the best I can do. So show some love for beta!

And now, on to the story! :)

"You took two hours and four minutes to complete the mission," Hanako announces as soon as we are back on the training field. She's sitting square in the middle of it, busy folding shiny bits of what looks like chocolate wrappers into little figurines. There are quite a number of them littered on the ground.

"Not bad for a newly minted team. Still, you're late. And late won't do."

"We're not!" Nawaki cries indignantly. "We finished early enough. It just took forever at the mission desk!"

I catch myself nodding in agreement and still the movement immediately. Wouldn't want him to think that we were friends or something. But, seriously, noble folks in Narutoverse need to get pets that they can handle without having to employ shinobi.

"Don't care," Hanako cheerily replies. She stands up from the ground after carefully putting her figurines into the pouch at her hip and giving it an affectionate little pat. Regashi shoots Nawaki a look that says 'Why do you even try anymore' which is ignored with the ease of long practice.

"I gave you two hours. You needed longer, so you need to face the consequences." She props her
gloved left hand on her hip and reaches out with her right. On her palm, one of the figurines is glinting in the sunlight.

"See this little fella here? He and his friends are gonna be your guides through the GRAND KONOHA PARKOUR!"

She stops for a dramatic pause, her face set in an entirely, unapologetically smug expression.

I'm hard-pressed not to roll my eyes. Seriously. People in my first life used to tell me I had the tendency to act like a drama queen but clearly, none of them had ever met someone like Hanako.

"They'll be spread across the whole village and you will get to them by performing each of the little exercises written on them. Yeah, you'll need to unfold them for that which is normally a crime heavily sanctioned, but I'm granting you absolution for this little game."

*She's kidding, right?*

"So, your first task was gonna be five laps around the village, with ankles bound to each other."

Well, that's not … too bad, I guess?

"However, you've been late, so we'll twist it a bit."

I probably should've seen that one coming.

"You're not allowed to touch the ground with your feet. You're not allowed to use the same path twice. Of course, you're not allowed to unbind your ankles, either, but that one goes without saying."

What.

"But because I'm a fundamentally generous person, I'll reduce the number of laps to three."

One look at Nawaki and Regashi reveals resigned faces and suddenly, I wonder how long they have been subjected to Hanako's special brand already. Do you just get used to it or is there actual damage involved?

I let out a sigh as Hanako tosses us two pieces of rope. She watches us as we tie ourselves against each other, lips pulled into a gleefully sadistic grin that makes my hair stand on end.

"You'll see me again at the end of the last exercise. Oh, and if you happen to have any questions in between: have fun figuring out the answers. You'll know if you did well. Good luck, pipsqueaks!"

Just like earlier in the morning, she disappears with a cheerful wave in a poof of smoke.

Ah, I see.

This, again, is going to be so much fun.

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"Would you mind shortening your strides, please?! I'd like to go through this without feeling like my legs are ripped out of my torso with every step we take in addition to having to succumb to chakra exhaustion midway through."

"Not my fault you're so short."
"Well excuse me for being so short, but this is what you're gonna have to work with!"

"I don't see you complaining about Regashi. He's even taller than me!"

"Because he's at least trying!"

"I am, Nawaki. We're supposed to get through this together, you know?"

"…"

"…"

"Fine."

"

Ok, I think I'm legitimately dying.

It's the last lap around the village, thank goodness for that, and I'm feeling like I'm more dragged along than really running. Horizontally. Bound at the ankles.

Has anybody ever told Kishimoto how much running on walls eats at the muscles around your stomach? Because mine are cramping so much, it's ugh. Plus, my chakra is running out alarmingly fast.

"You can do it, Etsuko-chan. Just a few steps left," Regashi says.

"Fkhiefuhw," I wheeze.

Oh god. And this is only the first exercise.

"

We make it, at the end. Don't ask me how.

"

"She wants us to get five chocolate bars without paying for them. "

"You sound as if you've had to do that before."

"Usually, she gives us money."

"So what are we going to do?"

"I don't want to steal. I think I still might have some chocolate at home –"

"Nah, I've got a better idea."

"Okay?"

"I'll show you, but help me get these ropes off first!"

"

"That was fast."
"Five year old girl, deadly exhausted, with huge watery eyes and trembling lips? It always works."

"I don't know. It still feels like stealing."

"It's not stealing if the previous owner gifts it to you."

"You've done that before?"

"… maybe?"

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"Okay, last stop. It says 'Climb to the top of the Hokage Mountain. Hands bound to each other. And no chakra please!'"

"What is it with her and limbs bound together?!!"

"We don't know, Etsuko-chan."

"And, climbing? You mean, like, actual climbing?"

"I guess so, yeah. Can you do that?"

"Uh … we'll see?"

"OK. Give us a shout when you tire out and we'll figure out a way to carry you."

"Wha –"

"Right, Nawaki?"

"… Fine."

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I revise what I said earlier. I wasn't dying before.

I am now.

My body feels like it's pumped with lead and every movement is so incredibly difficult and every muscle is so sore and close to ripping and my head is killing me and I need water and solid ground and I think I'm going to vomit.

"CAREFUL!" Nawaki barks into my ear right before I set my foot on a rock jutting out from the mountain that feels perfectly fine to me, mainly because it's a rock I can set my foot on. So I do it anyway.

It breaks away under my weight and I'm fallingfallingfalling –

"I got you, I got you! Don't panic, please."

I blink and look up to see my wrist securely grasped in Regashi's hand, the rope biting into his skin and already leaving angry red marks.

I gulp. That was close.

"Dammit, I told you not to step on that one!" Nawaki yells, but it sounds more exasperated than irate.
Together, they manage to heave me back.

"You alright?" Regashi asks, worry barely hidden in his voice.

I groan miserably. "Sure."

"You want a break?"

The offer is tempting, but the moment I think of either one of them having to climb with me as additional burden, my pride successfully prevents me from accepting.

So I shake my head. "No, I'll be ok."

"Uh, guys, we've got bad news," Nawaki butts in suddenly.

Oh no.

"We can't get around this part here, the following stretch is too smooth to climb."

Regashi sighs.

"What," I croak. "What does that mean?"

He grimaces. "It means that we have to go back and look for another path."

"Back how much?!"

"Nearly all the way."

Oh you've got to be shitting me!

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"Ah, well done my cutie potatoes! That wasn't so hard, was it?" Hanako greets us cheerily on top of the mountain.

If I had the energy, I would seriously consider punching the bright grin right off her face, Natalie-Dormer-lips be damned. As it is, though, I can barely stand on my legs. I can't thank the boys enough for more or less holding me upright.

I have never done anything so bodily exhausting in my entire two lives.

"So, before I let you go, I think you got something for me."

What else does she want from us?! I seriously don't have the energy for any of her crap anymore. I just want to go home and sleep. Is that too much to ask for?

Before I can open my mouth and say something stupid, Regashi gently loosens my grip on his waist. At my questioning glance he says "The chocolate, Etsuko-chan. We need to give it to her."

Oh right. I'd forgotten about that.

I watch as he walks up to Hanako, my steel grip around Nawaki's waist unmoved, and hands her the five bars of chocolate.

She makes a pleased sound. "Perfect. You even got my favorite brand. I have to say, I didn't think you had it in you, china doll. That act was very convincing indeed."
"Aaaaand that's a wrap for today! You kids are so lucky that I let you go so early, you gotta use the time. So, any plans already?"

Nawaki nods enthusiastically – where does that freak take his energy from?! – and launches into an explanation of our after-training-socializing-plans. Hanako's eyes light up at that.

Why am I getting a strange feeling about this.

Well, this is awkward.

I don't think anybody had thought about the possibility of Hanako wanting to join us for our little social get-together after training. And now that we're all neatly squashed into the tiny booth in a bar which she proclaims to be "100% kiddy-friendly", I'm also pretty sure that Regashi regrets not having insisted on going to the tea house he first suggested.

Not to mention that I feel like falling flat on my face from exhaustion.

"And then we blew that shit straight up into the air, documents and all. Ah, sugar-peas, you should have seen that explosion, it was glorious. Sensei wasn't too happy about it since he would've preferred us to bring those documents back, but hey, the mission only said that we had to prevent the enemy from getting their hands on it. They were all copies anyway, stuff that Konoha already knew."

Hanako stops to take a swig from her beer bottle. "So, what I wanted to say: Uchiha are super chill. My Uchiha-teammate totally agreed to our plan no problem."

I nod agreeably and decide not to mention that after all she's told us about this mission, it sounds more like she bullied both her teammates – as well as her sensei – into compliance than anything. But since I don't feel the particular urge to get on her bad side, I keep my mouth firmly shut.

This woman is seriously terrifying and her basically power-monologuing through this meeting doesn't dilute the impression at all. That Regashi and Nawaki both are extremely attentive when she's talking proves that the constant exposure to her ways doesn't wear it off, either.

Oh, and in case anyone was wondering how we got to this particular anecdote: I think it started with her attempt to convince me that not all Uchiha have to be social pariahs and that there're specimens that are indeed salvageable. Because, clearly, I must've been radiating leave-me-alone-I-don't-want-to-deal-with-any-of-you-vibes.

Yeah. So.

I guess her intentions were good enough.

She throws her head back to gulp down the last drops of her beer and slams the bottle down on the table with enough force to make our glasses – strictly filled with fruit juice, of course – jump.

"Ah, that was fun, kids. It's such a delight talking to you, but I have places to be. See you tomorrow, same time, same place! I have a surprise for you, so don't be late!"

With that, she waves a waiter over, pays him her due and vanishes.
At least she isn't a moocher like Team-7's Kakashi.

There's a moment of silence in which I imagine that Regashi and Nawaki would have squirmed uncomfortably had they been normal twelve-year-olds, until the former breaks it with a hesitant smile.

"Um … you still up for ice cream mochi?"

Nawaki nods enthusiastically at the mention of the treat. Both of them look at me expectantly now.

Great.

To be honest, I for my part just want to go home. After that hellhound mission, the following GRAND KONOHA PARKOUR and the forced socializing with Hanako, I feel bone-tired and want nothing more than to see Obito and hug him and hear him babble about his day. Also, fall into bed and sleep into next week.

So I shake my head. "I apologize, but I need to get home. It's been quite a long day."

I successfully pretend not to see the disappointment on Regashi's face and lift my glass to drain away the last few drops of my orange juice. What I don't manage to pretend, though, is to miss Nawaki's irritated outburst. "But it's barely four o'clock!"

Well damn. He does have a point there.

I hesitate.

"Besides," Regashi adds without missing a beat, "it really won't take long if you don't want it to. We just want to get to know you better. I promise that we're not going to ask anything that you couldn't ask us, too. It would really help us as a team."

"Yeah, us as a team," Nawaki echoes with a nod.

Shit. This is basically the Konoha version of the ultimate knockout argument. And if I decline now, they'll know that I want to get out of this team. Or at least that I'm not trying to get along with them. Which, of course, would be the truth.

So why do I feel so bad for wanting to blow them off?

When I was a kid as Elizabeth, I'd always felt the need to be accepted by the people around me. I tried to achieve that by pleasing everybody, but – and I'm pretty sure everybody with that tendency makes that experience at some point – that didn't work out too well for me personally. So I eventually adjusted my behavior to better survive in the world around me, but I never did manage to shake off those last bits of needing to please, even if it became a bit dulled. Hell, I even felt bad when I didn't manage to gain 100% approval of computer game characters and my family often teased/worried about me for that.

I should have known that being reborn into Naraiverse wasn't going to get rid of this trait of mine, either.

"OK," I agree after a pause long enough to make the boys start doubting. "But really not for too long. My bro- … I'm needed at home."
Regashi nods, a relieved smile on his face. "Don't worry. You can leave whenever you want to."

Both he and Nawaki gulp down the last drops of their juice, cranberry and grape respectively, and we pay our due to the waiter.

I'm relieved to say that my legs have decided to function in the most basic way again.

Regashi leads us to his tea house, the way closely following the course of the Naka River. We pass the playground and I almost reflexively turn my head in the hopes of seeing the shock of silver-grey hair that has become so familiar by now. In vain, since Kakashi's not there.

I wonder how Sakumo is doing.

"Looking for someone?"

I start and turn around to see Nawaki watching me, curiosity in his eyes.

"Yes - no," I say.

He draws his eyebrows together. "Yes or no?"

I shrug. "Why does it matter?"

"Dunno. Just didn't think you were one for something like friendships made on the playground."

I frown. "What's that supposed to mean?" Never mind that he's right, it still doesn't mean that I appreciate being called unsocial. I had plenty of friends in my old life, thank you very much.

Oh. My temper is rising again. It happens too often where Nawaki is involved.

Regashi, ever the voice of reason, steps in right before I can fly off the handle. "What he's trying to say is that you must've spent a great deal of your time training. 'Prodigy' doesn't come from nothing, after all, and we respect the hard work you must have put into it."

Of course he would know exactly what to say. I snort internally. Smooth boy. He's a prodigy himself alright, a prodigy of communication. Must be all kinds of rare for active shinobi.

I close my eyes and exhale softly, letting my irritation drain away with the air. "I don't have playground friends. But my brother does."

Regashi smiles kindly and for the fraction of a second, I see the Sandaime's face layered over his. There's not so much of a difference.

"You can tell us about him in the tea house, ok?"

I nod. "Alright."

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I have become addicted.

I have tasted it, the one ultimate pleasure that money can buy, and I can never go back.

Nothing will ever stop me from getting my hands on it now.

Green tea ice cream mochi.
"These are so frickin' good," I mumble and close my eyes to savor the sensation of the last bite dissolving on my tongue. I'm almost sorry to swallow it and can't completely suppress a content sigh that escapes me after I do. When I open my eyes again, I meet twin looks of bafflement on the boys' faces.


"You … really like these," Nawaki replies.

"Yes, I do."

Is it really so surprising that I adore these treats? I mean, ice cream coated by rice cake? Hellooo?!

A sly grin appears on Nawaki's face. "So you are human after all!"

There is the sound of skin hitting skin and a glance at Regashi shows that he's facepalming. "Nawaki," he groans.

I have to keep myself from laughing out loud. This is actually funny.

I throw my best smirk back at Nawaki and drawl in as low as I can pitch my childish voice. "Oh, you're mistaken. I'm emulating human behavior for infiltration purposes. I'm pleased to see that it works."

"W-what?" Nawaki stammers, eyes wide in shock. "Infiltration p-purposes?"

Another groan. "Nawaki."

"Oh yes," I answer gravely. "It is of utmost importance for my people from outer space to integrate themselves into human society. We prefer to achieve world domination by subtlety."

Nawaki splutters.

"Did you just make a joke?"

I blink, face abruptly set back into my best Uchiha mask. "Why would I do that?"

Color drains out of Nawaki's face as panic takes over and –

"Nawaki, for your grandfather's sake!"

It's too much, Nawaki's panic, Regashi's exasperation and I can't take it anymore.

I burst out laughing, the feeling bubbling from within my core and overflowing the boundaries of my body, so powerful that I need to put my head on the table. I'm gasping for air and clutching at my hurting stomach and it feels so good that I can't help but go on and on and on, especially when my voice is joined by two others, until finally, the laughter subsides into little hiccups and the occasional short outbreak of giggles.

"Ah," I sigh as I wipe away the tears that have gathered at the corners of my eyes. I look up to see the boys wiping their own tears of joy away, Nawaki sporting a slightly embarrassed grin and Regashi beaming with mirth.

"I wish you could have seen your face, Nawaki," he says. "It looked really stupid."

"Hey!"
And just like that, the bubbly feeling rises again.

The second bout of laughter is shorter, but not less loud, which is reason enough for the tea house owner to send us a warning glare. Or three, to be precise.

I'm not the only one who makes that observation. "We should leave before the lady incinerates us with her eyes," Regashi says.

Nawaki and I agree. We pay, leave and laugh a lot until I have to turn to another street to get back to Yashiro's.

"That was really nice, Etsuko-chan," Regashi says. "Even though you didn't tell us anything about your brother."

"Oh, well, I didn't get to hear anything from you, either," I answer lightly.

"True. That only means that we'll have to do this again!" Even if it was not phrased as a question, the look in his eyes makes clear that it is one.

It almost manages to slip past the wall in my head that is cleanly labeled 'Do not get involved with soon-to-be-dead-people'.

Almost.

My hands close into fists at my side as suddenly, all of the cheerfulness drains away from me and I avert my eyes from both of them to stare at the ground instead.

"Maybe," I mutter, and before Regashi can something smooth again – "Uh, see you!"

I don't wait to hear their farewell as I practically flee the scene.

Getting attached to them is not an option.

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_I suppose skipping this inevitable meeting with Yashiro was too much to hope for._

_Of course_ I'm here, sitting on a zabuton across from my guardian in his study, waiting for the punishment for either sabotaging the marriage deal – which I did not – or being insubordinate – which I very much was. I can't bring myself to regret it, though. I hope that he's not gonna ask for an apology because I'm not planning on giving one.

"Etsuko."

Here it comes.

"Activate your Sharingan."

Huh?

Oh.

Okay, I can do that.

Everything shifts into the sharp focus that flooding my eyes with chakra usually brings along and I meet Yashiro's gaze head on. Like that, the minuscule movement of the muscle at the corner of his
mouth becomes glaringly obvious and my brain automatically translates it into 'pleased confirmation'.

Which begs the question of what exactly he thinks is confirmed.

"As I thought," he mutters and stands up. He orders me to stay and keep the Sharingan activated before he steps out of his study, returning with a hand mirror shortly after. He hands it to me.

"Look."

I take the mirror from him and, with a last unsure glance at his now neutral face, look into it.

The change is unmistakable. Instead of one tomoe each swirling lazily on a bed of red, there are two.

I close my eyes and open them again. Yep, still two in each eye.

When did that happen? And how did I not notice?

"Probably when you executed the Goukakyuu no Jutsu. The chakra drain could have easily overpowered any sensations connected to the awakening of the second tomoe," Yashiro answers.

Oops, must've spoken out loud.

I make an "ah-"sound to acknowledge his explanation since it does make sense. "So what does that mean for me? Is there something I need to pay special attention to?"

I have a short vision of myself, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, hands moving before my eyes like I'm removing contact lenses. Only, instead of removing contact lenses, I'm putting my Sharingan into a glass filled with water.

Ugh, gross, Etsuko. Stop that.

"You'll find that you can see better regarding the use of chakra during the execution of jutsu. It's nothing major, but it will help you learn new jutsu, especially nin- and genjutsu."

So, basically a software update. I can work with that.

"It will be a good introduction into nin- and genjutsu in general. I will train you myself so that chakra exhaustion after a mere Goukakyuu will never be an issue again."

Oh man, the mortification is real.

"I am surprised, by the way, that you managed to do it at all. I only showed the jutsu to you once and it was only your first try." And then, after a short pause: "Impressive."

My jaw falls open. "Wha-"

Get a grip on yourself. Say thank you.

The audible klick of my teeth signals that my mouth is shut again. "Uh, thanks."

Yashiro nods awkwardly.

Welcome to the pinnacle of social interaction. Sincerely, two random Uchiha.

A few heartbeats of mutual embarrassment silence later, Yashiro speaks again. "Anyway, that's one thing I wanted to talk to you about. The other is this."
Before I can start to become nervous because *oh shit I'm so gonna get busted for yesterday*, he produces a set of keys and some documents and puts them in front of me.

"With your graduation from the academy and your successful genin test, you are officially considered an adult in Konoha. As such, you are now legally entitled to accept the inheritance that was left to you by your parents."

I feel like I've been punched in the gut.

My inheritance.

From Otou-san and Okaa-chan.

It seems only sensible that they would have settled it, just in case, because, *shinobi life*, but –

My hands are shaking when I reach for the items.

The keys are for the house. The house in which we'd been a family. Happy, if not free of problems, but whoever truly is? It was *home*.

"These are certificates for the house that you lived in with your parents as well as for the funds they left for you and Obito."

I look up to see Yashiro pointing at the documents.

"I have been in charge of these assets until now, but now you can decide to do with them what you will. They fully belong to you."

*They belong to me.*

I let my finger slowly glide over the shape the key, the feel of the metal cool against my fingertips.

I could take Obito and move into the house right here, right now. We could go home: just the two of us, without Naoko's coldness, Toshiro's jealousy and Yashiro's expectations. I would figure out how to properly take care of him and we would be happy together.

Except for when we wouldn't be.

My shoulders slump the moment I realize that it would never work out, what with me having to train and go on missions. Additionally, there is the fact that I've never taken care of anyone else except for myself, let alone a toddler. The only thing moving out of Yashiro's house would accomplish now would be hurting Obito. And that is entirely not an alternative worth considering.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

*Someday, Obito. Just wait a little longer.*

I open my eyes again and with a resolute movement, I push the keys and the certificate for the house back to Yashiro. "Please keep them safe for me. I have no use for the house now."

He nods. I smother a last surge of longing as I watch him put the items away and take another deep breath.

*Someday, when we both are stronger. I promise.*
One week of grueling team training and blocked attempts at team socializing later, I decide that enough time has passed for me to file a formal request for a team swap.

Learning that piece of information had actually not been as difficult as I imagined it to be. One afternoon spent in the public library, section 'shinobi regulations', and the solution to my team problem had been clear in my hands. Never mind that the particular regulation was meant for the use of jounin instructors – since I didn't find any rule that forbade a team member to file a request, I'm just going to do it.

Which leads to me sitting in one of those chairs in front of the Hokage's office, carrying the completed form.

Name: Uchiha Etsuko

Registration number: 006542

Rank: Genin

Reason for desired change: Team configuration incompatible.

Oh man. Explaining the last one to the Hokage is going to be so much fun.

Sorry Sandaime, your son is just too nice. Also, there is the possibility that he and the Shodai's grandson are going to die soon and I don't want to have to go through that again. I have history with my parents, you know?

Yeah. A blast.

Because, of course this kind of thing has to be personally approved by the Hokage.

I hunch over in my seat, swinging my legs since they're too short for my feet to touch the ground.

Finally, the door to the office swings open.

I hop down from the chair, not bothering to find out who just came out of the office since I most likely don't know them anyway –

"Etsuko-chan, is that you?"

I look up and there, from the door to the office, a kind face with dark grey eyes that is topped with spiky silver-grey hair looks right back at me. My eyes go wide as surprise hits me square in my face.

"Sakumo-san!" I blurt out.

Suddenly, I can't get to the door to the Hokage's office fast enough. I barely manage to sidestep another shinobi with long black hair who's just come out from there and grimace when my shoulder grazes their thigh. I hurry past them with a mumbled "sorry" which is honestly a bit rude, but meh, who cares. Someone with fabulous hair like that probably gets nice compliments all the time anyway, they'll survive.

Also, Sakumo is waiting.

He smiles a closed-eyes smile when I come to a halt before him, as if he was genuinely happy to see me, and squats down to talk to me on eye level. "So it is you! How are you doing?"

I can't help a smile of my own spreading over my face as I answer him. "I'm doing fine, Sakumo-san, thank you. How are you? Are you back for good?"
My enthusiasm is so great that I barely manage to clamp down on the I missed you that's threatening to burst out, which might have been a bit super awkward. I can literally feel my face going up in flames and I hope he doesn't notice too much.

Sakumo's smile doesn't fade, though, which is a huge relief.

"I'm fine, too. Unfortunately, I'm only back for a short time. I'll be leaving again in a week or so."

"Oh, OK." It's difficult to mask the disappointment.

"We definitely should catch up, though. Ume has been writing a lot about you, and I'm dying to see little Obito, too!"

"Sakumo, would you mind introducing us?" a voice interrupts him.

I look past Sakumo's head to see a woman standing behind him. She's tall, with long dark hair bound back in a ponytail, stunning green eyes and clad in standard jounin attire. There's a smudge of something reddish over the bridge of her nose and her right arm is in a sling.

"Oh right, sorry," Sakumo says sheepishly and lifts his hand to rub the back of his neck. "Sayu, this is Etsuko, the little Uchiha Ume keeps writing about in her letters. Etsuko, this is Sayu, my wife."

For the second time within a week, my jaw practically hits the floor.

Holy shit, Kakashi has a mom?!

I mean, of course he must've had a mom. I know where children come from, thank you very much. It's just – the manga never even mentioned her except to state that she died when Kakashi was very, very young. She's not supposed to feature anything near prominently, but despite all, here she is. Standing directly before me and smiling.

"I'm so glad to finally meet you, Etsuko-chan!"

Her voice sounds like liquefied rays of sunshine.

"P-pleased to meet you, too," I manage to squeeze out.

My thoughts are a whirling mess.

Kakashi's mom is here, alive. How is that possible? What does it mean? Has she survived permanently? If so, why?

Did I do that, however indirectly?

"I thought you said she was a genin, Sakumo?"

I blink dazedly as I realize that Sayu is talking to me. Or, about me, more accurately.

"I am," I reply and lift my hand to point at my forehead which should be covered by my hitai-ate. Emphasis on should. Because it's actually not and it takes a few moments of confusion for me to remember that it slipped down into the high collar of my shirt during training. So I fish it out somewhat awkwardly and fix it back in place.

"I see," Sayu says. "I'd almost believed that Sakumo pranked me on that."

"I would never," Sakumo answers with an innocent face.
Sayu looks at him with a raised eyebrow until he caves in with a happy grin. "Maybe not never, then."

He turns to me after that, but his expression soberes up a little. "Your hitai-ate must always be visible, Etsuko-chan. As a shinobi, you carry an important responsibility and people, fellow shinobi and civilians alike, need to be able to see that. It is a matter of reliability and not to be taken lightly. Do you understand?"

It's said in a gentle voice, but I know a reprimand when I hear one. Of course, he's right.

"I do and I apologize," I answer sheepishly. "It won't happen again."

He smiles at that. "Alright. Now, Sayu and I are going to fetch Kakashi now. Ume is at the playground with him right now. Do you want to come with us? It would be the perfect opportunity for you to tell us about your new team. We could wait until you've finished your business if it doesn't take too long."

Right, my business.

I glance down at the form in my hand.

If there is the slightest possibility that Kakashi's mom is alive due to something that I've changed … would that mean that I am actually capable of saving someone?

Would that mean that there is a chance that Nawaki could survive? That I could actually do something to make sure he survives?

"Uh, Etsuko?"

I look up into Sakumo's slightly puzzled face, Sayu's right next to him. Look back down at my form.

*Could it really be?*

The sound of blood rushing through my ears drowns out nearly any other noise as I breathe, in and out, in and out.

In.

And out.

And finally look up.

"Actually … my business is not so important," I say, slowly. A hesitent smile makes its way to my lips and the next sentence is much surer.

"I'd really like to come with you, if I'm not a bother."
The whole way to the playground I can barely keep myself from constantly staring at Hatake Sayu.

I keep expecting that she'll disappear at the next convenient moment, that the breeze blowing through her ponytail will make her disintegrate, that the sun shining on her olive skin is going to bleach her colors until she fades away like a forgotten memory.

Amazingly, none of it happens. Quite the opposite, actually.

With every word she speaks, she becomes more real. I don't know if it's because of her voice or because of the very special way she connects consonants and vowels when she talks, but I know that I've never heard anything like it before. The sounds she makes reveal her as a stranger, an unknown individual – a living, breathing person. And that unfamiliarity that follows her is what ultimately convinces me that she's not some product of my imagination. After all, researching dream mechanics in my old life has taught me that the human mind is incapable of thinking up something completely new.

The dawning realization makes it hard to concentrate on the ongoing conversation and when Sakumo asks me a question, I am caught completely off-guard.

"I'm sorry, I uh, didn't quite catch that. Could you repeat it please?"

Sakumo just smiles patiently. "I asked who your jounin sensei is?"

"Oh, right," I hurry to say. "I'm on Mitarashi Hanako's team."

This gets an incredulous snort out of Sayu. "Hanako? The Sandaime got her a second team?"

Sakumo, too, looks surprised.

"Actually, he didn't," I answer. "I'm the replacement for a teammate that's currently out of commission. A girl … I, uh, don't know her name, unfortunately." I frown. I know she was mentioned that day when they all came into my hospital room, but I had been busy reorienting myself at that time. Guilt creeps up, though, when I realize that I haven't even inquired after her since then. Regashi and Nawaki probably think I'm really cold and uncaring, especially after this last week.
where I practically ignored them outside of missions and training. And wow, now I'm upset with myself.

"Ah," Sakumo says with a neutral expression. "So how has it been, being on a team?"

Of course he was going to ask this.

My voice is cautious as I start explaining. "It's … nice. Regashi and Nawaki do a lot to help me feel welcome."

His face remains neutral. "And do you feel welcome?"

Shitshitshit I gotta get him off my track. I can hardly tell the guy who literally failed a mission to save his teammates' lives that I've been evading my own teammates' attempts at team bonding.

"I wouldn't know, since I spend most of my energy on surviving Hanako's training sessions, I guess?" I laugh nervously. "On the very first day, she made us chase a mad dog and then sent us through her 'grand KonoHa parkour' for which we had to climb the Hokage Mountain without chakra and with our hands bound together."

Please take the bait.

For a few heartbeats, Sakumo just looks at me carefully and I'm pretty sure he's going to call me out on my bullshit. My shoulders tense in anticipation and I swallow, trying to moisten my mouth since it has gone completely dry. It's kind of ridiculous, really, how afraid I am of being judged by him.

And then he gives a small reassuring smile. "That sounds like quite an … eventful first day. Hanako does love a good challenge. How did it go?"

I breathe out a quiet sigh of relief. "Very good, actually! I think I was only three-quarters dead by the end of that exercise."

Sakumo and Sayu both laugh at that, dissipating the last strands of tension. The conversation stays light-hearted after that and before I know it, we've arrived at the playground.

It's not too busy today and spotting Ume-san and Kakashi is an easy feat. They're at the climbing frames he has taken a shining to lately, probably busy nurturing his prodigy tendencies. He's so engrossed in his quest to conquer the metal construct in fact, that he doesn't notice our little group approaching until Ume greets us.

"Sakumo, Sayu! I didn't know you're back!" she exclaims, smile bright and radiant in surprised joy. "Kakashi-chan, look who's here!"

The little boy turns his head and I can see the exact moment in which cautious recognition flashes across his face. He quickly abandons the climbing frames and carefully approaches Sakumo and Sayu.

"Kaa-chan? Tou-chan?" His little voice sounds strangely hesitant.

What the hell. Why is he so shy?

Sayu squats down and gently takes his miniature hands in hers. "Yes, Kakashi-chan. Kaa-chan and Tou-chan are back. Do you remember us?" I can't properly see her face, but her voice sounds strangely breathy. Breathy and maybe even a little afraid.
What's – what's going on here?

Kakashi looks thoughtful. "I think so. There's a picture of you and me in the house. From when I was really small."

I almost snort at that. *Oh Kashi-chan, you're still reeaally small.*

And then it clicks.

Kakashi is not even two years old, yet.

Sakumo and Sayu have been at war for well over a year.

Which means that Kakashi has been essentially parentless for most of his short, short life. Practically an orphan.

Which in turn means that the fear of him not remembering is entirely plausible.

"That's right," Sayu says. "Do you remember anything else?"

Kakashi's tiny nose scrunches up in concentration. "Tou-chan took me to the playground once. But – I think you were already gone?"

_Oh god._ I think my heart just broke.

"Yes, Kakashi-chan, and I'm so sorry." A barely suppressed tremor. "But now Kaa-chan is back. And I won't leave you like that again. Neither Tou-chan nor Kaa-chan will."

Kakashi nods. "Ok."

And then they're hugging, Kakashi's little form almost completely disappearing into Sayu's embrace while Ume and Sakumo stand close by, wearing twin smiles of intense affection. The latter looks like he can barely hold back from throwing himself into the fray and I wonder why he actually doesn't. Maybe he wants to give Kakashi the time to properly reacquaint himself with his mother, since she's been away longer.

And maybe that's something I should actually do. Seriously, what _am_ I doing here, intruding on this intimate moment? This is a Hatake family reunion. I have no business being here.

That's the moment Ume chooses to glance my way – and however impossible, her smile widens even further. She comes over, leaving the three alone for the moment.

"Etsuko-chan! It seems like forever the last time I saw you. How are you doing?"

I return her smile easily enough. Although this woman has officially been Kakashi's caretaker, she's looked after Obito so often by now, sometimes even without me staying, that she may be counted as his just as well. I owe the old lady a lot.

"I'm fine, Ume-san. Training with my new team has been rather busy, so I apologize for not having shown up for a while."

"Don't worry, child, I understand completely. It's important for you to get along with your teammates, they're going to stay with you for a long time after all."

My smile becomes a little strained at that, but thankfully, she moves right on.
"How's little Obito?"

"He's fine. A bit lonely, though. He misses you and Kakashi."

"Oh, we'll need to do something about that!"

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can get out another sound, Kakashi's voice rings out to us.

"Etsuko-nee!"

I turn my head to see him securely seated on Sakumo's shoulders, his hands buried in silver-grey hair. He's looking at me with a thoroughly pleased expression as he steers his father to where Ume and I are standing, Sakumo wearing a dorky grin on his face. The pleased look turns into a small frown however.

"Why is Obito not with you?"

I bite down on a chuckle, lest he thinks I'm laughing at him.

"He's at home right now."

The frown stays firmly in place. "He should come here. The playground is boring without him and you."

"Maybe," Ume chimes in mildly, "you should try playing with the other children?"

The boy doesn't even have the decency to blink. "They're boring."

This time, I don't quite manage to suppress a short laugh. "There might be some merits to having more than one or two friends, Kakashi."

For a short moment, nobody says anything as his grey eyes are fixed on me in intense scrutiny. His expression turns thoughtful and I can literally see him dissecting the idea that I just uttered in his mind.

"How many friends do you have?" he suddenly asks.

Ugh, great.

Leave it to a Hatake to ask the uncomfortable questions.

"Um." I want to at least say 'more than one' but honestly, I don't even know if it's true.

Obito is my baby brother, not a friend. Yashiro is my guardian. I don't want to talk about Naoko and Toshiro. I have barely managed to accept my teammates as such in the last half hour and I don't know where that train-wreck of a marriage contract leaves Shikaku and me. Inoichi and Chouza are nice enough, I suppose, but I doubt they would have spoken to me had it not been for Shikaku. Kakashi is Obito's buddy and something like my second baby brother, and Sakumo – I still have that embarrassing crush on him, but that really doesn't make him my friend.

To sum it up: the state of my social circle is pretty abysmal.

I should … uh … do something about it. Even if it's just to be a good role model for my little brothers.

Among other good reasons. I used to have a moderate number of friends in my first life, after all. I've
almost forgotten how good it felt.

Right now, this new resolution of mine is only of limited use, however. Time for another diversionary tactic.

"I don't have many friends right now, but I'm trying to make more. Do you want to know why?"

He nods, his big grey eyes shiny in anticipation. His are not the only ones.

"Friends are the people we trust to guard our backs. We train to become strong, the strongest we can be. But sometimes, there will be things that we cannot do alone. Friends, true friends you can ask for help – and you will help them in return. You will form bonds through that and they will make you stronger in return."

OK, was that all? Oh, no wait. I forgot something.

Exhale.

"Stronger than you could ever be alone."

That wasn't too bad, was it? I think I checked the important points. Even stayed true to the Konoha spirit.

So why is nobody saying anything?!

"That," Sayu says carefully after another few agonizingly long seconds of silence, "was very inspiring."

Kakashi looks at her from his vantage point on Sakumo's shoulders. "Is what Etsuko-nee says really true?"

Uh, thanks for the vote of confidence here, bro.

"It is," Sakumo answers him. His voice sounds as light as always but when I look at him, I'm startled to find him watching me with eyes that seem to see right through to the deepest recesses of my mind. And those are decidedly off limits for anybody but myself.

I hurriedly break off the eye contact with a pointed jerk of my head and plaster on a cheerful smile.

"I promised Obito to show him some new hiragana characters today so I better get going now. Are you going to be here again sometime this week? So Obito can meet all of you?"

I manage to stay casual during the process of wrangling out a promise. Kakashi never relinquishes his superior seat, but Sakumo ruffles my hair before I leave, his demeanor back to normal as if nothing has happened at all.

I definitely feel more comfortable with that.

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"Do you remember what happened when you used the Goukakyuu? How it felt when you released your chakra?"

Yashiro looks at me with an expressively bland face as he waits for my answer. We're not on our standard Uchiha training field but on a pier that stretches far into where the Naka is so broad that it
can pass as a lake. I recognize it as the one Sasuke practiced his Goukakyuu on. It's probably the go
place for every Uchiha that's starting to play with fire.

It's starting to get dark and I'm anxiously eager to get back to the house because it's almost time for
Obito to go to bed. Thing is, he won't sleep if I don't sing for him. Instead of sitting at the edge of his
bed though, I'm here with Yashiro, trying to figure out what went wrong with my first Goukakyuu.
It's frustrating, to say the least.

"I don't know," I say after a lengthy pause in which I contemplate if I want to tell him that basically,
I'd been scared out of my freaking mind when I decided to use it. The sensation of overwhelming
fear had drowned out pretty much everything that might've been connected to my chakra use.
Except, of course, the feeling of getting the energy sucked out of my system, and fast. Maybe I can
tell him that part.

"The chakra drain was intense. It felt like all of it left my body at once."

"Did you try stopping your chakra flow?" Yashiro asks.

"Uh, no?"

*I didn't even know you could do that?*

"Usually, a jutsu requires a minimal amount of chakra to function," Yashiro explains. "There's
always the possibility to go beyond that minimal requirement, though, to enhance the jutsu and make
it more powerful – though, if doing so makes sense is an entirely different question. The Goukakyuu
is no different."

His gaze turns a tiny bit more pensive.

"I assume the fire ball had an above average size?"

Eh. What's the average size for a fire ball? "I suppose. There was a lot of fire. I mean … a lot lot."

Yay for precise explanations.

Yashiro lets out a barely audible sigh.

"Activate your Sharingan."

OK.

"Watch. Follow the flow of my chakra. Note exactly how much I put into the jutsu."

OK.

His hands move through the seals, but since I already know them, they're not my focus. He inhales,
his chakra pooling in his gut.

And then he breathes fire.

It's beautiful. The fireball lights up the whole lake, the flames being reflected a thousand fold on the
surface of the water and the heat radiating off with a gentle fierceness that belies the dangerous
strength of the jutsu. I can see Yashiro pouring an exactly measured amount of his chakra into it and
marvel at his control. After a few seconds, he cuts off the feed of chakra and the flames fizzle out,
leaving the lake a bit darker than before.
"Did you see where I channeled it?"

Wordlessly, I point at my stomach. He nods. "Try."

I put my hands through the motions of the seals, my movements not nearly as fluid or graceful as his, but well. I'll need to practice that. Chakra gathers in my center, building up pressure. I try channeling it, narrowing down the flow that comes rushing at my throat – and exhale.

The resulting Goukakyuu is a chaotic outburst of flames that barely resembles a ball. Also, damn, *these flames are freaking hot and I might have burnt the corners of my mouth?!* As soon as the flames have died down, I start coughing my lungs out.

Oh man. That went well.

When I finally finish with my fit and look up at Yashiro, I see that he has his Sharingan activated, too. He begins summarizing my performance.

"Your seals are acceptable. The amount of chakra you gathered seemed adequate, too. However, you lost a lot of it during the transformation."

I lost a lot of chakra? During the transformation?

Apparently, my face translates my confusion well, because Yashiro starts explaining again. "Do you know about the chakra natures?"

I nod.

"The raw chakra that runs through our bodies does not have a nature assigned to it. So when we try to execute a jutsu that requires us to turn our chakra into a specific nature type, we have to transform it."

Yeah, makes sense.

"Every shinobi has at least one affinity towards a certain nature type, which makes the conversion more efficient as well as effective."

Oh wait, I know where this is going.

"Do you mean," I interrupt him, "that my conversion was faulty? Because I don't have an affinity for fire natured chakra?"

"I didn't say your conversion was faulty. It was just not as efficient and effective as it could have been. But yes, there might be the possibility that your primary chakra nature is not fire. Unusual for an Uchiha, but not unheard of."

*Oooh oh oh oh oh.*

Suddenly, I'm really excited. "I want to know my chakra nature! Can you tell?"

Yashiro shakes his head. "Not like this. I'll need to get some chakra paper to determine your affinity. But that you managed to do the Goukakyuu despite fire not being your primary one bodes well."

*Oooooohhhhh.*
I think I'm glowing. I've not been this excited for a long time now.

I'm going to train so fucking hard.

New day, new training session, new agenda. Granted, the training is over now, but the rest still stands.

Hanako claps her hands. "That's a wraaaaap! Now get home and wash all that filth off, my little panda babies. You stink."

She pinches her nose theatrically and makes a shooing gesture with her hands.

"Remember, no training tomorrow. Don't you dare take off those figurines, though. You have to carry them with you at all times, got it?"

She's referring to her chocolate wrapper figurines of which she gave one to each of us. She has had a lot of them with her today, as if she's eaten nothing but chocolate for the entire week, but well. It's not as if I'm unfamiliar with sudden cravings for that stuff. Besides, carrying that thing is much easier than training anyhow and also, it fits perfectly with my plans for the Hatake play date.

Obito is going to be really happy, I think.

So I have no problem agreeing with Hanako. I hear Regashi and Nawaki doing the same and our sensei, like always, makes a fast exit.

I let out a slow exhale.

**OK. It's now or never.**

"Um, guys?"

Both boys literally freeze in the middle of their movements, their faces showing varying degrees of surprise. One week of giving them the silent treatment obviously left an impression. I decide to take advantage of that surprise and continue with my plan.

"Do you have any plans? I mean, it's still pretty early and … uh, I sort of don't have any and was wondering if we, um, could do something together? Like, hanging out … maybe?"

**OK, that definitely sounded more elegant in my head.**

The reactions I get are not particularly encouraging either.

Nawaki's mouth is hanging wide open and he's staring at me like I've suddenly grown a second head. Even Regashi is shocked speechless, apparently.

Um, backpedaling it is, then.

"O-only if you want, of course. I mean, I know, I've not been the greatest company over the last couple days and I apologize, I am really sorry about that and –"

"Who are you," Nawaki interrupts my rambling. "And what did you do to Etsuko?"

My mouth snaps shut abruptly. I look at him, long and hard.
I seriously can't tell if he's joking.

Judging by the wide eyes and still half-open mouth, he doesn't know it, either.

"I totally understand if you don't want to, of course, I mean, I don't want you to – you know, no pressure at all. And, and–"

There's a voice at the back of my mind that has started screaming *ABORT! ABORT!* but I can't seem to turn my rambling off, oh god, this is so embarrassing, can somebody please just go ahead and knock me out.

"Etsuko?"

"Yeah?"

I blink.

Regashi looks at me like he's approaching a frightened deer and I wouldn't be too surprised if he started doing cooing noises or something like that.

"It's okay, Etsuko-chan, really. We're just a bit surprised, but also very happy that you asked. Today, though, might not be the best day. We're going to the hospital, you see."

"Oh," I say weakly.

Wait, did he just say hospital?

"Is one of you sick? Or, both of you?!"

"No, dummy," Nawaki says. He's recovered from whatever he had before and is looking at me with an expression that's probably meant to convey annoyance. I find that it goes more in the direction of a pout. An offended pout. "None of us is sick. We're going to visit Akemi-chan."

That name … rings a bell. Somewhere wayyy back in my memory.

Klick.

*Oh.*

"Akemi-chan. That's your … original teammate, right? Before I joined?"

For a moment, I hear nothing but the wind blowing through leaves and the muted sound of a bird flapping its wings.

"Yes," Regashi finally answers. His voice is solemn and tinged with sadness. He doesn't sound repellant, though.

So I take a leap of faith.

"Would it be alright if I came with you?"

)00( My third time in Konoha Hospital, if I don't count Obito's day of birth.
Joy.

I'm so relieved that I'm not waking up in one of the sterile white rooms this time. I think I'm starting to understand why most shinobi are not too fond of hospitals – I can definitely sympathize with a general aversion against the feeling of having been run through a shredder.

The lady at the reception takes one look at the boys and smiles. At the questioning look she gives me, though, Regashi intervenes. "She's with us. This is Etsuko-chan, our new teammate."

"Pleasure to meet you," I say.

She nods. "Akemi-chan is in the same room as always. Speak to any nurse if you need anything."

Regashi thanks her and off we are to the maze of floors that make up the Hospital interior.

On the whole way there, Regashi and Nawaki are peculiarly silent. I shuffle awkwardly along while they walk with sure strides and serious faces, inwardly bursting with questions. Unfortunately, none of them are appropriate to ask. It's only when we arrive at a door with the number C214 and Nawaki walks right in that Regashi stops to talk to me just before I can follow.

"Etsuko-chan," he begins. I feel the weight of his hand as he puts it on my shoulder. "You should know one thing before you go in. Akemi-chan is not … conscious. Hasn't been for some time now. Just, don't be alarmed when she doesn't react to you or any of us."

I blink in confusion. It's not as if the concept of a coma is uncharted territory for me.

And then I remember that I'm technically five years old and that Regashi doesn't know my psychological history.

"OK, thanks for warning me. Is there something that I need to pay special attention to? Like, things that I shouldn't/should do?"

He smiles sadly. "No, you can act completely normal."

The she won't hear us anyway is unspoken but not unheard. I try putting on an encouraging smile even though I suspect that it won't be any help. He looks away.

And then we enter.

The room is flooded with light, shining in from the window that faces the afternoon sun. It makes the sterile standard décor appear almost friendly, the overall whiteness reflecting the light with a soft glow that blurs the lines. At the foot of the bed, there is a clipboard with the latest results of regular blood tests and so on, issued to Aburame Akemi. Next to the bed, on the side facing the window, there's a nightstand with flowers and what looks like get well cards. Also, something shiny like … one of Hanako's figurines?

Of course. Naturally, her sensei would visit her.

On the side facing the door, a life support system is quietly humming away. Nawaki has put a chair in front of it and is sat down, talking animatedly away at the still form in the sheets.

I feel a warm hand reaching for mine and look up at Regashi. He has recovered and is wearing a small but nonetheless friendly smile again.

"Come on, she's waiting."
I let myself be guided towards the bed and Nawaki. Regashi pulls two additional chairs to his side and beckons me to sit down.

"And here they are," Nawaki announces brightly. "Look, that's Etsuko-chan. She's, like, super smart or something, 'cause she blitzed through the academy in one year. Also, she's three, so basically a complete baby."

"I'm five, actually," I correct him without thinking.

He nods sagely. "As I said, a baby."

I roll my eyes and turn towards the bed to tell the occupant that he believes that I'm an alien, too, and that I –

Until I see her.


She looks like she's one step away from Death's door.

The words get stuck in my throat, the ensuing silence suddenly tensing up the air. The boys are holding their breath, waiting for me to say something.

"Hi Akemi … uh … I guess it's senpai? Hi Akemi-senpai. I'm happy to finally meet you."

Ugh. That sounded wooden at best, even in my own ears. Damnit, I hadn't been so verbally awkward in my first life. Why can't I stop myself from acting so clumsy this time around? I start fiddling with my hands, which doesn't help with the nervousness at all.

What does, though, is the gentle hand on my shoulder. Regashi is looking at me, open and honest.

"I think she'd be really happy to get to know you, too. She'd like you, wouldn't she, Nawaki?"

To my surprise, Nawaki nods without hesitation. "She would. She is a bit like you, actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really quiet and sometimes really intense. But she can be funny, too, even if it isn't always intended. Much less annoying than you, though."

I snort. "Thanks. I appreciate having a unique selling point, even if I'm just a replacement."

Regashi frowns suddenly. "Do you believe that?"

I blink in confusion. "What?"

"The replacement-part?"

Boy, he sounds downright agitated.

"Because you're not. It's true that you wouldn't have been with us if Akemi-chan wasn't out of commission, but that doesn't mean that we don't see you as a person of your own. We're glad to have you here. You know that, don't you?"

I have to blink again.
That was really, really nice of him to say.

It's probably the conclusion he arrived at as an explanation for my behavior over the last week, and even though it's not the correct one, it feels good to hear him say that. He must've spent some time thinking about it, too.

So when I smile at him, it's completely genuine. "I do, now. Thank you."

Regashi's answering smile is just as genuine. "Never doubt it."

Nawaki clears his throat. "I feel like I've accidentally ended up in a really cheesy movie right now," he mutters. "Anybody else feel that?"

I turn to face him, same smile still in place – ok, maybe a bit more smirk-y. "Don't feel excluded, Nawaki-chan. Let's all just have one big, fluffy, cuddly hug, shall we?"

I open my arms invitingly and smirk even wider because there's no way that he's going to get off his chair, come over and hug me.

There's a short pause in which he thinks about his answer.

"Good idea," he finally says.

And then he proceeds to get off his chair, come over and hug me.

"Oooooh."

Two seconds into that hug and Regashi joins us. We probably look like a pile of puppies or something. It's not an unpleasant feeling.

Maybe this team is not going to be so bad.

Half an hour later, we bid Akemi goodbye.

"Wake up soon, Akemi-chan. We're waiting for you" Regashi says and Nawaki adds a "Yeah, we miss you!" My own "I'd really like to get to know you" follows directly after.

After listening to the boys telling stories of their days as a team, I really mean it.

We move the chairs back to the wall and have a last look at the still girl.

"You know," I suddenly say. "Maybe she can hear you. I've heard that comatose people dream and sometimes, that the dream comes close to reality."

"That would be nice," Regashi murmurs softly. Nawaki agrees with a nod.

We step out of the room and take a breath in the hallway. There's a short silence in which we all gather our thoughts until Nawaki breaks it.

"I want to stop by my sis for a moment," he announces. "She has developed some kind of new soldier pills and I want to ask her if I can get some for us. You coming, too?"

Regashi and I both nod. It's not as if I have anything better to do.
We trudge down the hallways, climb two sets of staircases and finally come to a halt in front of another door that carries a small plate with Senju Tsunade engraved on it. There're voices coming from inside.

"This … this is brilliant!"

That sounds like Tsunade.

"I'd hoped that you would approve. Your opinion is carrying a lot of weight in the council."

That voice, though, is unfamiliar. It's soft-spoken and male, the owner of it apparently somewhat politically involved.

Tsunade snorts. "Wish that it was true. The old farts in there like to pretend to be open to innovations like this, but secretly, they're still stuck in the warring era with their way of thinking. I'll see what I can do, though. This could save a lot of lives. That has to count for something."

"Thank you Senju-san. I couldn't do this without your help."

"Please, call me Tsunade."

"Very well. Please call me Dan, then."

What.

Footsteps are approaching the door and suddenly, the three of us realize that we're going to be caught eavesdropping.

"Uh-oh," Nawaki manages to mumble before the door swings open to reveal none other than super-awesome-Senju-Tsunade. Upon sighting us, she develops an interesting tick in a vein on her forehead.


The vein becomes thicker. "Brother dearest. Say, you didn't just stand before my door to eavesdrop, did you?"

"Haha, what? No!" Another dazzling smile. "Regashi, Etsuko and me just wanted to ask you for your new soldier pills! Are they ready, yet? Oh, and you do remember Etsuko-chan, right?"

Her scrutinizing glare immediately shifts over to me and darkens further into a frown. *Holy shit, that woman has eyes that can freeze burning coal into ice cubes.*

"You, kiddo!" she barks.

I immediately stand up straighter.

She examines me for a few silent seconds until she nods with a little noise of satisfaction. "You do look better than the last time I saw you. Good, I was not looking forward to chasing Hanako across Konoha."

*Ah, nice to be reminded of the competent first impression I left on her.*

And then she turns her back on us to speak to the man with the long light-blue hair and pretty face. Yeah, I just called Katou Dan pretty. Because he is. Get over it. Also, it gives me a reason to stare.
Seriously, I don't know what these last few weeks are trying to tell me, sending all these characters that should be dead/are dying my way. It's almost like someone's trying to prove a point. Because here's the thing: I'm pretty sure that Dan and Nawaki never met in the original time line. You see, the latter's death was what actually brought Dan and Tsunade together. Shared grief over lost siblings, since Dan's sister had died, too. Narutoverse bonding at its best and purest.

Oh, and not to forget the reform that's going to revolutionize the whole squad system in the shinobi world and save a shit-ton of people's lives. You know, the one where they introduce the concept of field medics.

Oh gosh, I just realized that we don't have that, yet. What a shit period to be alive.

Regashi nudges me and I turn my head with a jerky motion to look at him.

"What," I say.

"You're staring," he says with that friendly smile of his.

Oops. I'd forgotten.

Dan finally leaves and Tsunade lets us into her office. It's cleaner and more orderly than I imagined, having her Hokage office and Shizune's exasperation clear before my inner eye. There's a big desk in the middle, some chairs for guests to sit on and shelves upon shelves of files, scrolls and leather-bound volumes of medical texts. The furniture is all in the same clean white like the rest of the hospital, but still the room manages to radiate some kind of professional warmth.

Nawaki flops down on one of the chairs and starts rocking it back and forth, watching as his sister rummages through a cabinet with an assortment of vials and other receptacles.

"Don't abuse the chair," she says absentmindedly and Nawaki stops with a pout.

"So, how's team training going?"

"Fine. Hanako has been torturing us with speed and stamina exercises up until now, but I think we'll move on to harder stuff after tomorrow."

"Oh? Why after tomorrow?"

"She gave us a day off."

Tsunade snorts and turns back around, a few tubes with pills in her hand. "You still believe Hanako when she gives you a day off?"

"We do have to safeguard her chocolate wrapper figurines," Regashi says pensively. "I actually expect it to be some kind of exercise."

What? Exercise? But – day off!

"I'm almost sorry that I'm working in the hospital," Tsunade grins. "It's probably going to be interesting to watch the action."

"I don't think it's gonna be something big," Nawaki pipes back in. "It's only the start of Etsuko-chan's second week after all."

Tsunade makes a disbelieving "hah!"-sound and doesn't comment any further on it. That's not very confidence-inducing, if I may say so. She gives each of us one of those pill tubes.
"You're lucky, they just passed the testing phase and will soon be distributed along with the standard equipment. Still, be careful when using them. Never more than one at once, and only one per day!"

"Sure thing, Tsunade-nee!"

Regashi and I voice our consent, too, and then we're unceremoniously shoved out of her office. Tsunade ruffles Nawaki's hair affectionately and Nawaki grins cheekily.

"Tell Jiraiya-nii that I said hello! And Orochi-nii!"

What the hell. Did he just call Orochimaru, creepy-snake-Orochimaru Orochi-nii?

"Yeah, yeah. Now, off with you! I have work to do!"

And then she shuts the door.

Orochi-nii?!

I spend the time needed to get out of Konoha Hospital trying to wrap my head around that concept – but, seriously? Orochi-nii?!

"Okay, Etsuko-chan. See you tomorrow, probably. Stay alert!"

Both boys wave at me and before I can answer with anything but a half-hearted wave of my own, they're off.

Great. Now I forgot to ask what Hanako might have planned for tomorrow. Looks like I'll just have to take my chances with that.

Well, like Nawaki said. It can't be too bad, right?
Obito woke up, saw his Nee-chan still in bed on her side of the wall and was instantly wide awake with excitement. She was still there, which meant she wasn't going away too soon and although she never failed to come back in the evening to sing for him, he couldn't help but miss her over the course of the day.

Not that he was alone then, what with Naoko watching him and Toshiro back from the academy in the afternoon. And sometimes, Naoko even allowed him to play in front of the house where other children would join him, or Toshiro would grumpily let him be in his room provided he was quiet – but Nee-chan was different. With Nee-chan, he didn't need to be quiet. She would listen to him when he told her about the butterfly that got caught in the bush in front of Inabi's house and how they rescued it, she would hug him and tell him how proud she was when he showed her the progress he'd made with hiragana. And together, they would lie around, on the ground and on the bed, and tickle each other until they were gasping for breath in laughter. The only thing better than having Nee-chan with him was having Nee-chan and Kakashi – and Ume-baa – with him on the playground. Those were the best days.

So the first thing he did when he saw her was to get out of his own bed, even though it was warm and comfy, cross the few feet of distance over the not so warm tatami mats and crawl into hers, which was again very warm and comfy. She murmured something and wound her arms around him so he could snuggle closer.

"Good morning, Nee-chan," he said as low as he could because sometimes, when nee-chan wasn't quite awake, yet, she would be startled when he was too loud.

She blinked and he giggled because she looked a bit like an owl when she did that, especially with her hair all unruly and sticking up from her head. And then she smiled and gave him a kiss on his forehead.

"Good morning, Obi," she whispered back.

He looked at her, barely able to contain his excitement. "Are we doing something today, Nee-chan?"

She chuckled. "Oh, I don't know. Would you like us to?"

"Yesss!" He looked at her with big, shiny eyes, anticipation written all over his face.

"Lucky you then," his Nee-chan drawled, a fond smile on her lips. "I just happened to schedule a
playdate with Kakashi on the playground for today."

Obito squealed. "You're the best, Nee-chan!"

Suddenly, staying in the warm comfy bed wasn't so important anymore. He wanted to get out, be on the playground, have Nee-chan and Kakashi around now. He started squirming in her hug, drawing out another chuckle from her.

"So impatient, Otouto. I learned once that good things come to those who wait, you know."

"But I don't want to wait, I want to go now!" he pouted.

"I think you're missing the point, Obi," she said in a deadpan that went entirely over his head. He proceeded to tug at the sleeves of her pajama shirt.

"Can we, Nee-chan? Go now?"

"Obi, if we go now, Kakashi won't even have arrived there yet. I made a date, which implies that there was a specific time we agreed upon."

"Oh," he said, briefly pausing at his sleeve-tugging. "But that doesn't mean we have to stay here, right? We can go to the playground by ourselves and wait until Kakashi comes, right? We can spend time together then, just us!"

She smiled at that. "Yeah, that we could. It sounds nice."

All the excitement came back in a rush and with an enthusiastic yelp, he began to work himself out of the hug again. This time, she let go of him.

They got dressed, his Nee-chan helping him while he babbled happily away, and made their way out of the house. A few steps into the direction of the playground, he turned to look at her, struck by a new idea.

"Nee-chan, can we get ice-cream?"

She snorted. "Ice-cream instead of breakfast? That's not very healthy, you know."

He thought about it, shortly.

"Can we have breakfast first and then ice-cream?"

She ruffled his hair with a quiet laugh.

"Sure we can, Obi."

Sakumo watched with an amused smile as Kakashi grabbed Obito's arm and guided him towards his mother.

"Kaa-chan, this is Obito, Etsuko's little brother." His son threw a quick sideglance at mentioned girl and continued with a solemn voice. "He is my friend."

Etsuko bit her lip in a valiant attempt to suppress her laughter.

"Obito," Kakashi continued, now turned toward the other boy. "This is my Kaa-chan."
Obito grinned brightly and waved at Sayu. "Hellooo, Kakashi's-kaa-chan-san!"

Sayu's brilliant smile came right back at him. "Hello, Obito-chan. You can call me Sayu, it's shorter than Kakashi's-kaa-chan-san."

"Ok," the little boy readily agreed.

Cute little boy.

Sakumo hadn't quite expected to come back from the war and suddenly have three children instead of one single son, but after spending the better part of yesterday's late afternoon and evening listening to Kakashi and noticing the repeated use of the words 'Etsuko-nee' and 'Obi', the thought didn't even seem remotely strange to him anymore. Ume's letters had prepared him, too, after all and besides, who was he to reject his son's chosen siblings? If anything, he was glad that his boy had formed such strong connections with the two Uchiha children. He had worked with enough of them to know that, despite appearances, people from that clan cared. Deeply. Kakashi would probably never make more loyal friends.

And that was not yet considering his own fondness of them. It was increasing steadily with every encounter.

In the meantime, the two boys had successfully persuaded Etsuko to reenact some of the training she had endured at Hanako's hands. The girl didn't seem to mind as she began walking up the climbing frame, sticking to the metal with nothing but the chakra-covered soles of her feet. She launched into a retelling of her latest adventure, changing her voice to imitate those of her teammates and executing various little stunts to enrich the narrative. She seemed relaxed and in a good mood, none of the tenseness from the last time they'd spoken apparent.

Something had happened in the last 24 hours, and it was good. Maybe the little intervention he'd planned for later today wouldn't even be needed? On the other hand, there was no harm in following through with. Like that, he'd be able to see with his own eyes. Peace for his soul and so on. Besides, he'd already spoken to Hanako and persuaded her to agree with the help of a few bars of chocolate.

Well.

Maybe a bit more than a few. It seemed he'd spent more money on chocolate for Hanako that day than he had for the entire decade before for Sayu and himself.

He still considered it money well spent, though. The kids might have a need for it, after what their sensei had planned for them today on their "day off". Although he didn't know exactly what it would be, he felt safe in the assumption that it was going to be out of the ordinary. Hanako's ways were always out of the ordinary.

Sayu came over to where he sat and nudged his knee playfully with hers.

"I don't even know why we're here," she said with a soft laugh. "Etsuko has both of them practically enchanted."

He grinned back. "Damage control. Also, we need to take over for her when Hanako comes swooping in."

"You sure she will?"

"Mm-hm. She said so and added that I should ignore anything her 'cute little student' was going to say about a day off."
Sayu laughed at that and Sakumo stopped speaking to listen. He liked the sound of his wife's laughter very much. He was a lucky man for hearing it so often.

"You know, I'm glad we decided to do this," he continued after she stopped. He looked her directly into the eyes. "I know that you met her just the day before yesterday and that you have no reason to go out of your way to help her, so I want you to know that I appreciate all of it very much."

"That's a given," she answered with a voice that was soft but earnest. "She means a lot to Kakashi and you, how could I not care? Besides, even I could see that something wasn't right. The talk about her teammates clearly made her very uncomfortable."

He nodded. Of course she understood. "Do you think the boys are giving her trouble?"

"No. I believed her when she said that they were doing a lot to help her feel welcome. It must be something else."

He sighed. "Well, we'll find out today, I guess."

Before either of them could say another word, a loud squeal erupted from where the children were playing. Sakumo looked up just in time to see Etsuko being thrown onto Hanako's shoulder, letting out another yelp. The jounin instructor lifted her hand and waved at him and Sayu.

"I'll borrow her for a bit," her voice boomed over the playground, making the rest of its occupants turn their heads. "See ya later!"

One heartbeat later she was gone, leaving nothing behind but a trail of dust.

For a moment, nothing but shocked silence filled the air, until little Obito turned to look at them with huge eyes and wobbly lips.

"She took Nee-chan away," he said, sounding forlorn and heartbroken.

"Obito," Sayu began but was promptly interrupted when the boy gasped and reached for Kakashi's arm, switching from sad to agitated in the fraction of a second.

"We need to save her," he yelled. "Come on, Kakashi!"

Addressed boy nodded and turned to look at his parents. "There's no time. Catch up with us later, Tou-chan, Kaa-chan!"

And then the two tiny boys began to run in the direction Hanako took off.

Sakumo sighed again.

He'd expected to be doing some kind of damage control at some point. Well, here it was.

Damn Hanako.

H00C

Hanako was enjoying her day.

Everything was going according to plan because of course it was, she'd been putting a considerable amount of time into thinking things out, after all. She mentally ticked off the boxes that had led to the situation as it was right now:
Verify that her cute little minions did indeed have the figurines on them and that said figurines were doing their work as chakra transmitters.

Check.

Put a handful of tadpoles into the purified water of the big civilian shrine right next to the market. Leave a half-eaten pocky stick and a carving saying NAWAKI WAS HERE on the shrine wall.

Check.

Smuggle three furious cats in a basket from the Uchiha compound into the Inuzuka one and set them loose. Leave a half-eaten pocky stick in it and a message saying TO TRAIN THE WILL OF FIRE, SINCERELY WILL-OF-FIRE-Junior on a piece of paper.

Check.

Leave graffiti on the Hyuuga compound wall depicting numerous huge eyes and the caption I SEE YOUUU. Put a half-eaten pocky stick on top and add UCHIHA STILL RULZ PS: I'M FIVE in a corner.

Check.

With China Doll thrown over her shoulder and the knowledge that the boys were indeed moving out – pity that she forgot where she learnt that trick to seal her own chakra into paper, it was a really useful one – she was ready to enter the final stage of her plan: THE GRAND CHASE.

Hanako grinned cheerfully as she thought about the details of her prank-exercise. It was all pretty simple, straightforward and therefore ingenious, really. Havoc was wrought, incriminating evidence planted, forces of order mobilized. The boys would know the moment police officers came after them, not to mention the moment the figurines went searing hot in their pants or wherever they kept them, and move out in the direction of training field 21 on their own. China Doll was getting special treatment because she was new. Hanako nodded sagely to herself as she thought that, yes, she was demanding but not cruel.

"Let me down, sensei! What the fuck is happening?!

Was that in her head? Or was it China Doll? Ah, yes, indeed, her baby student had started to come around. Or maybe she just hadn't heard her before. She was speaking to the other direction after all and the wind was really loud while running.

"Ts, ts, language dearie," Hanako replied. "I know you're excited but you'll see in a bit, don't worry! Patience is a virtue." After a short pause she amended the statement. "Sometimes. Seldom. Right now, definitely."

Etsuko, smart child that she was, shut up after that.

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Something was coming their way. Fast.

Shikaku saw Inoichi squinting at something from the corner of his eye and was busy pretending that he had not noticed anything out of the ordinary. Involvement in whatever was approaching was simply too troublesome. He hoped that his blond teammate would see it the same way.

"Shikaku," said blond teammate piped up. "Something's coming."
Shikaku sighed. Hope, as he'd learned a long time ago, seldomly converged with reality.

"So?" he drawled in as bored a voice as he could muster.

"You think sensei should know?"

He opened his mouth to respond but never made it that far.

"What should I know?"

Toudou-sensei had the remarkable talent to unfailingly appear whenever and wherever his name was mentioned. And most of the time, he appeared out of seemingly nowhere, scaring the living bejeezus out of his victim. Shikaku was 99% sure that he got a kick out of it.

Inoichi, completely unfazed by his sensei's sudden appearance, stretched out his arm and pointed at a dust cloud at the horizon. It was getting steadily bigger.

"Ah," Toudou-sensei said.

Chouza came over from where he'd been taking advantage of the break in training and hurriedly decimated a bag of potato chips and together, Team Toudou was watching the cloud come nearer in peaceful unity.

It was clear to see that it was not heading in their exact direction, rather bypassing them in a flat arc. It was also clear that the cloud was, in fact, a person running in high speed. A woman with a wild violet mane reflecting the sunlight, dressed in a jounin vest, shorts and bandages at the ankles, a huge grin that was even visible from where they were standing and … a strange bundle on her shoulder.

Shikaku squinted.

The bundle was waving at them.

He recognized the woman. That was Mitarashi Hanako, known for her battle prowess, unconventional ideas in the field and a considerable dose of crazy. She was the jounin sensei of the Sandaime's son, the Shodai's grandson and, if he'd heard right, also –

"Was that Etsuko?" Chouza asked.

"I think that was Etsuko," Inoichi answered.

"Who's Etsuko?" Toudou-sensei asked.

"Shikaku's bride-to-be," Inoichi answered. He looked inordinately pleased with himself, in that calm, focused way of his.

Shikaku groaned. That bastard.

Suddenly, Toudou-sensei was all attention. "You've got a bride-to-be? Man, congratulations! Where was she? I only saw Hanako there."

"She was thrown over her shoulder," Chouza supplied helpfully, back to munching on chips.

For a moment, there was silence as Toudou processed this.

And then he broke into unrestraint guffawing.
"You're … AHAHAHA … engaged to a … HAHA … toddler?! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Shikaku closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. When he opened them again, he saw his sensei still doubled over from laughing, Inoichi standing on one side looking smug and Chouza on the other, good-naturedly patting Toudou's shoulder.

Back-stabbing traitors, all of them. Even Chouza, who was guilty by association.

So troublesome.

"Stop bugging me, Nawaki," Tsunade said and gave him a gentle flick on the forehead that sent him staggering back some steps until he hit a chair with the back of his knees and flopped down on it. "I actually have a job to do. Shouldn't you be out training anyway? Making sure that the baby of your team doesn't surpass you? Or is it too late for that already?"

Nawaki stuck out his tongue at her as he rubbed the sore spot on his forehead. "Haha, very funny, Nee-chan."

"Oh, dearest little brother, don't worry." His sister's voice had suddenly become the sonic equivalent of a sly cat's grin.

His eyes narrowed in a suspicious squint.

He didn't like this. At all.

Her grin widened even further as she announced with a sing-song voice: "All sorts of gods will look favorably upon you because Nee-chan has put a bet on you."

Nawaki's mouth fell open in horror. "You put a bet on me?!

"Of course I did," she said smugly. "I have formidable luck."

"Tsunade-nee, how could you?!"

Through the mist of his general panic, he caught a glimpse of her laughing at him like the evil witch she turned into on occasion.

"Relax, Otouto, there're exactly two members in this betting pool: me and myself. Also, I put in a time limit of four months."

Nawaki scowled. "You think she'll have caught up to me in four months."

"On schedule for your birthday," Tsunade confirmed cheerily. "And no, not caught up. Surpassed."

"You're mean, Nee-chan!"

"Not mean, just helping your motivation. You do want to become Hokage, don't you?"

"Of course I do! I will make both Hashirama-jii and Tobirama-jii proud!"

Nawaki had not quite finished with his declaration when a knock sounded from the door of Tsunade's office.

"Come in!" she said in a voice more resolute than when she talked to him but still far away from that
strictly-business-tone she used with practically everybody else. Nawaki knew immediately that a teammate of hers was coming. He was proven right as soon as the door swung open.

"Orochi-nii!" he beamed and hopped off the chair in excitement. "I haven't seen you in ages!"

The tall man that entered was as familiar to him as his sister. Sure, he oozed that mysterious, powerful aura that most people found intimidating, but Nawaki had known him for years now. Due to the age gap of fourteen years between Tsunade and him all three of Team Hiruzen had already been jounin by the time he'd been born which meant that Tsunade had forced babysitting duty on whoever was available.

Really, once you'd slobbered all over someone's hair during a piggy-back ride the potential for fear just vanished.

"Brat," Orochimaru greeted him. "I've been busy."

Nawaki nodded enthusiastically. "I know! You've been fighting at the front lines, right? It must've been so exciting! The most challenging thing we ever got to do was getting supplies to an outpost within Fire Country borders."

Orochimaru raised a single eyebrow. "Go and earn a promotion if you're so bored."

What other people would've seen as an annoyed dismissal, Nawaki actually understood as the advice it was meant to be. Orochi-nii didn't do annoyed dismissals – they lacked style. Orochi-nii valued style.

So he just nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

Orochimaru accepted that as the end of the discussion and turned to face his teammate. "Tsunade, I need you to –"

"Hello to you, too, Orochimaru," Tsunade interrupted him flatly.

"– extend the duration of effect for the preventive serum –"

"We already talked about that, I can't do that without causing serious damage to the liver and kidneys –"

"– found a way to circumvent this by adding the components of –"

"– that would attack the heart instead which is not –"

"– is nothing that can't be counteracted by the new pill I've been working on –"

Nawaki decided then and there that he'd probably overstayed his welcome.

"Bye, Nee-chan!" he yelled extra loudly. "Thanks for helping me!"

"Yes, yes," she replied absentmindedly, already immersed in the world of science.

Tsunade-nee and Orochi-nii were both glorified nerds in his opinion and no display of their admittedly terrific skills could convince him otherwise.

He walked out of his sister's office, out of the hospital – and was unsure where to go next. He hadn't planned anything else for today since he'd been convinced that Hanako was going to spring some kind of surprise on him. That conviction was still alive but it also meant that he needed something to
do until it happened.

Might as well go train then. When Orochi-nii was right, he was absolutely right.

He didn't even make it halfway to his favored training field when the pocket in his shinobi trousers started to burn holes into the fabric.

Nawaki frantically turned the insides of them out. Some change fell out, pieces of scrap paper, and Hanako's chocolate wrapper figurine.

It was glowing red and, yes, searing hot. And then it burnt itself to ashes.

"Uh-oh," he mumbled.

"Senju Nawaki?"

Nawaki turned around to face the stern expression of an Uchiha police officer.

"Uh, yeah?"

"I need you to answer some questions for me. You're connected to a recent string of vandalism all over the village. Do you happen to know anything about it?"

"Vandalism? What?"

Dread was forming in his gut. The figurine burning into ashes. A police officer asking about his connection to a string of vandalism.

This smelled like one of Hanako's pranks.

"Uh …"

He was probably supposed to run.

"I'm sorry, officer, uh, but I don't think I can help you."

Then he turned around and ran.

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He collapsed in front of them, panting and gasping for breath. "What the hell, sensei?!" he wheezed, pointing an accusing finger at the jounin.

Hanako ignored him and clapped her hands excitedly.

"Ok, smoochy-cuties, now that we're all together we can finally proceed to the fun part. Regashi, Nawaki, you probably already figured it out so this is for you, China Doll: today is all about the art of escaping pursuers."

"What," Etsuko said.

"Three moderately important places in Konoha have been redecorated today and the police force is eager to find out who did the redecorating. Luckily, a clue has been left at each of the places that will identify the responsible persons as you."
"Oh no," Nawaki mumbled. "The vandalism charges."

"What?" Etsuko said.

"So now, you have to try your best to evade the police officers since of course you want to be the first ones to tell the Hokage what you did for the village, right? Did I mention that you want to see the Hokage? No? Then here you go: you desperately want to see the Hokage."

Nawaki saw Regashi groan quietly.

"Everything clear now? Gooood. Now, my sweet little whole-wheat-dumplings, I'd suggest you to get a move on it. Police forces will be here in approximately half a minute. Good luck!"

Nawaki had a coughing fit when he managed to inhale some of the dust Hanako whirled up with her exit. It tasted pretty bad, too.

Regashi helped him stand up at some point. The three of them looked at each other in varied degrees of despair and resignation.

"Let's go see my father then," Regashi finally sighed.

The Sandaime Hokage sighed.

"Hanako," he said, slowly and carefully. "What made you think that this … project was a good idea?"

Hanako grinned unabashedly. "It was exercise for the Police Force, exercise for my little minions and fun for me. A win-win-win situation." She was blithely ignoring the dark looks that her 'little minions' as well as the lone Uchiha officer were shooting at her.

"It's war time, Hanako. The Police Force is the major defense force of our village."

"All the more reason to keep them on their toes, then."

Hiruzen closed his eyes and rubbed little circles on his temples.

He opened them again. "You're dismissed. No, not you Hanako, you stay for a while."

He got a chorus of "yes, Hokage-sama!" and couldn't help a fond smile appearing as the children filed out.

"So," he began as soon as he was alone with one of his strongest jounin and the most prominent prankster in Konoha history. "Which security lacks did you find this time?"

"Do you think Hanako-sensei is in trouble?" Etsuko asked quietly as soon as they stepped out of the Hokage Tower.

"Nah, don't think so," Nawaki said, with his arms put behind his head and generally much more relaxed than twenty minutes before. "It's not the first time she pulled a stunt like this. I think she is the Hokage's favorite bringer of chaos or something."

Regashi nodded. "I think she actually achieves something with each of her pranks. Otou-san values
Nawaki watched her settle into a posture that was a little less rigid than usual. He even detected a slight bounce in her step. She looked more relaxed than he'd ever seen her before and suddenly he realized how young she was. It was strange that he hadn't noticed before.

But then, she was kind of super smart. Weird, but smart.

"So, now that the general threat of Hanako is over: do you have any plans?" Regashi asked.

"Not really," Nawaki answered.

"I need to go back to the playground," Etsuko said. "My little brother might be worried. Hanako's abduction was rather abrupt."

Regashi's and Nawaki's eyes met for the fraction of a second.

"Do you mind if we join you?" they asked in unison.

Surprise crossed her features. "I, uh, no, I don't mind."

"OK, then it's settled. Next mission: safely escort Etsuko-chan to the reunion with her little brother," Nawaki announced.

Etsuko snorted.

They never made it to the playground.

On a patch of grass not too far from it, they were stopped by a pretty woman with long dark hair bound in a ponytail who'd started waving at them as soon as they were within sight.

"Etsuko-chan, over here!"

Nawaki stared in wonder as a real smile bloomed over his teammate's face. Said teammate proceeded to head in the direction of the woman without hesitation, so both he and Regashi followed her.

The woman was seated on a red blanket that had enough space for at least five other full grown people. In front of her were a picnic basket and two little toddlers, one with black hair, pale skin and huge black eyes and the other with silver-ish hair and really pale skin.

The black-haired one immediately stumbled on his feet and yelled "Nee-chan!"

Regashi chuckled. "Obito, I assume?"

Etsuko actually beamed. "Yup!"

And then she was off to meet her little brother, who promptly tackled her to the ground.

Nawaki scratched the back of his head. "Did you just see what I did?" he asked no one in particular.

"Yes," Regashi answered. He sounded just as surprised.

They just stood and watched as the little kid started babbling, with Etsuko listening intently to every
word, watched as she made her way over to the woman who embraced her shortly but tightly, watched as the other kid got comfy at her side.

Until she turned her head to look at them with a raised eyebrow. "Are you two just going to stand there and watch?"

Nawaki's face went red in embarrassment. Yeah, they probably looked stupid.

As soon as they had settled on the big red blanket, Etsuko introduced them.

"Sayu, these are Nawaki and Regashi, my teammates. Nawaki, Regashi, this is Sayu. And here we have Kakashi and Obito."

"Hellooo," Obito said.

Now that he was up close, Nawaki could see how strikingly similar the siblings looked. It was not just due to the typical Uchiha coloring, which helped of course, but also due to the minute details in their behavior. The same gestures, the same smiles – and boy, Etsuko was smiling so much –even the same way of intoning their speech. For a short moment, it seemed like they were one person in two versions.

The only difference was that Nawaki had the feeling that Obito was happy far more often than his sister.

"We were going to rescue you, Nee-chan," the toddler was just saying. "Kakashi and I both were! But Sakumo and Sayu said you were ok. We still wanted to go, but then Sakumo said that we should trust that you're strong and we believed him because we know Nee-chan is reeeaaaly strong. Right, Kakashi?"

The other boy nodded and added with a much quieter voice. "Also, Otou-chan is right."

"Yeah, Sakumo is cool."

It took a moment for Nawaki to connect the clues.

Silvery haired child with a father of probably the same coloring since the mother was dark haired. Whose name was Sakumo.

"How do you know Hatake Sakumo, Etsuko-chan?" He burst out. "And why did you not tell us?!

"Nawaki," Regashi said.

"Tell you?" Etsuko asked in genuine confusion. "Why?"

"Why? WHY?! Because you know the freaking WHITE FANG!"

"Someone called me?"

Nawaki craned his neck and was suddenly confronted with the sight of his ultimate hero. A master of lightning, kenjutsu specialist with no peer, major strategist of the village: Konoha's White Fang Hatake Sakumo embodied everything that he wanted to be. He was strong, intelligent, kind –

"Nawaki, you're swooning," Etsuko remarked casually.

The heat rising in his face was immediate.
"Hello, everybody!" Sakumo smiled warmly. "That's quite a party going on here, hm?"

He walked around them to sit down next to his wife. "How are our kids doing?"

"Fine, fine," Sayu answered, barely suppressing her laughter. "Obito and Kakashi are still full of energy and Etsuko has brought her teammates. They were just coming this way together, so I invited them to join us for our picnic. I bought too much food anyway. Such a nice coincidence, don't you think?"

"Coincidence," Etsuko echoed.

Sayu smiled even wider.

Nawaki was occupied by something else, though. He squinted at Etsuko. "Did they just say you were their kid?"

Sakumo laughed. "Well, it's nothing official of course, but they sure feel like our kids. Besides, it's shorter than calling each of their names." And then he reached over to ruffle their hair, including Etsuko's.

This time, it was her who went red all the way to the hairline.

Nawaki huffed. "You know what, next time you fail to mention that you were practically adopted by a legend you better have an explanation ready. If I have to make an idiot out of myself, I'd like to be prepared at least."

Etsuko became even redder.

It was totally worth the short moment of mortification on his own side.

Chapter End Notes

And here you go. I hope the POV changes weren't too jarring. Tell me what you think! And join me on tumblr! There's loads of cool stuff on there (hint: if anybody ever wanted to hear my voice, you can do it now on tumblr).
I wake up to an odd feeling.

It's 6 in the morning. Obito is still soundly asleep, the house still in that transparent state of peaceful quietness – the one that only exists in the moment where the mind of the just awakened is not yet drowned out by the noise of the fully functional, ready to dissipate with the smallest of movements. Everything is as it is supposed to be.

At the same time, it's different.

There's a feeling in my chest, warm, heavy and reassuring, and as I give myself the luxury to revel in it, to simply lie and stare at the ceiling – I slowly come to a realization.

I have felt this way before, a lifetime ago. A life in which everything seemed so much simpler, where I'd spent so much time in this state that I'd taken it for granted. That I'd never thought about actively committing it to memory.

It is the feeling of contentment.

Images of yesterday trickle through my conscience, the morning with Obito, the Hatake, Hanako's insane prank, the picnic.

The beautiful, beautiful picnic. Just thinking about it makes my body grow warm and happy.
And how could I not be? Obito and Kakashi, already the best of friends with a strong and healthy bond. Nawaki, alive and adorably awed in an obvious case of intense hero-worship. Regashi, less obvious but still excited, also alive. Sakumo and Sayu, proud parents and the most lovable hosts ever. Both of them calling Obi and I their kids.

I'm still blushing at that thought.

Yesterday, the events of canon Narutoverse couldn't have been further afar. In the light of the new reality that I am a part of, even the barest notion of half of them being dead or dying seems impossible.

And I am absolutely not inclined to let this change. Ever.

It is with this decision that I sit up and get ready for training. I give Obito a light kiss on his cheek before I leave the room, heading directly for the front door. I nearly miss Yashiro stepping out of the doorway to the kitchen.

"Etsuko," he calls.

I stop walking and look up at his face. "Yashiro-san?"

"Come back home as soon as you can today and find me in the study. I have the chakra paper ready."

*Oh right!*

My back goes just a little bit straighter, my eyes just a little wider and the corners of my lips turn just a little upwards as *excitement* floods me. My primary chakra element. I'm gonna find out my primary chakra element today!

I nod. "Yes, Yashiro-san. I'll be there."

He returns his nod and vanishes back into the kitchen, probably preparing his bento. The thought that *strange, why is Naoko not doing that?* flickers briefly through my mind, but I don't pay it any more attention. It's not as if Yashiro is unable to prepare his own lunch, so the woman can very well have a lie-in or whatever.

I should probably start doing the same, in fact, if I don't want to spend all of my little mission money on eating out.

*Oh well.* Maybe when I'm finally able to reach the kitchen counter without having to climb on a chair every single time.

I'm so looking forward to getting taller.

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"Here, Etsuko-chan," Regashi says. He offers me his hand and I grab it gratefully, getting up with a graceless "ooof!" that could've come from an older lady. Like, in her 70s or something, with rheumatic joints and aches. Hanako didn't pull any punches, just as usual. Today has been all about taijutsu, and I think she'll want us to spar against each other soon.

I swallow hard.

That's going to be interesting, to say the least.
"OK, guys, I need to help my sis with something in the lab," Nawaki announces. "See you later at the assembly!"

Regashi and I wave at him as he takes off and we leave in the opposite direction shortly after.

Ah yes, the assembly. Sakumo told us about it yesterday, something about the Hokage wanting to announce a few things concerning the still ongoing war. All citizens of Konoha are invited and it will be held in front of the Hokage Tower to accommodate as many people as possible. I wonder what it could be about. Konoha seems to be doing pretty well, at least according to the bits and pieces of information that I can overhear sometimes.

"Can I ask you something?" Regashi's voice interrupts my musings and I look up to see him peering at me curiously.

I shrug. "Sure."

"You seem really close with the Hatake family. How did you meet them?"

I barely avoid freezing up on the spot.

The logical part of my brain tells me that this is a perfectly normal question to ask, that it isn't meant as an interrogation and that sweet, kind Regashi is certainly not out for my blood.

The rest of me just wants to run, because.

How can I tell him that I met Sakumo while I was sitting next to the corpse of my father, drenched in his and his murderer's blood and fingers cramped in the cloth that enveloped my little brother? How can I tell him that Sakumo was the first person I spoke to after my first kill? That he came just in time to prevent me from gouging my eyes out? That he'd been the one to find out that my mother was dead, too?

How can I tell him without making him realize that I am a walking bag of unresolved issues?

The truth is: I can't. Not because I don't trust him – but because I don't trust myself. Telling Regashi would mean confronting these ghosts of mine and I am not ready for that. I know it, with the same certainty as my body did when the chill of killing intent came oozing out of Hanako that day on the roof. The Goukakyuu had been a kneejerk reaction born out of sheer terror, not a calculated move.

There's no telling what will happen if I let all of it spill out now.

So I don't.

I don't freeze up on the spot. Instead, my step falters minutely, but I catch myself fast enough that it doesn't become too suspicious. And I give an answer.

"I met Sakumo almost two years ago. He introduced me to his son Kakashi and went off to war. My brother and Kakashi became best friends, Sakumo came back, brought Sayu along and here we are." I throw in a smile. "Sometimes, things just fall into place by chance, you know what I mean?"

Regashi smiles back. "That's amazing, Etsuko-chan."

I'm not sure he believes me.

A few seconds pass in which I keep expecting him to press the issue – but he doesn't. For some reason, he doesn't require more. And I am so grateful for that.
There's some friendly chitchat before we part ways at the usual spot and agree to meet up later for the assembly.

It's for the best, really. And with that, I shut all these unpleasant feelings away once more, away into the darkness where they belong.

I head straight back to Yashiro's house, my steps increasingly impatient and mind buzzing with mounting excitement because – *chakra element*.

Weeeeee.

The last few yards to the front door are covered with something that barely resembles a civilized walk. Doors cannot open fast enough and my mind cheerfully adds the sound of screeching tires as I come to a halt in front of Yashiro's office. It really takes every ounce of self-control not to just barge in there like a horde of euphoric elephants.

Instead, I get on my knees and notify him of my presence with a subdued voice, the way I was taught to be polite. I hear movement from the other side of the shoji screens and one moment later, he's standing before me, chakra paper in hand and ready to go.

"Come," he says and takes off without wasting another word.

Looks like I'm not the only one who's excited.

The walk to the training ground is swift and silent and before long, we're standing in the middle of it. Yashiro thrusts a sheet of the precious chakra paper into my hand and for a moment, I stare.

It looks completely unassuming. You know, like, grey. And square. And grey.

Incredible how this piece of scrap paper can hold that much meaning for my entire professional life.

Yashiro clears his throat. "Channel your chakra."

Right. Here it comes.

I summon my chakra and let a small stream trickle into my fingertips – and the paper reacts instantaneously.

There's a crackling noise, a faint whiff reminding me of overheated cables and just like that, the paper has turned all wrinkly and brittle.

"I see," Yashiro says. "Not uncommon within the clan, but it hasn't appeared in recent times, either. Your primary chakra nature is –"

"Lightning," I blurt out.

Yashiro's left eyebrow goes up in disapproval of being interrupted but he restrains himself with a taciturn "Yes."

"Lightning," I blurt out.

Yashiro's left eyebrow goes up in disapproval of being interrupted but he restrains himself with a taciturn "Yes."

Guess which other canon Uchiha had a lightning affinity. And yeah, you guessed right: none other than resident drama queen Uchiha Sasuke.
Ok, not yet resident. And ok, not yet drama queen, either. And yes, yes, I know he had pretty convincing reasons to be one. But that's not the point.

The point that I'm trying to make is that I am nothing like Sasuke. Uber-emotional, uber-angsty and uber-broody Sasuke, I'm-gonna-kill-that-man-Sasuke, I'm-gonna-destroy-Konoha-for-Itachi-Sasuke. Me? I'm nothing like that.

… at least starting from the point where he wanted to kill everybody. The stuff coming before that?

I can see when someone digs themselves a neck-deep hole. Unfortunately, that also applies when that certain someone is I myself.

Dammit.

"... and you will need high-quality specialized training," Yashiro says and suddenly I realize that I have missed most of whatever he was saying. Oops. "I'll file an inquiry for you to get an ANBU-level instructor or a jounin, since it is of utmost importance that you have the best training from the very beginning."

Wait, is he talking about getting me an extra teacher for my chakra affinity?

"Why can't you do it?" I blurt out in a hasty attempt to at least appear as if I was making a meaningful contribution to this conversation.

He pinches his nose and lets out an irritated breath. "You were not listening."

Oh well. Wrong contribution.

"As I was saying, I myself do not have the necessary qualification to give you the training you need. The clan elders will either match you with someone within the clan, which I doubt since there haven't been a lot of lightning specialists lately, or approve a request to the Hokage."

"You can do that?" I ask, surprise coloring my voice. I don't remember anything like that happening in canon. Then again, none of Team 7 exactly had the support of one of Konoha's major clans at their back. I'm not even sure if Sakura ever found out what her primary chakra nature was. I don't know why, but in Naruto's time, personal connections seemed much more important. As in, having one of the Sannin as your secret godfather and getting special training that way. That's probably the part my clan is doing for me.

"It is possible and even encouraged for special cases," Yashiro answers. "The village has an interest in providing the best training for their best people."

Yeah, sounds logical. But what about Hanako?

"What about my current jounin-sensei? Is Hanako-sensei not qualified?"

"She could train you in the basics, I suppose," Yashiro relents. "Your learning speed will ultimately determine when it is prudent to take the next step. And when that time arrives, a competent teacher must be ready and available."

"Uh, okay," I answer lamely. I suppose that's his way of saying that he doesn't believe that Hanako has the 'necessary qualifications'. But, seriously, who is he hoping to get as my super special instructor anyway? For all I know, Hanako seems to be pretty badass. Insane, yes, but badass. Badass enough for the Hokage to entrust her with the care of his own son and one of the last two remaining Senju. She would totally be able to handle my puny self. And, oh yeah, I might be getting
I'm rambling, aren't I.

Sigh.

I should've known that I would get attached to them as soon as I allowed them past my internal alarm systems. And my obsessive protectiveness has expanded to such an extent that I'm getting all upset at the slightest mention of Hanako's primary chakra nature probably not being lightning. Which probably isn't even meant as an insult.

This is ridiculous. Have I always been this emotional? Taken everything so personal? I can't … I can't remember if Elizabeth used to be like that.

I need to think about that some time. In silence and peace.

"Etsuko," Yashiro's furious voice cuts in and suddenly I realize that I've spaced out on him the second time within ten minutes. Uh-oh.

"This is a matter of exceeding importance for your future," he rants, "and as such, a matter of exceeding importance for the clan. You do not seem to understand the privilege that has been granted to you and I will not tolerate such a display of ignorance --"

I hurriedly throw myself into a bow meant to convey the deepest level of apology. I honestly didn't mean to upset him and also, I do kinda feel like an asshole. For the first time in, well, forever, he is actually communicating plans for the future to me. Plans that will significantly help me in my progress with shinobi-ing™ – and here I am, indulging my super emotional tendencies.

So a super deep bow plus apology it is.

"My apologies, Yashiro-san. I was lost in thought. It won't happen again."

Yashiro snaps his mouth shut mid-sentence, blinks once. Twice. Lets out a grunt.

I stay in position.

"You can stand up," he eventually says. He eyes me intently as I unbend myself and for a couple of seconds, neither of us says anything.

"Hn," is his verdict.

I'm hard pressed not to roll my eyes. Seriously. The communicative charms of my extended family are astonishing.

"What have your thoughts yielded, then?" he asks at length.

Uh.

Yeah.

Crap.

This might just be the first time ever that he asks me what I'm thinking and, well. I guess telling him
about how emotional I feel at times will not exactly convince him to ask me again any time soon.

So what could I have been thinking about instead? Something, productive, preferably? Maybe about a possible instructor?

I barely hold back a frustrated cry as I mentally race through my limited options since my few acquaintances are all either still babies or genin themselves, with the exception of -

*Oh.*

Oh man, I can't believe how stupid I am.

I look Yashiro square in the eyes. "I thought about asking Hatake Sakumo if he would train me. Would training under the White Fang meet the requirements?"

Yashiro's left eyebrow lifts in surprise. "Hatake Sakumo?" He stops to think about it. "He's not considered a clan affiliate although there have been efforts to reach out to his expertise from time to time. He is indeed a competent shinobi."

I nearly snort at that. Leave it to an Uchiha to call a living legend a 'competent shinobi' and mean it as a compliment.

"This alternative is worth considering. I will present it to the clan council at the next assembly."

With that, he signals me the end of our session. On our way home I have enough time to go over the exact meaning of his last remarks. The term 'clan affiliate' especially has sparked my interest.

'Affiliate' as a term is only known to me in the context of business. One meaning would be that of an 'unconsolidated holding company', another would be the complex that stands behind the term 'affiliate-marketing'. Both of them are connected by a common baseline: the concept of an organization having stakes in satellite organizations, all sides thereby receiving benefits that they couldn't have reaped if they'd operated separately from each other. A simple analogy would be a person having other people around them with whom they agree to work together to achieve their individual long-term goals.

And now that I think about it, it's not too far-fetched to put clan business in that context. I mean, think about it: the clan is nothing more than an organization. A socially intricate one, not with the primary goal to maximize profits and as such not a company, yes, but an organization nonetheless. An organization with an important function within society, interests of its own and a magnetic pull to outsiders. It's not too difficult to imagine that there're people trying to gain the Uchiha's favor and it's even less difficult to imagine that among them there are people with talents that the clan considers useful.

The idea of the Uchiha having affiliates is not absurd at all.

Which means that the clan must have regular contact with society outside the clan. Meaning there must be people who benefit from the clan. People who are going to stop seeing that benefit at some point, either by being convinced or – else.

Which means that the downfall of the Uchiha in canon must've been a concerted effort long, long before the actual massacre.

I – I know this shouldn't come as a big surprise. There had been every indication in canon that Danzou had worked on eliminating the Uchiha – *us* – for quite some time before pushing Itachi to the ultimate deed, but -
But.

The Uchiha – we …

We aren't bad people.

I know others think that we all have a stick up our collective ass and that we feel superior due to our
doujutsu. That we're an elitist bunch of assholes stuck in traditions and that we hold everyone against
impossible standards.

But then I think of the people I've grown up around and – and I see so much more.

I see Okaa-chan and feel generations' worth of motherly love.

I see Otou-san and hear his quiet encouragement to become the best I can be.

Even Yashiro, devoting much more time to me than he's obliged to because he firmly believes that
he's doing what's best.

And of course, Obito, my personal ray of sunshine.

We have our flaws, just like everybody. We have our ways, just like every collective that's survived
through the tides of time. We're humans, just like the rest of the village.

What have we done to deserve systematic eradication?

"Are you not coming in?"

With a start I realize that we've arrived in front of Yashiro's house. He's standing in the doorway and
looking at me with raised eyebrows. Through the opened door, I can see the interior of his home.

My home.


"Thank you, Yashiro-san. For today, I mean."

He gives a short nod.

"You're welcome."

I'm pretty sure there was a real smile ghosting over his face just then.

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"Nee-chan, look, Kakashi, Sakumo and Sayu are all here!"

Obito is excitedly tugging at the hem of my shirt and since I'm still looking for my teammates and
therefore not responding immediately, he decides to take matters into his own pudgy little hands. He
tries to wiggle out of the firm grip I have on him and nearly manages to break free.

"Alright, alright, Obi!" I let out with fake exasperation and retake his hands into mine. "Jeez, they're
not going to disappear."

Obito pulls me along as we make our way through the not yet dense crowd. We've arrived early
enough to secure some space at the front – let me tell you that I did not miss not being able to see
anything else but grown people's kneecaps or butts on eye-level – but Kakashi apparently doesn't have any need for that since he has two moving plateaus that go wherever he wants them to. He's currently seated on the right arm of the plateau named Hatake Sayu and as we arrive in front of the Hatake family, he looks down at us from his elevated seat with a pleased expression.

"Obito, Etsuko-nee," he greets us with a little wave.

Obito bounces back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Come down, Kakashi! Hiya Sayu! Hiya Sakumo!"

"Hey, you two," Sakumo greets back with a smile. He reaches over to his wife and attempts to get Kakashi down, but the little boy shakes his head.

"No," Kakashi says.

"Hey!" Obito exclaims.

Sayu laughs. "Let him get up, then!"

Sakumo nods. "Excellent idea."

Before I understand what she's suggesting, my little brother is hauled off of his feet and placed on Sayu's left arm. Sakumo steps back to me and points at his shoulders. "Wanna get up, too?"

"What," I manage to get out before he crouches down and presents me with his back. He cranes his neck to look at me with a bright grin.

"Come on, climb up! You'll have a much better view."

I can feel my jaw falling open like an unhinged trap.

He's serious. He wants me to climb on his back and sit on his shoulders like he's … like he's my dad or something.

I spend quite some time standing there, looking and gaping at him like a fish taken out of water until Sakumo's face starts to fall.

"Uh … you don't have to Etsuko-chan," he says hesitantly. "Just say so, it's okay!"

He gets ready to stand up again when I finally get over myself and find my voice again.

"Wait! I – I'd love to!"

Something like relief crosses his features. "Hop on, then!"

And I hop on.

He's right of course. Sakumo is a tall man and seated on his shoulders, I can see practically everything and everyone within the plaza. It's starting to fill up quickly now, shinobi and civilians alike finding a place to comfortably look at the small stage that's been installed in front of the entrance to the Hokage Tower. There're even more shinobi on the roofs of the houses surrounding the place as well as on power poles, perched on them like oversized birds.

That can't be comfortable.

But hey, nothing would beat my seating arrangement anyway. Which is the Best Seat Ever.
Sakumo’s broad shoulders are really comfy and I, daring girl that I am, can’t resist running my fingers through his silver-white hair. It’s surprisingly soft and fluffy in a way that makes me wonder how it manages to keep looking spiky. Maybe it’s because of his lightning chakra?

A propos lightning chakra. I need to ask.

"Are you comfortable?" Sakumo asks.

"Yesss," I answer.

Mmm.

Maybe later. Right now, I'm sitting here, blissfully petting the White Fang's mane and all is well and good.

"Etsuko-chan!"

Oh, that sounded like Nawaki.

I turn my head in the direction from where his voice came and see that it is indeed Nawaki. He's not alone but being accompanied by Tsunade and a big man with long unruly hair half a shade darker than Sakumo's.

I'd recognize that hair anywhere, even if it didn't come in combination with two red lines on the owner's face.

Jiraiya.

OMG it's the Jiraiya.

Afeafhqnyoushf.

Excuse me while I am silently fangirling.

"Look who's coming," Sayu says suddenly and Sakumo turns so that I'm looking in yet another direction.

There, pushing their way through the crowd, are Regashi and a woman who looks a lot like Sarutobi Biwako. She's also carrying a little kid on her arm. Asuma, if I had to guess.

Oh my god. I'm about to be part of a meeting of legends.

Ohmigodohmigodohmigod.

Nawaki's group arrives first.

"Sakumo-senpai! You here? What a pleasant surprise!"

I flinch involuntarily at the volume of Jiraiya's booming voice, not at all prepared for the exuberance and sheer energy that the man exudes.

I can't see Sakumo's face from here, but I can hear the smile in his answer.

"Jiraiya-san, it's good to see you. You too, Tsunade-san, Nawaki-kun."

"Sakumo-san," Tsunade greets with a nod. "And hello, Etsuko-chan. Don't think you're invisible. It's
not your fault my idiot teammate has no manners."

Jiraiya lets out an embarrassed little laugh. "Ah, sorry, sorry. Of course I did see you, Etsuko-chan. How could anyone not see a young beautiful lady such as yourself?"

Oh, what a smooth talk-

"And in a few years, the addition of a few assets will make you even more beautiful for sure!"

Before anybody can verbally react, Tsunade swings wide with her right fist and hits Jiraiya smack on his skull.

There's a loud, very manly shriek.

"Why, Tsunade-chan?" Jiraiya wails, his paws – err, hands I mean – over the impressive bump that's already forming on his head. "I just complimented her!"

A thick vein starts throbbing on Tsunade's forehead. Fascinating how closely it resembles the manga version.

She inhales.

And then I decide that, since this argument is about me, I should do something about it.

"It's alright," I say as I stare down directly into his eyes with a straight face. "I accept your apology, Jiraiya-hentai."

A heartbeat of silence.

And then Tsunade, spending all of her pent-up breath at once, breaks into roars of laughter. She laughs so hard that her breath comes in short gasps and whatever she's saying doesn't make it past her lips. At least not understandable.

Jiraiya, a grown man with the approximate measurements of a hulking bear, pouts and grumbles something about "scary women".

It's to this picture that the Sarutobi arrive. Regashi looks first at Nawaki and then at me for an explanation, but since both of us are busy grinning like children in a candy shop, he sighs and gives up for now.

Besides, Biwako-sama's appearance manages to quiet down the two Sannin. If the woman notices the state of Jiraiya's head – and there's no way she doesn't – she doesn't comment on it.

A new round of greetings and introductions ensues, proving me right about Asuma. Sayu approaches Biwako to let Obito and Kakashi meet the kid and my little brother decides to bestow the same treatment upon him that he also gifted Kakashi with on their first meeting: he pokes Asuma in his cheek.

And Asuma pokes him right back.

Looks like they're going to be great friends.

"So you're Etsuko-chan," Biwako says with a friendly smile and suddenly, I know where Regashi learned his. "I've heard a lot about you already. It's good to have you on the team."

I blush. "Thank you, Biwako-sama."
"You should come over to dinner some time. Regashi tells me you like ice cream mochi?"

"Yes, very much."

"It's settled then. You three agree on a date and let me know. I'll arrange the rest."

Ooh. I just got a dinner date with the Hokage's wife.

She's turned around to Tsunade and Jiraiya now, the former still biting her lips in an effort to stifle her laughter.

"It's good to see you two. Where's Orochimaru-kun?"

What.

Tsunade shrugs, her good mood undisturbed. "In his lab. When I asked him if he wanted to come he said," here she adopts a disgusted expression on her face and continues in a haughty voice, "you ask if I'd like to get myself squashed by unwashed bodies and numbed by the odor of sweat to listen to something sensei already told me anyway? No thanks." She tosses her hair with a dramatic gesture and suddenly, I can see exactly how Orochimaru might do that.

Jiraiya huffs. "Teme is just being his anti-social self again."

Biwako frowns. "He has holed himself up in his lab since he came back to the village. I think it's time I have a talk with him."

What.

I can't believe this.

This is Orochimaru we're talking about, Narutoverse villain extraordinaire, and these people make him seem like some spoiled, petulant child that just needs a serious talk with his mom.

How did I end up here? Is this still Narutoverse? Help.

"Hey everybody," Regashi pipes up. "It's starting."

As if on cue, the whole place falls silent. There's an almost tangible quality of hopeful expectancy in the air, and suddenly, I realize that whatever is coming, it's going to be something big.

Sarutobi Hiruzen walks nearly to the edge of the stage until coming to a halt, his hands behind his back in a relaxed stance and his face fully turned towards his audience. Next to him, a much taller man stands in a mirroring pose. He's dressed similarly to the Sandaime, a lot of loosely falling white cloth and elegant folds, with the difference that where the Hokage robes show flashes of dark red, a light green shines through. Oh, and also the character on his hat depicting 'wind' instead of 'fire'.

I … didn't know the Kazekage was in Konoha.

Behind them to the right are Sarutobi's former teammates Koharu and Homura as well as … Danzou.

No emotions, not now.

To their left are two unfamiliar shinobi with Suna hitai-ate: a woman with below shoulder-length brown hair and pretty heavy lidded eyes and a man whose tousled red thatch looks like he just rolled out of bed. Both are sporting serious but non-threatening expressions.
"My dearest people of Konoha," the Sandaime starts. His voice carries effortlessly into the crowd and I can literally see the attention of the people being grabbed and kept.

"I have invited you today so that I can share with you a moment of unique importance in Konoha history. Today you will witness the next step toward the dream that Senju Hashirama first had when he founded the village and inspired leaders everywhere in the Elemental Nations to do the same: the dream to create a better world. A world where no child is sacrificed for senseless fighting as his brothers were; a world where the strong ally themselves to help those in need; finally, a world in which the lands prosper and the people can live in peace. And today, fire and wind will unite their strengths in celebration of the victory we have gained over our foes."

He stops and looks into the audience as low murmurs erupt all over the plaza. A few seconds pass as he watches, until he lifts his right hand. Everything goes silent once again.

He smiles.

"Yes, people of Konoha, you heard that right. The war is over."

The reaction of the people does not disappoint.

All around me, deafening cheers erupt. People are jumping up and down, hugging each other and sobbing, overwhelmed by the force of their emotions. It's as if all of a sudden, a blanket has been lifted, airing out all the cumulated fear, worry and sorrow of the past months.

Sakumo has turned his head to look at Sayu and by the tender, happy look on her face I can tell that he's probably looking the same. My two baby brothers watch everything with delighted curiosity.

Yeah, even Kakashi.

And I myself?

This – I –

It seems like such an understatement to simply say that I am relieved. Yet, it is relief that's coursing through my entire body, light-headed, warm relief that makes me feel like I have the ability to take off and fly right here, right now.

Because this means everybody will survive. Because this means that people will be spared the heartbreak and grief of losing someone dear.

Hanako, Regashi and Nawaki.

Sayu, Sakumo and Kakashi.

Katou Dan and Tsunade.

Me.

Everybody safe and alive. Can it really be?

Both Kage watch the rejoicing people with contented faces for a few minutes more until the Hokage raises his hand once again to demand our attention.

"Before I leave you to your joy and celebration which you have truly earned I want to take this opportunity to announce another great event: Suna and Konoha will not only keep up their military partnership alive. From today on, the partnership will boost an exchange in a scale such as it has
never been seen before."

Sarutobi talks.

He talks about the projects he and the Kazekage have planned out. Trading routes, knowledge exchanges, joint exams.

I don't know how much of this was announced at the end of the Second Shinobi War in canon, but to me, it does seem extraordinary. I'm not the only one to think that, apparently, as both the Sandaime's advisors as well as the Suna nin bear signs of wonder on their faces, too, no matter how well they hide it.

Speaking of the Suna nin. Something about the man's hair and the woman's heavy lidded eyes seems familiar. I can't put my finger on it, but …

I want to know.

I tug at a strand of Sakumo's hair to get his attention.

"Yes, Etsuko?" he says without missing a beat.

I position myself for a better look at the side of his face as opposed to the back of his head. *Mah, this will have to do.*

"Who are the Suna nin?"

"Suna ambassadors. The woman's name's Akari, a terrific puppeteer that one, and the man is … uh, I forgot his name. Anyway, he's a medic. Both of them very skilled and very nice people. I worked with them for some time when I was stationed at the border. They showed me a photo of their son when I let slip that I had one myself." He chuckles sheepishly.

For some reason, that feeling of familiarity has gotten that much stronger suddenly.

"A son? Do you remember his name?"

"Yeah, it was Sasori. Why do you ask?"

Sasori.

Those over there are Sasori's parents.

Who would've been killed by none other than Konoha's White Fang if things had gone according to canon.

"I …," I stutter. "Suna people … they have interesting names, don't you think?"

"Really? I never noticed. But now that you say it, 'light' and 'scorpion' are indeed daring names to give."

"Right?" I let out a nervous little laugh. I can't believe he accepted that one without questions.

I think I don't realize often enough what a lucky idiot I am.

But.

Maybe, just maybe, in the light of all these good things that have happened recently…
… destiny has really decided not to fuck me over again.

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Time passes.

Days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months and Hanako's training turns into Hell Camp.

The aforementioned taijutsu training is indeed as torturous as expected. Nawaki and Regashi kick my ass so badly, it's not even funny. Also, Hanako seems to think it's a good idea to throw random kunai, shuriken, and senbon at us at random intervals during random hours of the day no matter where we are.

"Awareness and reflex training," she grins cheerily when I give her the Uchiha stink eye.

Add to that the wretched food poisoning I got the first time she invited us out to eat – Nawaki and Regashi tried to warn me but I was too thick to see the signs – and you get the picture.

But of course, not everything is bad. Far from it.

We have the date with Regashi's mom, as agreed upon, and I learn that nobody makes better nikuman – steamed pork buns – than Sarutobi Biwako. I also learn that between Regashi and Asuma, there's a little girl named Kimiko who is shy and as sweet as her brother.

Sakumo agrees to train my lightning affinity when I am ready and Sayu throws in naginata lessons as a bonus.

There's talk of a first joint Konoha-Suna-chunin-exam.

And amidst all this goodness, one week before Nawaki's birthday at the beginning of August, Hanako suddenly appears directly in the aisle of the shop where Regashi and I have been looking for a birthday gift.

She's unusually tense. It's everywhere, in the rigidity of her usually cheerful swagger, in the steely quality of her gaze and the flatness of her voice.

"Move out, kids," she announces without preamble. "Meeting in thirty minutes at the gates."

"A mission?" Regashi asks with a frown.

"Yes."

I almost expect her to leave without further explanations, but she stops again, her back still turned on us.

"Amegakure has declared war."

And then she disappears.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: For the next chapter, the rating for this story will go up for violence/body horror/blood/triggers. Please, please make sure you're up to this before reading on!
Chapter Summary

Twisting, turning, tumbling - how fast can everything change?

Chapter Notes

Hello again friends, how do you do?

I'm back with a new chapter which, as you can see in the title, is again the first part of a two-parter - yes, despite it already being at monster length. Thank you so so much for all the messages and reviews for the last chapter, every single one still makes me incredibly happy! If you have any more specific questions, I invite you to ask me on tumblr. I will answer there as best as I can.

Speaking of tumblr: I'm thrilled to announce that the wonderful tokibun has again worked their magic and made some amazing fanart: Etsuko-chan herself and Hanako! It's tagged under fanart on my blog, as usual. I'm still swooning over it.

Btw, you might have notice that the rating is still the same. Before you rejoice, though, a warning: it is merely a delay. Also, this chapter is a bit special, but you'll find out why as you read on.

And last not least: thanks to my beta NightsBlackRose13, who remains the best and most devoted source of inspiration.

There's no time for thinking.

Half an hour is barely enough time to get home, grab my backpack, and leave again for the village gates. My mind is completely blank, words echoing in the confines of my skull, bouncing around in slow-motion and leaving a bigger void every time the resonance wears off - until there's nothing left but a feeling of white noise.

Amegakure has declared war.

The house is eerily quiet as I mindlessly stuff a few additional things into my backpack. It has been well-stocked ever since Hanako made a surprise trip to the Forest of Death with us, only to leave us there on our own and watch as we survived two whole weeks with zero interference. I'd only survived because I'd been with Regashi and Nawaki, and packing my rucksack accordingly had not been the only lesson on survival I took away from then.

Amegakure has declared war.

Where is my hitai-ate? I should really wear my hitai-ate if I go out into the field, wouldn't want my fellow shinobi to not recognize me and start shooting fire balls or something. That would be bad. I
I paw aimlessly at my blanket and pillow, open up random drawers in my closet and stare into the heaps of socks and underwear until I remember that I'm wearing it. Have been wearing it all day, in fact. Silly me.

Amegakure has declared war.

I should … do something before leaving for the gate.

Say good-byes, for example.

Yeah, that's a good idea.

I sling my pack over my back – ahah, backpack, see what I did? – yeah, not funny – and walk out of my room to find the other occupants of the house, only to realize that I am probably alone. Makes sense I guess. Toshiro is either at the academy still or training. Yashiro is at work. And now that I think of it, today is market day, so Naoko is out, too. She's probably taken Obito with her.

I won't be able to say good-bye to him.

I write a short note on my absence and put it on the kitchen table, then turn on my heels and make my way out of the house.

He's going to be sad that I won't be there to sing him a lullaby tonight. I hope he doesn't give Naoko too much trouble.

"Etsuko!"

Oh. Looks like I was too fast in assuming I was alone.

"Yashiro-san," I say, my voice sounding weirdly dazed.

He steps out of his office and gives me a careful once-over. A shadow of … something passes over his face the moment he notices my backpack.

Tense silence.

And then he clears his throat.

"Remember, you represent the clan with every action you take. Think before you act, but when you do so, be swift and thorough. Be proud of who you are. And don't dishonor the clan by not coming back."

His mouth snaps shut the same moment mine falls open.

Did he just …

Did he just tell me not to die out there?

…

I think he just told me not to die out there. In Uchiha-speak, sure, but … I understand.

I take a step forward, then another, and another, until I'm standing right in front of him. I lift my arms.
And wrap them around his legs in an awkward hug.

"I'll do my best," I croak into his trousers.

He coughs, clumsily putting a hand on my head. "I'll await your report," he says gruffly.

I seem to have a frog in my throat.

It doesn't make the whole leaving thing easier.

Hanako is already there when I arrive. She's talking to a tall man with dark hair bound back in a ponytail and a jounin vest. I can't see his face since his back is facing me, but I can see hers.

I've never seen her this serious.

The two of them stop talking as soon as I am within hearing range and the man turns around. It's none other than Uchiha Fugaku.

"Etsuko-san," he nods in greeting.

I give a slight bow. "Fugaku-sama."

It's strange to be called 'san' instead of 'chan'. It has a frighteningly professional ring to it. It makes me realize that I am not a 'child-chan' but a 'fellow-shinobi-san'.

We don't exchange any more words after that.

I wonder if he remembers that his brother sacrificed his life to save mine.

Regashi arrives two minutes later and six minutes after that, Nawaki comes running.

"Sorry," he mutters under his breath. "Couldn't find Tsunade-nee."

He looks unhappy with that. I can definitely sympathize.

Now that we're all together, there's no reason to stay. We turn to look at Hanako, who shakes her head.

"Not yet," she says.

Oh.

Ok.

Another couple of minutes pass.

And then a woman with three children in tow comes running towards us.

"Nee-san," Nawaki says, surprise coloring his voice.

Honey blonde hair bound loosely in two pig tails suggest that yes, it is indeed Tsunade, but my attention is immediately swayed by the kids. One is a girl with bright red hair that goes well below her waist and exotic purple eyes while the other two look like the same boy twice over: exactly the same brunette hair and exactly the same faces with the telltale pearl-white eyes that make a Hyuuga identifiable from a distance of at least twenty miles.
If these kids are who I think they are -

"We have the antidote, Fugaku-taichou!" the girl yells.

Both boys roll their eyes in unison. I blink to make sure it's really two people and not just me being drunk and seeing double.

Never mind that I haven't touched anything alcoholic since being reborn.

"Good," Fugaku responds simply and holds out his hand.

The girl comes forward and hands over a vial with a transparent amber liquid. Fugaku takes it only to turn around and give it Hanako instead.

Hanako grins crookedly. "Thanks. And how considerate of you to bring the chemist right along. We could always use your monster-strength, Tsunade-senpai."

Tsunade doesn't return the grin. "Wish I could join you," she grumbles. "Instead, I'm stuck in-village. Seriously, figure out one antidote for Suna-granny's poisons and suddenly, your 'talents are much more useful in the lab'. Why not let Orochimaru do that instead? He's already practically living in his anyway."

"You countered every single one of Chiyo-san's poisons, Nee-san, not just the one," Nawaki deadpans. "It's practically a sport to you."

"It was." Tsunade nods with righteous indignation. "Before I was made to do it for every other poison, too." She sighs wistfully. "Imagine how annoyed she would've been if we'd been enemies."

Hanako cackles at that. "From what I've heard, she was still plenty annoyed."

Tsunade only answers her with a sweet, cat-like smile.

"So," Hanako drawls, "if you're not here to join us – why are you here, exactly?"

Tsunade's face turns serious with an abruptness that sends an almost physical jolt through my body. "I heard it was going to be your team to deliver the antidote and … I don't know, something feels off about this whole thing. Amegakure suddenly declaring war, the weird disappearances, the silence on the other side of the border – I just …"

Her voice wavers and she turns around to face her brother. "You birthday is still a week away, I know, but I want to give this to you now."

Her hand disappears briefly into the pocket of her haori and reemerges with a glittering crystal on a leather band. She puts it around Nawaki's neck and kisses him on his forehead.

And everything inside me grows cold.

Oh no.

No.

No no no.

This is not Tsunade giving Nawaki the Shodai's amulet. This is something else entirely.

*It has to be.*
Nawaki's eyes have gone as wide as saucers as he stares up at his sister's face. "Is this." He swallows. "Is this Hashirama-jii's?"

No. No, it mustn't be.

"Yes," Tsunade says and just like that, my desperate hopes are smashed into tiny little pieces.

"Thank you!" Nawaki cries out in unadulterated joy and hugs his sister tightly. "I promise, I'll keep it super safe!"

Tsunade makes a noise that's halfway between a choke and a chuckle. "Just, be careful. All of you."

"Yeah," the redheaded girl pipes in as she shamelessly wiggles herself into the embrace. Holy cow, she's loud. "Be safe, Nawaki-nii."

Nawaki grins. "You getting all soft on me, Kushina-chan?"

Oh.

Kushina-chan scowls. "Don't call me that, 'ttebane." She adds a light punch on his arm for good measure. Nawaki just laughs.

I'm not sure how long I can keep watching this.

There's a light hand on my shoulder and when I turn to look at the owner, I find Regashi looking at me with a questioning glance.

Are you alright?

I give him a shaky nod.

Just nervous.

Hanako thankfully chooses this moment to clap her hands and announce our departure. "Ok cutie-pies, as touching as this whole business is, it's time to get a move on." He voice sounds almost as bright as usual and I only detect the slight undertones of tension because I'm looking for them. "Grab your packs, smooch your sweethearts and shed a tear but move. Yeah, I'm looking at you, Nawaki."

"She's my cousin!" Nawaki yells in complete and utter horror.

Hanako raises an eyebrow and grins. "I thought that was normal in clan-kid-land?" She then proceeds to cackle like a clichéd madwoman and runs off into the Konoha forests.

Nawaki looks scandalized while Kushina's face turns as red as her hair. Tsunade just snorts.

Regashi shrugs. "She kind of has a point, doesn't she?" He looks at me with a crooked smile, clearly hoping that I respond.

I don't feel up to it and turn to face the gate instead.

"Let's go. We shouldn't let sensei wait too long."

I pretend not to notice the sudden drop in temperature – thanks for being the spoilsport, Etsuko, what would we do without you and your indomitable cheer – and a couple of hurried goodbyes later, we're running, Konoha disappearing behind us much faster than I would've liked. And with it, all I have known so far of this world.
I'm terrified to find what's new.

"It's a straight job. We have the antidote and are to bring it to Camp Sakana. It is imperative that it arrives there undamaged because it is the only chance of survival for a lot of people, shinobi and civilians alike. Which is also the reason why this is a B-ranked mission."

From next to me, Regashi frowns. "Are we expecting trouble on the way?"

Hanako laughs out shockingly loud. "We're never not expecting trouble, coffee-toffee."

Nawaki shoots me a long-suffering look at that admittedly terrible nickname that I'm meant to return in kind, but the muscles on my face feel like they've turned into stone. It's a good thing that my legs keep on working at least. I imagine that falling off the tree branches from this height might hurt a lot.

Nawaki grins crookedly. "Don't make that face, Etsuko-chan. We'll be fine."

I swallow thickly. "How can you be so sure?"

"Come on, it's your first assignment outside of Konoha. Aren't you at least a little bit excited?"

"Oh, on the contrary," I answer stiffly. "I could do with a little less excitement to be perfectly honest."

"It'll be alright, Etsuko-chan, just like Nawaki said," Regashi pipes in. "We'll protect you, no matter what."

*Oh no, don't you dare. Don't you dare go and die on my behalf.*

"I don't need your protection," I snarl, far more vicious than necessary or intended.

Regashi and Nawaki both flinch, their faces wearing twin masks of hurt.

Good job, Uchiha Etsuko, well done. And the award for 'asshole of the day' goes to me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I am … high-strung at the moment. Which is no excuse, I know. I'm sorry."

Nawaki recovers first, surprisingly. "Yeah well, if you prefer we leave you lying in a ditch there's nothing we can do, I guess." He starts grinning again. "Wouldn't want to get in the way of our mighty Uchiha."

I shoot him a weak glare that lacks all venom since I fully deserved that one. I wish the rest of this unpleasant business was as easy to deal with.

We keep running until the sun is so low that Hanako decides to set up camp for the night. Following the practiced steps to secure it has a calming familiarity to it and by the time we're all gathered around the small fire and Nawaki has launched into the tale of how he tricked Jiraiya into believing that Orochimaru was infatuated with the cute waiter from the yakiniku restaurant – which is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, by the way, because Orochimaru? Infatuated? – I can finally say that the almost painful knot in my stomach has mostly settled.

Hanako assigns first watch to me. I'm perfectly fine with that since I don't think I'm going to sleep
anytime soon despite being exhausted after a whole day of running. I settle down on a thick branch of a tree that allows me a clear view over most of the area and as the fire burns down to glowing embers, the rest of my team settles into their bedrolls. The silence of the forest descends and my thoughts begin to wander.

I wonder about the people back home. What they've been up to today, what they think about the whole situation. Yashiro and Tsunade are clearly aware of the danger that's inherent to Ame's declaration which alone is cause enough to be thoroughly unsettled – and that is not counting in my knowledge of canon events. Knowledge which I had gladly considered redundant the moment the Sandaime proclaimed peace.

Knowledge that nobody else has. That nobody else can use.

Everything around me stills.

That's right.

Nobody else can use it, but I can. I don't have to sit around and wait for the events to just happen.

Not this time.

I scramble to sit up in a position better suited for thinking while my brain rushes to collect every bit of information relating to Ame's involvement in the Second Shinobi War of the canon timeline as well as everything connected to Nawaki's death.

His death.

I mentally steel myself. If I want to tackle this, I need to be able to face this fact head-on.

OK, deep breaths. Here is what I know, in random order:

1) Hanzou was in charge of Ame. He should still be, as far as I know.

2) Konoha and Suna were adversaries, resulting in Sakumo killing Sasori's parents and Chiyo hating him guts. Also, hating Tsunade guts because of antidotes. This is not true here, fortunately. Well, except for the hating-Tsunade-bit maybe.

3) Ame's uprising in canon happened because Hanzou was sick of his people being punched around between the giants Konoha and Iwa who didn't give a rat's ass that they were hurting mostly innocents. This time around, I can't say for sure why they're picking up arms. Peace has been declared months ago and as far as I know, the Suna-Konoha-alliance managed to minimize casualties in other countries. Frankly, I have no idea what brought this on. It's worrying.

4) The circumstances on Nawaki's death are not clear. There is one thing that is certain, though: Orochimaru was there to pick up the pieces. Quite literally. That scene with him giving the crystal back to Tsunade stuck out as the most human he'd ever been in the entirety of the manga. Which of course doesn't mean that Nawaki is safe just because Orochimaru isn't prancing around, but as soon as that guy shows up, my alarm bells should be blaring. Ugh. As if he was in need of another thing to remind me to stay away from him.

5) Regashi and Hanako never appeared in canon. Which means that, if they existed, they probably died along with Nawaki.

6) Team Hanako had been pretty much doomed. Isn't that a cheery thought. Neither new nor surprising since that was the main reason I didn't want to stay with them at first, but that was before I
was lured into believing that the butterfly effect had taken care of the danger. Now is after, and it still doesn't taste any better. Worse, to be honest.

I bury my face in my hands with a quiet groan.

Shit. I'd hoped that the information gathering in my head would end on a somewhat more cheerful note.

Shit, shit, shit.

Shit.

I wish Obito was here. I've been away for not even a full 24 hours and already I'm missing him like crazy. I miss the way he looks at me with his big, trusting eyes, the enthusiasm and unbridled curiosity with which he tackles everything that's new, the kindness and positive energy that is the core of his very being. I miss his eagerness to learn whatever I show him and I miss his ability to make me feel better just by being there.

I wonder, is he missing me, too? Is he ok sleeping alone in that room? How are Yashiro, Naoko and Toshiro treating him? How is he dealing with them?

"If you're hoping to spot any incoming enemies with your hands before your eyes, I'm afraid you might be disappointed."

"Ammmaaoummmmmm," I mumble into my hands.

Regashi flops down next to me with a laugh. "I'm afraid you'll need to repeat that with your mouth free."

I lift my head to look at him. "Eyes are overrated," comes out in a deadpan.

"That coming from a shinobi with one the most powerful doujutsu in the Elemental Nations? How very humble of you."

"Is that sarcasm?" I retort. "From you? How very novel."

Regashi smiles. "Everything to cheer you up."

I laugh quietly. Sometimes, I still can't believe he's real.

We settle into comfortable silence for a few heartbeats until I turn my head to look at him again. "By the way, why are you not still asleep? My shift isn't up for another hour at least."

He shrugs. "I couldn't sleep. And then I heard your wheels turning from across the camp and decided to offer you some company." Here he hesitates. "Are you alright?"

Reassurances as swift as stray thoughts and just as insubstantial are already at the tip of my tongue and I almost let them spill forth as I always do – but something holds me back this time. Something in the earnestness in his voice, in the way the echoes of his hesitation still hovers above my skin, softly calling and reaching out, makes me realize that I … that I don't want to do it anymore.

I am so tired of hiding. Of carrying this burden alone. Of feeling crushed and suffocated while pretending to be fine.

And Regashi, despite being only twelve years old – I think he might even be one of the few people who would understand. At least a little. There're enough reasons not to tell him everything, of course,
and him being the son of the Hokage doesn't help in that regard, but.

Is it wrong, not to want to be alone? Not to want to be a stranger by the default of my mind?

Is it selfish, not to want to spend the rest of my soul span screaming on the inside?

"Hey," Regashi says, his hand landing lightly on my shoulder.

And I crack.

"Something big is coming," I blurt out, my breath coming in rapid pants. "Something terrible. We have to stay together. We have to look out for each other and be extra careful. We have to. We absolutely have to."

I let out a frustrated cry when I realize that this won't do. This is not enough for a proper warning, but what can I tell without revealing that I don't really know anything at all?

"Etsuko-chan!"

Suddenly, warm hands are on mine and I look down to see Regashi's there, gently but firmly grasping my hands to stop their shaking.

I didn't even realize that they'd been shaking.

"Deep breaths," he says, his voice sounding close to my ear and so calm that I latch on to it without a second thought. "With me. In. And out. In. And out. Good, Etsuko-chan. You're doing fine."

I close my eyes and focus on listening to his voice and simple commands and slowly, ever so slowly, I feel my breath coming down from levels of hyperventilation to something slightly closer to normal.

For a while, there's nothing but the sound of my breathing, the sensation of his warm hands around mine and the simple reassurance of his presence.

"Feel better?" he eventually asks.

"... yeah," I say quietly. "Thank you."

He gently squeezes my hands in response. I let my head fall against his shoulder.

We stay like that for a while after, neither of us saying anything. Around us, the sounds of the forest weave us seamlessly into the fabric of the night, making us all but invisible. It is almost easy to let the noise of my mind retreat together with myself and blend into the background. It feels strangely good to fall into inconsequentiality.

Of course, it doesn't last.

"Do you want to talk?"

I exhale.

I did just tell him that the apocalypse was coming, didn't I. And now that he's gotten rid of my mini panic attack I do owe him an explanation.

"It's … difficult to explain," I start.

"Take as much time as you want," he says easily.
I take a couple of deep breaths and try to find a good starting point. Something that puts the necessary emphasis on the urgency without sounding utterly ridiculous.

"There's great danger ahead. We – the situation is more than it seems. And we'll end up right in the middle of it. I can't explain it properly, but we have to be careful, watch out for anything that seems off. Especially for Nawaki."

"Nawaki?" I can't see his face in the darkness, but I can hear the frown in his voice. At least he doesn't sound outright dismissive.

"Yes. Regashi, we're all in danger, but Nawaki even more so."

There's silence as Regashi processes what I just told him. Ample time for my hands to become all sweaty and cold again, even though Regashi hasn't moved his away. It stretches on and on and by the time he finally speaks again, I'm sure that he didn't believe a word I said and thinks that I'm crazy.

"How sure are you?" he asks instead.

I swallow thickly. Is this some last minute test to determine my level of craziness?

"Very," I whisper. I clear my throat to make the next statement bolder. "I just – I know."

Regashi takes his hands from mine. I feel the loss of warmth keenly.

"Then we need to tell sensei."

I sit up straight when I feel him getting up from beside me and turn my head to look at him even though it's still too dark to really see anything.

"Wait!" I cry out breathlessly. "You believe me? Don't you have to ask how I know all of this first? Or the exact details of how things are going to happen? The when and where?"

"Would you withhold that information from me if you knew?" His voice is uncharacteristically sharp.

"No!" I splutter. "Of course not!"

"Then a threat to our life that has you in such a panic is reason enough for me to alert sensei at least."

Panic of an entirely new kind creeps up my spine. "And what are we going to tell her?"

That causes Regashi to pause in his steps.

"Even if you trust me and my panic, sensei will require something more concrete. And I can't give it to her. I want to – but I can't."

For a moment, the tension in the silence feels as taut as a drawn bowstring. Suddenly, I am acutely aware that should it break, it wouldn't be solely about this argument.

I would lose Regashi's trust, too.

"So," he says quietly, "what are we going to do?"

I close my eyes as relief floods through me and draw in a shuddering breath.

"We finish our shifts, then go to sleep. Tomorrow, when we move out, we keep our eyes open."
There are … there might be signs that I'll be able to identify as warnings. We stay vigilant and prepared."

I can feel Regashi's shoulder slump.

"You'll tell me, right? When you see the signs?"

I reach for his hands. He doesn't pull away.

"I promise. I also promise to explain more when we're safe."

He exhales.

"Ok."

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Regashi is much better at pretending that the world is not ending than I.

Which isn't too difficult to be honest. Because frankly, I suck.

I am extremely jumpy, even more uncommunicative than usual and my body is so tense that I feel like I could snap in two at any given moment. Nawaki makes exactly one joke about fearless Uchiha that ends with him checking if I have any wounds because apparently, I look like a blood-drained corpse.

He refrains from making any other jokes after that.

In the end, the day is just as uneventful as the first and when we make camp for the night, I feel like an asshole – again – for making the running hours the probably single most uncomfortable experience for everyone involved. The general air of brooding is as stimulating for conversation as one might imagine and I've already resigned myself to a night of misery when suddenly, Hanako speaks up.

"You kids behave like a bunch of boring old farts," she complains. "I feel like the only actual youth for miles around."

She looks at us with a disapproving curl in her lips. It's telling that none of us feel inclined to respond in any way and after a few more seconds of silence, she claps her hands together. Loudly.

"Anybody up for a game? I'm up for a game. It's called 'what do you do before you go to sleep?' and it works like that: we tell each other what we do before going to sleep and then proceed to do exactly that. Like this."

She sits up dramatically.

"Before I go to sleep, I eat two bars of my favorite chocolate."

She proceeds to produce two bars of chocolate from whatever pocket she was hiding them in, unwraps them at a languid pace - and eats them.

I blink.

Was that for real.

"This," Nawaki cries out, "isn't even a proper game! It's just an excuse for you to eat chocolate!"
Hanako grins. "It's not? But I just said it is one, so you're clearly mistaken." She lifts her hands to wipe at a chocolate smudge at the corner of her mouth. And then she turns to me.

"Your turn, China Doll!"

"Me," I squeak weakly.

"You," she beams. "Come on, it's not difficult. I'll help you: before I go to sleep, I blah blah - and that's where you tell us what you do before you go to sleep. Understood?"

"I ... before I do I sleep going," I splutter.

Oh god, I can't even make a proper sentence anymore.

I try again after swallowing thickly. "Before I go to sleep, I ... uh I don't know. I usually sing for my brother and then I just fall asleep myself after that, no big ceremony or something like that."

"Wait," Nawaki interjects. "You sing your brother to sleep?"

Uh.

Right.

Nobody else knew until now that I sing. Well except probably for Yashiro, Naoko and maybe Toshiro, since there's no way a family of ninja wouldn't notice. Oh, and Kakashi and Ume. And yeah, ok, if Kakashi knows, there's no way Sakumo and Sayu don't.

So … my teammates are actually the only ones in my inner circle who really don't know.

Ugh, I'm a terrible, terrible teammate aren't I?

"Yes?" I squeak. So much squeaking lately. Hah. Deconstructing the Uchiha image one squeak at a time.

"Goooooood," Hanako says. "Let's hear it then!"

She pointedly moves herself into a more comfortable position with Nawaki and Regashi both following suit, eyes shining in anticipation and genuine curiosity. In that moment, there is not so much of a difference between them and Obito.

It makes it easier to think myself into mine and Obito's bedroom, to imagine myself sitting on his bed, my hand stroking through his soft hair. I close my eyes, let this feeling of familiarity settle around me like a well-loved cloak – and launch into a song.

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China Doll had talent, there was no denying that.

Not that Hanako was a connoisseur of good music, no. There was not nearly enough music in the village to allow anyone in there to gather enough knowledge and make it a science. Music was a luxury since it neither had the sharp edge of a blade nor could it be formed like elemental chakra – and therefore, it was of no use to the shinobi life style. It was rather curious, really, that the girl had managed to find any inspiration at all in an environment such as this and even more curious still that she had managed to imbue this strange dalliance with actual skill.

And Hanako didn't need to be a connoisseur to realize that the way her sweet little voice bent and
flowed to weave her lovey tune did not happen by chance. She had trained her voice to do what she wanted it to do, purposefully formed it to produce something that was beautiful and pure and meant to soothe. Nothing else.

It was a marvelous thought: to train something, anything, without the end goal of it being able to kill and destroy. Her little Uchiha was always good for a new surprise, it seemed.

It was already her second one in just as many days.

Hanako had been a bit disappointed of course that two of her cute little muffins thought they could keep secrets from her in the middle of camp while whispering loudly enough to rouse the Shodai from his grave blessed be his soul – it looked like they needed something harsher than a food poisoning and stray kunai to keep them on their toes – but the fact of the matter remained that apparently, China Doll believed herself to have some sort of psychic powers.

Hanako had never had any problems believing any of the more outrageously bizarre aspects of shinobi life. As the child of a civilian family, shinobi had always appeared to her as those People Who Made The Impossible Possible and that outlook hadn't changed that much when she'd become one herself. How could it, seeing the insane power most of them wielded even without having kekkei genkai at their disposal. It really wasn't so far-fetched to think that her own prodigal Uchiha was just another Person Who Made The Impossible Possible with the respective powers.

It was just a pity that those powers did absolutely nothing to assuage her already pre-existing paranoia for this mission.

Right here and now, at this fire, in this camp, in this forest, her three little genin were nothing more than two children listening with rapt attention to the lullaby of a third. It was such a peaceful picture that she could almost forget that out there, a war was being fought over a cause as nebulous as the powers behind it. That they were carrying an antidote to a poison that had already claimed too many lives. That all of these children before her had been trained as killers and were expected to fulfill their duties without hesitation.

People Who Made The Impossible Possible were not to be looked at solely in awe.

"Whoa, that was awesome, Etsuko-chan!" Nawaki whooped, enthusiastically clapping his hands while the girl in question was going all red and smiling bashfully from the praise.

"You have a really nice voice," Regashi supplied.

Hanako joined in with the clapping but refrained from commenting to let the kids have their moment. Ancestors knew, they had been in dire need of one after all the hours running on high tension.

And there were still so many to come.

The night flew by in the blink of an eye and Hanako was not surprised to find that sleep had eluded her for most of the time again. It was a good thing that they would reach Camp Sakana this afternoon provided they could keep their tempo and didn't run into any trouble.

Which was, of course, exactly what didn't happened.

She sensed the squad of enemy nin seconds before they showed themselves, which was ample time to let a shadow clone take her place, slip the antidote into Etsuko's backpack without the girl noticing and position herself behind the first attacker.

Her kunai bit into the soft flesh of his neck with a vicious ripping sound, warm blood spraying out
like a geyser and the overwhelming stench of rusted copper assaulting her nostrils. His hands were still reaching for the shuriken in his pouch when he crumpled into a heap and off the tree.

She didn't stay to watch the body fall and trusted her team to know how to interpret the sight, instead darting over to the branch directly above the second attacker, throwing a kunai with a light bomb attached towards the third, and dropping down as soon as the nin underneath her turned around to look at the explosion of light.

Those hikaridama were really useful. Someone should give the Nara an award for that invention she thought detachedly, her main focus on the ugly cracking sound of a neck snapping between her hands. The limp body fell against hers and Hanako whirled around to throw it into the way of a fuuma shuriken aimed to cut through her midsection. Instead, it cleanly bisected the corpse and flew over her crouched figure into the tree, the blades impacting with a heavy thud.

She grimaced and turned her head sideways as bits of innards and blood hit her vest and got into her hair, drenching it again with its rusty smell. She'd need a shower first thing after arriving at camp. After they'd dealt with their attackers anyway.

Two down, the third one recovering from being blinded by the hikaridama and the fourth missing a fuuma shuriken.

Also, going after her team.

There was a faint hissing sound and Hanako escaped with a jump to her right, not needing to look to know that the barrage of shuriken had embedded themselves into the trunk.

Her team would have to brave it out until she had taken out number three.

She landed with her feet on soft moss and kept her run to the forest floor, taking advantage of the thick foliage that would prevent her target from following her movements and relying on her sensing to follow his movements in turn. A sudden rush of chakra informed her about the demise of her shadow clone. Images of Nawaki and Regashi circling the enemy nin with the help of her clone and herding him into Etsuko's Goukakyuu flashed in front of her inner eye before the sensation of a couple of kunai puncturing her vest cleared up the reason for her clone's dispersal. None of her kids had looked too strained or hurt.

She grinned. Her team was doing fine.

She gathered her chakra to summon two new clones without breaking her run and instructed one of them to use a concealing genjutsu. With the now invisible third clone and appearing indistinguishable from her visible one, the three of them arrived at the foot of the tree on which the enemy sat. The invisible clone passed it in favor for a neighboring tree while Hanako herself and the other clone shot up the trunk and launched into an attack.

The nin was prepared and blocked their initial blows, barely matching them in speed and aggression. Hanako and her clone worked in tandem, a blur of arms and legs relentlessly pushing at his defenses and compelling him into increasingly desperate manoeuvres to evade the onslaught. She propelled back and forth, her hands curled into the likeness of eagle talons and striking down at pressure points with near pinpoint accuracy. It wouldn't be long now.

Realizing his predicament, the enemy made a last ditch attempt at evading her. He executed a brilliant backwards flip that landed him on the branch below and started to form hand seals to shoot something nasty at her – which would have worked had there not been her third, invisible clone already waiting for her entrance.
Hanako could see the moment the enemy nin realized the danger he was in by the widening eyes and watched as he whirled around to block the incoming kunai.

"Finally decided to come out of hiding, did you," the man cried out triumphantly as he successfully parried the blow with a kunai of his own. "I know you, Konoha's Violet Ghost! But even a ghost can be killed."

Hanako was hard pressed not to roll her eyes. Melodramatic fool.

She joined the fight with her clone, noting with amusement how much he was focusing on taking out her third, firm in his belief that it was the original.

His surprise when it dispelled on a particularly vicious blow was all the opportunity she needed to send her kunai into the back of his skull. It caved in with a loud crunch upon impact.

Hanako didn't linger with the corpse, deciding to come back after she had checked on her kids and took off in the direction she'd last seen them in via clone memory. She kept the remaining clone with her, confident in her ability to take down the last enemy even with only half her chakra reserves.

She arrived to the picture of a large crater in the forest floor, the enemy skewered on a rock pillar spear and the children huddled together at the edge. There was the noise of retching and Regashi's voice in a low murmur. Hanako dispelled her clone before joining them.

"… hey, it's ok, you're ok …"

Upon coming closer, she saw that it was Etsuko making those noises. The girl was bent over, with one hand against the crater wall for stability and Regashi standing by her side, patting her back. Nawaki was nowhere to be seen.

Her insides grew cold.

"What happened here?", she asked, her voice sharp and commanding. "And where's Nawaki?"

"Sensei!" Regashi turned his head to look at her. "Nawaki is just over there, he got injured in the fight. I think his ankle is broken."

Hanako looked in the direction Regashi pointed at and indeed, sitting with his back against a tree was her little Senju, waving at her with a sheepish smile. A boulder fell off her shoulders at that sight.

"The crater happened because the enemy nin made one and Etsuko-chan decided to copy it. And the Ganchuusou is mine."

"And China Doll is retching because …?" Hanako arched an eyebrow.

"Because intestines," the girl answered glumly. "Lots of intestines spilling out and ugh."

Hanako shrugged. "All part of the job. Oh, and an advance warning: that blood is gonna get disgustingly sticky in a few. Do try not to be distracted too much."

Etsuko scrunched her cute little nose at that.

Hanako walked over to the skewered corpse to inspect it further. It was indeed a bloody mess, in the most literal of senses, and she almost turned around again when her glance fell onto the hitai-ate that had fallen off the shinobi's head. Two stylized boulders were etched into the metal, telling her what
she needed to know about their attacker's origins.

Iwa.

This war was with Ame.

So what the fuck was Iwa doing here?

This did not bode well.

She walked over to Regashi and Etsuko in a brisk pace.

"The antidote?" she demanded, looking directly at her Uchiha.

The girl gave her a puzzled look. "But I don't …" And then realization dawned. "Oh."

She hurriedly pulled the pack from her shoulders and reached into it. Her hand came back with the undamaged vial.

"Good," Hanako said. She gestured for the two to follow her to Nawaki and crouched down to look at his injury. His ankle had already swollen to an impressive size and was sporting a rather ugly purplish color. She frowned. "Can you put weight on it?"

Nawaki nodded. "I can manage, until we arrive at camp at least."

"Good." Hanako took a deep breath. "Those were Iwa scouts. They were probably after the antidote, thinking us easy targets. There's a chance that back-up will arrive shortly, so we better hurry. The camp is not far away anymore."

Etsuko looked at her with a confused frown. "Iwa? What's Iwa doing here?"

"Good question," she said. "If you can figure out the answer, I'll give you chocolate."

She didn't have to look to know that her youngest team member was rolling her eyes. She still couldn't relax, her mind prepared for more trouble and her body full of adrenaline. She couldn't shake the feeling that this had been too easy.

And how she wished it would've stayed a feeling.

At least a dozen chakra signatures appeared out of nowhere, surrounding them not even twenty minutes after they'd taken off again, this time staying close to the forest floor out of consideration for Nawaki's injury. Hanako had barely enough time to slam her hands down to create an earthen dome against the kunai aimed at them. She gritted her teeth.

She was a sensor.

These people had evaded her sensor abilities completely. All of them.

These people were fucking dangerous.

There were a lot of them.

It took only a split second for her to make the decision.

"I'll create a diversion that will give you the time and opportunity to run. Which is exactly what you're going to do. The antidote has to make it to the camp, is that clear?"
"But," Etsuko interjected, her black eyes huge and skin pale as snow.

"No buts! A lot of lives are depending on that antidote. Regashi, you have command of the team until I catch up with you."

The boy nodded, his ashen face set into an expression of determination.

She let her gaze sweep over her charges for one last time. Her genin team.

Ancestors, the children were terrified. And they were still so tiny. So, so tiny. All of them.

Just another reason for her to do this.

"As soon as the wall crumbles, you have to leave. Do not linger, no matter what you hear or what happens. I'll try to draw off all potential pursuers, so you only have to concentrate on running."

Her kids nodded, Etsuko most hesitant.

She pulled out a small scroll from the breast pocket of her vest, tossed it into Nawaki's hands and gave them a crooked grin.

"Do try to save a few bars of chocolate for me. You'll get fat if you eat all of them."

She turned away from their faces and began the sequence of hand seals that would form the basis of her distraction. Suddenly remembering something, she paused.

"Etsuko," she said in an even tone. "Don't get entangled in the roots of the tree. There's a reason why they grow in darkness."

The last hand seal fell into place and the dome around them started to crumble, chunks of earth hovering in the air before suddenly shooting off into different directions. Cries erupted as one by one, enemies were hit and fell.

"GO!" she yelled over the sound of crashing stone.

And her team obeyed.
Take Everything by Storm Part 2

Chapter Notes

Yoooooooo

I'm so excited to present you Part 2 of "Take Everything by Storm"! Apologies for taking so long again, but I've been writing my Master's thesis (finished, btw!) and also, this thing is a monster. I think there might be almost 2000 words of deleted content before I finally finished it, lol.

Before you dive in, though, I'd like to address two issues: 1) A tumblr post made me aware that, apparently, a "frown" can be understood as a motion of different parts of the face. Americans tend to think of it as the turning down of the corners of the mouth while everybody else takes it as a the furrowing of brows/the forehead. I belong with the "everybody else"-crowd, so whenever I write "frown", I mean the forehead.

2) Rating has gone up to M for gore and blood (also language). Please be cautious while reading!

OK, that's it, I think. Now, open the curtains for the next chapter! Thank you NightsBlackRose13 for being the most amazing beta. And also for not losing your mind whenever I announced something like "I deleted half the chapter :-)".

"GO!" Hanako yells and before I can say anything, do something, Regashi's hand closes around my arm in a painful iron grip and yanks me around. I have no choice but to stumble along, my feet falling into a run just so I don't get skinned alive between the forceful pull of his hand and the uneven forest floor.

Around us, chaos reigns.

The air is thick with cries of pain and swirling chakra, Hanako's usually so familiar and bright brand pumped close to bursting with malicious killing intent, viciously smothering any foreign signatures and making it hard to breathe. My whole body is shaking even though her power isn't even directed at me.

And while Hanako rips through the enemy nin, while the sound of stone maiming bones breaks up the cacophony of screams, while the leaves of the trees turn red and begin dripping -

Regashi pulls and pulls and pulls, over tree roots –

*Don't get entangled in the roots of the tree* –

- past moving shadows –

*Concentrate on running* –

- away from the screams and the sound of metalrippingopenskinandflesh and ohgodIrecognizedthatvoice –
Do not linger, no matter what you hear –

- he pulls –

Until suddenly, there’s nothing.

No, it’s not really nothing. It’s more like – less sensory overload. And no running anymore.

Regashi’s drawn face appears before my eyes. His mouth is moving frantically, but it takes him seizing my shoulders and shaking them until my ears finally pick up on the auditory signals.

“… come on, Etsuko, I need your help with this! I can’t carry you and Nawaki both, please, please snap out of it –”

I start. I’ve never heard him so desperate. It’s enough to reactivate my communication center.

“I – yes – I’m sorry,” I croak, my voice dragging over the dryness of my throat like gravel.

“Thank the ancestors!” he breathes out.

“Listen, the camp isn’t far from here. Nawaki’s ankle isn’t getting any better and I think something hit his head, so I’ll have to carry him all the way. I need you to make sure that nobody is following us. Can you do that?”

Wait, oh god, what.

“Something hit Nawaki’s head?!” I blurt out. With another violent start I realize that Nawaki is indeed not a participant in our conversation. I almost twist my neck in the attempt to find him and when I do, the sight of him sitting against a tree trunk, jaw locked and trying to endure the pain is not particularly elating. At least he’s conscious.

“Yes, he probably has a concussion,” Regashi explains. “Please, please, Etsuko-chan, we need you at our backs!”

Abruptly, everything snaps back into focus.

I have been trained my whole second life for this. My boys are in danger. They need me.

I can do this.

I don’t need to see the image of myself mirrored in Regashi’s eyes to know that my eyes have turned crimson. There’s a steady, throbbing pulse behind them, the sign of Sharingan-induced exhaustion courtesy to that one moment in which I thought it was a brilliant idea to copy a jutsu that was not only completely unfamiliar to me but also of a chakra nature I have never practiced in.

But it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters now but the survival of my team.

I straighten my shoulders and give a curt nod.

“Understood. I’m back. I got you.”

His grip on my shoulders slackens and for a short moment, he closes his eyes and lowers his head in relief before he looks back up and smiles a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Let’s get Nawaki to safety. And then we come back and help sensei kick ass, ok?”
I breathe out and nod.

“Ok. Let’s do this.”

Hanako keeps her word. There’re no pursuers behind us, but I still keep my Sharingan activated, at least until we have reached the camp. I’m not taking any chances here.

We arrive a scant hour later and are greeted by a contingent of tense looking shinobi in lab coats. One of them, a woman with short blond hair and thick glasses steps forward.

“Team Hanako?” she asks.

“Yessir,” Regashi answers. “Senju Nawaki, Uchiha Etsuko and Sarutobi Regashi reporting in. We have one injured needing medical attention. And we have the antidote.”

The woman nods and at once signals at two shinobi to come and take Nawaki off Regashi’s back. Nawaki mumbles something unintelligible before he’s carried away, his glazed-over eyes landing on me last. It occurs to me for the first time that whatever hit his head might have been poisoned.

Fuck.

The woman turns back to Regashi and I. “The antidote?”

I hurriedly pull the straps of my backpack from my shoulders and reach into it. My hand comes back with the vial, still unharmed, and I hold it out for the woman to take it.

She frowns. “This is not the antidote,” she says.

What.

The woman holds her hand over the vial and releases a burst of chakra that causes a puff of smoke to cloud over it. It clears – and reveals nothing but a flat rock. On the surface, the words “YOU WISH” are written in Hanako’s bold script.

“Oh,” Regashi says.

Fuck squared. When the hell did Hanako have the time to do that? I’m pretty sure that the vial she gave me before the first fight had still been the real one.

The woman frowns. “Did she give you anything else?”

Regashi and I are both at a loss for a few moments, but then he suddenly swings his own backpack over his shoulder and grabs a small scroll stuffed into one of the side pockets. “The chocolate!” he gasps.

It takes another moment for me to realize what he’s on about, but – oh my, Hanako is a genius.

The storage scroll is swiftly rolled open and unsealed. A huge pile of Hanako’s favorite chocolate bars spills out and there, right in the middle of it, is a padded envelope. Regashi snatches it up, opens it and takes out a vial with a transparent amber liquid.

The woman nods and takes it. “That’s it. I’ll show you to the Commander of this camp now. He will listen to your report and assign you your next task.”
No, wait.

She signals us to follow her and turns to leave, but before she can make even one step further, I dart forth and grip her arm. “No!” I pant out.

She turns her head and gives me a mildly affronted look. I hurriedly press on.

“Hanako-sensei is still out there and in danger. We need to go back and help her right now! Please. Please!”

She opens her mouth to say something, but hers is not the voice I hear next.

“What a rude child, talking to a superior that way. What are you going to do about it, Yoshina-san?"

Everything around me stills.

That voice.

Smooth as silk, with an edge like a serrated blade under a thick layer of confidence that borders on arrogance.

I step away slowly and turn to my right, whence the voice came from, until I am face to face with the only person who could make the whole situation a thousand times worse than it already is. And he’s looking straight at me.

“Orochimaru-rikushou,” the woman, Yoshina-san apparently, salutes. I can feel shivers running down my spine and dread settling deep in my gut.

I need to get Nawaki away from here.

“I was just going to bring the remaining members of Team Hanako to you to report.”

He mustn’t touch him.

“Though there seems to be an emergency here.”

Regashi must know. He has to get away, too.

“And what might this emergency be?” He sounds casual.

This time, Regashi decides to answer. “Hanako-sensei had been in a dangerous situation when we left. She might be severely injured and weakened from the fight. I formally request a mission to retrieve her. Please, Orochimaru-san.”

Orochimaru finally shifts his gaze from me and looks at Regashi. “How many were there?”

“At least a dozen, probably Iwa nin. We encountered an Iwa squad not half an hour before that.”

Without further questioning, Orochimaru nods once. “I will go myself. The lab team can handle the synthetic reproduction of the antidote themselves. Yoshina-san, you’re the acting commander of Camp Sakana as of now. You,” he looks at a shinobi behind Yoshina I hadn’t even noticed before, “fetch Inuzuka Fusa. You two,” here he looks at Regashi and I, “stay here.”

We both start protesting at the same time.

“You can’t leave us here! She is our sensei!” Regashi shouts, visibly upset.
“Leave Regashi here, but take me with you! My Sharingan will be useful!” I shout over him.

It is followed by stunned silence.

Regashi looks at me with confusion and betrayal written all over his face.

I quickly turn away from him and take one step closer to Orochimaru. “I can be of use. I can scan chakra traces and record everything with 100% accuracy. I am not injured and I promise, I can keep up.”

Regashi steps to my side and grips my shoulders with both hands, just like a little over an hour ago. He refrains from shaking them though. “Etsuko, what the hell are you doing?”

*The right thing, Regashi.*

Because this is the solution.

If I can keep both Nawaki and Regashi here in camp, a safe place with fortifications, perimeter guards and other well trained shinobi while I have an eye on Orochimaru a distance away from camp, they’ll both be safe. They won’t die.

I have to do this.

“I’m willing to take one of you with me, but only one,” Orochimaru announces. “Decide between yourselves, but be quick. I’ll leave as soon as the other one arrives, no matter if you have agreed on an outcome or not.” He walks a couple paces away with Yoshina and gives her further instructions in a low murmur.

“What the hell, Etsuko?” Regashi repeats, but now he seems more angry than anything. I’ve never seen Regashi angry.

I exhale. “Remember when I promised you to tell you when I see a sign of danger to Nawaki?”

He stills.

“It’s Orochimaru. He mustn’t be near Nawaki. And I need you to stay here and keep an eye on him.”

His eyes widen. “But … no, Orochimaru would never hurt Nawaki!” Regashi objects. “They’re practically family!”

Family. *Orochi-nii.* But no one knows what I know, not even Nawaki. Or Tsunade.

“I know,” I say firmly. “I never said that Orochimaru would hurt him. But I’ve seen Nawaki dead, Regashi. And Orochimaru was there. He was there, took the Shodai’s necklace from his corpse and gave it to Tsunade.” I pause to draw in a breath. “It doesn’t have to be this way, though, because you and the whole camp can protect him here. And I will go with Orochimaru to bring Hanako-sensei back. Please, Regashi. You need to trust me on this.”

Regashi is silent for a long time. I almost think that he’s not going to answer anymore, leaving us at this impasse and both at camp, but then his hands fall away from my shoulders.

“What about you?” he asks softly without looking at me.

My lips curl into a humorless smile. “I didn’t see me dying, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Regashi nods, hesitantly, and takes a step back. He looks exhausted and closed off.
“Stay safe,” he whispers.

It breaks my heart.

“Have you decided?” Orochimaru’s voice cuts in.

I turn around, away from Regashi.

“Yes,” I answer him. “I’m coming.”

“You know the way?” he asks.

I nod.

Orochimaru starts walking away towards the entrance of the camp. “Tell Inuzuka I’m leaving without him,” he calls over his shoulder at Yoshina. “He can stay in camp.”

I hurry to follow him and throw back one last glance.

Regashi is watching me.

I nod at my teammate and turn away for good.

This is for the best. Regashi and Nawaki will be here, safe, and Orochimaru far away. I’m doing the right thing.

I’m really doing the right thing. I have to believe that.

I have to.

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Running beside Orochimaru feels – even considering this whole train wreck of a situation – unreal. Possibly dreamlike, even.

There he is, hopping from tree to tree with the grace of a damn fairy, what with that entirely too long and beautiful hair to be practical and all those long limbs and elegant poise. Right beside me. Like he’s not the most durable and cunning villain in NARUtoverse that was ever written, but just another regular fellow leaf shinobi who I’m supposed to trust with my back.

Yeah, fat chance with that. I might be far away from ready to battle him, but at least I’m not stupid enough to believe his act.

I know him. Better than Nawaki or Regashi. Better than Tsunade or Jiraiya. Oh, so, so much better than the Sandaime. I know what he’s capable of, what he will do once his hunger for power outgrows any lingering attachment he might have had for Konoha at some point. And when that moment comes, when nobody is looking too hard, I will be there.

I will have been there for a long time. And I hope I will be ready.

We make good time, although I suspect that I’m much slower than Orochimaru would’ve liked –

“Short legs just mean you have to take double the steps, China Doll!”

- and the farther we get, the more antsy I become. Hanako should’ve met us somewhere in the middle already. That she doesn’t turn up means she’s probably heavily injured which makes me
increasingly worried. Damn this minuscule body. I have never been more aware of its limitations.

“I wish I was smaller. For my pranks, you know? Ah, imagine all the havoc that I could wreak if I were your size!”

Shh, shut up.

To make matters worse, because clearly, the situation isn’t already bad enough, it starts to rain midway through. Initially, there’re only scattered drops falling here and there through the thick canopy of the trees but that soon changes as heavy drops start pelting us like water bullets.

“See that drop there, mochi-boo? I can make that drop swallow your weak little Goukakyuu if I feed it with enough chakra. So you better feed your fireball first, got it? Come on, I’ll show you.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I’m just trying to think about rain here! Because I am completely drenched within minutes and one look at Orochimaru confirms that he’s not much better.

Except for his hair.

His damned hair still looks freaking fabulous.

Seriously, this man must be so vain, who the hell has the time to condition their hair in the middle of a war?! And keep their routine in the middle of a camp? I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone in Konoha with hair like that. Well except that one time when Sakumo came back from war with Sayu and I almost ran against someone. That person had had fabulous hair, too. Long and black, actually, not unlike Orochimaru’s, and oh god now that I think about it–

What if I have met Orochimaru before and my literal first thought was how fabulous his hair looks?!

Like, how superficial is that? What the fuck was I doing, running against him and not realizing wh-

Something hard hits my forehead protector and sends me falling straight on my ass.

Oof.

For a moment, I see stars and everything around me blurs together into spots of shiny, vibrant color, but I’m quick to shake it off, because ohmygod we’re being attacked!

I scramble up, wildly looking around and trying to focus on any approaching danger – but there’s nothing. Nothing except the rain and Orochimaru perched on a branch one level over mine – and phew, lucky there was one, otherwise I would’ve fallen from the tree – looking down at me with a nondescript expression.

“What happened?” I croak. “Were we attacked?”

He raises one eyebrow.

“No,” he drawls a length. His voice sounds deceptively mild. “But your attempt to best that tree with nothing but your forehead was rather … entertaining. You should try harder next time.”

…

DEAR.

GOD.

My face has grown hot all of a sudden and I don’t know what’s worse – that I was so distracted that
I apparently ran into a tree – and because of Orochimaru’s hair, of all things! – or that Orochimaru just made a joke about it.

Argh!!

I’d like to disappear please. Into the ground, thin air, dissolve into water, I DON’T CARE, I’M NOT PICKY, OK?!

Orochimaru abruptly stands up from his crouch and turns his back towards me. “You said you’d keep up,” he says. “Was that a lie?”

All of the embarrassment and humiliation falls away in one fell swoop.

Hanako is still out there. We need to hurry.

“I’m coming,” I call after him and once again, we’re running through the rainy forest.

Running.

And running.

And then – we’re not. Because suddenly, there is no forest anymore.

One moment, we’re jumping from branch to branch, between trees and past greenery aplenty. The next, there’s nothing but destruction, heralded by the initially faint but distinct smell of burnt organic tissue.

Trees uprooted and upturned, the soil ploughed open like a plundered carcass and …

And bodies. So many bodies.

Orochimaru and I stand at the edge of the carnage and don’t move for a few heartbeats. His eyes are narrowed as he checks the area for threats and the likes, scanning the battlefield for clues and signs of life, and while rationally, I realize that I should be doing the same, I find myself very much unable to.

The reason is simple: I think I’m on my way to my next retching session.

The air is pervaded with the acrid smell of burnt flesh and smoking hair and dripping with the stench of blood and gore. Clouds of insects are buzzing over the corpses – already! – and the whole bloody sight of it all, with those glassy eyes, the melted flesh, the spilt out intest–

There’s acid burning at the back of my throat. With a vengeance.

*I really, really want to vomit.*

Maybe I should ask Orochimaru if he could turn away for a second. Politely, of course. Throwing up over his open-toe-sandals would earn a frown at least, I think.

“I do not sense any living chakra signatures. Use your Sharingan,” Orochimaru commands.

I swallow down the rising bile. My eyes sting when I let the chakra flood them, the sudden sharpness of my vision almost overwhelming the already strained nerve endings, but my ability to see chakra traces remains unfailing. Or at least it appears to be when I’m looking at Orochimaru and his strong, purplish flame. No surprise about the color here.

A brief scan over the battlefield reveals nothing, however.
The bodies remain colorless and as I start walking through their lines, no recognition whatsoever at seeing their faces, hope starts blooming in my chest. No recognition means no Hanako and since no color means no life, I’m rather glad about it.

So I turn around to look at Orochimaru.

“She’s not here,” I say, my voice sounding wobbly with relief.

Orochimaru is not looking back at me.

Instead, his gaze is fixed on something several paces away at the other side of the battlefield, where the tree line begins again. He doesn’t say anything, just starts walking towards it and I have no choice but to follow.

He comes to a halt in front of a tree with particularly gnarly roots and crouches down to examine something between them. Even with him doing that I’m still too small to see over his shoulders and instead, I have to walk around him. It’s not a real issue of course, I mean, how could something as trivial as taking three more steps after traversing a whole field of corpses be –

-

-

I can hear myself breathing.

I can hear the blood rushing through my ears.

I can hear my own heart beating.

But.

I can’t see.

I can’t see.

No flame. No color.

I can’t see.

No.

No. No.

There’re plenty of people with purple hair. Even with Konoha hitai-ate. There are.

It’s not her. It can’t be her.

Not Hanako.

My fingers tremble as I move my hands to lift the chin of the corpse’s head – how did I even get here, on my knees, beside this corpse – and my eyes, my sharp, focused, all-seeing eyes, they burn the image of her face into my memory with the unerring precision and searing heat of a laser cutter.

They tell me what I don’t want to be told.

“Her wounds were not lethal. She died of chakra exhaustion.”
What am I going to tell Regashi? And Nawaki?

Orochimaru crouches down beside me. Long, white fingers grab for her right arm and rub away at a spot covered in soot and dirt until the skin underneath is visible again. It’s marked with the curled lines of the Konoha ANBU tattoo.

Oh.

I didn’t know. I’d never seen that tattoo on her arm before, even though she enjoys wearing sleeveless shirts. Enjoyed. She must’ve concealed it.

“The exhaustion was absolute. There wasn’t even enough left for the seal to activate.”

I turn to look at him.

What is he talking about. What seal.

Could it have saved her? Can it still?

“Seal?” I rasp.

“The ANBU seal for body incineration, supposed to activate when vital organs take enough damage that death is inevitable,” he answers, voice clinically mild. “It’s fascinating. I didn’t know it could fail.”

He finds it fascinating.

He finds it *fucking fascinating*.

Red-hot rage spreads through my body like wildfire, consuming the emptiness I hadn't known had settled there, and pushing at me from the inside.

One word. Just one other word from him and *I swear I'm going to kill him*.

He doesn’t talk, though.

Instead he stands up, motions for me to move away and, without waiting for me to do so, forms a series of rapid-fire hand seals.

I leap away, barely in time to avoid being caught in the flames of Hanako’s combustion.

The overwhelming smell of burnt flesh once again assaults my nose, the sensation amplified a thousand fold by the proximity and the visual accompaniment and I can do nothing but watch in silent horror as Hanako’s hair turns black and dull, as her skin melts off like liquid wax and her entire body vanishes into flakes of grey, smoldering ash.

And the smell. Gods, the smell.

Otou-san, with half his body blasted off, had smelt the same.

The same.

The same.

*Oh god, I don’t think I can do this.*
The girl had gone unresponsive.

He didn’t notice, at first. There were more important things to observe and put together on the scene at hand, especially since there were some issues that didn’t seem to add up properly.

The current hypothesis for the assault was that the antidote was the target.

How had the enemy known then that Mitarashi and her team were going to carry it? At exactly this time and place? How had they gotten past the Konoha front line in such a high number? It was reasonable to assume that they had all been high-level shinobi to accomplish that, but that just made the next question even more baffling: how could such a high number of high-leveled shinobi let three genin, one of them injured, escape with the antidote, the supposed target?

The first two questions could be answered with leaked intel. Even the third one, to a certain degree. But the last?

The last question did not fit the hypothesis. Which could only mean one thing:

The hypothesis needed to be changed to fit the last question. He needed to think like his enemies did.

So what would be achieved by letting the antidote escape and arrive at camp?

The genin’s survival made sure that the camp leadership was informed about the enemy presence behind the defensive lines. The reporting of their numbers would ensure that they were perceived as a true threat, which in turn would prompt an investigation.

So the next question was: what would the enemy gain by having Konoha investigate?

He turned around to look at the destroyed patch of forest. The rain was falling so hard now that the water was almost like a solid curtain, making everything in his field of vision blurry and undefined.

He assumed that the enemy had not expected to be wiped out by a single opponent.

If that was true, chances were that they had hoped to fight the investigating shinobi, which would have consisted of more than a two-men-team under ordinary circumstances. It would have diverted valuable resources from the camp itself.

That he had not decided to invest more than himself and a genin in this investigation was simply because he did not consider himself an ordinary circumstance. He knew he and a possibly damaged Mitarashi would have been able to take on any threat of that size without taking lethal risks.

It didn’t change the fact, however, that the most valuable resource of the camp still had been successfully diverted. *He* was its best defense, after all. And he was missing. Which led to following conclusion:

The goal of the assault had not been to prevent the antidote from reaching the camp.

The goal had been to leave the camp as defenseless as possible.

He abruptly turned around again and called out to the girl. “We need to leave. Now!”

That was when he noticed.

Skin deathly pale, eyes wide and empty, breathing coming in rapid, shallow gasps.
He had read the reports of the night in which the Konoha Police Force main building had been blown to pieces and several Uchiha had lost their lives. He remembered that her father had been fatally burnt by explosive chakra.

Apparently, he had triggered a flashback with his incineration of Mitarashi’s corpse, leaving the girl unable to operate.

“Why did Okaa-chan and Otou-chan die, sensei? Even though they were strong and smart?”

“Death is an inevitable part of life, Orochimaru. Knowing that is what makes the time we spend alive more precious. It drives us to pursue the greatest achievements.”

“What use are achievements if we all die anyway? If they all waste away to diseases of the body? To diseases of the mind?”

I cannot accept death. I won’t.

He did not have time for this.

The air turned as heavy as lead as he poured out enough killing intent to paralyze any living thing within a ten-feet-radius and watched as the girl turned even paler than before and her panicked eyes landed on him.

Good. He had her attention.

“Your choice,” he said, every syllable carefully enunciated and unambiguously clear. “You can either stay here and be a slave to the weakness of your mind, wallowing in self-pity and stuck in your deficiencies. You’ll die fast that way, which you might consider merciful. Or.”

He held out his right hand into the streaming rain.

“You return to camp with me. Now. It will most probably be under attack when we arrive. Your teammates will either be dead or in danger of dying if you hesitate. The chances of their survival decline with every second we spend talking.” He paused.

“What will it be, Uchiha Etsuko?”

We’re running again.

Around us, the world is a single blur of muddy wet colors and moving through the rain feels like hitting one wall after another. The weather has gotten even worse and I can feel the electricity of an oncoming storm resonating with my chakra.


Because running might be the only thing that saves Nawaki and Regashi now.

“The camp … under attack?! ”

“Decide quickly. I won’t ask again.”

Orochimaru’s words echo in my head over and over, the only things holding the overwhelming sensation of drowning under the stench of burnt flesh and the visuals of Otou-san’s massacred body at bay. They are the wall that separates timeless despair from the urgency and worry of now, they
alone make it possible for me to focus on the task at hand – and they are the reason I am able to move at all.

We need to get back in time. \textit{I} need to get back in time.

“As soon as we arrive,” Orochimaru instructs, “you are to head towards the field hospital. Fight your way through if you have to, but don’t stop or get distracted. Once there, find the head medic. He will have the antidote. If he is dead, search for it. Retrieve it, if necessary. It has absolute priority.”

I snap my head around to look at him. “My teammates –”

“\textit{Will probably die either way if you don’t get the antidote!}” he snarls. “Did you think the enemy would attack without their most potent weapons?”

I clench my teeth.

He’s right.

It still won’t stop me from looking for them first.

And then we’re there.

We’re greeted by the sound of frantic shouts and the feeling of heavy elemental chakra usage in the air. At the entrance two crumpled bodies with Konoha hitai-ate are lying carelessly thrown one over the other. My stomach churns.

“The field hospital,” Orochimaru says.

I have barely enough time to nod before he disappears in a swirl of leaves that’s immediately beaten down by the rain.

Fuck.


GAH –

Breathe, Etsuko, breathe.

You can do this. Orochimaru thinks you can do this.

Oh god, \textit{Orochimaru is a source of comfort}. How sad is that.

Now get your shit together and move. Nawaki and Regashi are waiting.

\textit{Please be waiting.}

With my Sharingan activated, I start moving through the tents in the direction the medics carried Nawaki to earlier. It shouldn’t be too far away – the entrance goes out in Konoha direction, which means that the other end is the war front. Not the best place for a hospital, so the back it is.

As it turns out, I simply should have followed the sounds of shouting.

The uniform mass of field tents, trampled down and collapsed for the most part, opens for a small
space in front of three rather big tents. Long before I actually arrive there, flying projectiles and
flickering shadows announce fighting shinobi and I slip in between the few still standing tents to
avoid being seen.

I nearly stumble over a slumped body in a lab coat leaning against a tent frame. The person is
wearing a Konoha hitai-ate around their neck, half covered by shoulder-length brown hair.

I skitter to a halt next to them and fall on my knees.

“Hey, medic-san!” I urge softly. “Are you alright? Can you tell me where I can find the head
medic?”

They don’t react.

“Hey!” I grip their shoulders and shake them.

Their head rolls to the side, parting the curtain of hair and revealing a masculine face with blank eyes
that are wide open.

I release him abruptly.

Broken neck.

Oh fuck.

I hurriedly move my hand over his eyelids to make that blank, blue-eyed stare stop, turn away and
start dry heaving.

I don’t think I have anything left to throw up.

*No big deal. I can find the head medic on my own.*

I get up and make my way through the tent rows to the hospital tents. It’s surprisingly easy to remain
undetected – the shinobi on both sides are completely wrapped up in their fights and busy navigating
through the storm. As long as I don’t attack myself, I should be fine.

I should be fine. I should be fine. I should be fine. I should be fi-

Oh, look, there’s a loose tent cover fluttering around. Goddammit yes, it’s time that I get lucky for
once, too. I slip inside.

I’m in some kind of storage area. There’re shelves upon shelves full of unused syringes, respirators,
medical tubes and the likes. I move past them quickly, since the chance of the antidote being here is
slim and ready myself to open a flap that leads outside again when I hear the soft sound of a muted
footfall behind me.

I whirl around, kunai ready in hand.

“Please don’t! I’m a friend!”

I blink. There is a person barely ten feet away from me, but.

The lighting in here is crap. I can’t see properly.

Although it is a good sign that the person is not attacking.
“Who are you?” I ask, my voice sounding about as confident as I feel.

“Tachibana Kurose, field medic. At your service!” He takes a step towards me.

“What are you doing in here?”

“I was hiding. I’m not a front line fighter. But together, we can make it out! I just need to find the antidote, orders from Yoshina-san.” Another step.

“You know where the antidote is?” I ask, cautiously lowering my kunai. “That’s good. I’ll escort you there. Lead the way!”

“Alright, though you’ll have to take point, ok?” Another step.

He’s close enough for me to see his shoulder-length brown hair, bright blue eyes as well as a Konoha hitai-ate tied around his neck.

He’s the same medic that I found not even five minutes ago. With a broken neck.

Shit, shit, shit.

I know exactly one thing in Narutoverse that has a penchant for killing people, morphing into their likeness, adapting their voices and even faking their chakra signatures.

_Oh Jesus, Mary and her husband Joseph!_

“Sure,” I say with a smile and take a step in his direction. We’re only inches apart now. “Just let me check that one shelf again, ok?”

_Just one more step, just past him – NOW!_

He dodges the blow to the back of his knee a split second before it can connect by jumping to his left and lands between two shelves on both feet.

“The tiny thing is smart!” he exclaims gleefully.

Shut up.

I dive after him, well aware that if I don’t finish him off quickly there will be no telling what his mokuton will do to me. Actually, no, I know what it’s gonna do to me and, OH GOD NO I DON’T WANT THAT GET IT AWAY FROM ME –

Wood shoots out of his chest at lightning speed, headed straight for mine, and I twist –

WHO THE FUCK WAS I KIDDING, FINISHING OFF QUICKLY MY ASS –

Vines uncurl from the beam and snap at my limbs –

HE WAS FUCKING AKATSUKI FOR FUCK’S SAKE –

And I somehow manage to twist and turn away from all the wood, thank god for the Sharingan –

The pain of a whip-like branch biting into my side is no distraction from the sensation of slamming full body into one of the shelves. The air is knocked right out of my lungs and for a moment, there’re stars dancing in my field of vision. Shelves are digging painfully into my back and I’m pretty sure that I’m going to die any moment now.
As if I could beat freaking Zetsu on genin level.

Hanako is gonna beat my ass in the afterlife for my delusion.

“Not bad, not bad,” the annoyingly chipper voice chips, its stolen owner’s head popping into view over me. “Master will be pleased to hear. Keep growing little Uchiha, will you? Like a little sapling, grow, grow!”

What.

I wheeze as I try to sit up in the middle of little plastic bags and boxes, but before I can make any substantial progress, the earth goes into a violent tremor and I’m thrown down, my back hitting the shelves a second time.

“Ah, that’s my cue to leave. It was nice meeting you! Mayhaps we’ll see each other again?” He cackles. “Until then: buh-bye!”

He simply vanishes after that.

A second tremor runs through the ground and I can’t do anything but wait it out. As soon as it stops, I scramble to get my aching body up and limp towards the tent’s exit flap.

No time to think about things. I need to get out and find the antidote and my teammates. Not necessarily in that order.

I stumble through the exit and am hit full-on by solid masses of water. The storm has truly arrived now, with strikes of lightning cutting through a darkness that seems more like night than day and through these flashes, I see remnants of the destruction the earthquakes have wrought.

The small space in front of the field hospital is completely ploughed open and littered with craters of various sizes. I have no idea what kind of jutsu can cause this kind of damage. The rest of the tents have collapsed, one of them almost completely buried underneath tons of earth that would explain where the material from the craters has gone. It’s the biggest tent.

It’s the tent in which I would put the injured if I were in charge.

--

I can’t breathe.

*There’s not enough air.*

My feet move on their own, carry me over upturned soil and unknown bodies, closer and closer towards the buried tent and before long, I have forgotten the pain that wrecks my body and fall into a run because if I ever want to breathe again I need to see.

There’s too much stone and earth on top of the tent. It’s impossible for me to remove all of it on my own and I don’t know any doton jutsu that could take care of this. But I need to see. What do I do?

Oh god, what do I do?

I move along the edge of the tent, desperate for an opening, a sign, anything that might tell me whether Regashi and Nawaki are alive. Almost half of the round passes before my Sharingan picks up a weak, flickering flame, half disappearing underneath a boulder.

It’s Regashi’s signature.
I’m next to him in a moment, my knees digging deep into the muddy ground and my hands cradling his face.

“Regashi! Regashi, can you hear me? It’s me, Etsuko! Regashi, please, talk to me! Open your eyes, please?”

The flame stays weak and mostly unresponsive which is a load of bull because he’s right here in front of me and he wouldn’t dare die on me without talking to me first because that would be rude and Regashi is nothing but polite –

There is a soft gasp.

“Regashi? Regashi?!” I slap his cheek lightly.

Another gasp. “Eh- Etsuko?”

_Oh thank god!_

Relief rushes through me and with it the chakra in my eyes fizzles out. They’re burning from the extended use but I don’t mind, they helped me find Regashi.

“Etsuko, I,” he stops for a moment and I use the opportunity to prop his head on my knees. He looks at me with pure anguish in his eyes.

“Nawaki … he was still in there. The medic nin, he wasn’t – I didn’t realize, I didn’t realize until it was too late –”

My throat closes up. “What? What did you not realize?”

“He was giving the injured medicine, sleeping pills, I thought. Nawaki … he didn’t want to take them and they argued … I told him … I told him to stop arguing and he took them … and when the alarm sounded for the breached perimeter, he wouldn’t get up, none of the injured that took the sleeping pills did!”

Regashi sobs.

“You told me to watch over him and I … I couldn’t. I’m sorry, Etsuko-chan. I’m sorry. I’m sorry …”

His voice fades into silence.

His eyes close.

He goes still.

“Regashi?”

Silence.

“Regashi?”

Nothing but silence.

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--
This is all my fault.

I insisted that the both of them stayed in camp. I took Orochimaru away from here. I left them alone.

I killed them both.

I killed them with my misplaced attempt to do the right thing.

Ragged sobs tear from my chest and through my throat into the storm, shaking my entire body with every intake of breath.

I did this. And now both of them gone.

They didn't even get to know about Hanako.

“Lookie here!” a raucous voice suddenly cuts through the air. “A present for us hard-working guys! Dang, Konoha must’ve been desperate to send toddlers on the battlefield. Complete victory my ass!”

More voices agree.

I slowly turn around.

More than a dozen shinobi stand in a circle around me, clad in reddish shinobi gear and Iwa hitai-ate. They’re all drenched in blood and guts, eyes glimmering with bloodlust and the certainty of triumph.

My hands clench into fists by my side.

They want a fight?

Chakra is building up behind my eyes, more than I have ever fed them, and when I blink, the pictures are clearer than ever before. I can see the light of the lightning strikes being broken in the raindrops, every ounce of chakra flowing through their bodies, the currents of electricity vibrating in the air. Something warm and sticky flows down my cheeks and when I touch them, my fingertips come away covered with the red sheen of blood.

I will give them a fight.

I will kill them all.

With a speed I have never achieved before, I’m on the shinobi closest to me, his own movements laughably slow in comparison. He doesn’t last more than a couple exchange of blows when my kunai finds his throat and bites clean through.

It sets the rest of them into motion.

They come at me at once, well-coordinated and with the intent to kill, but I am not worried. In fact, I have never felt as invigorated as right now, with white-hot rage flowing through my veins and the lethal thirst for revenge powering my every move.

They are nothing.

They will all die.

My own lightning chakra gathers at the tips of my fingers and the natural lightning in the air answers. They race at each other, coming from below and above, smiting everything and everyone on their path. Projectiles of all kinds fly at me but my body dodges them with the ease of reflexes deeply
ingrained through rigorous training.

They cannot touch me.

They realize this themselves and their chakra signatures flare with what is at first surprise, only to turn into panic and fear. I can almost taste it. It’s intoxicating.

I want more.

Something inside me surges forward, out of my body, into the nearest enemy and wraps around his flame.

I want it.

Give it to me.

I yank it free.

It rushes into me like a bolt of energy that goes straight into my very core. The shinobi collapses soundlessly, his flame completely extinguished.

Exhilarated, I reach for more.

And more.

And more.

One after the other, the shinobi fall until in the end, there’s no flame left.

Silence has returned, at last.

It only lasts for a second.

Excruciating pain explodes from my chest and burns paths of fire through my whole body. Screams tear from my throat and the edges of my vision begin to fade. My legs lose all energy and just before I fall over, I feel a pair of hands gripping my waist.

--

And then everything goes black.
Interlude: Orochimaru

Chapter Summary

He had no time to waste.

Chapter Notes

The waiting has come to an end! Thank you for being so patient with me. Reading your comments has helped me a lot with getting through the last few months, so this is my pre-holiday-or-whatever-promises-free-days-gift to you! I hope you enjoy it :-)

Beta'ed by NightsBlackRose13, as always.

There were a number of enemy shinobi at the command center, but not as many as he had expected. Yoshina and the other Konoha shinobi seemed to have the situation well under control. It was merely a matter of dispatching a handful of his snake summons, strategically placing half a dozen kunai and barely a touch of taijutsu before it was quiet enough to demand a report.

“Enemies are Iwa nin for the most part, the rest are presumably Ame nin, though it has yet to be confirmed,” Yoshina announced. She looked mostly unruffled, with merely her glasses sitting slightly askew on her nose. She rectified that quickly. “They breached the perimeter within one hour after you left the camp. Points of attack were focused on Command Center and the hospital. Command Center is under control again. However, we lost contact to our people at the hospital.”

He frowned internally.

He had just sent the Uchiha girl there. It occurred to him that there was a high probability that she would encounter problems that she wasn’t yet prepared to solve.

And, more importantly: Hime’s little brother and Sensei’s son were there, too. His mind told him that the chances of both being unharmed were exceedingly low.

For a moment, his chest went unbearably tight at the notion of accepting what his mind was presenting him as most probable.

He pushed it away. He had no time to waste.

“Secure all sensitive information and prepare them for transport. Signal the retreat – this camp is lost to us. Our priority now is to make sure to get all the survivors out of here and leave nothing behind for our enemies.”

Yoshina nodded. “Where are we retreating to, rikushou?”

The camp closest to this one, Camp Same, would not be fit to handle the reproduction of the antidote. None of the other camps were. That was the reason why Camp Sakana had existed in the first place. But Camp Same, with Hatake Sakumo as its commander, would have to do for now.
“Camp Same. Make sure the Diversion Team receives the information.”

Yoshina saluted. “At once, rikushou!”

He didn’t linger to watch her giving orders to the shinobi around. Instead, he reached for one of the empty message scrolls in his breast pocket that he had prepared with a layer of chakra-sensitive ink. A couple hand seals and a few precious seconds of concentration caused the needed characters to appear on the paper. He then proceeded to bite down on the tip of his right thumb and slammed the hand with the bleeding finger on the ground.

“Kuchiyose no jutsu!”

A small, white snake with a bright red streak that followed the length of its back appeared in a cloud of dust.

“See that this message reaches the hands of Hatake Sakumo, and his hands only,” he instructed. The snake obediently opened its jaws wide and swallowed the scroll. He took a precious second to watch it wriggle away before starting to move towards the field hospital.

He encountered and dispatched three squads of enemy nin, two Iwa and one Ame, before a series of rapid explosions with considerable fire power shook the ground underneath his feet. Judging by the shock waves, the epicenter was close to the hospital.

The chances of finding Nawaki and Regashi alive were rapidly degenerating. He didn’t know why he’d been holding out hope at all. It was foolish. Had been, from the start.

He would have to be the one to tell Hime and Sensei.

The heavy downpour of rain and the darkness made it difficult to look further than a few feet, so when he was finally close to the open space in front of the hospital tents, it wasn’t an image that made him stop in his tracks and fall into a defensive position – it wasn’t what he saw but rather what he felt that made his hair stand on end.

Because there, right at the spot where the hospital tent used to stand –

Sweat, not breaking out during the fighting but here instead –

_Labored breathing_ –

*IaMgOlngtBbeCrushEDeXtinguishHedERASED_

- And then it was over.

He blinked, once, twice, only to find himself on his knees, his hands dug into the mud, the rain hammering down on his back and his whole body shaking, breath still coming in short rapid pants. Through strands of his dripping wet hair and with the help of lightning zapping through the heated air he could see a lone, tiny figure standing upright in the middle of a ring of corpses. The electricity seemed to gather there before quietly dissipating and leaving the scene in darkness again.

He got up.

His legs felt disgustingly weak and it cost him a tremendous amount of energy just to move forward. His body was screaming at him to turn around and get away before the danger returned, that there
had been something unnatural and deeply disturbing happening just moments ago, but his mind –

His mind.

It told him that he needed to know.

That what he had felt was something he had never experienced before. That it was beyond what he could easily explain. That it was unique.

And so he moved.

With every step he took, the certainty grew that whatever that technique had been had come directly from the figure still standing motionless in the rain. It was only after he was directly in front of her, though, that he realized – it was the Uchiha girl.

She was paler than before, blood running down her cheeks, her aura noticeably different, and her eyes –

Red iris, strange black arcs reaching out from the pupil before abruptly bending back to their origin and a bizarrely fractured sclera – what happened to her sclera? –

Those eyes were something else. Something powerful. Dangerous. Beautiful.

They were magnificent.

His arms moved on his own, reaching for the swirling pattern of blood and coal. A calmness had settled over everything, the rain, the wind, the fizzling electricity and there was nothing beyond his fingers and those eyes, that power, undiluted and potent unlike anything else.

Until she blinked and turned away on unsteady legs.

Just like that, the connection was broken and sounds rushed back with the force of a flood returning to the dry beach. It had become quite hectic in the few moments that he had spent entranced, and now he realized that Konoha shinobi were swarming around, carefully circling the space around the corpses and the girl. They jumped even further away when she started screaming and doubling over.

His hands were still outstretched from before and it didn’t take active thought on his part to step forward and grip her waist. She went boneless as soon as he caught her and with that, the spell was well and truly broken.

His rational mind snapped back into action as he laid her down to perform a quick check. The green glow of his medical chakra was not as steady as Tsunade’s but it would do for a first diagnosis.

The scan revealed several minor injuries, but more importantly, dangerous physical as well as chakra exhaustion. While he could treat the former himself, the latter could only be resolved with proper rest and medical monitoring. He clenched his jaw.

“There might still be survivors in the rubble, rikushou. Your orders?”

He lifted his head to see Yoshina standing right next to him, posture set in an immaculate stance and appearance looking minimally ruffled. He didn’t know when she’d arrived at the scene, but he was grateful for her professionalism nonetheless.

“Fetch a couple medics who can take care of her,” he instructed with a wave at the Uchiha girl’s still form. “You, help me dig through the hospital tent. If there’s someone still alive, they’ll be there.”
He stood up and headed towards the massive heap of dirt and soil underneath which the hospital tent lay buried. Up close, he realized with no small amount of irritation that it was bigger than anticipated. Additionally, the rain had soaked through completely, giving it a muddy consistency. It would be difficult for any survivor to breathe through all that.

Finding Hime’s brother and Sensei’s son was going to be a matter of finding the right corpses. He hated himself for thinking that.

“This is going to be difficult,” Yoshina said. “I am not sure how my skillset can be of any help here, but I am of course still at your disposal.” She was again standing beside him, looking at him for orders. Always the perfect second. It was a shame that her abilities were not more versatile.

His gaze went back to the problem at hand.

He’d once fought against a doton user who had been able to break the ground into slabs the size of tatami mats and proceeded to throw them around. Different from then, the earth here was already broken up into too small pieces. But if he could press the bits together and create slabs, it would be an easy thing to get them out of the way. He would have to let his chakra seep evenly into the earth, give it an adhesive quality and attach the slaps to chakra threads.

It would take an enormous amount of concentration and control on his part, contrary to when he was fighting the enemy nin.

Nawaki and Regashi’s faces flashed before his inner eye.

Things that were necessary needed to be done, no matter the cost.

He started to pump his chakra into the rock and dirt, spreading it like a finely woven net until it covered about half of the heap. Imagining the feeling of the soles of his feet sticking to tree bark, he separated individual quadrants from the net and made their content stick together by virtue of his chakra alone. Beads of sweat were rolling down his temples and mingling with the rain as his breath grew heavier, the control it cost him to pull off the feat straining him to his limit. But slowly, ever so slowly, hand-made slabs of rocks began to lift into the air where he gave them a push that flung them wide away.

Time ceased to have any meaning as he worked away, fatigue threatening to overwhelm him with every passing second. He soldiered on, though, silent images of Hime and Sensei hovering before his inner eye and demanding him to bring back something. Anything.

Spread chakra. Make quadrants stick together. Fling them away. Repeat.

He slaved away for what felt like hours when finally, finally, the heap was gone.

Yoshina had moved in immediately after enough of the debris had been cleared away to start looking for survivors. She and a helpful of other shinobi were moving over the space, checking still bodies and sealing them away in storage scrolls.

He knew too well what that meant.

He shook his head once to get rid of the dizziness and began to move through what used to be the hospital tent himself. Unlike the others, though, he didn’t stop to check random bodies. He moved and moved until the weak glinting of light caught in crystal caught his eye.
He looks unscathed. Quite peaceful, actually.

That familiar hair, a honey two shades darker than Tsunade’s. The baby fat on his cheeks, merely lacking their rosy tint.

He kneeled down beside the corpse that had once been the little brother of his teammate. The closest thing to family he had.

He’d known Nawaki since the boy’s day of birth. His literal first steps. First words. First training.

And now he knew the day of his death.

His fists clenched at his sides.

How was this fair?

His hand moved towards the Shodai’s crystal.

He knew the answer, of course.

Closed around it.

It wasn’t.

And gently loosened it from Nawaki’s neck.

Nothing in shinobi life ever was.

He slowly stood up from his crouch.

Tsunade would appreciate getting it back.

His hand went searching for one of the storage scroll in his hip pouch to seal the body away, but his fingertips stilled as soon as they touched one.

Nawaki looked relaxed, entirely unruffled by the rain or the heap of rocks that had been crushing him just minutes ago. It was easy to imagine the perpetual rosy tint on his cheeks or to imagine a slight up and down movement of his chest. It was easy to imagine him just as being asleep.

His hand fell away from the pouch.

There were other people coming to collect the bodies. He still had to find the other one.

He turned away from the still, small body and slowly made his way to the other side of the hospital, eyes scanning the ground for that last familiar face. It didn’t take long.

Where Nawaki had looked peaceful and merely asleep, Regashi clearly had suffered pain. His lips were slightly parted, his brows furrowed and the skin ashen, bloodless – and it was easy to see why: his entire lower body was mangled beyond recognition, bones shining through blood and torn tissue and sticking out in angles they were not supposed to. Had the boy lived, he would have never been able to walk again.

For the second time, he sank to his knees beside the corpse of a person he considered family.

Unlike Nawaki, Regashi didn’t carry something as distinct as the Shodai’s crystal with him. There was nothing for him to bring back but the entirety of his broken body, so there was no point in
lingering. It was useless and helped absolutely nobody.

And yet, he couldn’t move away.

He just kneeled. Lingered. Stared.

Useless.

He was just about to end it, stand up and walk away when he heard a soft gasp.

He whipped around instantly, eyes wide and fixed on Regashi’s face. He waited with baited breath, the sound of his heart pounding loud in his ears, not yet willing to believe what easily could have been an illusion.

One second passed.

Another.

Another.

And Regashi’s chest moved, ever so slightly, to let a second gasp pass his lips.

Time seemed to double its speed as Orochimaru instantly threw himself to work, checking vital signs, stabilizing within his limits and calling out for medics.

Later, he couldn’t remember what had happened the few seconds between his discovery and the sight of Regashi being carefully strapped onto a gurney and hurriedly transported away, but what he felt was enormous. It made him feel light-headed and out-of-sorts, which he strangely didn’t mind.

Relief.

That his lingering had not been wasted.

That at least one of them had survived.

That he would not have to bring Sensei the news, too.

Just – relief.

)00(

“See that the injured are taken care of! They have utmost priority! Sakana-Medics? Good, follow Mitsuhashi, she’ll show you the hospital tent.”

He could hear Hatake Sakumo’s firm, commanding voice over the noise that their arrival had caused moments before the man in question spotted him and came over.

“Orochimaru-san!” he said, eyes alert and hard lines set around his mouth. “I’m glad to see you’ve arrived safely. The message you sent has been greatly distressing, and seeing the state that the survivors are in now only adds to that. What happened?”

He gave his report in a clipped voice and concise words, detached from what was happening around him and focused at the same time. Hatake asked several more detailed questions which he all answered in the same fashion. The whole conversation didn’t take longer than ten minutes and he was about to leave at Hatake’s silence after a string of questions, thinking that it signaled the end, when the man opened his mouth again for a last question.
“Do you know what happened to Uchiha Etsuko?”

Ah, yes. The girl with the fascinating technique.

He remembered well.

“Her condition was critical when she was transported away. Total exhaustion.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath.

“She might not make it. Now excuse me – I have to send a report to the Hokage.”

He turned around and left the man standing. He wasn’t called back.

)00()

Reporting Officer: Orochimaru

Registration Number: 002300

Rank: Jounin, Commander of Camp Sakana

Subject: Emergency Report

**Concerning the attack at Camp Sakana**

Perpetrators: Iwagakure nin; Amegakure nin

Death toll: 12 Konoha nin, list enclosed; about 25 enemy nin

Injured: 4 Konoha nin, 2 critical

Result: Camp Sakana and its medical facilities destroyed. Antidote lost. Survivors moved to Camp Same.

Detailed report enclosed.

Commentary: […] Genin Uchiha Etsuko has displayed the use of unknown techniques of remarkable power. Usage heavily detrimental to her health however. Recommend close monitoring that needs to be continued should she survive, especially with added unstable mental condition. Individual mentoring with a capable jounin instructor should be taken into consideration. […]

[On a slip of paper, tacked onto the back of the report:] *You’ve always wanted me to take on a student, haven’t you, Sensei?*
Thou Shalt Not Pass

Chapter Summary

Somebody has some explaining to do.

Chapter Notes

What's up, my favorite readers?

Welcome back to another update. It's been a while, and I'm afraid that the speed won't be picking up for the time being since - drumroll - I got my first job after uni and whew work is no joke. But I'm not stopping, so please don't give up on Joyous Children, either, I'm counting on your support!

Speaking of supporting: JC has been up and running for two years now, hooray! On anniversary day, I posted a new chapter in the Side fics, so have a look at it - it features Toshiro and what he thinks about the girl that just waltzed into his life and threw everything off balance.

Thanks, as always, to my beta NightsBlackRose13 for being patient and giving super helpful advice. Also, beta has started a Naruto-One Piece crossover over on ffnet with me beta'ing: it's called "Drifting Whitecaps" and I think I'm safe to say that there're some awesome things coming. So please check it out!

My eyes fly open with a jolt.

Clean, fresh air rushes into my lungs, free of any unpleasant scents and lingering tastes and I spend several seconds just breathing it in. And out. In. And out.

It feels so good.

For a long moment, I just lie there and breathe, my eyes staring upwards at nothing in particular. There's nothing interesting to see anyways since the sky has decided to go all white today. What a weird thing to do, sky. Eh.

It takes entirely too long for me to realize that this is something just slightly too out of the ordinary to be so nonchalant about.

I sit up with a start. Look around.

It's not just the sky that's completely white.

Everything is.

Like, literally.
Everything. No up or down, no left or right.

Just – white.

How … how did I get here? Where was I before this? What is here?

My hands grope for a kunai, a shuriken, anything that could function as a weapon. I get up from my sitting position into a defensive crouch, the blood in my ears loud enough to drown out the crackling silence of the whiteness. My breath is coming in short bursts like I've just come out of a battle, like my body is still high on adrenaline even though I've been lying around not half a minute ago.

I have a bad feeling about this. Worse still, I think I've been here before. What was it?

I wreck my brain trying to recall why I find this all so terrifyingly familiar, but for some reason, my thoughts move with the speed and consistency of chewing gum that's been slapped beneath a school desk and forgotten for at least a week.

My hands haven't come up with anything and I have no choice but to put them up in the familiar Uchiha style taijutsu stance. The bandages have loosened at places, covered in soot and dirt and again, there's the strong feeling that I've just come out of a fight.

A sudden thought comes to me then.

Is this how it feels like to die?

Am I going to die?

My hands start shaking as my vision blurs. My eyes are blinking rapidly as one moment, there's just the dirty bandages and the next, blood is dripping down between my fingers, running sticky rivulets down my cheeks –

I am going to die.

I am dying.

D … y … i … n –

WHACK

Did something just hit my head?

WHACK

Ow!

Something definitely just hit my head! My head already hurts! Bad Idea!

WHACK

"You bloody soot! Dimwitted dookie nugget! Brainless queen of trolls!"

What?

WHACK

"Moronic over-powered mimosa!"
HEY!

The next WHACK never comes to existence as my hand shoots out to catch whatever the hell is hitting me. My fingers close around thick, rolled-up paper and without thinking, I yank at it hard enough to send the person holding it in a wide arc over my head and slamming into the ground right in front of me.

I blink.

Huh.

I didn't think I was strong enough to do that.

Well.

They should have let go, then. Or refrained from hitting me in the first place.

Also, hooray to chakra use.

They lie unmoving in a heap before me, their kimono of a slightly iridescent purple color that makes me dizzy after watching it for longer than a few seconds. It jostles at another part of my memory and when they lift their head to give me a reproachful look, their androgynous face finally allows the last puzzle piece to fall into place.

I gasp.

Point my finger at him.

And yell.

"You are The Bureau Guy!"

Everything makes sense now. The whiteness, the loss of orientation, the headache. And of course, The Guy from the Bureau for Soul Transfer Affairs themselves. How could I forget all of that? You'd think that meeting a representative from 'Heaven' would stick out as something rather prominent in a brain. Or, in this case, as something super unpleasant, what with the noise, the headache and the weird revelations surrounding my reincarnation into Narutoverse.

Which reminds me.

Why are they even here.

This … is not exactly a social call, right? Most probably.

Umm.

Did I do something?

Last time they appeared, I was in desperate need of someone kicking my ass. You know, to stop being a zombie and all that jazz. But this time?

What – what exactly did I do before coming here?

"You! Are! A! Fool!"

Oh. They're at it again.
It's annoying.

I reach forward to grab them by their collar – which is easy since they didn't bother to get up properly and just continued yelling propped up on their arms in a supremely undignified manner – and bring their eyes to the same level as mine.

"How about you tell me what the hell your problem is before insulting me?" I snarl.

Oh wow, I sounded mean. But I'm super pissed, so I forgive myself.

The Bureau Guy breaks off mid-rant and just stares at me.

I stare back.

"Ah," they say after a while, voice back to sounding like the pleasant voicemail announcer that I remember from last time. "I see. The memory wipe has already been active. I didn't realize. Apologies."

What.

Memory wipe?!

Rage bubbles up inside me, adding to the headache from the whiteness and pounding against my skull.

I swear, if anybody has been messing with my head again I am going to find them and obliterate their ass. I am so sick of this, I'm going to fight whatever god there is myself and give them a thorough piece of my mind.

As if being able to hear my inner rant, Bureau Guy, conveniently close to me since my hand is still bunched into a fist at their collar, sticks out their arms and puts their hands flat on the sides of my face.

The whiteness instantly makes place for images and scenes so vivid in color that I feel like I'm reliving an experience.

Running through a forest – an ambush – Hanako is so fast – oh god we gutted that guy – Nawaki is injured – another ambush?! – no, we can't leave Sensei behind! – camp – Orochimaru – Zetsu – And – And.

Everybody is dead.

The realization falls on my head with the force of an avalanche, screams its horror at my face at point-blank range and burns a hole into my chest with the blunted ruthlessness of a heated iron poker.

No wonder it felt like I was reliving an experience.

It's all real. It happened.

And

It's
"Objectively speaking, that is not true at all."

I slowly turn my head to look at the only other person there to witness my current wretched state.

"There is no indication at all that would point to you being responsible for the attack on your camp, because you simply were not. So saying that their deaths was your fault is quite a stretch."

They have gotten back to their feet and are looking immaculate again. I don't know when I released them. I don't know what they're talking about. Can't they just leave me alone? Can't they hear me screaming, breaking, crumbling? Being ground into dust?

"However," they continue, "you killing yourself was your fault, and your fault alone."

And here I thought being dead would be free of any pain, silly me.

And then it clicks.

Amongst all the other colossal failures, I apparently also managed the feat to kill myself without realizing it.

I am dead.

When … when did that happen?

Another sensation rushes at me, but instead of pictures, this time is … different. The echo of something deep within myself – reaching out and – closing around a foreign brightness. Eclipsing it.

It leaves me with the feeling of having done something profoundly wrong. Sacrilegious.

Does taking one own's life feel like that?

"Only if one keeps pushing an overpowered ability without regards to the consequences, as you foolishly did," Bureau Guy dryly comments.

Wait.

I didn't say that out loud. What are they, a mind reader? And why so goddamn rude about it?!

"Stop that!"

They arch one perfectly plucked eyebrow. "Stop what? Reading your thoughts and generously offering explanations or, I quote, 'being so goddamn rude about it'?"

This one is just asking to be punched, I swear it.

"Instead of using physical violence, I recommend listening to my words. As I said, I'm willing to explain."

This does manage to stop me in my tracks. On the one hand, I could really do with some explanations. On the other, I really do want to punch them.

Hm.
Questions first, punching later. And at the end of the day, I can still go back to being depressed. Doesn't that sound like an appealing deal.

I narrow my eyes to appear a bit more intimidating and a little less like a hot mess. "Good enough for now. Start talking then. And better begin from the beginning!"

"I do not approve of your plan to punch –"

"And stay out of my head!"

There's a short silence.

And then, pleasant as ever: "As you wish."

Oh?

That was easier than expected. Except of course, they don't mean it. But even so, there's nothing I can actually do about it. Well then.

Nothing left but jumping right into it, I guess.

… OK, let me summarize – just so you know that I got it right," I say dryly, after a perceived hundred years of them explaining … well, a lot.

Bad thing after that: I am positively numb because I'm supposed to feel too many conflicting emotions at once.

Good thing after that: I am positively numb because I'm supposed to feel too many conflicting emotions at once.

Sometimes, not often, things are easy like that.

"I unlocked my Mangekyou because I watched my teammate die. And because I and my circumstances are super extra, the unlocked ability is not something ordinary like, say, distortion of the space-time-continuum or awesome torture illusions. Instead, I get some kind of life-force-absorption which sounds almighty and super awesome but is actually not because it kills me with a speed proportionate to the amount of life-force that I absorb. Did I get it right so far?"

"Because foreign life-force is 'cancerous' to your own, yes," the Bureau Guy helpfully adds. And then, with a smile that is genuinely pleased: "I am delighted to see that my explanations have been well received."

Ah. Good for you, buddy.

I almost hope they heard that.

"Yaa … I'll just continue then. So, the reason I'm here right now, talking to you, is because I overused my Mangekyou so badly, my life-force was completely poisoned within minutes. Hence me dying. Oh, and also, my body couldn't handle the Sharingan-induced strain. Correct?"

"Correct."

"But I am not actually dead and stuck in some kind of limbo here with you because you or the people you work for don't want me dead quite yet, right?"
At this, Bureau Guy frowns. "I did not say that."

I huff. "Of course you didn't. this is something I am assuming. Look, there must be a reason you're here and stopping my soul from going to Nirvana for the second time already and the most direct answer is that someone is refusing to let me pass. I'm not complaining, mind you, but I do want to know why. Also, you promised to explain, so please explain."

They don't look too convinced. "How do you know I'm working for someone else?"

*Oh, please.*

I just barely manage not to roll my eyes. "You are from the 'Bureau of Soul Transfer Affairs'. If that name doesn't scream 'Hierarchies!' and 'Bureaucracy!' I don't know what does."

"Ah, I see."

They fall silent again.

Seriously. Is it going to be like *that.*

I ready myself for a battle over every scrap of information and am about to go on the offensive –

"Your assumption that your soul is not allowed to pass into the next stage is right. It has been decided that the benefits of keeping you alive in your current dimension and universe outweigh the costs."

Huh.

Good, I guess.

Also, *what the hell.*

"You have only been active for a comparatively short time, but in proportion to that same short time, your achievements have already been significant. Because of this, the potential of your actions now and in the foreseeable future has increased exponentially."

What what what. I don't feel so numb anymore.

"Simply put, it has been judged that you will be able fulfill the most important expectations within the realms of reasonable certainty."

HELL WHAT?!

"Expectations?!" I explode. "Nobody told me anything about expectations?! What are you talking about, dimension, benefit and cost, achievements, potential – WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN?!"

Bureau Guy smiles patiently. "I understand that you might be upset at this sudden reveal of information. To better accommodate your queries, I ask you to specify them."

**I AM SO GOING TO PUNCH THEM**

"And may I remind you that violence is not advised as I am still willing to answer."

I close my eyes.
I should … breathe. Yeah, breathing is always a good idea. Maybe count to ten, too?

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Repeat.

… nah, I'll pass on the counting. My fists have almost stopped shaking anyway.

"So," I drawl, markedly slow, "what's this about expectations? I distinctly remember you telling me that all my decisions are my own the last time we talked."

"You remember right and it remains true. Though I do admit that this was only part of the … ah, let's call it overarching truth." They clear their throat. "It has always been imperative that you do what you believe is right. You were not to start following a plan or some schedule that was forced upon you, since it was believed that that would have had detrimental effects on your productivity."

I let their words sink in.

"This," I finally say, "has got to be the single worst approach to achieving a goal that I have ever heard of. 'Oh yeah, let's shove a girl from one universe to another and hope that her motivations and actions somehow align with our plan, which, by the way, let's not tell her about that part.' I mean, seriously? That was the plan?"

They nod. "I understand why that appears absurd to you on the basis of the information you have available. However, it is important to note that there has been far more thought put into giving you the right incentives than you are aware of."

"… incentives?"

Why do I suddenly get the feeling that I won't like what they're going to answer?

"Do you think it was chance that let you be reborn as a member of the Uchiha, a clan with a key role in everything that was and is to come in this world? That allowed you to take control of a body with immense power in its genetic make-up? That put you into a close relationship with your brother, another key player of the future?"

"But," my voice comes out small and weak, "the first time, you said … you said that there had been a mistake in the system, that I – that I wasn't supposed to be here!"

Their reply is calm and measured. "I lied. I apologize for causing you emotional distress, but it was necessary."

It was necessary.

That's it. That's their reasoning for pulling the ground from underneath my feet. For collapsing the little corner of normalcy, of reality, that I have finally managed to build for myself, to make myself keep going.

It was necessary.

Have any of the decision I've made until now been my own? Truly, entirely, exclusively mine? Ever?

"The existence of the plan does not make your reality any less true. You have no reason to feel invalidated."

I slowly look up at them, their face carefully set into a neutral expression. I absently register that they
must've been in my head again, but right now, I don't care.

"What is this plan?" My voice sounds strangely hollow to my ears. "Tell me."

"You are familiar with Kaguya, the Rabbit Goddess and later Demon of ancient times?"

I blink.

Uh.

"She was introduced very briefly in the manga. I don't know much about her except that she was the first one to use chakra because she ate the fruit of that huge-ass tree, became evil, had two sons who shot her on the moon, left Black Zetsu behind, came back hella mad with said Black Zetsu's help, was punched by Sakura and got sealed away for good by Naruto and Sasuke. I think there was going to be more about her in the anime, but I died before watching those episodes. Which is inconvenient, I guess?"

"It suffices for now. Although I have one correction to make: her sons did not 'shoot her on the moon' as you put it, rather, she was encased in the husk of the ten-tails and became the moon."

Humph. Fusspot.

"So what about her?" I ask, trying not to sound too impatient.

"She originally worked for the same entities that I work for."

Wait, what?!

"What little information you will be able to find about Kaguya in your world describes her as the princess of a clan from a star far away in the galaxy. This is how she presented herself to your people, but the truth of the matter remains that she is only a servant to one of those entities that you can call 'The Old Ones'."

Oh god, this is getting better by the second, isn't it.

"She served The Old Ones as a guardian to this world, the main task being to take care of what your people call the 'god-tree', or in your words, that 'huge-ass tree'. She did so since the beginning of this world and, over time, grew compassionate towards the plight and struggle of the humans. So she decided to go against the rules of The Old Ones, made herself known to her charges and lived among them. It did not take long for her to take the next step, however, and she abused her duty by consuming the fruit of the tree."

Ohohoho wait I know where this goes.

"Let me guess," I hiss. "What Kaguya did made a mess for those Old Dudes, they couldn't be bothered to handle it, ordered you to drag me here and expect me to fix it?"

At that, Bureau Guy looks offended. "It is a lot more complex than that! The Old Ones cannot take care of it personally because they cannot physically enter this world. I can assure you, however, that a lot of consideration has been put into choosing you for the task. You should feel honored."

Honored.

I should feel honored.

White-hot pressure is building up inside me, pushing through my throat, pulsating behind my eyes
and hammering against the top of my skull.

The gall.

"I. Did. Not. Ask for this! Nobody asked if I was even remotely ok with this! I refuse to be the tool of some nebulous beings whose motivations I don't know and who couldn't be bothered to tell me their plan until I died and threatened to destroy that plan! I refuse, refuse, refuse, you hear me?"

"This," Bureau Guy sighs, "is exactly what they feared would happen if the plan was made known to you."

"Well they were fucking right to expect that!"

They nod once, accepting. "Are you sure you want to refuse?"

Wha-

"Does … does that mean I can?"

"Of course. Although I suggest you listen to the possible outcomes of that decision first."

They do have a point. I loathe to admit it, but they really do. So I reluctantly relent. "I'm listening. Shoot."

"The immediate consequence of course would be that you will not go back to living since bringing you back is only possible with considerable effort on our side which would not be very effective if you were no part of the plan anymore."

I should have expected that. Of course they would stop any investments as soon as I refused. But … I don't know, would it be so bad? To go and rest?

"The long-term consequences," Bureau Guy continues on, "are, of course, harder to determine. However, I have to warn you about this: we have observed a phenomenon in which time tends to push events and results into what we call the original timeline if not actively worked against. We call it the principle of time elasticity."

I frown. "What does it mean exactly?"

"It means that even if time is wound back, the likelihood that certain events that occurred in the original timeline, occur again in the same or similar fashion is greater the less they are actively worked against. Allow me to give you an example: On the one hand, Uchiha Kiyomi and Uchiha Nobuo died in an attack on the village in both the original timeline as well as the timeline that has seen a primary modification through the addition of your existence, because there was nothing or too little done to work against the flow of events that led there.

"On the other hand, Akari and Kyoden of the Sand that you know as the parents of what will become Akasuna no Sasori survived their encounter with Hatake Sakumo in this timeline thanks to your initial interference. They will continue to work against the time elasticity."

Wait, what?

"How did I help Sasori's parents survive meeting Sakumo?"

"By killing the kunoichi Tsuge Toya, who belonged with the perpetrators from Iwa that attacked and destroyed much of Konoha's security infrastructure. She killed your father."
My mind is whirling.

I don’t know if they’re aware, but Bureau Guy’s habit to call everyone they talk about by their name just gave me a huge clue to the mystery that I wasn’t aware I was carrying around me: the mystery surrounding that very same attack. As far as I know, it’s still unknown how those Iwa nin even got that far into the Land of Fire and past the village’s security measures. With this vital piece of information I could … I don’t know, do something.

If I go back, that is.

Aside from all this, it still doesn’t explain the connection to Sasori’s parents.

"Please elaborate. I still don’t get the connection."

"You killing her prevented her from activating her self-destruction seal and made her body a treasure trove for Konoha’s intelligence. It is thanks to that information that Konoha was able to figure out which party was behind the attack, consequently making it possible to work out an alliance contract for Suna, one which was accepted. Thus, even though Akari, Kyoden and Hatake Sakumo still met, the result was different."

Holy frickin' shit.

I did not know that.

That's –

That's the first good news about my existence that I've heard.

Bureau Guy – I should ask their name, I can’t keep calling them Bureau Guy forever – graciously allows me to take a few seconds to digest the information before he continues. "To come back to the matter of the possible consequences of your refusal: although it is undeniable that you have changed a lot already and set the course for some other developments, too, the probability for a lasting alteration to this world and dimension slims down the further time progresses. If you leave now, the elasticity of time will find a way to restore the original timeline – you can call it fate, if you want to. That includes, among others, the fate of one Uchiha Obito."

My whole body goes cold.

Obito, Obito, my sweet baby brother.

Consent, being a plaything for the Old Ones, being tired of everything – all of the things that have bothered me until now.

They all dwarf in the face of the possibility that I can save Obi. This is something only I can do. I am his only Nee-chan.

Bureau Guy is right. I can be fed up with everything that I have been dished out. I have every right to be.

But I can never abandon my little brother.

I let out a humorless laugh. "You already knew how this was going to end from the very moment you came here, didn’t you?"

"I told you that the Old Ones put a lot of thought into giving you the right incentives," they say
quietly and for once, I can make out an apologetic note in their voice.

I close my eyes and exhale. Swallow. And open my eyes again.

"What kind of tricks are you going to pull to bring me back to the living this time?"

The rustle of a tent flap being moved is the first sound that arrives at my ears, followed by the soft footfall of a person walking in – cautiously, but not stealthily – and sitting down somewhere near me. Their breathing is calm and regular, and a few seconds pass before I hear the crinkle of a paper scroll being unfurled.

I'm lying on a thin mattress, with a thin blanket covering me and my head supported by a thin pillow. It feels like what I imagine your typical field-hospital bed to be like, not that I've ever had the pleasure to lie on one before. No, only real hospital beds for me, the luxurious kind.

Time to open my eyes I guess. Maybe I'm lucky and it's a medic. Or anyone who could give me some water I guess. My throat feels positively parched.

The lighting in the tent is dim but that doesn't seem to bother the person reading their scroll. I blink a few times to chase away the blurry edges around my field of vision and immediately recognize that silvery grey shock of hair.

"Sakumo?" My voice sounds so weak.

The man stands up from his chair and is by the side of my bed even before I have finished saying his name.

"Etsuko-chan, you're awake! How are you feeling?" He gently pushes some strands of hair out of my face and doesn't remove his hand after that, instead softly stroking my cheek.

"Thirsty …" I croak.

"Of course," he says and I instantly miss the warmth of his hand as he stands up to get me some water.

"There. Drink slowly, alright?"

I nod and take the bottle from his hands. He carries the chair over so he can sit right by my side. His hand is back in my hair.

I drink his affection up together with the water like a dried-up sponge.

He retakes the bottle and puts it on the little table beside the head of my bed after I've had enough. "Do you want some more?"

I shake my head. "How long have I been out?"

"It's been almost eleven days now." He breathes out. "It … didn't look good for a couple days. But you're strong, and you survived." He smiles. "I'm so proud of you."

I look down at my hands. They're bandaged up, white stripes running up the length of my arms and disappearing beneath the sleeves of my shirt.

I have no reason to be proud of surviving. I had help, from so many, here and above.
The rest of my team didn't.

"I'm alone now." It slips out of me without asking for permission and I can't bring myself to look at Sakumo. I wish he didn't hear that.

At first, he doesn't answer

Suddenly I feel strong arms wrap around me, pulling me into a tight hug. The smell of sweat, dogs and sandalwood rises up into my nose, so comfortably Sakumo. He is so warm, too.

"It hurts a lot now," he says with a quiet voice. "It will keep hurting, for a long time after, and it will never really disappear. But we learn to make space for it in our hearts. We learn not to stop letting others into our hearts, too. This is how we are never alone, Etsuko-chan."

He doesn't let go, not even as sobs start racking my body, as my tears start soaking through his flak jacket.

He doesn't let go until I exhaust myself from crying and fall back into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Regarding Uchiha Etsuko

Hokage-sama,

Uchiha Etsuko has awoken from her coma and appears to be physically healthy.

I am aware of the reasons for keeping CAPUCHIN's survival a secret. However, I believe that the recovery of both CAPUCHIN as well as Uchiha Etsuko can be accelerated considerably if the both of them could support each other. Therefore, I formally request the information be shared with Uchiha Etsuko as soon as she's stable enough.

As to the further development of her shinobi training: since continuing in her team will be impossible, I formally apply to be appointed her jounin instructor, following the structure of an apprenticeship. Points in favor of my appointment will be listed in a separate document.

Respectfully,

Jounin Commander Hatake Sakumo

Requests in regards to Uchiha Etsuko

Hatake-kun,

I am relieved to hear that Uchiha Etsuko has awoken without further damage. I understand your reasoning for requesting the classified information be shared with her and, personally, am in favor of it. However, since this is a matter of village security, it will have to be discussed with the inner council. We shall see.

Your request to be appointed her jounin instructor will be taken into careful consideration as well. You might be surprised to hear that yours is not the only one of that kind — or maybe not, since you have recognized her potential early on as well. In this, too, we shall see.

I will inform you of new developments as soon as they arise.
May the Will of Fire guide you,

Sarutobi Hiruzen

AN: Capuchins are a breed of small monkeys.
Inside It, The Seed of Redemption

Chapter Summary

Never say never.

Chapter Notes

Hi peeps!

Another long wait for the next chapter, but here it is! Thank you for all the lovely reviews you left on the last chapter, I'm quite pleased how many of you I could surprise with the re-appearance of Bureau Guy, eheh. Also, shoutout to colasea for drawing awesome fanart for me! Come over to tumblr and have a look at it!

The title of this chapter is taken from the poem "Waste" by Kay Ryan

Waste

Not even waste

is inviolate.

The day misspent,

the love misplaced,

has inside it

the seed of redemption.

Nothing is exempt

from resurrection.

It is tiresome

how the grass

re-ripens, greening

all along the punched

and mucked horizon
once the bison
have moved on,
leaning into hunger
and hard luck.

- Kay Ryan, Waste from the collection "Say Uncle"

The camp medic orders me to stay in bed for another two days until I am released.

My brain uses this time as an opportunity to work off all the emotions that I didn't get to feel while lying comatose, and because there is no such thing as doing one thing after another with matters of the heart, I am allowed the dubious pleasure of having to deal with them all at once. And I do, somehow. Albeit very badly.

I cannot stop myself from getting lost in the pathlessness of 'what-ifs' and 'what-could-have-beens'. It is all the same muddy color of rusted twilight that blows up like a mushroom cloud and suffocates my rational ability to think, to focus on what lies forward. It's ironic, considering that looking beyond the here and now is the only reason I have decided to return and yet, all I can seem to do is look back and regret.

Regret, regret. So much to regret and feel guilty for. No amount of sorry will ever be enough, no person that could hear me ever able to absolve me of my crimes. I am condemned to continue underneath all that, to burrow my way through and hope to not be crushed until I have made good on my unspoken promise to Obito. It is my only chance for redemption.

Sakumo tries to keep an eye on me and visits as often as he can despite his duties as Commander of the camp. He keeps treating me ever so gently, offering warmth and forgiveness that I don't deserve and the more he smiles at me, the more I feel like a thief, leeching off his kindness without ever giving anything in return.

I'm glad that my bed rest ends soon. Avoiding him will be easier when I am on the move and in use.

)00( 

On the evening of my first miserable day back from the dead, a woman enters the tent and heads straight towards my corner. Although I have never seen her before, her ridiculous good looks combined with the unmistakable midnight blue of her mantle identify her as a clanswoman of mine. There are two things that make her stand out, however: her long, wavy and purple hair that, needless to say, gives her appearance an even more ethereal quality, for one. But even more prominent than that is the fact that only one of her eyes is of the customary charcoal black – the other has a milky white color that speaks of loss of sight.

"Etsuko-chan," she greets with me a light bow. Her voice sounds low and velvety, just as beautiful as everything else about her. I bow back as well as I can from my sitting position on the bed.

Beauty like that clashes horribly with the air of depression I've built around myself.

"My name is Uchiha Naori. I don't believe we've met, yet."
Uchiha Naori. That name seems … familiar. Which means that she must be someone huge, considering the fact that Kishimoto could barely be bothered to mention more than a couple female Uchiha at all and I certainly haven't heard of her from Yashiro.

"No, we haven't," I answer. "A pleasure to meet you. Please take care of me."

*A bit flatter and your voice could squash any trace of sincerity that might have been there, Etsuko.*

She sits down on the same chair on which Sakumo has sat earlier, too.

"You probably wonder why I am here. I came as soon as I'd heard that you'd woken up, as is the duty of the senior Uchiha in the camp. We care for our own."

"Thank you," I say and bow again.

Granted, I have no idea how many of us are actually out here, but just the fact that she, as a woman, is the senior, is kind of impressive. For anyone who hasn't noticed, my clan doesn't think much of women in general.

"How are you feeling?"

*Oh, shit. How do I answer that?*

"Don't feel obligated to mince your words. I want you to talk openly to me." She smiles a small but genuine smile. "Although – I guess it's easy to demand openness without showing openness yourself. I'll start then, if you don't mind."

Her smile doesn't waver as her normal eye turns red and three tomoe start spinning rapidly. My body immediately tenses up in response, a leftover reaction courtesy to that one time Otou-san used his Sharingan to genjutsu me – even after all the training with Yashiro – but Naori's eye doesn't stay that way for long. There's another shift and the black of her tomoe turns into three lines that split the red in three parts, making her iris look like a three-petal flower.

Holy fucking shit.

That is a Mangekyou Sharingan.

And now I know who she is, too.

In the fight edo-tensei-Itachi and Sasuke versus Sage-mode-Kabuto at the beginning of the 4th Shinobi War, Itachi had used a forbidden technique that was only usable for Mangekyou-wielders to make Kabuto see the error of his ways: Izanami. There had been a flashback, too – what would Naruto have been without flashbacks – in which it was explained how Izanami came to be.

A handful of my clansmen had become super powerful Mangekyou-wielders, invented Izanagi – yeah, that technique *Danzou* was so particularly fond of with his arm full of stolen Sharingan – and decided to use that technique to cheat fate, so to speak. Also, start killing each other. It became really bad really fast, but one of those idiots was lucky enough to have a sensible badass friend who single-handedly invented Izanami and sat him back on his ass. That sensible badass friend's name had been – you guessed it – none other than Uchiha Naori.

And now that Uchiha Naori is sitting before me, one eye blinded – meaning that she'd used Izanami that one time already – and the other displaying one of the most powerful doujutsu in Naiutoverse in its full glory.
I know I've said it before, but – Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"This, Etsuko-chan, is the next step in the evolution of the Sharingan after reaching full maturity with three tomoe. It is called the Mangekyou Sharingan."

I nod once to signal her that I'm listening.

"The Mangekyou is the most powerful form our doujutsu can take" – oh, I don't think she knows about the Rinnegan – "but we pay a heavy price to obtain it. Tell me Etsuko-chan, what happened right before you awakened your ordinary Sharingan?"

I gulp.

I have never talked about this to anybody.

Nobody asked and I was quite happy to suppress the memories.

I guess … now is the time to revisit them.

"It was the night when the Uchiha Police Building was destroyed. I was with Obito – that's my little brother – and Otou-san had left us in a side street to fight off enemies. He was … defeated, though, and the enemy came for us. I … I killed them. Her."

I can't bring myself to look her in the eye, instead fixating my gaze on my hands. They're fisted around the thin cover, the material bunched up and wrinkled underneath.

"I don't remember when exactly I activated my Sharingan, but I know that I had them when I found Otou-san … Otou-san's corpse shortly after." Burnt into my memory forever, lines and contrasts clear as crystal, color and smell vivid as if I were there still.

Naori nods. "Awakening our gift is often enough caused by emotional stress, but even more often than that, by the overwhelming desire to protect what we love. You killed that enemy nin to protect your brother, did you not?"

I nod without hesitating. For this one, I don't need to think. "Obito means the world to me."

She smiles again, this time long and full of heart-felt empathy and oh gods she's so beautiful. "I believe that this is the original reason we have developed our doujutsu – that for us Uchiha, nothing stands above the love we feel for our precious people."

Her voice is full of conviction and I believe without a doubt that she believes every word she says. I mean, that is as close to the truth as any in-Narutoverse-person who doesn't know about Kaguya can get.

"Feeling so strongly is what propels us forward, what gives us a goal every single day. We develop along the lines of our love, for better and for worse – and it makes us vulnerable in ways more dangerous than most could ever imagine."

She stops for a few heartbeats and I can literally see the memories passing before her inner eye. She would know all about pain– she gained her Mangekyou after all, and the Izanami ordeal could not have been easy either.

And now, I'm starting to understand why she is here. She must have heard reports about what had happened at Camp Sakana, deduced that I had awakened my Mangekyou and immediately come here to explain since it would be a logical conclusion to think that I have no idea what happened to
me. Nobody knows that I know about the Mangekyou – how would they?

It's quite the service actually. It's surprisingly nice and considerate.

"The last stage of our doujutsu, the Mangekyou, is what we receive when we have been hurt in the worst possible way. When we realize that we failed to do the one thing we are born to do. When all we can see is the ways in which we were not enough to stop fate ripping away the love we wanted to protect. When everything in us yearns to undo what has been done, to recover what we have lost. You know that feeling well, don't you, Etsuko-chan?"

I nod mutely. The accuracy of her words is painful.

"Would you show me?"

Um.

I'm not sure what to do.

Am I supposed to act unsure about how to activate it?

Which reminds me.

… I do not even need to act as if I don't know. If I think closely about it, I really have no idea. In the heat of the battle, it was just something that, umm, happened, not something I actively worked for.

Aaand now I feel royally stupid. My face radiates way too much heat to have remained not red.

"I'm, uh, not sure how to …?" I mumble.

Naori smiles reassuringly. "Don't worry, I will guide you."

Beautiful, badass and super nice. I wasn't aware that I was looking for a role model, but I definitely found one. I'd like to be her when I grow up, please.

"Activate your Sharingan the way you always do."

I close my eyes to concentrate on the rush of chakra, trying to detect anything that might feel new or just different. It's a pity it doesn't happen though and I open my eyes again, slightly confused.

"Three tomoe," Naori comments. "How many did you have before?"

"Two," I answer. I squint in a brilliant attempt to assess my sense of vision and find that I can see even more details in dust particles than before. Cool. More potential to get distracted.

Ok, time to go one step further.

I take a deep breath and give Naori a quick glance which she answers with an encouraging nod.

I push even more chakra into my eyes and –

Nothing happens. Nothing except an increase of pressure behind my eyes that verges on painful.

"Remember," Naori's voice floats to my ears. "Try and recall the feelings you had when you awakened it."

It's terrifyingly easy, remembering Regashi's pain-filled voice, apologizing for mistakes that are not
his to apologize for, and watching him close his eyes again, breathing growing ragged and finally, still –

The built-up chakra pushes through with an abrupt rush that washes my vision red.

I'm panting from the sudden onslaught and intensity of incoming signals. It feels like every energetic current in my immediate vicinity has been shoved under a magnifying glass and focused into one dense beam of information shooting right through to my brain, frying it from all sides and being matched in intensity by the roiling waves of my equally enlarged emotional landscape. If any imaginary ship ever was to brave those seas I don't see any other result than a wreck getting lost in it.

Hyper-emotionality gains yet another level of meaning as a user of the Mangekyou Sharingan. Hooray.

The sudden feel of a hand firmly – but gently – gripping my chin and guiding my face into the line of vision of Naori manages to distract me from the overwhelming sensations of my Mangekyou.

Her face is unreadable bar a tiny frown.

I hope this doesn't spell bad news.

"This," she says after another few moments of increasingly awkward silence, "is unprecedented."

Oh.

Haha.

I have no idea what she's talking about, but umm.

Surprise?

She lowers her hand. "You haven't seen your Mangekyou yet, I assume?"

I shake my head no.

Her pretty Mangekyou revert back to the standard Sharingan and a moment later, I feel a subtle ripple go through the air.

I blink a few times and when I refocus, her eyes, both of them, have changed yet again.

They have turned into Mangekyou, without doubt, but to say that this version is … strange is an understatement.

Her irises are red alright, and there're three scythe-like black arcs that look like the blades of a wind power plant, but that's not what's strange.

The strange parts are her sclera.

They're bizarrely fractured, black lines covering the standard white of eyeballs that look like a web of small blood vessels, only without blood but – yeah well, black instead.

I've never seen anything like that before. Not even in Narutoverse-as-a-manga. Because despite all the weirdness surrounding eyes in this universe, the changes only ever happened inside the irises, I think. At least for all the standard doujutsu that are not the result of some overpowered merging of Uchiha and Senju cells. Of course, there was also that whole business with edo-tensei-zombies that had grey or black sclera, depending on the grade of personality-suppression, but you know. No
actual living people with sclera other than white. I think.

Hmmm.

Weird.

Also, since when do people have two different versions of the Mangekyou?

Before I can ask, Naori speaks up again. "I apologize for putting you in this genjutsu, but we don't have any mirrors at hand and this seemed to me the easiest way to show you."

Ah.

Oh. Yeah. Makes sense. Good thing I didn't ask. That would have been awkward.

Wait, does that mean that strange looking Mangekyou is mine?

"Why do they look like this?" I blurt out.

"Every Mangekyou looks different, tailored to the individual who awakened it. And yet, you're right to notice that yours are quite unusual. We shall observe whatever comes of it."

She closes her eyes and a heartbeat later, I feel the ripple again. When she reopens her eyes, they're back to the standard Sharingan and the milky white.

For a moment, none of us speaks.

"When you return to the village," she begins slowly, "the clan elders will want to know everything."

Uh. Right.

"Do you already know what you can do with them?"

"They, uh," I start but can't bring myself to continue. They rip away the life-force of my enemies. No, not chakra, life-force. And they kill me a little more with every use, but that's nothing new for Mangekyou wielders, right? Haha.

I don't think I'm ready to tell her that. Tell anybody.

"I'm not exactly sure?" I squeak instead.

"Good," Naori says. "Tell the clan elders the exact same thing. You will need the time to figure out your abilities – it's better not to give them any ideas for ill-conceived ambitions."

I think my jaw just dropped to the ground.

She is so cool?!

She stands up and looks at me with a warm expression. "I will leave you to your healing now. Rest, Etsuko-chan. Survive the guilt. And when you're ready to explore, come to me or Uchiha Kagami. No one should be left alone with this."

"Thank you," I say, honestly stunned.

Her voice and face turn serious. "You have a long way ahead you, Etsuko-chan. If I can help you in any way, no matter how small, I will. The future of the Uchiha clan lies in hands such as yours."
I nod and lean my torso forward in an imitation of a bow. She nods back.

And then she's gone.

Uchiha Kagami, eh? That mysterious ancestor of Shisui’s.

I do have to admit – I am a bit curious to meet him. And I have no trouble admitting that I'm looking forward to seeing Naori again.

The conversation with her is the only thing I think about for the next days – and by 'conversation', I actually mean the gigantic ball of issues that's weighing down on my chest.

There's the Mangekyou, obviously. It becomes increasingly obvious to me that I've been incredibly lucky to meet one of the few Uchiha that for one, do not believe in the "you gotta kill your best friend to activate it"-philosophy and for another, is not going to present me as the newest weapon of mass destruction to the clan elders. Apparently, there's a veritable club for that line of thinking with the very limited number of two members – granted, there might be more, but at least Naori hasn't offered their help to me.

While I'm, without a shadow of doubt, incredibly grateful that she's agreed to guide me through the whole Sharingan mess, I can't help but feel completely overwhelmed by everything still.

Take just the act of activating the Mangekyou, for instance. Looked easy enough in the manga and anime both: a shift, a blink or not if one felt dramatic – we're talking about Uchiha here, so of course that belongs into the list of criteria – and bam! Fires that never burn out, illusions that contest reality, portals into pockets in time and space to contemplate one's midlife crisis in peace.

Hah.

Nobody said anything about reliving the pain the moment before activation, but here it is. I'm not sure if the process is supposed to get less reliant on the emotional experience with time, but even if it is, I don't know how often I can survive recalling that memory until I'm able to activate it with nothing but intent.

Have I mentioned that I don't deal well with watching people important to me die? No?

I don't deal well with watching people important to me die. Bonus if I'm responsible for their death.

Aside from all that, there's the other small issue of my Mangekyou literally killing me, not only by means of the usual going-blind-and-drowning-in-my-own-blood-deal but by actually poisoning my life-force with every use. I mean, whose idea was that?! Who thought designing a One-Hit-Kill-ability that only works as a kamikaze attack made sense?

If I find out at some point that I'm meant to go out as some kind of sacrifice I'm going to …

… I dunno, I can't really quit, not with Obito's life on the line.

I'm probably going to get mad. Yeah, crazy fucking mad.

There.

Go big or go home, right?

Fuck. I'm feeling guilty for complaining about my Mangekyou – as if I'm trying to squash the
memory of Regashi and Nawaki with it. As if I'm trying to distract myself from the knowledge that I could have saved them had I moved the right pieces at the right time, had I made proper use of the space the elasticity of time allows for. Like, leaving Orochimaru at camp, for example.

I'll probably never know if that would have made a difference, but just the possibility –

I can't stop thinking like this. I'm going crazy with these circles and spirals my mind keeps walking in, but I just can't stop.

I don't think I can get this all sorted before I step in front of the clan elders, which, needless to say, is yet another battlefield all on its own.

…

I miss Obito.

…

I think I need a drink.

)00( I don't find any drinkable alcohol. Instead, Orochimaru finds me.

It's not even ten minutes after I've been discharged from the hospital. I'm talking to a fellow shinobi with an unassuming appearance whose name I've already forgotten – I'm sorry, shinobi-san! – who's going to escort a handful of people who have been wounded too much to keep fighting plus me, who's joining because … I think Sakumo might have told someone at home that I'm not doing so good. Yeah.

"We leave in five days, meeting is in front of the hospital."

I bow. "Understood. I'll meet you there."

What's-his-name nods and disappears in a poof of smoke.

I should learn the shunshin, too. Looks like it might come in handy in a lot of situations.

Like, when you turn around to walk into the tent with your appointed bunk only to be intercepted by one of the worst criminals in your universe, who nobody knows is going to be one of the worst criminals in your universe, yet.

"Leaving already?"

I freeze on the spot.

He's standing before the tent flap that leads to safety, his arms folded and posture casual in a way the super glorious queen of king cobras might be when she's reasonably sure that her opponent poses no threat.

I'm very sure, too. That I pose no threat, I mean.

"A pity," he says, tone conversational – as if he was simply replying to something I said. "Change only happens if people are present to cause it. I assumed you'd be interested after what happened to your team."
What.

He unfolds his arms and gets ready to leave. "On the other hand – it does take strength to do that. I see now that I was wrong to assume you'd have that strength."

My hands have turned into fists at my body's sides.

*How dare he.*

He's turned away from me now, and somehow, the picture of his back accompanied by his voice makes his message just a thousand times more infuriating.

"If you ever decide to take over control of your own life, however, come see me. You know where to go."

*Arrogant asshole.*

Who does he think he is? Who does he think *I am?* Uchiha "I'm-easily-baited-by-the-promise-of-power-because-I'm-so-consumed-by-vengeance-I'm-fucking-blind"-Sasuke?

Hah.

Over my dead body.

)00(

*Simply put, it has been judged that you will be able fulfill the most important expectations within the realms of reasonable certainty.*

*It is important to note that there has been far more thought put into giving you the right incentives than you are aware of.*

*You already knew how this was going to end from the very moment you came here, didn't you?*

)00(

*If you ever decide to take over control of your own life, however, come see me. You know where to go.*

*Over my dead body.*

)00(

Good thing I've already died, then.

)00(

I can't believe what I am about to do. Common sense tells me to turn around and leave now, like *pronto,* and yet, I'm standing here, in front of the tent of the new head of research of Camp Same, hearing *his* voice floating over from the other side of the canvas.

And the worst thing is that, even though I can't believe it, I can explain. Kind of.

After he left me standing in front of the tent with my bunk, I was livid.

I had just lived through losing my sensei, my teammates, literally my damn life. I was 4 days away
from going back home and seeing Obito again. I just wanted to be left the hell alone.

And then he comes and calls me out like that.

It's not true. I do want to change things.

I just – I just needed a break first. Was that too unreasonable?

As it turned out, there's indeed no rest for the wicked. At least not of the kind that would distract me from thinking about The Guilt:

Sakumo continued to treat me with kid gloves. Every time he gave me one of his infinitely kind smiles and that soft "how do you feel?", I felt the urge to scream growing inside me. The only reason I didn't was because he didn't deserve it. I know that I am the problem, not him. Never him in a million lives.

Naori had been called back to wherever she'd been stationed before she came to help me understand the Mangekyou. She left a message on my bunk, apologizing for her abrupt departure. I wish she didn't have to leave.

The rest of the camp so obviously didn't know how to deal with me that I gave up on asking for tasks after the fifth person told me to go rest.

I swear, if I spend one more minute on a bed, doing nothing, I'm going to self-destruct.

And that, in short, is the reason why I'm here, about to ask Orochimaru of all people for a meaningful task. I can't help but note that for the second time, his words are the only thing saving me from falling into a pit of endless despair.

It has the enormous potential of being the biggest joke of my existence yet. And this time, I don't even have the excuse to say that it wasn't my choice.

The tent flap opens and the woman he's been talking to steps out. She gives me a nod and a short "You can enter."

He already knows I'm here then. Of course he does.

There's no turning back now.

I let out a long breath.

And I enter.

"To be fair, that is kind of surprising."

Jiraiya shifted his gaze from the tiny Uchiha who was bent over something research-y on a table on the other side of the rather large tent, face set in a concentrated frown that would have been cute had it not been so dead serious, to his teammate who was just as engrossed in his science.

"I never would have thought that you'd be the next one to have a student. I mean, you never seemed exactly interested in teaching brats."

Orochimaru removed a petri dish from his microscope stage and took another from the small assortment on his desk.
"She's not my student," he said without looking up.

"Not yet," Jiraiya corrected. "Come on, we've been teammates long enough. I can see from a mile away when you're making grabby hands at something."

At that, Orochimaru did look up, a mildly affronted look on his face. "I do not make grabby hands at anything."

Jiraiya, mature adult that he was, snickered. Sometimes, it was so easy to get a rise out of his favorite bastard and he could never resist an opportunity. It was even more fun when Hime –

His sniggering stopped abruptly when he remembered that Tsunade was not going to laugh about anything for a long time.

Orochimaru gave him a side-glance at the sudden silence.

"You know," he began slowly. "I'll get back to the village earlier than you. I could give her the crystal if you …" His sentence trailed off.

"No."

Orochimaru's answer was swift and decisive and Jiraiya felt bad for the rush of relief that coursed through his body. The truth was that he had hoped for Orochimaru to deny his offer.

Losing Nawaki …

…

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and for a few seconds, he concentrated on breathing alone.

He wondered how Orochimaru dealt with it. How he appeared so calm and collected even though the guilt must have been eating through him. Maybe taking on the last functioning member of that team was his way to repent?

If that was the case, he resolved, he would do anything to support him.

He reopened his eyes. "I'm going to tell Sensei that you'd make a great teacher for the little Uchiha."

Orochimaru's hands stilled in their task and for the first time, he lifted his head to truly look at his teammate.

"I did not ask for your help," he said, his voice tinged with surprise.

"I know," Jiraiya answered. He put a hand on the other man's shoulder, happy to note that he was still one of the few people who Orochimaru didn't mind touching. "But I'm still doing it. I genuinely believe that you can be an awesome teacher. Also, I think the girl will be good for you. She's quite a special little snowflake, isn't she?"

Orochimaru huffed.

Life, Jiraiya mused, had a habit of going on, even in the darkest of times. It was difficult to see the light shining through from different places, but if one was willing, one could see. There really was no choice, after all, if the only other option was to drown in sorrow and despair.

Maybe he should start looking for some more students himself. Ancestors knew, he had enough to seek redemption for.
I'm not even surprised anymore.

Heya, it's been some time!

I'm still alive and JC is still going strong, in no small part thanks to all of your encouragement, too! I feel incredible seeing all your comments and in addition to that, both colasea and toibun over on tumblr have blessed me with so much fanart, I am beyond amazed. Here's a huge shoutout for you!

Of course, you're always welcome to leave some love for beta NightsBlackRose13 here, too, because without them, this chapter would have been a lot less polished. Again. Lol.

One week ago

"Since it can be reasonably assumed that the Uchiha is going to wake up, it is absolutely necessary to discuss the next step in making sure that her skills are put to use in Konoha's best interest."

Danzou watched as both Koharu and Homura nodded in agreement, as always able to see when he made reasonable suggestions. He prided himself in always making reasonable suggestions.

And as always, Hiruzen was slow to follow.

"It wouldn't make sense to allocate her to another genin team," Danzou continued, his eyes never leaving those of his former teammate, "considering not only the time it would take for everyone involved to get used to the new arrangement, but also the time Konoha loses not honing the skills of possibly the most promising weapon since the mokuton."

Koharu's eyebrows shot up. "That is some extraordinarily high praise, especially coming from you."

He shifted his gaze to her. "Is it? I never denied the power of the Uchiha clan – this and their unpredictability are the reason why they need to be tightly controlled in the first place."

"A wild animal on a leash does as it is forced to do, always waiting for an opportunity to run free," Hiruzen interjected. Finally. He'd been wondering why it took so long. "Winning its trust, however, makes it not only a reliable partner but also a dedicated supporter."

"Trust is a two-way-street." Danzou retorted without missing a beat. "The Uchiha have shown us in the past that they're not interested in becoming long-term partners. You cannot keep holding a door open that they don't want to go through, Hiruzen. You only invite more trouble in that way."

"What do you propose, then, Danzou?" Homura asked.
Just the opening he needed. Homura had always had the most accurate sense of timing.

"I have the perfect solution." He smiled.

"Let me introduce to you the new black ops unit I've been working on within my ROOT division – a unit that will consist of the most loyal and uniquely skilled shinobi Konoha can ask for: DeepROOT ops."

Present time

I have never been the type to whom the understanding of natural sciences came, well, naturally.

True, I did well enough in math and physics, having been raised by my parents with a keen appreciation for the ability to think along the lines of logic, but biology had always been a hit-or-miss interest-wise and chemistry – ugh, don't talk about chemistry in my presence. I don't think I've ever understood anything of that subject, not even on Day 1. Particularly on Day 1. I like to blame my teacher for my complete incompetency in that subject because that's more comfortable than admitting that I was too lazy to take the time and learn at least the basics on my own.

So imagine my surprise when I realize that not only do Orochimaru's explanations make sense, they also make me genuinely curious about the results. Even though it's not an assignment that's going to move the earth. Even though I ask a lot of question, most of them probably stupid. Even though I'm about as charming about it as a constipated penguin.

I mean, not that I actively tried to be charming, but you know. I'm kind of surprised he hasn't killed me of annoyance yet.

Maybe that blaming-the-teacher-strategy has merit after all. Eheh. And yes, that was me admitting in a very roundabout way that Orochimaru isn't a half bad teacher.

Which.

Well.

I feel icky finding something positive to say about Orochimaru.

Yeah, I'm that petty. Strange to have such strong feelings about a psychopath that experiments on children, right?

To be fair, now that I think about it – him being a decent teacher probably shouldn't come as a surprise. I mean, his students made some of the most badass shinobi in canon, ethical orientations notwithstanding. Kabuto, Kimimaro, Sasuke, just to name a few of the more prominent ones; Anko, too, probably, even though Kishimoto couldn't be bothered to show her abilities properly. Sure, they were also all very talented, but it's not as if talent being wasted by not having the proper instruction isn't a thing that happens much too often. Which is not very nice for the talented person. Right?

…

I'm rambling.

Maybe I should just focus on my task now. Good idea, yup. Who knows, I might even count scientific sketching as part of my skillset at the end of the day. The Sharingan-provided photographic memory is a big help at least and also, focusing on the shape and contents of cells is a rather neat
way to push other thoughts out of my head.

Like dead teammates and senseis. Nope, totally not thinking about that.

"You're distracted."

_Holy fucking shit._

I whip my head around fast enough to hit myself with my own goddamn hair.

Wasn't he _over there_ just a second ago?

I automatically lean away as he leans closer to have a proper look at my sketches, trying to maintain a distance of at least an arm's length, which proves somewhat difficult – I'm _on_ the desk, since I'm too small to work from a sitting position on a chair, and short of jumping off it, there's not much room for me to avoid physical closeness without appearing _super rude_ which I can't afford because holy shit do I _not_ want to be on his bad side so early on already.

Still, he gives me the heebie-jeebies.

He probably notices.

Umm.

"Not enough details, too focused on prettiness," he says, his distinctive voice clinical.

Well, if that's all. It could be worse.

"This kind of sloppy work gets you killed, in the field and in science both."

Ouch.

"True beauty lies in the absolute attention to detail, in the knowledge of the link between design and function, in the precision of the moment of execution – even if it is a simple reproduction."

Wow, good thing I'm not really a five-year-old. Understanding that would have been pretty hard to do if I were, I think?

He takes the sheet of paper I've been sketching on and –

… incinerates it in his hand.

"Observe. Understand. Be exact. I have no time for someone who doesn't push for excellence."

Without another word, he turns around and goes back to his working station at the far end of the tent.

…

I hate to admit it, but he's right.

_Thanks a lot, asshole._

)00(

One day until my planned departure to Konoha. One day until I can see Obito again. Just one day left.
"I can do this. Yes, even this awkward lunch affair.

"So …," Sakumo starts, cautiously observing my every reaction. "How have you been the past couple days?"

Or maybe not.

It's a simple enough question, really, almost trivial, but at the same time, I can practically see all the questions that he's barely stopping himself from asking.

'Why have you been ignoring me? Why are you rejecting my help? Why are you accepting his instead?'

They're all very valid and they all succeed in making me feel really, really guilty. Truth is, the only reason I've not flat out denied him this lunch is because even though facing him now is nearly unbearably awkward, putting it off would just make everything worse and I'm too selfish to let that happen. I can't let the first person who's been genuinely nice to me without expecting something in return slip through my fingers like that. Especially if that person is the father of my baby brother's best friend, whom I also happen to see as my second little brother.

It's almost embarrassing how much I rely on the good graces of two toddlers.

"I mean," Sakumo continues hesitantly after my introspective silence, "I'm glad to see you up and active, of course." The corners of his eyes crinkle softly as he smiles, still tentative. "Just wanted to make sure you're doing alright. Um."

He's trying so hard for me. How can a person in this world be so kind?

I look up at him.

The least I can do in return is to give him an answer.

"I'm …"

An honest answer.

"… not fine. No." A small gasp that sounds like half a chuckle escapes my lips. "But Orochimaru's tasks keep me busy. Thinking about them keeps me from thinking about … anyway, it's better that way."

There's a short pause.

"I see."

Another pause. This one manages to stretch into a small eternity in my head, accentuated by the soundtrack of chopsticks hitting the metal tableware, low murmuring voices in the background and my constant desire to clear my throat, hoping it would clear the awkwardness away as well.

I'm sorry for dragging Sakumo into the Uchiha-preferred mode of communication. I swear, I did not know it had black-hole-like qualities.

"So," Sakumo continues, bravely bridging over said black hole, "what will you do today? Did Orochimaru give you any task before leaving?"

"He did," I answer. "I'm supposed to make a full documentation on that one plant that was discovered on a large rock formation not far from camp. It doesn't grow near Konoha and seems to
be promising for healing purposes. It stunts the growth of cells in our chakra paths which would otherwise lead to malignant expansions that eventually render the body unable of chakra usage."

"Ah, that's very important work" Sakumo nods. "How is it going?"

"Well enough, I think. It's something different from day to day ninja business, but I'm still useful. I hope."

"Of course!" He smiles at me, a real, encouraging smile this time – and suddenly, the cords wound around my heart loosen up just a little bit. "It's good for you to see that being a shinobi can have sides other than fighting. And who knows, maybe you'll even come to enjoy it. That would be great, wouldn't it? You could choose what you want to do then."

If the clan ever agrees to me not being a fighter, that is. But I appreciate the sentiment. Also, he looks genuinely enthused.

So I return a small, but just as genuine smile. "Yes, that would be nice."

The following pause is so fundamentally different from the one before that I'm half surprised that there isn't some kind of physical manifestation. The awkwardness has dissipated and instead there's the budding feeling of being able to look forward – the first time since I woke up.

Sakumo is amazing. I am so lucky to have him.

I can't ever lose him.

"Hatake-rikushou?"

A shinobi is standing at the entrance of the tent, waiting for his general to allow him to disrupt his lunch with me. He's blond and baby-faced, a teenager in the middle of puberty, out here and on duty.

Oh god, I hate this war.

Holy cow, what is it with my brain and super dramatic thoughts right now?

"Akamine-kun, something to report?"

I snap my head back to look at Sakumo because whoa he just sounded so different, was that really him? Is that his General-Hatake-voice?

The teen bows. "Hattori-san's report just arrived, rikushou. You wanted to see it as soon as it arrived."

Sakumo nods. "Right." He looks at me regretfully. "I'm sorry to cut this short, Etsuko-chan, but this can't wait."

I stand up quickly and bow down. "No, no, it's alright. Thank you for taking the time. And for being so kind to me, I truly appreciate it."

He smiles. "Any time, Etsuko-chan."

As I head towards the tent flap, I can see Akamine throwing me a curious glance, probably wondering why the general takes time for a tiny dot like me and says stuff like "any time".

Same, Akamine-san, same.
I'm finished documenting the plant before Orochimaru comes back from his recon mission with Jiraiya.

I tried being as thorough as possible with it and I hope it's enough to be of help. No matter how small that step, if it leads to even one person being cured from a disease, it will be the best thing I've done in this universe.

All under Orochimaru's supervision.

No, I'm still not over it.

Yes, I know that science is just a tool, a means to an end, and that it depends entirely on whom and with what goal it is wielded, just like almost everything else in mankind's world.

It's just – the thought that this rule even applies to Orochimaru feels strange to me, I guess. That not everything he does and uses is inherently evil just because it's *him*.

Intent is a game changer indeed.

"Good," Yoshina-san says after finishing her review of my work. I have no idea if she's really pleased with it or just acknowledging the fact that I think I finished it and possibly holding back on telling me what I did wrong, but well – so be it. If there's nothing else to do –

"Do you have any other tasks right now?"

Oh. Looks like I'm getting something new.

I shake my head.

"Good. You can go gather more of the herb you documented today then, while there's still light outside. Do you know where to find it?"

"I know where the location is on the map," I reply cautiously. See, I don't want to lie to her but I also don't want her to know that I'm pretty bad at directions. It's not as bad as in my first life thanks to all the shinobi training, but it's still not something to be proud of, sadly.

"I hope you have it memorized," Yoshina says, completely unfazed. "Go to the Provision Master and request a medicinal storage scroll. The rocks are in Fire Country territory so there shouldn't be any trouble with enemy forces. However, don't let your guard down. Upon contact, avoid fighting if possible and report promptly."

I bow down. "Understood!"

I'm actually glad for the task. I was already afraid I'd be stuck with doing nothing again, but it seems I got lucky.

That doesn't happen very often, these days.

The run for the storage scroll is a matter of two minutes. I'm traveling lightly, with only my kunai pouch on my thigh and the scroll pouch at my hip, since I'm supposed to be back within an hour, one and a half at most. I didn't take a map with me, but I did scan one with my Sharingan, for good measure – easy task or not, getting lost so close to the border to Amegakure would be unfortunate.
I arrive at the rock formation without problems and start walking up their steep walls to get to the cracks in which the plants in question grow. The ability to pour chakra out of the soles of my feet is indeed very useful. I can't imagine how stressful it would be to try gathering the herbs only with the help of normal, not-ninja-equipment.

I crouch down – or better, I crouch across, I guess – to reach for a particularly large specimen firmly wedged in a rather small hollow when I hear the unmistakable sound of branches breaking under footfall.

Um.

I wince.

Ok. Shite.

I wish I had thought about securing the area before I realized that my ass is hanging on this rock wall in plain view, which happened just about now.

Why did Yoshina-san even trust me with this.

Someone gasps.

*Whoa they're loud. Not stealthy much, eh?*

"How do you do that?!" a high-pitched, distinctively childish voice yells.

I finally look down.

From up here, I can't see much except for a tiny face under a shock of bright orange hair and an outstretched arm with a finger pointing straight at me.

I think I can out rule the possibility of that being an enemy nin.

I jump down after pocketing the herb I'd been after in the first place and land two feet away from the kid. A closer look reveals a boy around my physical age, clothed in a shirt that's a bit too small on his thin body and shorts that have seen better days. His face looks too thin, too, but his eyes are sparkling and his mouth is wide open in awe. I'm about to open my mouth and ask him what the hell he's doing here, but he beats me to it.

"This is awesome," he says, voice shaking in excitement. "Teach me how to do that! I wanna do that, too! I can learn!"

Oh no.

He looks so eager.

*Boy, you do not want to be a ninja, I promise you.*

"You shouldn't be out here alone, you know" I say to him. I want to discourage him from wanting to learn this, true, but he's only a kid after all. It does no one any good to deny a kid some basic kindness. "Are your parents nearby?"

He freezes, the excitement going out of his eyes like an extinguished flame.

*Oh no.*
"They died," he replies in a monotone voice.

My throat feels tight.

I don't know what to answer.

I don't know how.

I just ... don't know.

So we're standing there, two children staring at each other and neither looking away, and although our circumstances are probably vastly different, we're all the same in the things that matter.

They died.

I miss Otou-san and Okaa-chan. I miss Hanako-sensei. I miss Nawaki and Regashi. I miss them so much.

He understands.

I finally look away. "You should go. Find somewhere safe."

The words haven't even left my mouth and I already know they sound hollow.

He exhales. "You belong to them, don't you?"

My focus snaps back to him. His eyes are blazing again, with a fierce determination that is mirrored in his voice and the balled fists on either side of his body.

"If you belong to them, you can fight, too. And if you can learn to fight, then so can I!"

This kid –

"Why?" I hiss, my voice getting progressively louder as emotions boil up from within. "You know, more than anybody, that nothing good ever comes out of fighting! Why would you want to be a part of it?!"

"How else can I fight back?" He yells in return. "How else can I make things better? Protect my friends? Do you think I have a choice?"

There's nothing I can reply to that.

He's right, of course. In this world, choices are a privilege of the strong. Isn't this the same reason I chose to learn how to fight myself?

I close my eyes, breathe, and open them again.

"What's your name?"

"Yahiko," he answers.

Of course.

I'm not even surprised anymore.

"I suppose your friends are somewhere nearby?"
He immediately stiffens up. "How –"

"No need to get all nervous," I say quietly. "Listen. I'm going back to my camp now. In half an hour I'll be back with someone who will teach you. The choice of being here, with or without your friends, is up to you."

He blinks. "Wait, really?"

"Just be prepared for questions."

I turn my back to him.

I have enough herbs anyway and Jiraiya and Orochimaru should be back by now.

The way back is ample time to think about what I want to say to him.

)00( 

"You want me to go to a rock with you?" Jiraiya deadpans.

"Yes. It's a very interesting rock."

I admit, I could have worded that more elegantly, but this is not my most compelling argument anyway. Let me try again.

"There's … um, stuff at that rock the likes you'll never see again!"

He squints at me.

One second passes. Another.

Yeah, I could have done that better, too.

He sighs dramatically. "Ok, I'll bite. What's there that's so interesting?"

Yes!

"I have to show you. If I could just tell you, you wouldn't need to come with me, so please, please come?" I try to channel my inner Obito and hope it works. Judging by the stiffness in my facial muscles, I'm severely out of practice, though. Oh well.

"You sure it's not something you'd rather show Orochimaru?"

_Uh no, absolutely not._

"Yes, I'm sure!" Seriously, why is he so reluctant? It's not like I'm asking him to be my teacher or something. I'm just asking him to teach the Ame kids. Not that he knows.

He scratches the back of his head. Sighs. "Alright, alright, I'll go with you. Not today, though, I'm pretty beat already."

_Oh for fuck's sake!_

"Or do I sense an objection?"

I could swear that he's doing this on purpose. Is he doing this on purpose? What's his goal? Is this some kind of test? What's he testing a five-year-old for?
Hah.

You're not the only one who can play games, Jiraiya.

"Oh, ok," I say, markedly nonchalant. "I understand. It's not as if the fulfilment of some kind of prophecy is depending on that rock, haha."

The effect is instantaneous.

His eyes widen almost comically and the entirety of his hulking body goes eerily still.

He gulps. "Could you … could you say that again?" His voice suddenly sounds so hoarse.

"Uh … it's ok, I understand?" I know that's not the part he wanted to hear but if there ever was a time to play dumb, it's now.

He looks at me, hard.

Keep breathing.

He doesn't ask again.

The tension disappears from his posture as if it's never been there in the first place. He yawns dramatically. "Nah, a short walk will do me some good. I'm feeling stiff as a board having spent so much time with that bore of a teammate."

Phew. I almost can't believe it but I done did it.

"Great!" I throw him a brilliant smile. Isn't it easy to make a simple child like me happy?

"Let's hurry," he says, now grinning brightly himself. "I have to admit, I can't remember the last time I was so curious."

I nod in agreement.

Everything's set. The only thing that could go wrong now would be if the Ame trio didn't show up. Which would be super embarrassing, among other things.

Ugh.

Please show up.

\(\)\(\)

Jiraiya slows down to a jog a few hundred feet before we arrive at the rocks. "Someone's there," he says. "I don't think they're dangerous, but it might be a good idea to wait until they're gone."

Shit. I should have anticipated that he would sense them before we actually arrive there.

Well. It's not as if me baiting him with the child of prophecy hasn't already made him at least a little suspicious, so there's no use in holding back now.

"It's alright," I tell him. "We can go there anyway."

He eyes me with an unreadable expression but doesn't comment further. I'm sure a future interrogation is unavoidable at this point, but I'm done playing around anyway.
Orochimaru was right, again. If I want change, I have to be the one to initiate it.

And with that, we enter the scene.

Good news: Yahiko is waiting at the rock, just as promised.

More good news: he's brought Konan and Nagato, too.

_Goddammit yes_, it's high time this time elasticity thingie works in my favor for a change.

The three are standing closely together, tightly clutching each other's hands, expressions on their tiny faces set in various degrees of anxious anticipation.

"You really came!" Yahiko pipes up upon seeing Jiraiya and me approach. He immediately turns towards his friends. "See, told ya she would. We're going to learn how to fight for sure!"

Konan and Nagato nod timidly, their eyes nervously following every movement Jiraiya and I make.

Speaking of.

Jiraiya looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "You promised them what exactly?"

I exhale. Here we go.

"They're all orphans, Jirariya-san. They have nobody to protect them, to rely on. They only have themselves, but they can't survive if they don't have any guidance. So I promised them a teacher."

Jiraiya cuts me off before I can continue. "Oi, brat, you can't walk around promising stuff like that without asking first!"

I shut up immediately.

He sounds a bit mad.

Ah.

This is bad.

He sighs and turns towards the Ame kids. "What are your names?" he asks gruffly.

Yahiko goes first, no surprise there. "I'm Yahiko!" he announces, a touch of desperation at the edge of his voice. He's probably afraid that they're going to end up abandoned again.

I am afraid for them, too. Nagato's Rinnegan is my last hope.

The girl of the trio follows suit with her introduction. "Konan," she says quietly.

Nagato can barely get his name past his lips. "Na-Nagato." He's looking at his feet, his hair effectively blocking his eyes.

That's not enough.

What do I do? Should I just ask him to look at Jiraiya directly? Expose my knowledge of his doujutsu like that?

This would be a risk on a completely different scale from before, though. While everything up to now could be explained away with me being naively compassionate towards the plight of children
my own age, this – this would reveal that I know stuff I'm not supposed to have any knowledge about.

"Alright," Jiraiya says. There's a tiny pause in which I think I hear a quietly muttered 'shit'. "Listen, Yahiko, Konan and Nagato. I cannot teach you." His voice is firm but gentle, set on making the rejection as painless as possible. "You're still young and the most important –"

"We can learn!" Yahiko interrupts him, his voice full on desperate this time. He falls on his knees, with hands outstretched and begging. "I promise, we will do anything you want us to, we will work hard and you won't even notice that we're little! We will be like her, I promise!" He points at me. "Please, Jiraiya-sama, please, you must teach us! You owe us, for our homes, for our parents and siblings!"

Konan gasps loudly and covers her mouth with her hands.

Nagato is shocked into action as well. "Yahiko!" he exclaims and throws himself at his friend. His gaze is frantic as he directs it at us. "Please, don't get mad, my friend didn't mean it like that. Please don't hurt him!"

His hair has fallen aside, finally leaving the view on his Rinnegan unobstructed.

Omg, YES!

For the second time today, I witness Jiraiya's eyes going wide in shock.

He clears his throat.

"Stand up, boys."

Yahiko and Nagato hesitantly do as commanded. Konan steps up to their side again, reaching for Yahiko's hand.

Next Jiraiya turns towards me and motions towards a spot a few feet away.

Um? Ok?

We're out of earshot by then, but he still lowers his voice to barely above a whisper. He looks very serious.

"I've come to a decision concerning those three, but before I tell them, I want to ask you one thing."

He leans in really, really close.

Umm.

"Instead of going through all this trouble, you could have eliminated them. It would be a kindness compared to the harsh life of an orphaned shinobi in training, don't you think?"

What.

"You … you mean killing them?" I stutter.

How could he even ask this question?!

Jiraiya's eyes are steely. "Of course. I think I was quite clear, was I not?"

I can't even –
"You might not feel troubled making such a decision," I hiss, "and maybe I'm naïve for not even thinking about it. But if killing kids is what we routinely resort to just because it's more convenient, then we are nothing short of trash. I can't accept that. I want to believe that Konoha shinobi are better than that! I want to believe that we're people, not killing machines!"

My head is pounding.

"We have to be."

I am completely out of breath.

I – that question makes me so, so angry. The failure of protecting the people I care about has already dyed my hands red. I wouldn't survive dunking them into the thick liquid of murderous intent. Against kids.

Without any advance warning, Jiraiya moves.

His hand comes to rest on the top of my head and stays there for a few seconds. His face has taken on a softer expression.

Abruptly, he turns around and walks back to the Ame trio.

Hey – what?

My own hand goes up to the spot where the weight of his has left an imprint that radiates warmth still. It echoes back to the warmth from before, a feeling I've missed ever since the after. It says, more than anything else, that it's okay. It's okay to go on.

I close my eyes briefly and breathe.

I should listen to what he has to say to the Ame kids.

"You have guts, I give you that." Jiraiya crouches down to talk to them at eye level. "How about this: I take you with me to camp and you show me in the next couple days what you can do. I decide if I want to teach you after that. Deal?"

Their relief is almost physically noticeable.

"Yes, Jiraiya-sama!" they yell in unison.

Jiraiya chuckles.

As for me?

It's probably the understatement of the year to say that my knees are a bit weak. But maybe, just maybe, this is the beginning of a new future. The beginning of me finally being able to look forward and move on.

Maybe I did do a good job today.
Chapter Summary

Nobody has ever accused me of being meddlesome. Maybe I should correct that.

Chapter Notes

Hiya, how are you all? You're probably surprised by how "fast" this update has come, but hey, sometimes the stars do the align the right way :D

I'm pretty happy with how this turned out now and I'm especially grateful for my trusted beta NightsBlackRose13 who took a lot of time to look and agonize over it, but also for enbi and tokibun for smoothing over thigns that were rocky and giving me valuable feedback. Thank you all, truly.

Don't forget to have a look at my tumblr (link on my profile) to stay updated on chapter progress, tumblr-only-bonus-content like drabbles and take outs as well as the possibility to ask the questions that have always interested - the probability of me answering is exceedingly high.

Now, on with it!

"Hey hey, Etsuko-chan! Tell us, what's Konoha like?"

Yahiko's voice is bright and boisterous as he marches up to walk next to me, with Konan and Nagato trailing after him like little ducklings. Apparently, he's decided that I'm the go-to person for questions of all kinds when Jiraiya isn't immediately nearby and I – strangely, I don't mind.

Maybe I just really like the older sister role, even though technically, I'm younger than him.

"It depends," I reply. "What do you want to know?"

He doesn't waste any time and launches straight into the thick of it. "What are the people like? Do you have really tall buildings, too? And how's the weather? I hope it doesn't rain too much. I hate rain. It reminds me of people crying."

I bet it does.

"We're … just people, I guess," I reply, admittedly in a very lame fashion. It's still the truth, though, so I guess it'll do. "Our buildings are ordinary, not too tall, and definitely not as tall as in Amegakure. It rains occasionally but not permanently."

Yahiko's eyes go big. "You've been to Ame?"

Oh god, I'm so stupid. Why do I always become so stupid when I get comfortable?
... When did I get comfortable around Yahiko?

"Someone told me once that the buildings there touch the sky," I say with as much of a straight face as I can muster. "Or is that not true?"

"Nah, it's totally true!" Yahiko looks at me like I've asked something very silly. "The tallest houses in the whole world are all there."

"And Hanzo lives in the very tallest of them," Konan adds quietly.

Well, not as quiet as Nagato, who doesn't talk at all.

It's been like that ever since they came back with us to camp – which was only yesterday, to be fair. But still, the contrast to Yahiko, who never shuts up, is frankly astonishing. I'm half convinced that the latter fact is one of the reasons that Jiraiya was so fast in deciding to return to Konoha with them which led to the addition of not only me to the party of wounded scheduled to return, but also the Ame trio and Jiraiya himself. The other reasons are probably made up by the realization that

1. a war camp is no place for untrained children and
2. the Rinnegan is something that would be welcomed with open arms back in Konoha.

I'm pretty sure that, had he discovered Nagato's eyes as late as in canon, he would have decided to up and leave with them to god knows where again.

Also, I like to believe that Yahiko and me bonding so fast moved him to decide in favor of bringing them back to Konoha, too, even if it was only a drop in the pond.

Either way: objectively speaking, this outcome is pretty game changing for the entirety of Narutverse. So much potential for things to go right, so early on.

And endless potential for things to go wrong, too.

It serves to remind me that from now on, I have to be careful with every step I take, even more so than before. Just because I initiated a change process, there's no guarantee that it is going to contribute to any kind of overall improvement in the world I live in.

The uncertainty of life has never been so frustrating. Or frightening, for that matter.

Yahiko is still blathering away, blissfully unaware that I've been spacing out on him, when Jiraiya joins us.

"Ok brats," he announces, "the great Jiraiya is back! What have you been talking about?"

"What we can do to get Hanzo to listen to us," Yahiko promptly answers. He sounds so upbeat and earnest. "Because if he listens, he can make the war stop and then all the people can live in a better world. But he only talks to the strongest people, so we have to become strong first! You'll help us do that, right?" His gaze is full of expectation as it lands on Jiraiya.

Oh Yahiko. I admire your innocence. I wish for you to keep it as long as possible.

"Nah, I'm not sure, yet," Jiraiya says with exaggerated doubt on his face. "Y'all look rather mangy, it's gonna be tough getting you into fighting shape."

A collective outcry of dismay erupts from the trio and I have to turn away to hide my grin. If they only knew that the fact alone that Jiraiya was taking them to Konoha was practically the same as a
declaration of him becoming their legal guardian. Jiraiya is as much the troll as Nawaki always makes him out to be.

It's only after I look back to grin at my boys that I realize that somehow, I managed to forget.

I feel like I've been punched in the gut. My throat tightens painfully.

Regashi would have been much better at handling Yahiko's incessant questions and I'm pretty sure Nawaki would have gotten Nagato to talk a long time ago.

*Shit.*

My eyes are stinging.

Shit, shit, shit.

I have to fall back a bit to avoid them seeing me wiping at my face with the collar of my shirt because my Uchiha shirt only has short sleeves and who the hell thought it was a good idea to design a shirt with such a huge collar *but no wipe-able sleeves* –

Someone taps my arm. I hurriedly wipe away what I hope are the last traces of my suppressed crying and look up. It's Konan.

The girl is holding out a handkerchief. "You don't have one, right? You can use mine." She smiles.

Oh.

"Thank you," I say, my voice sounding breathy.

It's a square piece of white cotton cloth, the edges embroidered with a swirling blue pattern and a little flower in one corner that I can't identify.

"It's pretty," I tell her.

She beams at me. "It is, isn't it? Okaa-chan gave it to me. She said that when I'm sad, I should look at the plum blossom here and remember that the most beautiful of all flowers blooms despite the winter." She stops and inhales deeply, her smile turning dejected. "I miss her."

Without thinking about it, I take her hand. "Your mother was a very wise woman. Thank you for sharing her wisdom with me." I give her a gentle squeeze. "If you want, you can tell me more about her, I'd be happy to listen. Plum blossoms don't grow alone on a tree, right?"

Her smile brightens up again as she nods with a happy little "hmm!"

*The boys would have liked her a lot.*

Our hands stay linked for a while after that. And if I hold it a little tighter than necessary, well, nobody is going to blame a five-year-old for that.

O0O0O

The main gate to Konoha looks unchanged from when we left, barely two weeks ago. The two door panels are of the same dusty green color, the walls of the same bleached ocher and the characters over the archway the same dark red still.

It feels crassly inappropriate.
Why is there no change at all? No acknowledgement whatsoever that of the four-man-team that set out, only one returns? Not a single sign of something missing?

I wonder if my life will ever be able to go on in the same seamless way as life here. New eyes, new team, new everything. Wouldn't that be neat.

There is a small crowd gathered just behind the gate and a couple of medics rush forward to check the wounded. I quickly back away to give them the space they need. It's probably a good moment to say goodbye to the Ame Trio and Jiraiya. I wonder how he'll react to my request to keep me updated on their progress?

"Neeeeeee-chaaan!"

My body is moving already by the time I have consciously recognized the voice. Its owner is moving towards me, too, with short little legs running as fast as they can and wildly waving arms.

We collide halfway, with him straight up jumping into my arms and me landing on my butt.

I don't mind at all.

Obito is soft and warm in my arms and holding him immediately makes everything more bearable. The edges get just a bit duller, the burden just a bit lighter and hope just an inch nearer with him so close, so solid and real. If I hadn't been sure before that living for him was the only right choice, I would have been now at the latest.

"Nee-chan," he says again, much quieter and broken up by little hiccups.

Oh no.

"Don't cry, Obi," I tell him, dangerously close to crying myself. "Nee-chan is back and I'll work hard so everything is going to be okay."

He looks down at me with watery eyes and sorrow all over his tiny face. "You were just gone! And you didn't come back! Just ... just don't go away again, ever!"

My chest feels too tight to contain all the things that I'm feeling right now.

"I can't promise that, Obito," I say, fully aware of how miserable I sound.

"Why can't you?" he asks with a small voice.

"Because Nee-chan is a shinobi. And when the Hokage asks a shinobi to leave, they have to obey. Do you remember what I told you about the Hokage? About what his task is?"

Obito nods hesitantly. "He tries to protect Konoha and its people."

"Right. So when he asks Nee-chan to leave, it's because he wants to protect Konoha." At least that's what he's supposed to do. It won't hold true if the Hokage's name ever becomes Danzou, but that's not something I can tell Obito now. "So Nee-chan can't refuse. But what Nee-chan can promise is that I'll always try to come back for you." And quite literally from death, too. "Is that enough?"

He sniffs and thinks about it for a while.

"Ok," he finally relents. "But you mustn't forget that you promised! Ever!" His lips are pressed tightly together as he watches me, eyes wide and anxiously open.
And it hits me like a truck at full speed.

I cannot let it all eat away at me.

The pain, the grief, the darkness - even if I can never shake them off, never truly get rid of them, never fully cleanse myself, I will have to let go at some point. Let them rest in a corner of my heart, carefully guarded but never smothered, so I can remember and forgive. Because Okaa-chan, Otousan, Hanako, Nawaki and Regashi deserve to be remembered, and Obito deserves to see me forgive myself.

In the end, this is the only truth that counts: if I cannot show him that he can and has to turn away from becoming Tobi, all will have been for naught.

I kiss him on his cheek.

"I won't forget. Thank you, Obi."

We get up from the ground and I take a moment to wipe off the dust first from Obito's and then from my clothes – all with one hand since he refuses to let go of the other, but that's ok. Right now, I prefer it if he doesn't let go, anyway.

Which reminds me. "Did you come here alone?"

Obito shakes his head. "Sayu came and asked Yashiro if she could bring me and Kakashi. Yashiro almost came, too! But Naoko said no, so he didn't."

Oh wow, what. Sayu coming to Yashiro's house must have been a sight for the ages. And he even wanted to come, too? That's straight-up sentimental.

"So where are Sayu and Kakashi?"

Obito points at the crowd that has grown considerably smaller with the medics gone. There, in the first row, I can indeed see Sayu and Kakashi sitting on her arms. When our eyes meet, he turns to say something to her and in return, she sets him on the ground. He wastes no time in moving over to where Obito and I are still standing, with Sayu following at a slower pace.

He goes in for a hug and buries his face into my shirt for a few heartbeats before he looks up at me. "Etsuko-nee, you're finally back."

"Yeah," I say as I put my free hand on top of his head. "I'm sorry it took so long."

Sayu joins us soon after. Kakashi makes place as she crouches down and hugs me, too.

To think that for a moment, I was almost ready to leave all these people behind.

"You must be tired," Sayu says, gently rubbing my back. "Let's bring you and Obito home."

I nod into her shoulder and she lets go to stand up again.

I look back to the group I came with, in case anyone was still there, and realize that the Ame kids are. The three are standing closely together, clutching at each other's hands tightly and staring at me. Or more precisely, at the little group I've gathered around myself.

Shoot. I'm not proud to admit that I've totally forgotten about them for a moment.

"Wait," I tell Sayu, "I first want to introduce you to someone. Come with me?"
I hurry over to the trio still holding Obito's hand since he still refuses to let go, absently wondering where the hell Jiraiya is, but well. If I have to start being responsible with my life, I might as well begin with something simple as being there for three kids stranded in a strange country.

"Konan-chan, Yahiko-kun, Nagato-kun, these are my little brothers Obito and Kakashi," I announce once I've planted myself in their immediate field of view. "Obito, Kakashi, these are our new friends, Konan, Yahiko and Nagato. Say hello to them."

Obito, reliable as always, gives them a big, sunny smile. "Hiyah, Konan-chan, Yahiko-kun and Nagato-kun!"

Kakashi takes hold of my other hand. "Hello. It's good that you are Etsuko-nee's friends. She doesn't have many."

Ahem.

Thanks for throwing me under the bus, Kashi-chan.

But it's nice of you to hold my hand through it.

"Err, yes, on with the show! This," I point at Sayu with a shake of my head, "is Kakashi's Kaa-chan, Sayu-san. Sayu, my new friends."

Sayu looks like she's trying really hard to keep a straight face. "Hello, it's nice to meet all of you. Any friends of Etsuko's are more than welcome into our little family."

See Kakashi, that's how you do it.

"You are Etsuko's mom?" Yahiko blurts out.

Sayu smiles warmly. "Only if she wants me to be."

Yahiko scrunches up his nose. "I don't get it. Kakashi-chan is her brother, you are Kakashi-chan's mother, but you are not Etsuko's?"

I'm just about to open my mouth and correct a few assumptions when a very quiet voice beats me to it.

"I think I do."

Nagato doesn't look up from his feet while he speaks. "We're kind of like brothers, too, aren't we, Yahiko? And Konan is like our sister. Our parents are not the same, but that's not what matters, is it?" Here, he does lift his head. There's a shy smile on his lips as he first looks at his friends and then at Kakashi, Obito and me.

Obito beams right back. "You can be our brothers and sister, too! Can't they, Nee-chan?"

He steps towards Nagato and reaches out with his unoccupied hand to take the other boy's. Nagato doesn't protest.

"Sure," I answer. And if I sound a little breathless – well, nobody's pointing it out.

Sayu laughs as she seamlessly closes the circle by taking Kakashi's hand on one side and Yahiko's on the other. "Looks like I'll have to step up my parenting game. I can't wait to see Sakumo's face when he comes back and realizes what he's going to have to catch up to."
Yahiko looks flustered holding Sayu's hand, but he's not showing the slightest inclination to let go. And Kakashi's somewhat uncertain expression is immediately replaced with a bashful smile when Obito shoots him an excited grin.

I'm pretty sure that this thing did not happen in canon. Even the elasticity of time would have trouble bending this back to the way it was then. And something like this couldn't be entirely planned, not even by some supernatural entities, right?

_Hey, Old Dudes._

_You see this? This fit into your Grand Plan? Yes? No?_

_Guess what._

_It's happening anyway._

)00( 

Lying on the grass, staring up at the sky like this – it feels surreal.

It's been almost a week since I've come back from war and even though it's still raging out there, there's barely anything in here, within Konoha's walls, to indicate any signs of turmoil.

It goes to show how advantageous it is not to have the fight directly at your doorstep – I imagine even Konoha would feel the impact of war if it was actually fought on Fire Country soil – and also, how strong Fire Country's economy is to sustain it so shortly after the most recent one. Having arable land in abundance and a constantly agreeable climate for crops to grow really does make a difference in a lot of ways.

Almost a week.

That's not a lot of days, objectively speaking, and it does feel like time is in a rush to get all its items to the checkout, but at the same time, said items are all just big and clunky enough to make you take a closer look at them.

Yashiro's 'welcome back' has been … spacey. I think he was glad that I'd returned more or less in one piece even if his way of showing it wasn't anything I'd describe with 'warm' or 'enthusiastic'. I did notice however that he's been leaving me a lot of space. He hasn't proposed any training sessions or lengthy discussions in his study, yet, instead letting me stay with Obito and meet the Hatake. I doubt that he doesn't know about what happened on my mission, so I assume that this is him trying to be kind. I genuinely appreciate it.

Jiraiya has found a place to stay for the Ame Trio. How he managed to pull a vacant apartment a few yards from the academy out of thin air I will never know, but it sure beats some orphanage where nobody notices if a couple of random children get sucked into Konoha's underbelly. And with "Konoha's underbelly", I mostly mean Danzou.

It's good to know that he takes this whole Rinnegan business as serious as I thought he would. I mean, it's the only logical thing to do, of course, but these days I don't think I can be blamed for getting anxious over – well, everything, really.

À propos Rinnegan, the kids are supposed to start going to the academy tomorrow, so Jiraiya has come up with a way to hide Nagato's eyes. I don't know what that plan is, yet, but learning about that is just another reason to go visit them.
I'll do just that for dinner, I think. Of course, Obito's coming, too. Also Kakashi, if he wants to and if Sayu is ok with it. For dinner itself I'm thinking fried gyouza. Mmm. Yeah, good plan. I don't even remember the last time I had that, it must've been at that one place where Hanako –

… where she took us out on that first team outing after I'd joined.

…

They weren't very good there. I'll have to go somewhere else to get them. Or just … don't get gyouza.

Really, yakimeshi sounds just as fine.

*Congratulations on dragging yourself back into the hole.*

It was a bad idea to leave Obito and Kakashi at the playground. Not for them, no, since Sayu is watching them. No.

Just … bad for me. I should try and get myself together before returning.

A shadow falls over me right as I'm about to sit up.

"You mind me joining?"

I squint to try and get the sky-blue-filter out of my field of vision and to identify whoever's talking to me. In the end, the low drawl in his voice gives him away even before the spiky pineapple ponytail.

I nod.

"Lying in the grass and looking at the sky, two of my favorite things to do," he says as he sits down next to me. I watch as he gets comfortable, plucks up a blade of grass to chew on before he puts his hands underneath his head. He goes straight to watching the sky without any further comments.

So I lie down again, too.

Silence settles between us like it belongs there, comfortable and in no rush to leave.

It's amazing how just having him next to me succeeds in slowing the whirling tornado of thoughts and emotions in my head down, down, down, until my conscious mind is ready to refocus, to hold on to something steady in the midst of all the mud of my upturned mental riverbed.

Until I finally feel confident enough to speak to him.

"It's been a while, Shikaku."

He turns his head to look at me, the blade of grass lazily swinging from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Mhm," he hums. And waits.

Ah.

A classic get-talking-tactic.

A classic because it works.
"We haven't had time to catch up at all. After all that … uh … marriage stuff, I guess."

That gets his face into a scowl. "Ugh. Don't remind me."

I chuckle. "Simpler times, eh?"

"Not sure about that. Sheesh, so troublesome."

I know he's just joking, but all that marriage jazz really feels like a thing of another life. And technically speaking, it is. I mean, I did die. Again.

And now that I think of it … I actually have no idea how that situation was resolved? Was it ever resolved?

_Oh my god, Shikaku wasn't joking at all!_

"You don't think they're still after us, do you?" I can barely hide the rising panic in my voice and I don't really try to anyway.

I really, really don't need this to become an issue again.

He snorts. "You make it sound like we're being chased or something. Like criminals."

I grimace. "In that matter, I might as well be in the eyes of my clan."

"Great," he drawls with a playful smirk, "so I'm gonna be married off to a criminal?"

"I hope not," I tell him sincerely. "You deserve someone perfectly ordinary." Even though that might just be the hardest kind of human to find in shinobi space.

He turns his face away to look at the sky. "Yeah, that would be best," he says, although judging by his tone, he's not getting his hopes particularly high up.

Well, it's not as if marriage is high up on the list of a twelve-year-old anyway.

We don't talk much after that, both busy thinking our own thoughts. It feels good, sharing space without having to share words. The quiet is not a burden but open ground, saturated with mutual respect and patiently waiting to be filled with true meaning.

Neither of us is surprised when, at the end, I turn my head to look at him. "Thank you."

He looks back at me with a nod. "You're welcome."

\(\circ\circ\)\(\)\(\)\(\)

Ever heard of the saying 'The way to a person's heart is through their stomach'?\n
Yep, it's proven to be true again. Obito, too, is pretty awestruck by this display of ravenous hunger. Which is kind of amazing since one of his hobbies is eating food. On the other hand, who doesn't like eating food? Yeah, silly question.

"Whaaaaa! What's this? This is awesome!"

Yahiko is in the middle of stuffing his face with the food that – mostly – Sayu has bought for dinner. There's pork plus mapo tofu, pak choi in sesame oil and chilli, tamagoyaki in heart shapes and yakimeshi, all neatly packed and handed to me with a smile and the announcement that she would be
picking us up before sundown.

"Don't talk while you eat and don't eat so much at once," Kakashi says, in a completely serious tone. "Kaa-chan says it's not healthy."

"Finally someone told him," Konan sighs.

Yahiko's face is scandalized as he looks at her. "Oi!"

"I did tell you, too," Nagato adds with a small smile.

Obito starts giggling and is quickly joined by Konan and Nagato, until we are all having a good laugh, Yahiko included.

I don't know why I ever thought it was difficult to get through to Nagato. I should have guessed that bringing in some food and my little brothers would do the trick. Better make some use of that momentum then.

"So, are you excited for the academy already?"

"Yeah!" Yahiko is – predictably – the one who replies. "We're going to show them how awesome we are! We'll get through it even faster than you, Etsuko-chan, and then Jiraiya will teach us as a team, you'll see!"

_Eheh._

"Faster than me? Wanna bet on that?"

"Yahiko, no," Nagato interjects with a worried little frown.

Yahiko grins and puffs himself up. "Yahiko YES!"

"Alright," I say as Nagato and Konan express varying degrees of exasperation, "the bet is on. If I win, I want you three to promise me something."

"Ok, yeah, what do you want us to promise?"

I shrug. "I don't know, yet. I will think of something till then."

"That's a strange request," Konan says, looking at me thoughtfully.

Yahiko moves his hand like he's brushing something away. "Whatever. It's not like Etsuko-chan's going to ask to do something weird." He squints at me. "Right?"

I smile. "Nah, I would never dream of doing something like that."

He nods vigorously. "Yosh! Now for our wish!" He hops down from his chair and scoots over between his friends. The three of them stick their heads together and discuss in a low whisper.

Obito watches them debate with interest. He tugs at my sleeve. "Nee-chan, what are they doing?"

"They're discussing what they want out of their bet with me," I explain. "Since Yahiko-kun included both Nagato-kun and Konan-chan, it's only fair that he doesn't make a decision on his own and asks for their opinion on it, too."

"Ah," Obito says. He thinks for a bit. Tugs at my sleeve again.
"Shouldn't he have asked them before the bet, too?"

_oooohhhh well done baby brother of mine!_

"You're right. Normally, he should have. We can let this go this time because neither Konan nor Nagato have seriously protested against the bet although they could have many times by now."

"Also," Kakashi chimes in, "they're all good friends, so Yahiko knows they're ok with it."

I turn my head to look at him. "In this specific case that might be true, but being friends is not grounds to assume that you automatically know that the other person likes an idea, too. There's nothing more important than to communicate well, _especially_ when you're close."

Obito scrunches up his nose. "What's com- _commu-nate?"

I pause, trying to come up with an explanation that's easy to understand and yet conveys the importance of the subject. It's … not so easy. "It's when people tell each other what they think and feel," I begin slowly. "It's particularly important when what you think the other is thinking is not the same as what they're really thinking. Like, when you don't tell me something because you think I might get sad, but if you did, I really wouldn't."

"There's _nothing_ I wouldn't tell you!" Obito exclaims with the conviction of a true believer.

_My innocent baby brother._

I give him a kiss on his cheek. "I know, Obito."

"Etsuko-nee?" Oh, that's Kakashi. "How do I know that what the other is thinking is really something else from what I was thinking?"

_Oh well, he's getting a kiss, too._

"You don't. That's why you have to ask them to find out."

Kakashi's ears always go so adorably red when he's flustered.

"Ok!" Yahiko announces from the other side of the table. "We know what we want!"

He skips over to us. He puts on a very solemn expression. "If we win the bet, we want you to stay our friend forever."

My throat goes all dry.

_Oh._

I swallow.

"Alright, that sounds doable."

The beaming smiles I receive from all sides after that reaffirm what I've been becoming increasingly sure of: this was absolutely, undeniably the right thing to do.

)00(

"Etsuko," Yahiro says before he gets up from dinner, "come find me in my study when you've finished helping Naoko. We have things to discuss."
I nod. "Understood, Yashiro-san."

What's this gonna be about? The usual, probably, so either training or my Sharingan. Maybe both. It's been a while, so this has been long coming.

"Otou-sama," Toshiro pipes up. "Will you have time to look at my gokakyuu later? I've been practicing a lot and –"

"Some other time," Yashiro cuts him off.

Toshiro looks like he's been slapped, his mouth falling shut immediately. From the corner of my eye, I can see Naoko's hands tighten around her chopsticks.

"Yashiro," she says and promptly stops. Her voice sounds strained.

"What is it?" he very nearly snaps back.

Oh shit, he's annoyed.

The tension in the air is thick enough to cut. Yashiro's whole posture radiates impatience, but what really has me taken aback is the coldness in Naoko's eyes.

I suddenly realize that I haven't looked into her eyes for a long time now.

In the end, it's still her who looks away.

"Nothing," she says, stands up and takes her used tableware to the sink.

Yashiro seems to prefer it like this and leaves the room.

I look from the shoji screen over Naoko's back to Toshiro, who's quietly seething at the table.

This … what is this.

What just happened?

"What are you staring at?" Toshiro spits out when my gaze lingers on him for too long.

I hurriedly avert my eyes and choose not to answer. He is already upset, there's no need in irritating him any further. I should just concentrate on finishing so that I can get Obito and myself out of here and think about this whole situation later.

)00(

"The clan wants you to join the next clan meeting," Yashiro announces after I've finished my greeting bow and settled on a zabuton across from him.

Well, Naori did say that the clan would be interested in the awakening of my Mangekyou. I'm actually more surprised that they've left me alone for so long.

"When will it be?"

"Tomorrow night."

Oh. I guess this still counts as enough of an advance warning. Well.

"Wear something formal. Be ready at sundown. We'll walk from here."
I nod in acceptance.

Ever since I've come back from the war I've known that two major issues regarding me would need to be solved:

1. The question of what's going to happen to me in terms of team re-assignment etc.

2. This thing right here with my Mangekyou and the clan.

Looks like I'm finished with waiting. As long as they come one after another, I believe I can deal with them.

*Let's go dabble in some clan politics, shall we?*
Something Something Politics

Chapter Summary

Rolling, rolling rolling - the ball of life is, indeed, round.

Chapter Notes

Did you miss me?

Here I am, emerging from behind the pile called "adulting"TM, presenting you the latest installment of Joyous Children. I hope you enjoy it, and don't forget to tell me what you think! I'd like to see the comment count per chapter rising again :P

Thanks to trusty beta NightsBlackRose13 of course, as well all the people who helped me smooth over grammar etc.

I think I'm starting to understand why canon Kakashi spent so much time at the Memorial Stone. It's quiet, for starters. Also, the shape of it is bizarrely interesting. It's probably supposed to look like a leaf from up in the air or something, which is nice and artistic, of course, but – well, we people are down here on the ground, are we not?

Anyway.

There's the thing with the names, too, of course.

It's early in the afternoon. Warm and rather sunny, as Konoha's autumn is wont to be, the sunlight reflecting off the polished black surface of the stone and making it appear as if it was made of glass. The edges of the characters are carved in so sharply, so delicately, that it looks like someone wrote them on with the finest brush, the curves and lines of the calligraphy so naturally elegant that it is almost uncomfortable. Their lightness doesn't fit the occasion.

I wonder how they decided to measure all the space. As in, the size of the characters in relation to overall surface and ergo, the amount of names that can go on it. What did they hope for when they made such a limited monument? That, one day, names would stop going on there? That there would simply be a new stone?

Did they even think about the future at all or is this place only ever meant to face back in time?

I lift my hand and bring my fingertips close enough to the surface that they can glide down the names.

Uchiha Nobuo, Uchiha Kiyomi, Uchiha Fumio.

And further down: Mitarashi Hanako, Senju Nawaki, Sarutobi Regashi.

I cannot stop looking back. I don't want to, either. Suppressing all those thoughts and emotions
would not only be a huge insult to their memory but to myself and all I've been through as well. I stand here, able to look forward, because of all of them. What good would it be if I erased all that I'd be looking forward from?

So, no, I cannot stop looking back. What I can do, though, is to make a special place for it. A place to visit and leave, a place that is in the present and carefully marked-off – somewhere I can remember without the memories following and overwhelming me in every other place.

I've decided that this place here, at the Memorial Stone, is just fine.

I sit down.

For a while I just stare at the names, not exactly sure how I should proceed with this, but I'm in no hurry. Now that I have decided to do this, it feels like … I don't know, like I've won back some time, maybe?

*Adult Kakashi talked to his dead. Maybe I can try that, too.* Without spilling secrets to a potential villain in hiding, of course.

Haha.

I let out a long breath.

If I'm lucky, it might even help clear my head for the clan meeting a few hours from now. Wouldn't that be neat.

)}()()

Wear something formal, he said. It's gonna be great, he said.

OK, to be fair, he didn't say the last part.

I am more nervous than I thought I would be kneeling in front of the most important people of my clan, which is absurd, of course. Why should I be so nervous about some peeps that decide the next couple steps of my life without ever asking what I think would be prudent or preferred?

*Ahahahahahaha.*

Completely ridiculous, right?

Up front at the altar, Takao-sama sits flanked by a vaguely familiar old man and – well, other old men. There are five of them, facing the rest of my clansmen including me from a slightly elevated dais. And yep, we're in that infamous secret meeting room underneath the Naka Shrine. Apart from it being secret, though, it really is quite plain.

There's the aforementioned dais with the altar and the stone tablet. The rest of the room is rectangular, covered with tatami mats and that's it. Nothing spectacular, I'm afraid.

"Uchiha Etsuko," Takao-sama begins and my spine immediately straightens up.

"You have been brought here today by force of the power you have awakened in your eyes – eyes that have been bequeathed to you through generations of gifted clansmen. Today, you shall be introduced into the clan as one who has been able to achieve what is reserved only for a chosen few. The power of the Mangekyou Sharingan, Uchiha Etsuko, has opened the doors of fate for you."

A shiver runs through my entire body.
He has no idea how accurate his words are, even beyond the usual incredible things the Mangekyou is capable of doing.

I lower my upper body until my forehead touches the tatami mat I'm kneeling on and speak the ceremonial words I've been taught to say by Yashiro.

"I humbly accept this gift and vow to honor it with my life. I shall be a servant to the clan's best interest and ask for nothing but to be of use in return."

"Stand up and step forward," Takao-sama commands.

Ok, I can do that.

The line of men on the dais has stood up, too. They have parted left and right to form a short corridor leading to the stone tablet. Takao-sama is standing on the right side, facing me and beckoning me to come closer.

I swallow.

Ok.

I'm totally not close to peeing in my figurative pants. You know, since I'm wearing a kimono, so no pants.

Ahahahahahahahahah.

Ahaha.

Haaahhhhh.

Keep breathing.

It's gonna be awesome. The famous stone tablet. You're gonna see it. Woohooo!

My walk up that dais feels like I'm moving through water, plus cotton balls stuffed into my ears and a prickling sensation on my skin. It begins at the tips of my fingers, a hundred tiny, heated needles pressing in at the same time, and travels up my arms, down my back – I'm suddenly acutely aware of the silk of my kimono – and further down, until it ends at the soles of my feet, making me stop in my steps to curl my toes.

I've only ever felt that way when I've been sick.

Actually arriving at the tablet takes ages and I honestly don't remember the details of the walk. I'm just there at some point, Takao-sama's voice coming in fuzzy through the thick of my confusion.

"The Sharingan, as powerful as it is, serves an even more powerful purpose: it is the key to unlocking the true legacy of the clan." From the corner of my eyes, I can see him gesturing at the stone tablet, the swing of his arm fittingly grave for the occasion. "Activate your Sharingan."

Wait.

Am I not supposed to read what I can already see without the special hack first?

On the other hand.

Might be a good idea not to question my clan leader in front of the rest of said clan for something that
trivial.

I shrug internally. I can still come back for it some other time, I guess.

It takes quite a bit of willpower to focus and channel my chakra into my eyes. Thankfully, though, it helps to clear up the strange cottony feel in my head for a bit.

The by now familiar sharpening of my vision settles in quickly and I blink a couple times to recalibrate my visual focus point. Takao-sama nods approvingly and again gestures at the tablet. I comply with the unsaid command.

Huh.

The kanji on it are doing something really strange.

Have you ever seen any of those optical-illusion-thingies where you think you see stuff that's at the fringe of your field of vision but as soon as you focus on it, it disappears?

That. Just in reverse.

The characters are in a latently *glimmering* state, but I'm pretty sure that they still make up the original text – at least until I focus on them with my Sharingan. Because then, *woosh*, new text.

Amazing.

I wonder if anybody has ever tried to find out how it works exactly. In a scientific way, I mean. Seeing that this happens without even actively using the Sharingan as it is used in a technique, I bet the findings would be extremely useful in uncovering some fundamental truths about its inner workings.

And this isn't even everything, yet.

"Activate the Mangekyou."

This is gonna be.

A not-unsubstantial pool of dread forms in my stomach and I swallow once, twice to try and get over it. I close my eyes. Boost their chakra supply.

Until the pressure becomes too much to continue delaying the inevitable.

The photographic quality of my memory of Regashi's still face is as unfailing as it was the last time.

I clench my fists as the dread in my stomach surges up into a crushing wave, flooding my chest, pulling and squeezing at my heart at the same time, and my breath comes out in a shaky exhale as I can feel the chakra finally spilling into my eyes.

The visual stimulation when I open them almost knocks me off my feet, because -

The kanji have, quite literally, *transcended their earthly confines*.

They are everywhere in the room, hanging in the air, pulsating, arranged in lines, curves and spirals of living, breathing text and it's *so freaking beautiful* that my words could never do them justice. I make a slow full rotation, my jaw dropped in awe at how all-encompassing it is and how it literally creates a second layer of reality. Like, my clansmen are still there and at the same time, they aren't, because the text is. I have no idea if it even makes sense, but - this is how it is. And I can see both
realities simultaneously.

How is something like this possible? I'm not even looking at the tablet itself!

I decide to start reading the closest paragraph. The characters are arranged in the form of a dense spiral but the moment I focus on it, there is a gentle ripple that uncurls and smoothes things out, making it instantly ten times more readable.

*This is so awesome.*

Truly, virtual reality headsets have nothing on this.

… the holder of such overwhelming power could easily be corrupted. So, seeking stability, one god was divided into yin and yang. These opposing two forces acting together obtain all things in creation -

The jarring sensation of a hand landing on my shoulder interrupts my reading.

"That is enough for now. Deactivate the Mangekyou."

What, why? I've just started!

Then again. Maybe it's not such a bad idea since he's alerted me to the fact that I can quite literally feel my energy draining away. Rapidly.

I need to reassess my statement of the Mangekyou not actively engaging with the text, apparently.

The writing in the air abruptly disappears and for a moment, I feel a sharp stabbing pain in its wake, a feeling of loss that is completely irrational but real nonetheless. I shake my head to try and get rid of it.

*Phew.*

That was way more energy consuming than I thought it would be. Good on Takao-sama to interrupt me, actually.

I guess that's why experience is so nice to have, huh.

I'm facing the small crowd of clansmen from on top of the dais, a sea of faces mostly unfamiliar and yet close. I'm pretty sure that only a fraction of the ones present are in possession of the Mangekyou themselves, but sharing that moment a few heartbeats ago has been a strangely intimate act. Even if they do not truly understand, they … they still somehow do.

They *belong*. Just like I do.

I snap back to attention when Takao-sama and the other elders go back into a line. I kneel down directly in front of them for the second part of this ceremony.

It's time for the interrogation on my Mangekyou's abilities.

"Uchiha Etsuko," the vaguely familiar elder says. *Where do I know him from? "Report what happened after you awoke the Mangekyou."*

Ok, here it goes. Actor me, on!

I lower my upper body into a deep bow, my forehead touching the ground in a display of utmost
"Forgive me," I say. "I am afraid I cannot say anything on this matter."

"Why is that?" His voice is tinged with surprise.

"I," a pause for theatrical purposes, "do not know how it works, yet."

There's a short, baffled silence after that admission.

I'm relieved that this isn't even a lie. I'm pretty shitty at lying, for anyone who hasn't noticed.

"You used it against the enemy nin at Camp Sakana, didn't you?"

My forehead is still pressed against the tatami mat. There's probably going to be a nice pattern imprinted on the skin when I finally get up again.

"I do not remember any details of it. I apologize."

There's an impatient huff from the right side of the line. "How can you not remember? You wiped out almost a dozen enemy nin, how can you -"

"Usui-san," a new voice interrupts him. "Let's not be like that. It's not that strange to be a little fuzzy on the details of an occurrence more than two weeks ago."

"It's not just some details! It was the awakening of her Mangekyou!"

The new voice sighs. "Let me ask you something, Usui-san. What did you have for dinner one week ago?"

"I don't - what does that have to do with anything?!"

"You don't remember? Strange. You always eat so much and so heartily, I'd thought you would. And you didn't even almost die in the aftermath or spent time at a field hospital in the middle of the war."

Oooooofoooohhhhhhhhhhh.

I can't help but lift my head and sneak a peek at the person who's handing out burns like a scout handing out chocolate cookies.

Two men are locked in an intense battle of stares, the familiar one named Usui looking distinctly more incensed than the other who is relaxed to the point that it almost seems like he's smiling. That man … seems oddly familiar, too, now that I'm looking at him? Like. Huh.

Am I starting to confuse my clansmen with one another?

The smiling man looks at me. He has light lines going down at the corners of his mouth, short, curly hair with grey streaks in between and eyes so youthful and alert that I immediately want to take back that offhand comment about only old people on the dais from before.

"Takao-sama, allow me to make a suggestion."

Takao-sama clears his throat. "Speak, Kagami-san."

Wait, what?
"I suggest we postpone this second part of the ceremony to a later point. It would be prudent not to forget that all things related to the Mangekyou are extraordinarily taxing, especially since Etsuko is still of such a young age. Let us all rest, Takao-sama - except for the eagerness of our curious hearts, we are in no hurry."

My clan head takes a moment to ponder this. I'm slightly surprised that Usui isn't protesting, but he's probably too busy licking his wounds. His opponent didn't even get reprimanded, after all.

Which brings me to the next point.

_Uchiha Kagamiiiiiiiii._

Hmph.

Rude.

He could've at least introduced himself before I walked in here. Knowing that I have an ally in my back would have taken a considerable amount of anxiety off my chest.

Uh, a late discovered ally is still better than none, I guess.

"A reasonable suggestion. We shall delay the second part of the ceremony and continue with it in a fortnight. Let us move on to the next issue, then."

Oh, nice. That was easier than expected. Good to know that Kagami's opinion is so highly valued.

Takao-sama signals me permission to return to my place in the crowd. I get a last close up look at Kagami before I turn around. He's looking at me, too, his eyes more serious again.

Methinks we're going to have a conversation after this whole affair is over.

I settle down next to Yashiro who gives me a short expressionless nod, the Uchiha equivalent of an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

_It's ok, I understand._

The meeting continues with surprisingly mundane concerns: Uchiha Blih's contract with the trader who supplies the fabric for every single piece of clothing that has the Uchiha fan on it is close to expiring, may it please be renewed. Uchiha Blah notes that training field x's target posts need to be replaced again. Uchiha Blubb reports that crime rates have stayed stable since the last meeting.

Also, the new Police Force building next to the prison is making good progress.

Ouch.

Nice reminder for the fact that, although a lot of things are starting to change, we're still very much in the core realm of canon Narutoverse.

After that, I admit that my attention wanders. It's not like my clan is going to ask me to weigh in on administrative matters anyway. Which will have to change at some point, of course, just - not yet, thank you very much. Blissful is the person who can hide behind the protective armor of childhood innocence. Sometimes, at least.

Apparently not when it comes to marriage.

"At last," Takao-sama announces, "it remains to decide our course of action regarding the situation
with the Uchiha-Nara marriage contract."

Ugh. I should have known that this issue did not dissolve into thin air just because I ended up in a genin team and hoped it would be so.

The real question is: why are they coming after me only now?

"We have confirmation now that the parameters have changed drastically. Uchiha Etsuko indeed is a wielder of the Mangekyou Sharingan. As such, the original intent behind the marriage contract is no longer valid. Her abilities are too valuable to be given away in an arrangement like that."

What.

"Yashiro-san, your attempts at delaying the finalization of the contract have proven, although unwelcome at that time, to be quite useful. Annulling the contract now would have been much more dolorous, not to mention disastrous reputation wise, than modifying it."

What.

Did I mishear? Delaying the finalization of the contract?

Yashiro?!

"Now, for the question of how to modify it. Essentially, we have two possible ways to deal with this: either we find a substitute with comparable value for the marriage contract itself, or we find a substitute for the marriage candidate. Within the frame given by the contract draft, of course. Thoughts?"

Wait, they're going to discuss this in front of me?

I mean, of course I'm super relieved that I don't have to marry Shikaku anymore, but, like, we are friends. That ... thing torpedoed our whole friendship into a huge turmoil. It would have been the worst if it had ended up broken because of all this. And now, they're not even throwing me some, I dunno, some acknowledging bone? Like I'm a person with actual feelings that might've - definitely - gotten hurt by this?

I guess that's the crucial point right there.

Well. It's not as if I hadn't had an inkling before.

Still doesn't stop me from feeling hurt, though. What a bother.

You'd think that with a clan full of people that freak out so often over anything emotional, someone would have thought about this problem before and done something about it. I don't feel like I'm asking for too much here, am I?

"What we promised to the Nara with this contract was the potential for future cooperation, maybe even an alliance," one of the other old men on the dais says. "It was a daring step for us to take in the first place, which is why we made a rather big deal out of it. I fail to see another offer we could make that promises the same weight. In that regard Nara Shikarui thinks a lot like us."

That would be Shikaku's dad, I take it. His mentality seems to be made of warring-era stuff if he still thinks that marriage is the only way to form lasting alliances.

Seriously, where are we, in the middle ages?
Same goes for my clan of course.

"Agreed," Uchiha Blah says.

"That leaves us only the option of offering a different candidate, then," Takao-sama concludes.

Oh, exciting. I'm pretty sure they already have an idea who they want to send instead. So, who's it gonna be?

And indeed, Uchiha Blubb bows down so that his forehead touches the tatami mat.

"Takao-sama, I would be honored to offer you my granddaughter Yoshino."

Oh my god WHAT?!

"She is an obedient girl and will gladly fulfill her duty."

This can't be true.

"And as a close member of your own branch, she will make up what she lacks in ability with her social standing."

Is this the way of the elasticity of time to rub it in my face? That there's no outrunning the original order of things?

And also.

HOW THE FUCK IS YOSHINO AN UCHIHA WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?!

"It is a sound suggestion," Takao-sama announces. "If there is no one that wants to suggest alternative candidates, we shall take a vote."

I can't believe this. I just can't. WHAT IS THIS FUCKERY. Somebody explain, please?

The meeting ends with a unanimous vote in favor of putting Yoshino forward in the upcoming negotiations with the Nara and I'm just -

AAHHHHEKGPWLQIFO

How is this entire second life thing so surreal?

I move like a robot as the people around me start to get up and either leave the room or form little groups to discuss stuff, the primary focus of my mental energies not able to unglue itself from the latest revelations.

Yashiro, my secret protector? Uchiha Yoshino, the sacrificial lamb? No offense to Shikaku here, if anything, he's just as much of a victim here, but damn.

I barely register Kagami coming over and suddenly, he's right in front of Yashiro and me.

"Yashiro-san," the older man says, "do you mind if I borrow your ward for a bit? I promise I won't keep her out too late."

Yashiro bows down. "Of course, Kagami-sama." With that, he retreats.

Kagami smiles at me. "Would you accompany an old man for a walk, Etsuko-chan?"
I nod and we exit first the meeting room, then the shrine.

The night air has cooled down quite a bit while we were sitting inside and now, I'm glad that the silk of my kimono is warm and snug against my skin. Funny how the usefulness of a material's properties can be perceived differently according to the situation, isn't it?

"It's a beautiful night," Kagami says. "I always find the night air most refreshing after clan meetings in that stuffy room." He looks at me with a boyish grin which omg he must've been so handsome when he was younger. "I hope we relics from times long gone don't seem too outlandish to you, Etsuko-chan."

I hope my face isn't too red as I answer. "Not outlandish. Just ready for … some fresh air, too, I guess?"

He throws his head back and lets out several strings of deep, throaty laughter that take off into the sky like colorful balloons. It's the sound of someone who has had both opportunity and determination to practice it - a conscious choice made at some point of his life.

Amazing what kind of insight a simple thing like laughter can offer into a person's mind, isn't it? … or maybe I'm just projecting.

Yeah, that's most probably it.

"Naori never told me that you have such a witty brand of humor," Kagami remarks after he's calmed down again. "Then again, I do understand that the things you were able to talk about were not of a particularly humorous nature."

"Um," I answer eloquently. "Yeah, that's true."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to start droning on it now. I think we're both too exhausted for that." He pauses shortly, his eyes briefly taking on a far-away look.

His face is shockingly expressive.

He turns his face to look at me again. "I do want you to know, though, that my door and ears are always open if you decide you want to have a talk. About anything, really."

I'm about to open my mouth and say thank you, when he adds another thing.

"In return," he says and oh, here come the conditions, "I want you to meet someone."

… OK?

"Sure," I say. "When and where?"

"Does dinner a week from today sound good to you?" He grins. "And be so good and come to an old and frail man's house, would you?"

Pfft.

"Yeah sure, no problem," I answer with a deadpan voice.

"Perfect. Maybe Naori can make it, too. We'll see." He lets out a small chuckle.

We stop walking and I realize that we've arrived at Yashiro's house.
He crouches down in one fluid motion - old and frail my ass - and taps my shoulder. "Have a good night, Etsuko-chan. I'll see you soon."

I give a quick bow. "Good night, Kagami-san."

He watches as I enter the house and smiles when I give him a last wave before closing the screen.

Phew.

Tonight was rather dramatic, looking at all the stuff that I learned. Even through all the drama, though, I have to admit that it actually wasn't too bad. The attending clansmen were not unreasonable, I have people standing not too far from my own corner and most importantly, thanks to my being a child I have the luxury of staying in the back and doing what I do best: observe and practice.

It's not a bad place to start.

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"Go, Nagato-nii!" Obito yells. Nagato runs, rapidly gaining speed and Obito squeals with glee.

"Yahiko-nii, faster!" Kakashi commands in response to his challenger. His knees wiggle in an attempt to encourage the older boy to move according to his wishes and Yahiko complies with a loud "Whoooooop!"

I look at Konan. "Who do you think is going to be faster?"

The girl frowns a little. "I don't know. They're pretty much the same speed. Though, Nagato is more ok with losing than Yahiko. Yahiko can get really competitive sometimes."

We watch the two boys race down the training field, each of them carrying one of the toddlers on their respective backs, touch down at the target post and come right back. It's tough to say who's going to win until the last few yards and two heartbeats later, Yahiko cries out triumphantly and pumps his fist up into the air.

"Wiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnnnn!"

He bends down to let Kakashi climb off his back and stays like that to catch his breath. There's a huge grin on his face, complementary to Kakashi's pleased expression.

Heh. Out of all the things they could've chosen to bond over, it's their aversion to losing that comes up first. These two are just made for each other.

Nagato has let Obito climb off his back by now, too. He crouches down in front of him and gives him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Obito-chan," he says, still out of breath.

Obito is bopping on his feet. "It's ok," he announces brightly. "We'll do better next time!"

Nagato gives him a happy eye-squeezing smile. "Ok!"

Ahhhhhh, heart eyes for all of them.

Someone taps my shoulder. "Etsuko-chan," Konan says. "Someone's coming our way. He … looks like the man from the camp. The one who came to say goodbye the day we left for Konoha, I think?"
Sakumo?!

I turn around to look and indeed, there's Sakumo, walking up to our training field. He looks tired, but the moment he catches sight of us, a smile appears.

"Otou-chan!" Kakashi exclaims, surprise evident in his small voice. He runs out from the gaggle of kids and launches himself straight into his father's arms.

Behind me, Yahiko asks in a rather loud whisper "… Otou-chan?"

Oh right, they don't know.

Sakumo must've overheard him, too, since he turns to face us fully after setting Kakashi down again - who by the way looks like he'd rather stay on his father's shoulders.

"Yahiko-kun, Konan-chan and Nagato-kun, is it?" He smiles. "I see you've made friends with my family already. Let me introduce myself properly: I'm Sakumo, Kakashi's father. Obito's and Etsuko's, too, if we disregard formalities."

Aaaand my face is red again.

I don't think I'll ever get used to him calling Obito and me his kids.

"Hello, Sakumo-san," the Trio choruses.

Yahiko, of course, has something to ask already. "So, Sayu-san and you are married, right?"

His eyes light up even more at that. "Indeed we are. Speaking of, is she here, too?"

I shake my head no. "No, I rounded everyone up after Konan, Yahiko and Nagato finished the academy. With Sayu's permission for Kakashi, of course."

"I see," he says with a pensive nod. "I'd hoped to talk to her since I just arrived, but that will have to wait." His gaze lands solely on me. "Etsuko-chan, I'm sorry for cutting this short but I'll have to ask you to come with me right now."

Kakashi has the corners of his mouth turned down in a disapproving pout. Very cute. "You're leaving already and taking Etsuko-nee away?"

Obito doesn't look too happy either, for that matter.

"I'm sorry kids. I promise I'll bring her back as soon as I can. In the meantime," he bites his thumb and places his hand on the ground, "I'll leave my trusted companions with you."

There's the poof a moderately big smoke cloud that dissipates quickly to reveal a twin pair of dogs. Obito squeals in delight.

"This is Haruka and Misaki," he says, pointing first at the one on the left and then the one on the right. "Ladies, may I ask you to look after these children for a couple of hours?"

Misaki cocks her head. "Your pack has gotten considerably bigger again, Sakumo-kun," she comments.

Sakumo grins sheepishly and scratches the back of his head. "Is that a yes?"
Haruka smiles sweetly. "Of course, Sakumo-kun. Anything for our little pup."

Both lady dogs stand up in one graceful move and head over to the kids who are staring at them in awe.

"Alright, mini pups," Haruka barks, "we need to learn your names."

And so the tale of the two dogs and the starstruck children takes its course.

Sakumo turns to me. "Shall we go, Etsuko-chan?"

I nod. We set into a run.

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On the way, there's just enough time for Sakumo to tell me that we've been called for by the Hokage himself. When I ask him if this is about my new team assignment he just smiles apologetically and says that he cannot really tell me.

I'm pretty sure that this is about my new team assignment.

My excitement is rather … limited, to be honest. It feels like it was only yesterday when I went up to the roof of the academy to get myself tested by Hanako and I …

I'm becoming acutely aware that I'm absolutely not ready for a new team.

A wave of something hits my chest and I have to struggle to keep my breath steady. Tears are threatening to spill out of my eyes and my heart is beating fast.

"It's ok, Etsuko-chan," Sakumo says from right next to me. "I'm here. It's ok."

I exhale.

He's right.

Having him with me for the meeting with the Hokage can only be a good sign, right?

We arrive at the Hokage Tower and walk up the stairs to the office. Sakumo puts his hand on the door handle and gives me one last reassuring smile. He pushes the door open.

Sarutobi Hiruzen has grown old within the span of three weeks.

His hair has turned almost entirely grey and there are lines in his face that haven't been there before, but the most jarring difference lies in his eyes. There is a hardness to them that makes my skin crawl and I'm abruptly reminded of the fact that he, too, like Hashirama, carries the moniker "God of Shinobi" which has been coined for his feats in the First Shinobi War, among others.

Right now, there's nothing that would prompt people to call him soft.

"Sakumo-kun, Etsuko-chan, thank you for coming on such short notice."

Sakumo and I bow down in greeting.

"Hokage-sama," he says. I'm about to echo this, but he doesn't stop there. "Danzou-sama. Hello, Orochimaru-kun."
Wait what.

Why are there so many people here?

…

And Danzou?!

I can see that Sakumo is surprised, too, but that's not helping at the moment.

Oh god.

I can't shake the feeling that something terrible is going to happen.

I want to leave. Get as far away as possible.

Oh my god.

"Uchiha Etsuko," Sarutobi begins with gravitas in his voice, "as a genin of Konoha it is your duty to carry out missions that befit your status as an active shinobi. However, I, as Konoha's representative, have the duty to provide you with the means to ensure that you do not walk your path alone. You will need guidance in all that matters to the way of a shinobi, so that you can blossom, unfold your full potential and stay true to the Will of Fire. For this, I have chosen a mentor for you out of the people present, who have all expressed a keen interest in your development."

My eyes dart wildly between Sakumo right beside me and the two others standing close to the Hokage's desk. Orochimaru is upright, his stance relaxed but attentive, following Sarutobi's every word. And Danzou …

There's a glint in his eyes that I'm straight up terrified to think too much about.

Please let it be Sakumo.

It has to be.

It just has to.

"The decision I have made after careful considerations is as follows: as of today you, Uchiha Etsuko, are assigned the student to a person who has not only earned my full trust and confidence in his skill as a shinobi as well as his devotion to Konoha, but who has also grown dear to my heart."

He lifts his hand in a grand gesture.

And points -

"My very own student -"

OH GOD

"Orochimaru."
ANBU agent Kiso tried not to think too hard about who the patient with the codename CAPUCHIN really was. Her orders were clear, after all:

1. protect the patient with her life,
2. keep their identity anonymous, including to herself, and
3. notify the Hokage himself the moment they wake up.

She stood in front of the mirror over the sink and gave her masked reflection an encouraging nod, garnished with a markedly enthusiastic thumbs-up.

She was doing pretty well so far, really!

Granted, her job was made easier by the fact that a minimum amount of people actually knew about the existence of her patient, but she suspected that the situation would change the moment information about them was leaked.

She was not about to let that happen. No, not on agent Kiso's watch. Hah!

A look at the clock on the wall revealed that her internal peptalk had lasted a grand total of two minutes and twenty-six seconds. She deflated.

The cold, hard truth about this job was, that it was drop dead boring.

Agent Kiso really tried not to feel like that ungrateful person. She was aware that the patient had to be important, what with all the direct reporting to the Hokage, the secrecy and such, it was just -

Wasn't she overqualified for this?
All that work, all the blood, the sweat, the tears in the field to finally make it into the ANBU corps - and that was it? Guarding a practically unknown person from quasi non-existent dangers?

No, no, no.

Focus. She had to focus.

This was just as important a job as any. And she would do a bloody fine job, too.

Focus.

Without her internal monologue, the room was eerily still, even more so with the constant beeping of the machine the patient was connected to. There was no echo in between each beep, just silence that came back more pronounced with every time, swallowing whatever lingered and forcing out a new start.

She wondered if this was the side effect of some special jutsu. Maybe more measures to ensure the invisibility of the patient? Something worked into the standard security seal that had flared up in recognition of her chakra signature upon her entry into the room? Would it flare up again if she exited and re-entered?

"Maybe I should try it out", she said out loud. Not to anyone in particular, mind you, just as an attempt to fill and bridge over the pockets of silence in between the beeps. She didn't expect anyone to answer her question, after all. Least of all her most mysterious patient.

In hindsight, she should have known that this was exactly what it took to wake said patient up.

Everybody loved a good jinx, right?

Agent Kiso sat perched on the ledge at the bottom of one of the tall windows of the Hokage's office and peered in through the glass, trying to make out what was going on even though no sound came through - muting seals at work again. She wondered shortly if it might be considered an oversight in security that she could, in fact, see through, however, and make out the funny little gathering inside. Maybe this meeting was only confidential instead of super confidential.

Then again, she could clearly see council elder Shimura Danzou, the White Fang and the Sandaime's creepy genius student aside from the Sandaime himself.

It sure was a super illustrious crowd for something not super confidential.

It didn't take long for the Hokage to notice her presence and walk over, opening the window just wide enough for her to stick her head in and maneuver her mouth close to the Hokage's ear.

She could feel her pulse shoot up by at least several hundred beats per minute.

Strange how not even routine fighting and killing could stop her from being flustered around her personal hero.

"Hokage-sama," she said, wincing at how breathy she sounded. This was getting awkward. She hoped that the Hokage didn't think her weird.

She took a moment to remember why she was there in the first place.

"CAPUCHIN has woken up."
Limited by her porcelain mask, her position by his ear and his big Hokage-hat, she couldn't see if he had any particular reaction to that announcement. Heck, she couldn't even read any of his subconscious body cues since the combination of the hat with the flowy flap-thingies and the flowy robes made flowy waves around everything. Which was actually really smart if it was part of the original intention, now that she thought about it.

She hastily took a step back when she realized she'd been hovering by the Hokage's ear for a while now and nearly fell off the window ledge.

Brilliant.

Great ANBU agent material she was.

The Hokage didn't acknowledge her inner or outer floundering and instead turned his back on her.

"An urgent situation has arisen," he announced to the rest of the people who were still in the room. "I have to leave. Orochimaru, take good care of your student. Etsuko-chan, I wish you all the best. May the Will of Fire be with you all."

Kiso knit her brows together in confusion when she heard a name she couldn't put a face to, but the Hokage didn't give her a chance to think more on it as he turned around to look at her again. Something in his expression gave her a feeling of immediate pressure.

"Come with me."

Oh, he wanted her to use the door. With him.

She hastily scrambled through the window and after the Hokage who was already halfway through the room - until council elder Danzou stepped in to block his path.

The man didn't look happy.

"This is not what we discussed with the rest of the council," he said, eyes flaring up with barely suppressed anger. "Are you even aware of the consequences of your actions?"

Agent Kiso heard the sound of nervous feet shuffling and realized with a start that there was a little girl in the room, too. She hadn't seen her from the window, but now, she was close enough to take in a pale face, almost shoulder-length black hair and black eyes. An expression of confusion mixed with terror. A dark blue shirt with a telltale white-and-red-fan on the back.

Oh.

Was this the Uchiha girl everyone had been talking about? The one that had killed more than a dozen Iwa nin at the Camp Sakana incident?

Hm.

Didn't look like much of a killing machine.

Maybe the rumors were exaggerated?

"I have made my decision and the issue is closed, Danzou," the Hokage replied, voice just as steely as the council elder's. "Now excuse me. I have urgent matters to attend to."

Danzou didn't move.
Oh no.

What was happening.

Why were things like this.

His jaw tensed.

*Oh no.*

"This is not over, Hiruzen," Danzou hissed.

And finally moved away.

The Sandaime turned his head to look at her and give a short nod.

Agent Kiso hurried after him and through the double doors of the Hokage's office, leaving behind whatever that situation was. She hoped she'd never stumble into it again.

The Sandaime asked her exactly one question on the way to the hospital.

"Did they say anything to you when they woke up?"

"Just that they needed water," Kiso answered. "I called the nurses then and went to fetch you, Hokage-sama."

He nodded, sighed quietly and immediately, she felt ashamed to have disappointed him so gravely. She was aware that that sentiment was at least a little bit irrational since it was not exactly her fault that the patient hadn't said anything meaningful, but still. She couldn't help but take this situation as a personal failure.

They arrived to the presence of a pair of nurses, busy adjusting whatever needed adjusting around the patient. The moment the Hokage stepped into the room, however, both of them bowed down, their murmuring going quiet enough for that insistent beeping noise to pierce through.

Agent Kiso wished she could strangle that noise and beat it with a stick.

"Hokage-sama," one of them spoke up. "The patient is still too weak to stay awake for long, he fell asleep again. It is a good sign that he woke up at all, though. We have high hopes that he'll make it through alive."

He?

Kiso tried not to be too elated about this tiny bit of new information regarding the patient's identity. She wasn't supposed to be interested in that, after all.

"Thank you, Hattori-kun" the Hakoge said. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the chair beside it.

For a few heartbeats, time seemed to be suspended as the Hokage watched the patient and something in Kiso's chest *squeezed.* Hard.

The moment was broken when he then turned so he could see both the nurses as well as her. "In fact, thank you all for your hard work. Now I must ask you to leave. I need a moment alone with the
Kiso followed the nurses who bowed, muttered their farewells and made their way out of the room. She went last, halting in the doorway to look back at the Hokage.

He was slumped over the bed, one of his hands clasped around the patient's, the other in his hair.

And then, in one of the perfect silences in between the beeping -

"Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me."

So much anguish. So much grief. Desperation.

ANBU agent Kiso hurriedly shut the door behind her, certain in her knowledge that what she had just witnessed was something she would be carrying with her until the day she died.

When she came back an hour later to resume her duties, another ANBU agent stood in front of CAPUCHIN's door. He didn't move an inch as she approached, not even when she stood directly in front of him. She didn't recognize the mask.

"Uh, would you mind letting me in?" she asked, hoping to sound confident. "The Hokage left already and I'm supposed to be back. Guarding, you know? Super important stuff."

The agent looked at her.

"You're relieved of your duty, agent Kiso. Report back to the head of your platoon. They will give you your next assignment."

She was stunned. "But - I - the patient -"

"You have done your job," the agent replied. "Informing the Hokage was your responsibility. Leave the guarding to the ones responsible now."

She …

Her job hadn't been about guarding the patient?

"Oh," she managed to get out.

The agent chuckled. "Not as glorious as you thought it would be, is it, green-horn?"

She could feel her face turn red.

She bowed down hurriedly, mumbled a quick farewell and turned away to walk back right to where she came from.

It was only when she was out of ear-shot when she finally dared to let out what she'd almost told him in person.

"... arsehole."

"Don't you have anything better to do?"
Tokiko let out a yelp and nearly fell off the branch she'd been crouching on. She barely managed to grab another one, calling forth chakra to help her stick to it. When she was reasonably sure that the branch would actually support her weight, she swung up and assumed a crouching position yet again.

"Prick," she answered.

The man sniggered with delight as he watched her recompose herself.

She pursed her lips in indignation. "What, and you don't have anything better to do than to spy on your little sister? Don't you have your own kids now?"

At that the man grimaced. "Please stop calling them my kids."

Tokiko smirked before clasping her hands together in a poor imitation of juvenile obedience. "Toudou-sensei, I don't want to train today, can I just watch the clouds instead? Toudou-sensei, let's go eat barbecue! Toudou-sensei, aren't we the best-est students you ever had?"

Her brother groaned. "I shouldn't have shown them to you."

"Aw, come on. They're cute. Also, you love them to death, so shoo! Go be their mother hen already!"

"Not before you tell me what you're up to." Toudou's face suddenly went serious. "I'm not kidding. You've been loitering around the hospital for the third day in a row now and it's becoming creepy. And don't try to sell this to me as ANBU stuff. If it were, you'd be wearing that creepy demon mask."

"It's a Kiso horse," Tokiko retorted. "Also, you seriously need to expand your vocabulary. Describing everything with 'creepy' isn't going to cut it when you finally become an adult one day."

And then her eyes widened.

"How do you know I've been here for three days in a row?!"

"I didn't," her brother said in a deadpan. "I thought I'd exaggerate a bit. Apparently, you're much creepier than I thought."

'Prick', she thought but didn't say out loud since she'd said it once before already.

That didn't save her from her brother's expectant gaze, though. He still wanted an answer, which kind of put her in a dilemma, since her loitering did in fact relate to ANBU stuff.

Only, she wasn't on it officially anymore.

And she had been explicitly told to forget about the entire affair.

Which she would.

After she'd made sure that CAPUCHIN was really doing alright. Nevermind that she didn't even know where to start looking, since everything concerning him was so top secret.

But she couldn't tell Toudou all that, could she now?

She was just going to have to improvise. Maybe that infamous luck of her brother's ran in the family. Or at least just enough to con him into believing a tiny little lie. A really small one. Itty-bitty
"One of my teammates got hurt really badly on the last mission. I'm just worried."

Ok, that wasn't a small one.

It would have to do.

She hoped that her face was straight enough to not tip him off.

He frowned. "Couldn't you just go visit him like a normal person then?"

"I don't want him to know that I'm worrying so much. I don't want anyone to know, in fact."

Ah, genius. That would do it, surely?

"Oho, him?" her brother asked, wagging his eyebrows suggestively. "A forbidden crush? Is that what has you hiding in a tree in front of a hospital room?"

Ugh.

Well.

At least he was distracted.

"Shut up," she hissed. She didn't even need to pretend to be annoyed.

Toudou's grin only widened. "I get it, sister dearest. Don't worry! I won't tell anybody, at least not yet. If you two do get together, I will follow up on embarrassing you as is my duty as your older brother. But only then, I promise." He blew her a kiss.

She rolled her eyes. "Go away."

He cackled as he bowed with a flourish. "Good luck, Imouto. With that strategy of yours you'll need it." And then he set off.

Tokiko let out a long-suffering sigh. Sometimes, she was glad that her brother could be such a dumbass.

Not long after she went back to watching, a couple of nurses came out, carrying one laundry basket each. She inched closer to them until she could hear them talking.

"... hit her hard. I think he was her first patient," one was saying.

"Yeah, losing a patient is never easy. But losing the first one in your own, personal care is just too cruel."

Tokiko blanched.

They couldn't be talking about CAPUCHIN, could they?

"At least he lived a long, satisfied live. How old was he? Nearly ninety, was he not?"

Oh.

Probably not, then. When she thought back to the still form on that bed, he hadn't appeared to be that old.
"Yeah, something like that. Still, he's been here for half a year now and she's been with him from the beginning."

The two women soon moved on from that topic, talking about other patients and colleagues that didn't seem to fit CAPUCHIN's profile. When they finished hanging up the last piece of laundry and prepared to return inside, Tokiko finally admitted defeat.

She would probably have to live with not knowing what had happened to the subject of her very first ANBU mission.

The nurses were still talking when they passed the tree she was sitting on, this time about a patient who needed a personalized wheelchair.

"My heart goes out to them. Quadriplegia, and at such a young age, too! There's no cure for that, not in the Elemental Nations anyway."

Tokiko sighed again when the door shut down behind the nurses.

She didn't know what that Quadri-plebs-stuff had been about, though she did gather that it was bad. Which, unfortunately, wasn't very helpful on its own.

She looked up at the building, noting the rows upon rows of windows stacked on top of each other and silently prayed for a complete recovery for the patient behind every single one of them.

Because that was really the only thing she could do for them, was it not?

The only other thing was to make sure that less people ended up there in the first place. That, she had a chance at. That she would do.

She hoped that that could be enough.
Tell Me A Story

Chapter Summary

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

Chapter Notes

It's Comeback time! Here's another brandnew chapter for your reading pleasure, thank you for staying with me and my erratic updating schedule! When I look back at the beginnings from three years ago, it seems crazy how far we've come and I'm truly grateful for this opportunity. May there be another three years coming—at least :-(

As always, beta'ed by NightsBlackRose13. Head over to their page on ffnet and show their stories some love! (Might even motivate them to update, lol.)

Once upon a time, there was a girl. She was neither particularly gifted nor did she have any overly ambitious goals in life. Her family was content to let her find her own course and the people that she surrounded herself with neither pushed her into high-flying ambitions nor did they put rocks in her path, at least not with the intent of sabotage.

She was perfectly ordinary in every aspect, living a perfectly ordinary life.

You ask who that is?

Yeah, fuck if I know.

‘Tis certainly not I.

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The Hokage’s sudden departure leaves the air in the room several degrees colder.

I’m surrounded by three adult men. One looks like he’s going to rage murder someone any second, another like he was hit by a ton of bricks and the last ... well, pleased.

At least one of us feels that way then.

If I were an observer from the outside—say, like a person watching a TV show—I’d be expecting some visual or aural effect to illustrate the frosty silence that’s currently reigning supreme. Some windy howling maybe. Or just plain ice breaking. You get the gist.

Frankly, I think I’d prefer that to whatever situation I’m in now. At least I’m feeling kinda numb, so that’s a plus.

Murderman WHO I’M SO GLAD I DID NOT END UP BECOMING THE APPRENTICE OF—woops, not so numb after all—finally has decided he has enough of us, throws one last contemptuous
look into the room and storms out through the double doors through which the Hokage and his ANBU agent—they seemed to be quite nervous, bless their soul and oh shit, me too—have left just moments ago.

That leaves me with one smug and one crushed man. Common practice tells me that I ought to pay my respects to smug man since he’s going to be my teacher from now on.

Screw common practice.

I’m not about to leave the person I consider my second father since reincarnation standing in the proverbial rain. Also, I’m still right next to him, so it just makes sense.

I reach up and, without much thinking, take his hand into mine. “Sakumo?”

He looks down at me, the look in his dark grey eyes far away and directed at me at the same time. “Etsuko-chan,” he begins but doesn’t continue.

He looks desolate.

I have a feeling that this isn’t solely about me, that there’s something happening at the back of his mind and with a sudden start, I realize that I don’t really know anything about Sakumo and his past. What happened to him? What got him shaken up so badly?

Who did he lose?

My hand clasps his tighter.

I want to help him. I wish I knew how.

Suddenly, he closes his eyes and shakes his head. It looks like he’s trying to shake off his thoughts.

When he opens his eyes again, the turmoil has vanished behind a kind smile.

“Congratulations, Etsuko-chan. I’m sure Orochimaru has a lot to teach you, he’s one of Konoha’s strongest shinobi after all. Come, you should go greet him as your new sensei.”

Before I can utter another word, he reverses the grip of our hands and leads me to stand in front of Orochimaru, who’s been leaning against the Hokage’s desk, watching and probably feeling awkward.

Or smug, I don’t know.

“Congratulations to you, too, Orochimaru-kun. She’s going to be your first student, is she not?”

Sakumo gives Orochimaru a smile as well and again I have to wonder how many of his smiles are actually shields he’s been hiding behind. It breaks my heart to think about Sakumo like this.

“Thank you, senpai,” Orochimaru says. His gaze lands on me. “I have high expectations.”

Great. That’s what I wanted to hear, of course.

Do you, by any chance, want to have this body and this pair of eyes, too, kind Sir?

“Alright,” Sakumo says after a pause in which nobody says anything since it should have been my cue to start with the please take care of me, Sensei!-stuff and yeah, well, I didn’t. In my defense, I
think there’s a frog in my throat. A really fat one.

“I’ll leave you two to it then. Congratulations, again!”

Wait what, he’s just going to leave me alone with the creepy snake?!

He tries to let go of my hand, but I’m. Not. Ready.

Sakumo looks slightly puzzled, our arms extended and my hand desperately clutching his.

*Please, don’t let go!*

My face must be showing my panic because his reaction is immediate. He crouches down and puts his second hand on top of my death grip.

“Hey,” he murmurs, his voice soft and reassuring. “You’ll be fine, ok? You’ll both be fine.”

No. He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know Orochimaru like I do.

“I’ll be around and if you want to, I can still teach you Raiton jutsu when you’re ready. That sound good to you?”

Why couldn’t it have been Sakumo?

“Have faith in the Hokage’s decision, Etsuko-chan. He’s guided by the Will of Fire and knows what’s best for all of us.”

My jaw nearly hits the ground.

Does he really believe that?

Sakumo uses my moment of confusion to work his hands free. He stands up.

“Please take good care of her Orochimaru-kun. Consider it a favor owed.”

Orochimaru nods in acknowledgement.

And with that, Sakumo gives me one last smile before turning around and walking through the door.

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The ordinary girl with the ordinary life had never felt the desperation of losing to Fate. “There are always options, always a choice,” she had said to herself. “The only thing you need to do is to be prepared enough to make that choice.”

Do I agree with her?

I used to, a long time ago.

Now, I’m not so sure anymore.

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I can feel him watching me watching the double doors fall shut. He doesn’t say anything.

When I finally gather the nerve to turn around and face him, the sudden awareness of our proximity makes my hair stand on end. He’s still leaning against the desk, his legs stretched out in front of him
and crossed over each other, the light streaming in from the windows behind him casting shadows over his face.

It’s reality.

I’ve been apprenticed to Orochimaru

And there’s nowhere to run.

“When was your last physical examination?”

The sound of his voice cuts cleanly into my thoughts, leaving no room for doubt that he’s expecting an answer. The beating of my heart pounds heavy in my ears as I comply with his request.

“Right before my graduation exam, Orochimaru-san.”

He tilts his head, his eyes still fixated on me. The intensity of his stare is burning straight through to the base of my skull.

“Aren’t you supposed to call your teacher sensei?”

I’m starting to feel dizzy.

“Hn,” he lets out when I again fail to follow up. “It matters little, I suppose.”

He uncrosses his legs and stands up. The fabric of his dark grey yukata falls back in place with a slight rustle, covering his black pants. Standing straight and close like this, I realize for the first time how tall he is.

“Come,” he says and makes for the door. I have to run to match his stride.

We leave the Hokage Tower and walk until we arrive at a complex that I know well by now. Orochimaru pays no attention to the nurse at the reception, not hesitating once as he navigates through a number of hallways until he comes to a stop in front of a door far away from the actual patient’s wings. He knocks and before I can read what’s on the nameplate, it swings open.

Everything inside me grows cold as I look up -- straight into Tsunade’s eyes.

)00(“Try to make choices that don’t harm anybody”, the girl learned. “And make sure that to harm someone is never the sole or true intent of your actions. There’s already enough suffering and hurt that nobody ever meant to afflict: such is life. Do not seek to add to that burden.”

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They are big and brown and I feel like I’m drowning.

An instant of eternity passes as we both stare at each other, paralyzed at the eye of a storm that has been brewing behind facades of sunlit playdates and the sound of children’s laughter. A storm held under by clan meetings and revelations within the seemingly familiar. A storm waiting to finally break through and sweep over the illusion of normalcy that has been worked out so painstakingly -- at a moment’s notice.

That moment is now.
And I learn that hell hath no fury like the conscience of the guilty.

*Nawaki, Regashi and I chasing after Kawaii.*

*Nawaki’s intense hero-worship for Sakumo.*

“Yes, well if you prefer we leave you lying in a ditch there’s nothing we can do, I guess. Wouldn’t want to get in the way of our mighty Uchiha.”

*Nawaki’s face when I tell him I’m an alien.*

*Nawaki coming to hug me in Akemi-chan’s hospital room.*

I can’t remember his last words to me.

Maybe there were none.

What else have I forgotten? Do I even know -- really, really know -- how he died? What his last thoughts were? His last wish?

What do I tell his sister?

How do I tell her that I misinterpreted my foreknowledge of canon events so badly that I took the most effective defense for the camp away? That I had the hubris to think that I knew what’s best for my team? That I wasn’t there, with them, with him, when we needed to be together the most?

How can she not hate me when I am the one who murdered her baby brother through the choices I failed to make?

The instant she takes a step closer, arms raised and gaze changing from wide-eyed shock to something else, I close my eyes and brace myself for the blow that is sure to come.

And why wouldn’t I? I deserve it. I deserve whatever punishment she deems fitting.

I hear the sound of air being swiftly displaced, smell a faint whiff of something strongly alcoholic--

--and then I’m tightly surrounded by body heat and soft cloth.

I open my eyes in shock, paralyzed by the unexpectedness of it all and the tight embrace Tsunade has me in.

*This--what--*

Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see her dimly illuminated blonde hair.

It’s really her.

Why? Why would she do this?

I can feel a slight tremble in her arms and hands. She moves them to cradle my head gently, and brings her face close to mine so that our foreheads touch.

Her eyes again make my entire world. I can see myself staring back from them.

I look tiny and scared.

She closes her eyes for a moment again before loosening her embrace and standing up.

I have no idea what just happened.

“What do you need?” she asks, but her question is not directed at me.

Right, Orochimaru. Sidelined again. That would’ve been funny, at another time, another place.

“She’s my student. I need her to be examined anew. Her last physical was at her graduation.”

Orochimaru’s voice sounds clipped and completely neutral. If there was any emotion touched on his end, it’s not showing. At that, I’m not surprised at least.

Tsunade nods and walks into her office, with us following suit. She signals me to sit on the exam table and fetches a few tools while Orochimaru gets comfortable leaning against the door.

Wait, does that mean--

He is going to stay?!

His gaze catches mine, confirming the lacking intent to leave the room.

I cross my arms.

Oh, I think the fuck not.

Tsunade walks up to me and raises her eyebrows when she realizes that my body language is pretty much the textbook example for ‘closing yourself off and forming a kibaku-fuda-proof barrier’. She stops walking immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

I don’t want him in here, that’s what’s wrong.

What comes out instead is a small, miserable whine and some vigorous head shaking.

Oh yeah, nailed it.

I should consider holding lectures on how to ace persuasive argumentation.

Tsunade is still waiting but when she realizes that there isn’t anything else coming, she inches closer. Slowly, eyes trained on me, checking my every reaction.

I stare right back, but don’t protest. It’s not her I have a problem with after all.

When she’s almost close enough for my knees to touch she crouches down and looks up at me. “You wanna tell me something?” she asks, voice low as not to startle me.

Yeah I do.

My eyes dart towards Orochimaru who’s watching us with an unmoving face. If it weren’t for one slightly raised eyebrow I’d say he looks uninterested.

With him watching like that, I’m suddenly afraid to tell Tsunade. He won’t like it.

Tsunade inches closer still.

“You can whisper into my ear,” she says conspiratorially. “So it’s only us that know.”
Uh.

Well.

She’s not wrong.

I lean down quickly before I can change my mind. “I don’t want Orochimaru to be here for my physical,” I whisper in a rush, only to sit up again and watch how she deals with this grand revelation.

Because now that I’ve said it out loud ... it does seem a bit silly. I know it makes sense for him to know my current physical condition, and, yet, I can’t help but feel super uncomfortable. I hope Tsunade can tell and takes pity on me.

Said woman blinks once, twice. Thrice.

She’s probably going to tell me that I’m ridiculous.

She nods, stands up and faces Orochimaru. “I need some privacy with my patient. Do you mind?”

My eyes are not the only ones that go wide and round with that request. With Orochimaru, that expression looks pretty comical.

“Did you just tell me to get out?” He furls the thin line of his eyebrows. “Out of the question. She’s my student. I need to know.”

“Nothing I can’t tell you afterwards,” Tsunade answers flippantly. “Now move, I have neither the time nor the nerve to argue with you right now.”

The face Orochimaru is making at this exact moment is priceless. He’s not angry, at least not that I can tell. He’s just -- utterly perplexed. Like he’s never had someone ask him to leave.

Or maybe it’s just that Tsunade’s never done that?

“You--you’re serious,” he says.

“Of course I am.” Tsunade makes a waving motion with her hand. “Now shoo. I have a patient to look after.”

And then she turns to me, pointedly presenting Orochimaru her back.

*And thus, the greatest villain of Narutoverse gets blown off like an annoying fly.*

Tsunade gives me a tiny little smile while she collects my jaw from the floor. My teeth come back together with a loud *klack*.

Orochimaru’s movements are stiff when he stands up.

“I’ll be waiting outside,” he says, still sounding like he got hit by a frying pan.

The noise of the door falling closed behind echoes loudly in the room.

And suddenly, we’re alone.

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The girl came to know that sometimes, the overwhelming clamor of silent murmuring revealed deeper wounds than the loudest screams ever could.

She steps back from me the moment Orochimaru has left. She has a pained expression in her eyes and cradles her chest in her arms.

“That whisper trick worked well for Nawaki, too, when he was little” she says, so softly that I almost don’t understand her. “It always made him feel better about saying things that he didn’t dare say out loud.”

Oh.

What do I say in a situation like this? What do I do?

The moment passes.

Tsunade lets out a shuddering breath and I can see her literally pulling herself together. Her arms fall loosely down her sides.

“Let’s get this started with, shall we?”

I nod. Can’t say I’m not relieved about going back to businesses.

As she starts asking me all the questions typical for a physical, my mind enters a space pleasantly devoid of any and all emotions. It’s a completely impersonal thing and I’m grateful for the clinical precision of Tsunade’s work.

I’ve never felt more safe.

That probably says some worrying things about my psyche, but I’m too busy clinging to this status to care at the moment.

Near the end of the exam, when I have taken off my shirt to allow her to listen to my lungs and stuff —and oh boy it occurs to me that I’m really glad about Orochimaru leaving the room beforehand— she finally breaks the veneer of careful neutrality.

“You know, Nawaki was highly impressed by you and your abilities. He talked a lot about you. In fact, you were all he talked about when you joined the team.”

She gives a little laugh that sounds like something delicate is breaking.

“I teased him about it. Mercilessly. I even made a bet with him. I bet that you were going to surpass him in ability by his next birthday. It was supposed to motivate him to train harder.”

Oh no.

Oh fuck.

She finishes up and signals me to put my clothes back on.

“I have the worst luck in the entirety of the Elemental Nations. My bets never win. But this time, it did in a way, didn’t it?”

I can’t move.
“I keep thinking: if I hadn’t made that stupid bet … could he be alive still? If I had joined the mission, would he have survived? If I had never found the antidote to the poison, would Team Hanako have been deployed at all?”

Silent sobs rip through her body.

“Ah, but I don’t know do I? I don’t know anything, anything at all. All this training, all the studying and I still don’t know anything that could have saved my little brother. Or my sensei’s son. Or you.”

She looks at me, her big brown eyes shining with tears.

“Instead, I’m only burdening you, a genin barely half a year out of the academy, who has lost her entire team on that day. It’s pathetic, isn’t it?”

She lets out a short joyless laugh, takes two steps away and turns her back on me. I see her shoulders heaving in silent grief.

“Go,” she says weakly, “go and tell your sensei that you're fine and that I'll write out a full report later. Tell him I'm sorry that I cannot do more right now.”

My head feels strange. There's a slight buzzing in my ears.

She …

She doesn't blame me.

I watch dazedly as she moves behind her desk and proceeds to fumble for something in what I presume are the lower drawers until she appears back up again, a bottle in one hand and a small ceramic cup. She furrows her brows when she sees me.

“You’re still here,” she says, but it doesn’t sound reproachful.

Alcohol. She’s started to look there for consolation, just like her canon counterpart.

“It’s not your fault,” I blurt out, “there’s nothing you could have done.” There’s more that I want to add--not yours, it’s mine, it’s my fault, he died believing me, they both did--but the sounds never make it past my throat.

Coward.

Her eyes are still trained on me as her lips twist into a bitter smile, her hand lifting up a cup full of liquid oblivion in a mock toast.

“Don’t I already know.”

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Time heals all wounds, they say. The ordinary girl in her ordinary life would probably find proof for that theory at some point and validate it with an experience of her own.

Unfortunately, I’m not there, yet.

If you still ask my opinion though: I think time can hurry the fuck up. For everybody’s sake.

)00(
Orochimaru is leaning against the corridor wall opposite of Tsunade’s office. He watches me like a hawk as I step out and suddenly, I feel the urge to close the door with utmost care, free of noise and as perfect as possible.

Before now, I wasn’t even aware there was a perfect way to close a door.

And naturally, as the clutz that I am, I fail miserably. Getting parts of my shirt between the door and the doorframe makes sure of that.

I spent half an eternity fumbling around until my shirt is out of the way and the door closed and by then I have died approximately two dozen deaths by embarrassment. I swallow as I finally turn around to face him.

He looks duly unimpressed at my display.

“The results?” he asks at length.

“Um,” I start. Elaborate, I know, thanks. “I’m fine. Tsunade wants me to tell you that you’ll get further details in written form.”

His eyebrows go up at that, but at first, he doesn’t say anything. He takes a couple of seconds to make a decision.

“You’re dismissed for today. I expect you tomorrow at dawn on training field 18 for further evaluations.”

Oh.

That’s not what I was anticipating. But — gift horse’s mouth and all that.

I bow down.

“Understood, Orochimaru-san,” I say, and after a little pause, “... sensei.”

He nods.

I’m off in a flash, and just before I turn around the corner, I see him standing before Tsunade’s door, hand resting on the knob and ready to push.

I wonder if she’ll let him stay.

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The sound of children’s laughter brightens up the air long before I arrive back at where I left my brothers and the Ame Trio. A few moments later, the visuals catch up -- and I can’t help but smile at the sight.

Obito and Kakashi are seated on one of the twin dogs each, having the time of their lives while chasing down Konan and Yahiko. Nagato is sitting a bit apart, watching the chase with rapt attention. I decide to join him.

“Etsuko-chan,” he greets me with a happy little smile. “You’re back!”

“Yeah, I’m sorry it took so long. Though it looks like Haruka and Misaki have everything taken care of.”
He nods enthusiastically. “They are amazing. They look like they could be Chibi’s family.”

Chibi? Who is that?

Nagato answers my question before I can ask. “Chibi was my dog.” His voice goes quiet. “He died.”

Oh. I think I remember.

The little stray dog that Nagato picked up before he met Konan and Yahiko. I think he died in the crossfire of some battle in Ame.

This world is cruel. And today, it seems even more so.

“I’m sorry for your dog.”

So inadequate.

And yet, Nagato smiles, his head tilted so the curtain of his hair falls aside, revealing his eyes. “He’s somewhere safe now. And we will always remember him.” The purple rings of his Rinnegan almost glow from the warmth within, lighting up his whole face and softening the curve of his smile.

It catches me completely off-guard --

It takes my breath away.

There is something indescribably, infinitely precious, happening here and I cannot stop looking, drinking in every detail until I forget everything else around me.

This, too, belongs to today.

“Etsuko-chan, are you alright?”

I need a few moments to realize that Nagato is talking to me, voice sounding a little uncertain on account of my sudden muteness and wide-eyed staring.

I blink a couple times and smile reassuringly.

“I’m fine, don’t worry. Just … noticed something, is all.”

He hesitates, but when he sees that I mean what I’m saying, he relaxes. “We should tell the others you’re here. They haven’t realized, yet.”

I nod but before I get up to tackle one of the kids something else occurs to me.

“Say, why are you sitting here all on your own?”

Nagato shrugs good-naturedly. “Oh, I was defeated.”

Uh.

“Umm … ok?”

“We’re playing a game in which Yahiko is an evil Lord, Konan is a princess and I was the samurai guarding the princess. Kakashi-chan and Obito-chan are Lords, too, but the good ones, with Haruka and Misaki as their companions. They wanted to save the princess.”

Ohhhhh, I loved these kind of games when I was little.
“Then Kakashi and Obito succeeded, I guess?”

Nagato grins. “Kind of. Konan said she was able to smuggle a knife into her cell, ambushed me, freed herself and has now joined up with Kakashi-chan and Obito-chan to overthrow evil Lord Yahiko.”

Oh my gawd.

*This is hilarious.*

I burst out laughing, hard enough that I have to wipe away tears.

Nagato doesn’t seem to be peeved at the fact that he was kicked out of the game in such an inglorious fashion, on the contrary; he seems rather proud of his accomplishment.

“It’s so nice to see you laugh like this, Etsuko-chan,” he says.

Oh.

I … I see. That’s why.

I have to look away as my face heats up in embarrassment, though I can’t really stop grinning. The good mood is too persistent.

I’ll have to surrender to it, I guess.

It’s easy, too. It’s easy to fall into the kids’ bright and cheerful bubble, let myself float on that island of innocence and happiness and forget all the sorrow and fear surrounding it. I know that it can only be momentarily, that it can be gone in an instant, but it’s here right now and basking in it feels good.

It feels *so* good.

Until the brightness and the warmth ebb away to make place for a soft glow and ambiguous shadows, until the Ame Trio has to leave to do Academy homework, until Kakashi gets escorted away by Haruka and Misaki when Sakumo fails to show up, Obito’s tiny hand in mine and Yashiro’s house cool and distant.

That’s when the shadows grow stronger again.

That’s when the bubble starts to crack.

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“I’m glad you could make it, Etsuko-chan,” Kagami says with an expression of genuine delight as he ushers me into his home, to the dining room.

“Of course,” I reply. “We had an agreement.”

I follow him into a room with a low table and traditional zabuton on the tatami-covered ground. Laid out are four sets of tableware, bowls and plates with food that smells absolutely heavenly and small cups currently being filled with tea by a woman with curly hair that’s separated into two ponytails and reaches below her shoulders.

Another woman is sitting at the far end of the table, her deeply purple, wavy hair making her identity unmistakable. My heart rate instantly goes up.
“Naori-san!”

She turns her head to face me.

“Etsuko-chan,” she says, a graceful smile on her lips. “It’s good to see you.”

The other woman has finished filling the tea cups and turns around, too. “Etsuko-chan, welcome! I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” Her eyes make little upturned Us as she smiles.

I instantly like her.

“Etsuko-chan,” Kagami says, “meet my daughter Sumiko, the person I wanted to introduce you to.”

Pure-thinking child.

Makes sense that someone aware of the Uchiha Curse chooses a name like this for their offspring.

I bow down. “Please take care of me, Sumiko-san.”

“Such a polite child,” Sumiko marvels. “Now sit down, all of you. There’s food to be eaten.”

Yeah, I definitely like her.

We settle down around the table and start digging in, fortunately without much decorum and formalities. I guess they’re just as hungry as I am. Ninja-ing is hard work, after all. Even when not on duty.

After today, I say especially when not on duty.

“So,” Sumiko says after we’ve had our first couple mouthfuls each, “I hear you went to the last clan meeting. Liking our circle of old and wise men yet?” She winks at me with a mischievous grin.

“Who wouldn’t,” Naori says in a deadpan.

Sumiko coughs discreetly.

But Naori is not finished. “What’s not to love about a bunch of men who are not interested in anything about you but your marriage potential until you show them your potential as a weapon of mass destruction instead?”

Uh.

Is she mad?

I mean, I’m kinda touched, but--

Kagami is part of that illustrious circle of old and wise men.

*He is sitting right there.*

I mean, I totally believe him to be more open-minded than the rest of them, what with having broken through the Curse of Hatred and yada yada. However, it’s not quite the same as being ready to accept harsh criticism like this, especially since it’s aimed at a mentality and an institution that dates back to well before the foundation of Konoha. Experience from both lives has taught me that people do not part easily with ways that have somewhat successfully carried them up to the present.
Kagami puts down his chopsticks.

“Naori,” he begins gravely, “I understand that you’re upset. And while I agree that we have our work cut out doing right by Etsuko, I ask you to be patient. Change is coming, but the clan needs to time to adjust.”

“Not fast enough,” Naori says in a dangerously low drawl.

I am quite taken aback by the sudden fierceness in her behavior. It’s so crass compared to her usual poise. Again, I have the distinct feeling that I’m missing some vital sub- and context.

“This kind of thinking is the exact same kind that got us into the Mangekyou Crisis. Harnessing power for power’s sake—we should be past it. We should have learned from our mistakes. But here we are again, ready to jump at the first opportunity to develop some kind of super weapon.”

OK, I have absolutely no idea what she’s talking about, but this sounds personal.

Does she see herself in me?

“It’s not like that,” Kagami says quietly. “And I’ll do my part to make sure it won’t ever be.”

Naori draws in a deep breath.

And is promptly interrupted by the soft chime of a door bell.

“Oh,” Sumiko says. “I’ll get the door.”

She gets up and disappears down the hall.

“Did you invite someone else?” Naori asks Kagami with a raised eyebrow.

Kagami frowns. “No.”

We hear voices coming down and shortly before the screen to the dining room slides open, Naori expression shifts into icy indifference.

“Thank you, Sumiko-chan,” a terrifyingly familiar voice says. “I can take it from here.” There’s the muted sound of a walking cane coming down on the tatami mats.

My blood freezes in my veins.

“Good evening, Naori-san. Kagami, my old friend. And you of course, Etsuko-chan.”

Kagami inclines his head.

“What brings you here, Danzou?”

I’m pretty sure that the ordinary girl would agree with me when I say that this is a situation that sucks major balls.
Let The Games Begin

Chapter Summary

Playing a new game is always exciting. Especially if nobody tells you the rules and failure means death.

Chapter Notes

... surprise? It's only been 7 months after all.

Beta'ed by NightsBlackRose13, as always. Beta, who is very talented, loves you all, as does the author.

Seriously, your comments are everything and I read them religiously.

Hiruzen's blindness was going to be Konoha's doom.

In many ways, that was already the case. Danzou saw, clear as day, that the village had taken a heavy toll in the first stages of the war—it was undeniable. But instead of putting everything they had into raising the new generation to be strong and able to take on the world, all the potential was being smothered by either endless coddling or the failure to seize it from places where they were almost certain to become a danger from within.

How could he not see the need to add to the village's firepower? The real kind, not the soft bodies that served as cannon fodder. Because that was the only thing the methods of the current system were capable of producing.

Once again Danzou realized the truth in the saying that only the things done by oneself were the things done properly.

It wasn't anything new to him. He just wished people could recognize truths like this before it was too late. Especially Hiruzen. In the meantime, there was nothing else for him to do but to move forward on his own and to try and prevent the worst from happening.

"Utsoru-kun."

His personal guard immediately appeared before him, silent as a shadow and on one knee, ready to serve at a moment's notice. A perfect picture of absolute obedience.

"Danzou-sama," the figure replied.

"Is my old friend still holding that soirée in his house?"

"Yes, Danzou-sama."

"Is the girl there?"
"Yes, together with Kagami-san's daughter and Naori-san."

Danzou nodded to himself. As much as the Uchiha preached unity, there was no denying that there were factions within the clan advocating different beliefs concerning the future. It made sense to make a move on a potential asset as long as they were young and malleable.

As for the Naori woman—he would have to see. True, she had played some kind of role during the Izanagi infighting, but hadn't appeared somewhere noteworthy ever since. He didn't expect too much trouble with her, provided he could talk some sense into Kagami.

"Fetch me my walking stick. We're going to join their little party."

I should have known watching him storm out of the Hokage's office wasn't going to be the end of it.

Every single muscle in my body is tense and close to tearing as he makes himself comfortable directly opposite of me. He's in no hurry, thanking a visibly confused Sumiko for the tea and generally behaving like he was invited. The general air has taken on a guarded vibe, too, with Naori's face looking closed-off and her watchful gaze cautiously moving between Kagami and the new guest.

She clearly doesn't like this.

Me neither.

Ugh, I hate my life.

"Danzou," Kagami says, voice sounding guarded but not unkind. "This is a surprise. It has been quite some time since we last sat together, my friend."

"Indeed," Danzou answered. "We have both been too busy to notice the time pass, I imagine."

Kagami smiled and nodded. "So what brings you here? A sudden impulse? Nostalgia? Or is it some other reason altogether?"

"Is it hard to believe that I merely wished to visit an old friend?"

Oh you bet it is, you old warmongering hawk.

Naori apparently isn't about to take his shit either. She gives a short laugh. "Forgive me for being candid, Danzou-sama, but a courtesy call is quite possibly the last thing any of us would have guessed given the fact that you are the visiting party."

For the first time, he turns to look at her. His gaze is piercing, but Naori doesn't back down and stares back, face set in a neutral expression that belies the fury I can practically feel rolling off her right now. She must be thoroughly upset to lose her composure like that. I reckon she knows Danzou and his machinations too well not to be.

Then again, she's been in an explosive mood already before he entered.

Danzou answers with a fake smile that stinks to high heaven.

"My, Naori-san," he starts, ever so pleasant, "I'm quite surprised to hear you hold me in such low regard for I cannot rightly remember us ever having held a proper conversation before."
"That is true," Naori says, her voice and face tightly controlled. "But reputations have a habit of proceeding the person they belong to, especially if said person happens to be the head and founder of the one secret ANBU subdivision operating outside of Konoha's authority."

*Don't get entangled in the roots of the tree. There's a reason why they grow in darkness.*

My stomach sinks even further upon remembering Hanako's last piece of advice for me.

This is it. Him sitting here, smack in the middle of an Uchiha family dinner. This is what she was talking about.

*Fuck.*

"Please, dear friends," Kagami pipes up. "My daughter put a lot of effort into the meal, it would be such a shame for it to go to waste."

There's steel in his voice, giving his friendly words a quality not unlike that of a warning and since everyone at this table has been raised well enough, we're all too adept at social etiquette to consider not heeding it.

We're also all perceptive enough to notice that absolutely nobody is feeling comfortable right now.

"As I was saying before you joined us, Danzou," Kagami says, "settling into the village's structures and transitioning away from the ways of life before it is still a work in progress. We should not forget that it hasn't been long for any of us and there are still people alive today that remember living in times when clans were the only structure shinobi had."

That … is not quite what we've been talking about before. At least, not explicitly.

This must be a message for both Naori and Danzou, I'm sure of it.

The latter one nods. "Very true. We should also remember that the ways from before are the reason we have made it to today. It would do us a bad service to just shrug them off. On the contrary, the responsible mind would heed them carefully, for the world around us has not changed that much from then."

Okay, he did not get the message.

"That, my friend," Kagami counters, "I have never denied. The wisdom of times past is not automatically obsolete, just as setting sight on the future is not irrelevant-as it often is, finding the balance between them is what we should aim for."

Danzou is swift to answer. "Men like you are destined to go chase that golden balance, Kagami. Ordinary men like me stay back and keep the business running steady."

Kagami laughs. "You give yourself too little credit, Danzou. You chase things at least as often as I do."

Danzou gives a thin-lipped smile that immediately invokes an urge inside me to punch it off his face. Since he hasn't stolen any of my relatives' eyes yet, I'm not in danger of damaging anything precious, so I'm seriously considering it. Also, I'm reasonably sure that there are people here willing to help me hide the evidence when the deed is done.

"Etsuko-chan seems to be having thoughts on this," Danzou suddenly says. "What do you make of this, child? Let us hear."
Oh, crap.

My throat goes dry immediately and all my mental raging comes to a screeching halt.

He was not supposed to notice. Because the moment he did, this whole thing turned into a test that I could only fail.

I show him I hate him, I'm dead.

I show him I support him, I betray myself and my clan.

I avoid a clear answer, he realizes that I think much more than I'm supposed to.

I need to find a way out of this trap. Now. Think, Etsuko, think. Something, anything!

*Men are always willing to believe two things about a woman: one, that she is weak, and two, that she finds him attractive.*

"Danzou-sama," I say, eyes demurely pointed at the floor, "I am very confused right now. I am afraid I cannot give you a satisfactory answer, as I do not understand. May I ask you to explain?"

I look up to gauge his reaction.

For a few seconds, he regards me with an intense stare and nothing else. I realize too late that he's probably getting much more from my face than I from his.

Again, crap.

He inhales. "Well, you are a child after all."

I imagine hearing the tiniest trace of disappointment in his otherwise level voice and have to be careful not to let the relief show.

*Phew, thanks Dragon Age.* Never thought I'd use advice from one of my favorite video games to deal with the ultimate asshole of one of my favorite manga—and with minimal changes, too. Funny how life plays out sometimes.

For the rest of the dinner, I thankfully manage to control my face and mouth so the whole affair thankfully never worsens from absolutely uncomfortable to flaming disaster. It is also notable that Danzou tries going for an amiable tone most of the time. Naori doesn't buy it and lets him know from time to time.

I think she simply has no fucks left to give.

I feel a little sorry for both Kagami and Sumiko when we reach a point where it's clear that none of us guests really want to stay anymore. Mostly Sumiko, since she went through so much trouble to prepare all the food.

When I tell her that shortly after deciding to leave first, she's graceful about it and laughs. "Don't you worry about that. I enjoyed cooking it and I could see that all of you enjoyed eating it, too. That's plenty for me."

We're standing in the genkan of her house, her being the only one that's seeing me off since Danzou wants to stay a little longer and Naori staunchly refuses to leave before he does. When I've put on my sandals, she hands me a small bag with a bento box with some of the food. "You should visit us again, Etsuko-chan. Maybe when it's a bit quieter."
I smile. "I'd like that." I even mean it.

"Well then," I say, about to turn around and leave, when she adds something.

"You did well tonight, Etsuko-chan. It's not going to become any easier from here on, but remember that you're not alone. And keep that strategy, you pull it off very convincingly."

I blink, a little surprised. "Thank you, Sumiko-san."

Her smile doesn't waver. "Don't be alarmed, I don't think Danzou noticed. It's a girls only secret."

I think ... I think I need to reevaluate my first impression of Sumiko.

And start counting my allies. I'll need them.

)00(  

The next day sees me bright and early on training field 18. At dawn, just as requested and seriously who does that, this is an unholy time.

Orochimaru isn't here yet which strikes me as strange, especially after his preaching about precision and exactness and I swear, if this is yet another one of those stupid tests-

Argh, fuck, this is a test, isn't it?

Sharingan activated, my vision goes uncomfortably sharp, my body immediately switching into panic mode as I scan the area for hidden chakra signatures. Left, right-straighten your fingers, fists are not going to help you-in front, behind-feet into position, be prepared to swivel around-up, down-knees unlocked, shift the center of gravity-relax-tense means stiff means slow, and slow means dead-

...  

Nothing. No purple or any other color anywhere.

...  

It doesn't calm my nerves at all.

For a couple more moments, I remain on high alert, every fiber of my being tensed to the maximum, breath shallow and slightly too fast. It's not a state I can stay in for a prolonged time, there are black spots at the edge of my vision already because of fucking course I didn't have any breakfast before coming here and I should know better by now but who in all honesty can digest anything taken in that early?!

Something hisses right by my feet and I scream.

)00(  

Snakes are fascinating creatures. Did you know, for example, that the neck of a snake is actually really short? The first few vertebrae behind the head generally do not have ribs on them, and would therefore count as a neck. Ah, you might say, so they're basically all tail? Well, friend, prepare yourself: Their tails are actually pretty small too. At the bottom of their ribs they have their cloaca and anything below that is the tail. Which means that they are mostly torso.

Mind blowing, right?
I have another one: did you know that snakes' hearts move around in their bodies? That's because they lack diaphragms, which means their heart's position in the body can adjust somewhat. This usually happens so it doesn't get damaged when the the snake is ingesting large prey. Yes, they make room for dessert quite literally.

As you can see, I have quite a penchant for compelling and delightful trivia about the most random things. I like to think that that's one of the main reasons for my open-mindedness and ability to be easily awed which in turn I like to think of as pretty positive traits.

But, positive traits or no, the fact remains that being abstractly fascinated with the sheer possibilities biology and other natural sciences present does not automatically mean that the factual manifestations of precisely those possibilities invoke a purely enthusiastic bodily reaction upon encountering.

In more precise words: a whole fucking snake launching itself at me from perceived nowhere at full speed is fucking horrifying.

So, yes I scream.

Loudly.

Piercingly.

For more seconds than either necessary or smart.

I never claimed my reactions to unexpected situations to be appropriate.

Upon my screeching, the snake backs away a little, looking much more startled than I admit I ever imagined a snake could. It prompts me to swallow my second screech and watch, frozen stiff and unsure what to think or do.

The snake catches itself first. "Thisss must be a missssstake." It slithers a little closer and *uhhh can you not?" Orochimaru-ssama sent me to ssssee his apprentisssss, not ssssome wailing child."

Oh wow, way to get insulting within the first twenty words of a conversation.

"You could have not snuck up on me," I shoot back, sorely offended. "Also, I expected Orochimaru himself, not his summons."

"Sssso you are his apprentisss?" It doesn't look very impressed. "He ssssent me to tell you that he will meet you on training ground forty-four."

I blink.

Forty-four.

That's the Forest of Death.

*I fucking hate everything.*

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The snake's name is Agatami and weren't it for the fact that they're leading me to certain death, I'd say that they were of quite an agreeable nature. They're mostly quiet, the few glimpses of sass from before hidden behind a refined veneer of shining white-and-red-scales and fluid movements. Once I've gotten over the surprise and fear I freely admit, they're actually really beautiful.
I'm also really thankful that they don't comment any further on my embarrassing behavior, so there's that.

Orochimaru's figure stands tall in front of one of the gates. He's wearing a black yukata with a veridian haori casually thrown over and of course it looks fabulous. The greatest villains always have the best fashion sense.

Agatami heads directly for him and doesn't stop as they reach his feet. No, they wind their way straight up his leg and settle comfortably on his thigh. They're longer than they appeared to be, slithering along on the ground.

"Orochimaru-ssama, I brought the chhhhild."

"I can see that," Orochimaru says. "You're dismissed."

There's a small pause in which I'm 99% sure that Agatami is going to get offended because that was just plain rude of Orochimaru, not even uttering a single word of thanks, but the moment passes and the snake disappears in a puff of smoke.

Maybe I should say something about that?

Orochimaru's whole attention suddenly shifts to me, his stare piercing straight through to every single insecurity I ever had and probably will have.

Err, no, some other time. Maybe.

Or I'll just make sure to thank the snakes in his stead from now on. Yeah. Rebellion from the shadows. Good stuff.

"I need to assess the full extent of your fighting abilities," he says. "Are you familiar with the specifics of Training Ground Forty-four?"

"Um yeah, nice to meet you too I guess. I swallowed. "Hanako-sensei took my team and I here once. Not for long, though, and we didn't meet anything too dangerous."

Now that I think about it, it really wasn't as scary as I'd imagined. I mean, I didn't even ramble about it. But maybe that was more due to the circumstance that we mostly stayed in one place and the fact that we were not hunting slash being hunted by other teams.


Yay, such good news.

"Follow me."

)00(

Orochimaru leads me to a clearing half the size of a football field. It's surrounded by dense forest, the grassy surface mostly flat and occasionally broken up by mounds of black soil, with those mounds appearing more frequently in the center. It would appear bizarrely quaint, if it wasn't for the lack of anything but grass. So no, I don't trust it.

We come to a halt at the edge of it, my teacher dearest not saying anything to me. I mean, who needs explanations about anything, right? Instead he crouches down and puts his hands on the ground. Before I can ask what he's doing, I feel a sudden pulse go through the ground, leaving the air
vibrating and my legs shaking in the wake of it.

I have such. A bad. *Feeling*. About this.

Orochimaru stands up again.

"You will stay here until I allow you to leave," he says. "In the middle of the field is a pouch with tools and supplies that you are allowed to use to survive."

Oh great, we're talking about surviving here. Cool. I'm the ultimate survivor. I'm so surviv-ish that I come back from the dead. Which actually means that I am really fucking bad at it, now that I think about it.

A rumble goes through the ground.

And another.

I could swear that right there, on the other side, the ground is actually _moving_.

His lips curl into a cruel smile. "I recommend not failing to do so."

And then he shunshins away, leaving me to face the unknown. Alone.

This is not optimal.

My first idea is to run back to the edge of the clearing, into the beginnings of the thicker parts of the forest, climb a tree and observe what is going on with this particular patch of land before deciding on a strategy to stay alive. My legs are already moving in a sprint, my eyes fixated on the first tree I can see, and together with the thought that this seems a bit too easy a plan to really work, my head hits something _hard_-a flash of purple-whoawhattthefuck-

Butt meets ground.

Ow.

For a couple seconds I'm not sure if it's the ground that's rumbling or my head, but as soon as the fuzzy streaks disappear from my vision, a bloodcurdling realization creeps up my spine:

The Trees are still quite far off and I didn't get thrown back hard enough to cover that distance. In between, there's only black soil and air.

Which means that there is nothing in front of me I could have run against.

Meanwhile, the rumbling in the ground has reached an intensity that has the ground shaking. I can literally hear something crunching its way underneath my feet and _crap I need to get outta here fast_

Hands stretched out in front of me and moving considerably slower, I try another go at the climbing-tree-plan. Again I don't get far though, because there most definitely is some kind of resistance mid-air.

My pulse shoots up into staggering heights as I mutter a stream of profanities under my breath, my fingers prodding all over that invisible surface in a desperate attempt to find a weakness to whatever it is and finding none, of course.

A last ditch attempt has me sending chakra into it which does elicit a reaction-the purple flash makes a comeback, accompanied by a straight line of quickly fading kanji on the ground.
Fuuinjutsu.

Shit.

The ground's shaking grows intensely violent at a rapid pace and with it a sound like something ancient rumbling from an abyss, reaching me from behind.

No time left to run.

I turn around.

And am just in time to see a giant fucking worm erupt from the earth, splitting it apart.

End Notes

Beta'ed by the amazing NightsBlackRose13. You can find their stories over at ff.net

I have a tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!