Addendum
by shanatical

Summary

Or, 'How I Learned to Stress Out and Ruin Everything': a gripping tale of tears, danger, tender hearts and derring-do, in which I take on a world that isn't as made-up as I thought it was and my choices really, really matter.

[A self-insertion story that has been a long time coming but was also inspired in no small part by YourIdiotWriter's SATOKO and Tozette's Day One.]
It’s funny, almost, how much of our lives are outlined and maintained by our routines.

Get up, eat, shower, brush your teeth, start the day. Go to class, eat, go to work, eat, study, relax, sleep. Repeat. It can make the days blur together, and make entire weeks slip by in the blink of an eye. And for me, that was a pretty comfortable situation, if a little on the dull side. Occasionally I switched things up—I’d go out with friends, or write, or just laze around—but on the whole I plodded along in my own little groove, content and ultimately unremarkable.

That probably explains a lot about how I reacted when I first realized what had happened.

I had always been a quiet type, the girl who didn’t stray too far from the pack and disliked making a scene. So, when I blinked out of an all-nighter driven doze to find a tanned, scarred man smiling down at me, I completely locked down and stared at him.

“Impressive as ever, Tsukimi-kun,” the man said warmly, handing me something. I took it without really seeing it, feeling thin fabric and cold metal as I reflexively nodded in acknowledgement.

“Congratulations. You’re officially a Genin.”

What.

My expression went even blanker at that, but not quite as blank as my mind did. The man—Iruka a faint voice in the back of my mind gibbered—was still talking, reciting something that sounded patriotic and proud that I completely glossed over. I came back to myself when he ripped three conjoined sheets off of a small, official-looking pad. He scribbled a time and a series of numbers into blocked off fields, then slid both the pen and what I belatedly recognized as carbon paper across the table he was seated at.

By some grace, my new body seemed to be just as inclined towards routines as the old one, because the pen was in my hand and moving mechanically across the remaining required fields before I had much time to panic. I mean, I still did, but it was a broad panic rather than a specific one.

“All right,” Iruka nodded, tearing off the top sheet to file away in a manila folder and handing the remaining two to me. “This is your appointment for your registration photograph at the Tower tomorrow. We’ll meet back here on Tuesday for team assignments, at nine sharp.”

I fingered the thin papers for a moment, finally letting other details filter in—namely the fact that there was another person in the room. At first glance, aside from the pale gray hair, he seemed like a laid-back person, shooting me a friendly grin.

“Congrats,” Mizuki told me with real warmth. “We know how hard you’ve worked for this, Rookie of the Year.”

“Hey, you know we aren’t supposed to talk about the results this early,” Iruka chided, but he didn’t look very upset.

“It’s not exactly groundbreaking news. She knows she’s good,” Mizuki bantered back easily, as though he didn’t have a plan in the works to manipulate a twelve year old into committing larceny and treason as they spoke.
I felt my breath begin to get shorter and abruptly bowed—probably too deeply, since I could feel the familiar uncomfortable tingle that came on the heels of breaking some sort of sequence—to both of them.

“Thank you,” I said, toneless because the only other option was strangled hysteria. “For everything.” I straightened up and noticed that they both seemed a little dumbstruck, and finally gave into my baser instincts and fled. My pace was slow and graceful, but it was what it was.

There was a side door at the back of the room that led to a hallway, which opened up into a courtyard filled with families and jubilant little soldiers-to-be. I had exactly fifteen second of horrifying uncertainty as to whether anybody was waiting on me, expecting their daughter, until I found my answer.

“Oh!” A voice cut across the hustle and bustle, a bit too sharp to properly be called ‘sweet’. “Tsukimi-chan made it!”

I glanced in that direction and found myself looking at a blonde girl—undeniably Yamanaka Ino, that same little voice whimpered—who was looking at me with a dreamy sort of look that made my stomach knot up in instinctive horror, my subconscious finally reaching understanding even as my mind rebelled. I started walking again, this time lengthening my strides as I tried valiantly to ignore the interested stares I was garnering.

Given that there was a wide, high collar I was hiding most of my face behind, it was frustratingly difficult to run away from the truth dogging at my heels. I left the school grounds and hit the streets, letting my feet take me where they would while I struggled with my own fragile world-view.

*Rookie of the Year.*

That meant I was the top of the class. That meant, from what I remembered, I was going to be sorted with the worst student as a teammate, and then a third would be our buffer, probably making up for the former’s worst deficiency.

*A deadlast and a bookworm.*

Oh God. Oh God. I sucked in a breath as I finally drew to a stop and looked around, somehow not even surprised at the fact that I was standing in front of a large, imposing gate in an unsettlingly quiet area, mostly bereft of shops. I let my eyes trail resignedly up to the insignia at the top, a faded fan in red and white.

I stepped into the Uchiha District, the beginnings of a hysterical giggle tickling at the back of my throat.

As it turned out, ‘Uchiha Tsukimi’ lived in a small but relatively lavish two-story townhouse down the street from the Main House she had probably lived in with her parents. The bottom floor had a sitting room, a bathroom with a large, covered tub, a kitchen and a tiny little laundry room.

The first room I found after going up the stairs was an extra room filled with weaponry.

*Literally* filled with weaponry. There were actual boxes of kunai and shuriken, with larger and more specialized weapons mounted on the walls. I left that room behind, after a few moments of numb
staring, to explore the second floor. There was another bathroom, this one only sporting a toilet, shower, and sink, and a large master bedroom with a balcony.

It was dismally familiar: one wall was entirely glass, leading out to a balcony, and the opposite one sported several wall scrolls and the clan insignia. The bed was queen-sized, with a neutral blue coverlet and three thick pillows. There was a low table towards the sliding glass doors, a TV, and several low, long cabinets filled with books and folders.

Shunted off to one corner was a full-length mirror, which was... Well, it was certainly *something.*

It gave me my first glimpse of Uchiha Tsukimi. She—I?—was pale and dressed in a particularly familiar and incredibly upsetting fashion. There were the arm-guards, the blue shirt, and the only real difference in design, from the collar down, was the fact that I was wearing white capris pants rather than shorts. I regarded my new self for a moment, then reluctantly went to go draw the curtains and shuck off the baggy shirt, idly confirming that there was a fan emblazoned on the back.

I tossed it onto the bed, and turned back to the mirror with my hands on my hips. My first thought, looking at the willowy, pale preteen staring back at me, was that I was *disgustingly* cute. I had large doe-eyes, thick, dark lashes, and shapely, pale pink lips. My bust was—understandably—much smaller than I was used to, now little more than a modest curve in the weird, strappy sports-bra I had been wearing, and my stomach was flat with a surprising amount of definition for a twelve year old. My arms were too, and probably my legs as well, under those capris.

My second thought was, 'Thank God I don’t have his hairstyle, too.'

My hands drifted up into the long, dark mane I now sported. I had bangs, but the rest of it fell to the small of my back. It was thick with a strange, pleasant volume; I’d almost call it fluffy, except it slid silkily through my fingers when I combed through. As a person who had grown up with curly hair, this was a bittersweet victory.

Ino’s hair had been long as well, I remembered, and then dropped that line of thought like a hot stone because I wasn’t ready to contemplate that aspect of my situation just yet. There was so much more to worry about before even *touching* that particular can of worms.

I sighed and cupped my face in my hands, leaning in as I pinched and tugged at my cheeks, testing out different expressions. I tried on a snarl, a glower, a cold look, even an affronted pout, but it was to no avail. I was still offensively attractive. I didn’t even want to know what I might look like with a pleasant smile; my twenty-two year old ego was battered enough by how much this body outclassed my last one already. I sat down on the floor in front of the mirror, stared down at my bare, pale toes, and tried to stay calm.

My breath grew ragged and my throat tightened.

As ironic twists of fate went, sticking a crybaby wannabe psychologist in the shoes of a vengeance-driven child with half the weight of the world on their shoulders had to be pretty far up the list. I finally caved and gave in to the urge that had been growing stronger by the minute: I hugged my ankles and let myself sob, helplessly. When I finally calmed down, hiccupping and sniffling, I glanced up and found a rosy-cheeked, glistening-eyed picture of misery peering back, and let out a watery growl of frustration.

I even looked cute after crying like a bitch. In what world was that fair?

I pulled a (cute) face at the mirror and dragged myself back to my feet, shuffling off to the bathroom to get a cold, damp washcloth, which I held over my eyes for a moment while I forcefully prodded
my sluggish, terrified brain back into motion. This was an arguably real, arguably inescapable situation. Fine. I was locked into a career where I would be expected to lie, cheat, steal, kill, and sabotage. Not fine at all, but I could probably fake it for a while until I came up with some way to deal with all of… that.

I let the washcloth slide down my face and leaned against the doorway of ‘my’ bedroom, idly staring at the discarded shirt I had left there. I raked back my bangs, and huffed out a small sigh, coming to my first real decision.

There was no way in hell I was going to live my life wearing a glorified cone of shame, historical and cultural relevance be damned. My stomach gave a small growl around the same time, and reminded me that I should probably figure out where the hell I kept my money. I began nosing my way around the room, checking my pockets, the drawers and my closet first.

I found a thin black wallet tucked into a hidden pocket in my kunai holster, filled with several bills of varying denominations. The closet at least confirmed that I did not, in fact, own any normal shirts or even dresses that weren’t a somber black number I vaguely recalled as being funeral-fare.

The drawers yielded underclothes and medical supplies, as well as even more books and folders that turned out to be past textbooks and Academy assignments which I idly skimmed. I had apparently inherited the body of the world’s most organized hoarder, and I fully intended to binge read all of it once I had solved my financial and fashion crises, respectively.

I checked a couple more of the books stacked in the side-cubby of the desk near the closet, and finally found what I was looking for. The thick *Ikebana of the Great Nations, Vol. III* had a secret compartment cut into the pages, filled with several rectangular white envelopes addressed to Tsukimi, most with a “10,000” written in the bottom corner in pencil except for the top one, which had no number and was still sealed. I apparently either did not believe in banks, since I assumed this was the savings built up from whatever stipend I received from the village, or I was waiting to open an account for some reason.

I took a deep breath, opened the top envelope, stuffed the contents into my wallet, and went to go pull my stupid shirt back on. I checked the refrigerator on the way out, and was satisfied that I had enough groceries to get me through the next few days.

I guessed that more shinobi-centric shops would naturally gather somewhere in the general region of the Hokage’s Tower and set off in that general direction. If nothing else, it would be good practice for tomorrow, since I had an appointment to keep. Given how eerily, analtyically tidy the house was, I probably had a reputation for being faultlessly punctual as well.

I felt my stomach drop as I gradually moved back toward more populated streets, filled with people beginning to head home after work or heading out to take over the next shifts. It was still light out, and I realized I should probably figure out what the date was at some point or another, since it hadn’t been written on my little carbon-paper certificate. I mused on that as I weaved through the moderate crowds, passing grocery stores and food carts.

Eventually, I caught sight of a promising display window down a side street a few north of the Tower and ducked in, noting the various feminine mannequins posed around the shop. Some of the styles seemed like something—understandably enough—right out of a manga, but by and large most of what I saw on the racks seemed similar to what I might have found in an active-wear section.

There was a shop assistant who greeted me immediately, zeroing in on the telltale shirt that obviously marked me out.

Her nametag dubbed her ‘Chika,’ and I very carefully tried not to focus on how I could read the characters so naturally. I had tried that when pawing through the books, and had gotten a splitting headache and a flash of double vision for my trouble.

“I need a new outfit,” I said, completely unnecessarily, and then scrambled to B.S. something else so that it sounded as though I had merely been pausing for effect. “Wearing clan clothes around the village is one thing, but now that I’m a Genin…” I had taken the forehead protector along with me, tying it loosely around the base of my collar.

I was talking entirely out of my ass, but Chika merely nodded along understandingly. “Very forward-thinking of you,” she praised. “Do you have an idea about what you’re looking for?”

I informed her, short but civil, that I wanted to browse before making any decisions. The door opened behind me with a soft chime, heralding the arrival of two older women, also sporting forehead protectors on their arm and thigh respectively, and I was politely abandoned to poke around as I wished.

I flipped through the racks, trying to ignore the speculative looks I could somehow feel occasionally raking over my back. I drifted around, picking up and discarding different combinations as I went, until I finally had something I was satisfied with and was ushered into one of the changing rooms at the back of the shop.

One of the first things I had selected was what appeared to be a thin black camisole. It was tighter than it looked, with some mesh-like under-armor with built-in support between two layers of thin black fabric. It was snug but flexible, and I paired it with a long, cream-colored tank top made of something that looked like cotton but was surprisingly slick to the touch, probably as a precautionary measure during close-quarter fighting or some equally grim rationale. I decided to trade out the capris for black stirrup-style leggings and dark shorts nearly hidden by the hem of the tank. I studied myself, decided I was going to ditch the arm warmers, and tossed a dark overshirt with large, elbow-length sleeves open on top.

I was almost satisfied, but as I drank in my reflection, my eyes kept drifting to that cute, doll-like face and the dainty white column of my throat. I rummaged through the accessory section, past holsters and stiletto daggers disguised as bejeweled hairpins, until, against all odds, I found what appeared to be a rack of infinity scarves. They were probably used as makeshift slings or nooses or something to that pragmatic, macabre tune, but I wasn’t going to think too deeply on it. I selected one in the same basic shade of cream as the tank top and snatched up a few copies of the final outfit before dumping them at the register.

I walked out a little shell-shocked and with a lot less in my wallet, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that it was ultimately for a good cause. I got an itemized receipt with the date on it, as an added bonus, so I had my first frame of reference for pricing around here, too.

I wandered back to the Uchiha District around the time the streetlights came on, and only felt a little silly as I ran into the townhouse and bolted the door behind me with a full-body shudder. I refused to feel silly about turning on all of the lights. It was a damn creepy literal ghost town out there, and I was inarguably a wuss.

I hung up my new clothes, guilted into neatness by the sheer oppressive sense of order that oozed from every corner of the house, and carted a bunch of the old Academy work and books down to the kitchen as I got ready to make myself a late dinner.
I had some studying to do.

The next morning, I paused halfway through the history of the Third Shinobi War to shower and change into a fresh high-collared shirt, though I elected to wear the leggings-and-shorts combo. I had already wrapped on my holster and fastened my weapons pouch before I noticed what I was doing, so it took relatively little time to get ready. I toweled off my hair and properly tied my forehead protector in the traditional place.

I had a plan.

Well, that might be giving me more credit than I really deserved. I figured that official photos had a greater chance of being leaked or used for Bingo Books—I vaguely remembered some sort of detailed program for VIPs during the Chuunin Exam, too—so it was probably for the best if I looked like an average Uchiha was expected to.

It wasn’t exactly a stroke of genius misdirection, but I figured I would probably need every little edge I could get, being the alleged ‘last’ Uchiha. I didn’t think too deeply on that subject however, because that way lays madness. And Orochimaru. God, I was not ready to even consider thinking about Orochimaru yet, let alone any of the other dangers looming ahead.

“Ready?”

I blinked, snapping out of my anxious musings to look at the antiquated camera. I hadn’t slept at all, so I didn’t really have to force the cool glare I leveled at the lens. With one flash it was over, and I was ushered out to hand my carbon-paper off to the Third Hokage himself.

I had seen the faces carved into the mountain, but I had somehow half-expected him to appear to be a kindly, unassuming old man, like my grandfather or the elderly chemistry teacher I had during high school.

I was entirely wrong.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was broad-shouldered and stately. His hair may have been white and his tanned skin dotted with what appeared to be liver spots, but altogether he had a harsh, hawkish face only somewhat softened by the laugh-lines creasing it into a proud, grandfatherly expression. He stamped my paper, tore off the top sheet, and handed back the last one, nodding to me with solemnity.

“Congratulations, Tsukimi-chan. You worked hard for this.” he said, and I struggled not to be surprised at how deep and rasping his voice was. Then I struggled not to feel self-conscious. Had the boy originally meant to be standing here been congratulated over and over like this? Or was it different, because I was a girl.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama,” I managed to say smoothly, letting a habit I never formed take over and guide me through a proper bow.

Luckily, that seemed to be enough, and I was sent off to another desk to collect a thick envelope of registration paperwork, which the Chuunin—a fresh-faced brunette kunoichi—walked me through in the brisk, practiced fashion of somebody who had been saying the same thing over and over again all
day. It covered the basic policy for submitting mission reports, which I had re-learned how to write sometime around midnight, how to submit a request for a training ground, which I didn’t need because my District was full of empty lots and old training areas, and so on and so forth.

As an aside, I found out that I would get a hefty bonus package for opening up a bank account as a shinobi, rather than a student, and decided to make that my next errand for the day after I stopped to drop the information packet off at ‘home’.

After all, I thought dismally, it was possible—unlikely, but distinctly possible—that I might end up failed by Kakashi come Tuesday.

Chapter End Notes

As an added bonus, feel free to imagine Tsukimi periodically staring at her super-comfy looking bed with tragic longing each time she drifts upstairs to get more books to read during the night.
In which I accidentally start a riot

Chapter Summary

Despite the title, our brave little toaster doesn’t do all that bad for herself for most of this chapter. ...Most of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day I had the life of Uchiha Tsukimi and the position of Genin thrust upon me had been a Saturday—October 12th, to be specific.

When I got back from the bank early Sunday evening, I had more or less gotten through the basics in the textbooks and had found that by and large it felt more like ‘refreshing’ old information rather than actually learning anything new. This was, I implicitly understood, complete bullshit. So much so that I was entirely willing to blame it on my new physiology; in the original story, the boy who should have been living this life had unlocked his Sharingan the night his family was killed, but hadn’t been able to consciously repeat the feat for more than half a decade.

If there was some subconscious use of Magical Eye Bullshit going on, it made things a little less insane, though the trials looming ahead of me were still pretty damn daunting.

At the very least, that sort of phenomenon would help explain how dishearteningly easy it was for me to use chakra. The tiny, giddy, childish part of my brain that was actually beginning to get a little excited about my current situation—despite the pervasive, existential terror I had been running on for the past twenty-four hours—was almost disheartened.

From what I had read and written during my years as a Naruto fan, I had expected… more. I had expected to need to meditate, to dig in deep; to wrestle with my core in order to use an energy that my every logical notion screamed shouldn’t exist. Instead, it came when called, in the exact amounts I needed as I walked myself through the leaf exercise and practiced the different hand seals, which felt natural despite how alien the shapes should have been to me. I remembered that girls had a natural tendency towards better chakra control as well, and I wondered if that contributed to it at all. I could and would use any advantage I could get, at this point.

When I finally mustered up the courage to try the three basic jutsu ‘I’ had apparently been tested on before my arrival, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I had only concentrated the barest amount on what technique I wanted to do and began to say the name, and my hands quickly slammed through the signs as quickly as if I was playing some old, familiar clapping-game like Miss Mary Mack. On the tail end of that I felt a full-body tingle and then my vision was disrupted with smoke.

When it cleared, there were two copies of me, each sporting an expression of adorable disconcertion. I promptly stuck my hand through the chest of the one on my right and she—it?— promptly dispersed. I hadn’t felt a thing, even as the resultant smoke curled and wafted through my fingers. I turned to the one on my left with a speculative look that she mirrored perfectly, and recalled the instructions that were neatly outlined in the notes I had excavated from some time earlier this year.
After a bit of concentration, that one puffed out of existence as well.

I was still very, very wary about how straightforward that had been, so I tested out the Replacement Jutsu—and figured out just how far away I could get at any one time—and then the Transformation Jutsu, moving to a nearby pond to idly study the reflection of Iruka peering back. The water itself niggled at me as I disrupted the technique and returned to my smaller, arguably natural form. After a bit of frustrated brain-wracking, I recalled that there was a Fire Release Technique I was supposed to know, out of some sort of Uchiha coming-of-age tradition.

“Fireball Jutsu,” tumbled out of my mouth when I concentrated, followed by a long stream of flame that twisted out over the water.

It was probably a very majestic scene from the outside, fire dancing out over the water as the sun finally sank beneath the horizon. Internally, however, I rapidly remembered that I had been supposed to suck in as much air as possible before triggering the technique, and my small supply was depleting rapidly.

Also, I had no idea how to stop spitting fire.

Ultimately, my body took precedence; when there was no more air the fire dwindled and after a surprising delay finally cut off, leaving me to drop like a puppet with its strings cut. I wheezed pathetically against the warm wood of the dock my cheek was pressed against, and tasted bile. I felt, all at once, achy and light-headed, as though my limbs had been filled with lead and my senses dampened with cotton.

According to the notes, these were fairly consistent signs of chakra exhaustion. I had probably burned—no pun intended—through what little was left in my reserves when I ran out of air. Coupled with my experimentation earlier, it made sense that I hit my limit.

I let out a pathetic whimper and slowly pulled myself to my knees, crawling off of the dock and up the grassy little hill beyond. I got to my feet once I hit the road beyond, which my legs tried to rebel against, and shakily made my way back to my house. Truth be told, the only reason I made it back in any definition of good time was because dusk had already begun to fade away and the District gave me the heebie-jeebies after dark.

I locked the door behind me and stumbled up the stairs, finally flopping facedown on the bed after half-heartedly setting an alarm.

The next morning I found, to my horror, that I was a light sleeper. Furthermore, while I no longer felt the muffled, smothering withdrawal of chakra deprivation, I still felt thoroughly exhausted when the soft chiming of my little silver clock jolted me awake as easily as a klaxon. I muffled a whine against the covers but reluctantly rolled off.

I felt stiff but not too bad, which was a very good thing because I still needed to figure out where I stood in regards to taijutsu. Chakra was all well and good, but if I couldn’t handle a physical altercation then there was literally no way I’d be able to survive outside of Konoha, assuming I could even get past Kakashi’s test on ninjutsu and Hallmark sentiments alone.

I was still not feeling very safe about assuming anything, at the moment.
One step at a time, I encouraged myself bracingly. One hope, then another. Who knows where—I stopped, halfway down the stairs, and sighed.

“No Disney montages,” I told the empty house firmly. I had to set boundaries, now, or I’d be shamelessly humming *I'll Make a Man Out of You* for the rest of the day. While it would probably do wonders for my morale, I couldn’t afford to fall into that sort of comforting habit; not when I was on the cusp of being under the purview of one of the higher-level shinobi of the village. It would be a miracle if he didn’t notice *something* was off about me, but sudden bursts of songs that most likely had no counterparts in this world were just a bad idea all around.

I finished going down the stairs, resolve set, and picked through my rapidly dwindling supply of food for a semi-decent breakfast. I would probably need to go out again either tomorrow or the day after, I realized as I bit into an apple. And that meant I either needed to figure out where I usually shopped—I probably had a meticulously organized shoebox full of receipts, somewhere—or pick a restaurant.

Before that, though, there were more books I wanted to read. I knew the basics, now, but there were all sorts of details I wanted to know more about, and I probably should make sure I had the same dexterity with setting and disarming traps as I did with wrapping my hands or fastening my holster into place.

I paused at that thought, tossing my core down the garbage disposal, and bit back another sigh.

For the sake of ensuring I survived as long as possible in this impossible world, I would have to temporarily kick my sense of caution to the curb.

The training ground closest to the townhouse was presumably the one that Tsukimi habitually used, since it seemed to be in a tidier state than any of the others I had seen when I originally poked my way around the District looking for my new ‘home’. I selected one of the more sturdy-looking poles jutting up from the ground, with the freshest coat of paint outlining the bull’s-eye.

However, when I drew a kunai, I first spent a moment running through the different ways I could grip the blade and finding which felt comfortable. That was the great thing about hands, in this body and others; the line between familiar and not was as clear as day. Luckily enough—for a given definition of ‘lucky’ anyways—my aim and throwing skills seemed to be worthy of the ‘Rookie of the Year’ title, even if I had no memory of doing anything to earn them.

The most cumbersome part of *that* was just prying my weapons back out again. I had pessimistically lowballed my absolute range and backed up a few feet between lobbing my kunai and shuriken at the post, so some of those suckers were lodged in *deep*. I was, I suspected, much stronger than a skinny little girl ought to be.

With that in mind, I was at first at a loss as to how to test my taijutsu skills without some sort of partner.
After a bit of deliberation, I figured I might as well test my physical limits, and backtracked to the townhouse to pick up a few of the notebooks outlining warm-ups, cool-downs, and some of the basic forms for the style that the Academy taught. After a glance at the clock in the kitchen, I threw together a sandwich with the last of my bread, pulled a water bottle down from one of the cupboards and filled it, and wrapped it all up before setting out once more.

There was a bench outside the Main House’s walls where I stowed my little lunch and stack of cheat-sheets, before I started to limber up. I had a small stopwatch/timer gadget in my shuriken pouch, and I decided to use it to see how long it took me to do a lap around the District, after exploring my newfound flexibility.

The answer? Distressingly little time. I had not been a start athlete, originally, so the sheer ease I covered the distance with was… Well. ‘Bittersweet’ didn’t even begin to cover it. It meant good things for my current life-expectancy, but the disparity between this still-growing body and my previous, fully-grown body stung, nevertheless.

I rubbed my face and slowly sipped at my water.

The real kicker was, I barely felt winded after a few of the cool-down exercises outlined in the notebooks. I mean, my limbs still more or less felt as stiff and sluggish as they had when I first got up that morning, but it was nothing compared to the jelly-legged hell I had been in yesterday night on the dock.

I plopped myself onto the bench and ate my sandwich without really tasting it, idly paging through the taijutsu tips one more time. Once I was done I stretched again, and began wandering the District once more.

I was understandably unfamiliar with how advanced gym equipment might be, but there was one stand-by I knew had to be hanging around somewhere. After a few awkward failures—a locked door I ‘remembered’ how to pick after a few moments of fruitless jiggling, what turned out to be an abandoned tearoom, and an old daycare—I finally found what I took to be a dojo set aside for the Military Police, as evidenced by the fan-and-shuriken emblem above the doorway. When I tried the switch, the lights flickered but eventually came on.

Inside, gratifyingly, were several rooms with mats, padded pillars, and my main target: punching bags.

There was nothing I could do about the faint layer of dust covering the room, not on the tight time schedule I was on right now, but I was glad I thought to wear one of the standard Uchiha outfits today, rather than my new clothes. I had many misgivings about the strange, high collar, but it was passable enough as a mask against the dust for the time being.

Still, I could do without the suffocating, stilted silence pervading the room. I still had no earthly idea what possessed somebody to allow a child—even a child soldier-in-training—to like in this creepy, creepy place on her own. Probably burgeoning Uchiha stubbornness, I concluded after a moment of disgruntled contemplation.

After that little moment of speculation, I promptly broke that eerie quiet by slamming my fist into the tough leather of the bag.

It actually moved about half a foot—I had selected one of the lighter bags after testing a few of them—and I automatically slipped back to account for the backswing. My arms crossed protectively in front of me and I pivoted on one foot, just as thoughtlessly as I had conjured fire and delivered a follow-up kick to the bag.
Okay, I thought, as my body continued to shift and respond with minimal input from me. *Still total bullshit. Good to know.* I had no way of being certain how I might fare in attacking an actual, sentient opponent, but it seemed like I wouldn’t have much difficulty defending.

…well.

I wouldn’t have any more difficulty defending myself than a Rookie of the Year *Genin* would. Given the sheer level of some of the opponents I might have to face in the near future, that wasn’t saying much. Just the *thought* of the Wave mission, of Haku’s countless needles zooming in from every direction, sliding into my skin, my arms, my neck—

The old, stiff leather finally gave up the ghost and split beneath my palm, unable to take the strain it once could have after so long without proper maintenance. Sand sputtered out, hissing out onto the floor even as I leapt back with cat-like nimbleness. A cloud of dust billowed up, making my eyes water and my nose twitch.

I sneezed several times in rapid succession, wheezing pathetically as the useless, high-necked collar failed me and left me to choke and sputter as I beat a hasty retreat.

I decided, as I hit the lights on my way out and stumbled from the building, that I had learned enough about my body for one day. Eyes streaming, I made my way home, just barely remembering to collect my notebooks and trash along the way. I treated myself to a nice, hot bath, and chose to devote the rest of my time to exploring the other, less academic books littering the shelves of my room for the rest of the night.

I actually managed to shower, change into my new and improved outfit, and get halfway to the Academy before the effects of frantically packing in as much cramming and practice as possible over the course of the last few days really began to hit home.

I couldn’t bring myself to fully regret my choices; some of the more expensive-looking history volumes on my shelves had read like Tolkien novels, and I had actually found a few almanacs from different countries to pour over as well.

Tsukimi had probably been studying up to prepare to hunt down Itachi, somewhere down the line. I was just happy to find out that the climate in the Land of Fire didn’t differ too radically from what I was used to. Granted, it was nowhere near as balmy as Florida, given that we would get snow in the winter, but I had spent the first ten years of my life in the Boston area and still occasionally went to spend Christmas up there.

All things considered, a nice, temperate, landlocked village was not the worst place I could have found myself.

One benefit to my drowsy state, however, was that it was incredibly easy to fall back on what felt natural to find the right classroom. I bit back a yawn as I slid open the door and quietly slipped inside, blinking a few times as the sounds of some scuffle taking place halfway down the steps drifted up to me.

It was, I realized with real, abrupt horror, Ino and Sakura, with the bouncing, eye-catching addition of Naruto at the edges, for flavor. All at once, the memory of Ino’s expression came back to me, squirming free of the mental box I had locked it in so that I could process issues that I had considered
far more pressing. My throat went tight and I hunched my shoulders, burrowing into the relative safety of my infinity scarf as I slunk blindly towards an open, safe seat.

“…Uchiha-san.”

“Good morning, Aburame-san,” I said on reflex, nodding back to the sunglasses-wearing boy I had sidled past in order to reach salvation. I had taken the window seat in the back corner, leaving him on my right as… well, as a literal buffer between me and whatever form the popularity of the Last Uchiha currently existed.

“—like I said, I'm saving this seat for Tsukimi-chan, Ino-Pig! So get lost!”

“Ha! Please, Sakura; poor Tsukimi-chan won’t be able to listen to Iruka-sensei’s announcements if the glare from your fat head is distracting her the entire time.”

“Hey, hey, Sakura-chan, if Tsukimi-hime is sitting with Yamanaka, then why don’t I—”

“Drop dead.”

I laced my fingers together, Gendo-style, and did my level best to fade from existence entirely. I couldn’t be sure—not that I particularly wanted to be—but it seemed that the suffocating web of interpersonal preteen relations was more or less unchanged. While the progressive part of me was pleased at the sexual equality that implied, by and large the whole of me was unerringly horrified at the thought that I was going to be dodging the romantic advances of children for the foreseeable future.

The flip-side of that, of course, was Naruto.

While ‘princess’ was leagues better than ‘bastard’—or rather, the rough, vulgar ‘you’ I vaguely recalled te me was meant to convey—the distaste that colored the honorific didn’t inspire much hope within me. The single silver lining on that stormy cloud was that he was very obviously not interested in me romantically as of this moment.

I sighed silently and let my heavy eyes fall shut, mentally running through what I knew would happen today.

Team 7 would be formed under Kakashi, naturally; I hadn’t entered this world or body anywhere early enough to influence that much, unless for some reason the Hokage wanted to stick with the two-boys-one-girl formula, in which case...

No Sakura?

Ugh. That sat heavy in my gut, but I had no choice but to let the chips fall where they may. What else…

The Kiss was simply not going to happen, ever, period. That was honestly part of the reason why I was hiding next to Shino. My new outfit would hopefully throw off all assorted admirers and rivals long enough for Iruka to call them to order, and I wouldn’t have to deal with the squickiness that was mouth-to-mouth with a twelve year old boy.

On the heels of that, I’d need to take action to prevent my likeness being used for mouth-to-mouth with a twelve year old girl. The question was, how? I couldn’t just avoid them, and from what I recalled Naruto would be actively ambushing me to make sure I didn’t interfere with what now seemed, in my current position, a seriously shady tactic to get Sakura’s attention.
Maybe I could—

“…and Uchiha Tsukimi.”

“YES!”

“Ugh, I’m with her?”

“…eh? Tsu... Tsuki…”

“…EH? TSUKIMI-CHAN?!”

My eyes snapped open and I stared down at the tiered desks in front of me, to where Sakura was standing up and gaping at me, one shaking finger extended. After a moment of blank uncertainty, I realized two very important things. The first was that I had dozed off and slept through Iruka’s opening spiel and the first six team assignments. The second was that the classroom and the various wide-eyed stares zeroed in on me were all tilted at a faint angle.

I inhaled slowly and sat up, resolutely not looking at Shino, who had silently allowed me to pass out against his shoulder and in no way deserved what I had a sinking feeling might be coming next.

“I am,” I murmured to him from behind my scarf, sending a cool, unruffled look back at our gawking classmates. “So very, very sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Shino said, toneless but gracious.

Iruka, bless the poor man, tried to push on with the assignments in a desperate bid to prevent what was coming, but it was to no avail. Aside from the strangely unified chorus of disbelief, there had been a strained, shocked silence that lasted just enough for me to finally regret my reckless weekend cramming session.

Then three-fourths of the class promptly burst into what I could only describe as pure chaos.

Chapter End Notes

As part of the YourIdiotWriter-portion of the inspiration driving this fic, there's a song parody for Tsukimi's current state of mind over on my tumblr. Check it out, if you've got a couple minutes you want kill. Also, I made some minor edits to the last chapter, because while I was re-watching Episode 3 I actually got a concrete date for Tsukimi's Not-So-Dynamic Entry.
In which I try to win friends and influence people

Chapter Summary

Delicious food and questionable company—we'll call this one a tentative victory for Tsukimi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By some stroke of luck—or basic social conditioning—our classmates didn’t completely fly off the handle; none of them left their seats, which was good, because as the wild chatter and slightly hysterical questions grew louder and more frantic, Iruka seemed to be inching closer and closer to an apoplexy.

I could relate.

Perhaps I should have been scared, or shrunk back, but for all that they were kunoichi and shinobi who would one day become actual soldiers, right now they were just kids. More to the point, they were kids that were disturbingly, offensively invested in my personal business. All of this, over a nap? Over what probably amounted to five or six square inches of cloth-to-skin contact?

“How unpleasant,” I said, unable to keep a look of disdain from sliding over my face.

“Quite,” concurred Shino, who honestly probably wouldn’t have breathed a word of my little lapse to anybody, if one of my teammates hadn’t blown things entirely out of proportion because she wanted to gloat. I didn’t know that for certain, only having a fictional account to base my idea of his personal character off of, but he hadn’t struck me as a loose-lipped gossipmonger so far. Guilt churned sickly in my stomach, prodding me to do something to get the poor boy off of the hotseat.

“Iruka-sensei,” I said, only slightly raising my voice. Like magic, the rowdy cloud of noise died down. Some of them even seemed to be holding their breath, which struck me as a bit ridiculous. What, did they expect me to suddenly announce my undying love, like some cheesy drama heroine? “I apologize. I wasn’t paying attention.”

From the looks I was beginning to receive, perhaps that was actually more unnatural for Uchiha Tsukimi than a sudden confession.

“Thank you for being honest, Tsukimi,” Iruka said with a tight smile. Thank you for shutting them up before I had to, his eyes conveyed.

“Please repeat what you said before you were… interrupted,” I requested in a mild tone, still only looking at our soon-to-be ex-teacher.

“Of course.” He glanced around, silently daring any of the students to make so much as a peep. None of them did, not even Naruto. “You’re in Team 7, with Haruno Sakura and Uzumaki Naruto, and you’ll be working under Jounin Hatake Kakashi.”

“Thank you.”
“You’re welcome. Moving on,” he continued, voice bright but gaze venomous, “Team 8 will consist of Aburame Shino, Hyuuga Hinata, and Inuzuka Kiba, under Jounin Yuuhi Kurenai. Team 9 will…”

I settled back in my seat, still garnering the occasional peek or side-glance but otherwise ignored. Unfortunately, this was likely out of fear of reprisal from the Chuunin at the front of the room rather than an actual lack of interest in my affairs, such as they were. As I waited for him to finish explaining our new responsibilities and to respect our new instructors, I whiled away the time doing a quick head-count of my classmates.

I was surprised and faintly pleased to find that, of the twenty-seven children present, eleven were girls. Setting aside the fact that there was a Team 10 being assigned today, that said promising things about the gender balance. I idly wondered if there was a team that still used their assigned number in an official capacity, or if, like some hotels or ships, Konoha simply avoided using ‘unlucky’ numbers. I remembered that four shared the same sound as ‘death’ in Japanese—

“No, wait a minute. I frowned, fingers lacing in front of my face again. The Forest of Death used that pun, I remembered, because its official name was Training Ground 44. So, the first option seemed most likely.

“—okay, that’s enough of the heavy stuff,” Iruka was saying, clapping his hands together and rousing me from my idle thoughts. He was smiling, so that boded well for the class. “You have an hour to eat, but after that your Jounin Instructors will be arriving to pick you up, so don’t be late.”

‘Don’t be late.’

I bit back an ugly laugh, almost purely by the virtue of not wanting to raise anymore of a ruckus, but also because there was no feasible way for me to explain my amusement. I made a mental note to get some extra snacks and a drink while I was out, since I knew I had a long wait ahead of me.

“Dismissed!”

I stood and bowed with the rest of the class, then slipped out behind Shino with another apology that he stoically accepted. Moving on little more than a whim, I reluctantly padded my way down the steps, uncomfortably aware of the pointed stares I could feel on my back. Against my better judgment, I stopped at the end of an aisle housing a bickering pair—or rather, one fawning and one angrily opposed—of Genin.

“Uzumaki. Haruno.”

They both froze, giving me a deer-in-the-headlights sort of look. I knew, in a vaguely tangential way, that on the scale of social intimacies dropping a suffix from a surname wasn’t a huge imposition, but it was probably more than the originally Tsukimi had ever extended. I would be a filthy liar if I said I hadn’t been banking on that. The beauty of arriving at this pivotal point in ‘my’ life was that I could justify any number of changes. It was a huge shift in the life of Uchiha Tsukimi—student to soldier, loner to teammate. I could and was intending to milk that for all that it was worth.

“Y-Yeah?” Naruto was probably trying to be confrontational, raising his chin like that, but the bewilderment clear on his face undermined that. Still, it was enough for Sakura to ram her elbow into his ribs.

“Don’t be rude!” she snapped. Her countenance took a total 180 when she turned to me, which was somehow more discomfiting than I thought it would be. “What can we do for you, Tsukimi-chan?”
I gave her a blank, mild look, until she started to wilt around the edges. “I neglected to bring a lunch,” I said. “Since we’ll be working together from now on, I wanted to know if either of you wanted to eat out with me.”

They looked at me as though I had just suggested setting fire to the Tower.

“If not,” I went on, unruffled. “I will see you in an hour—”

“Yes!” Sakura blurted out, hands clasped under her chin with glittering eyes. “I—I’d love to, Tsukimi-chan! Let’s go, right now!” I saw her eyes dart somewhere over my shoulder, lips twitching into something cruel and triumphant for just a beat. So, probably Ino, I concluded.

“Uzumaki?” I waited patiently, despite Sakura nearly vibrating with anticipation. That… yeah, I was just going to ignore that whole issue, for now.

His eyes darted to mine, searching for something, before he gave a short, jerky nod.

“Mm. Good. Any recommendations?” I asked him. Come on, I coaxed, You know what you like, you’re not ashamed of it, just say—

“Ramen,” flew out of his mouth, and I gave a mental fist-pump.

Yessss.

Outwardly, I was unruffled. “Fine,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“E-Eh?” Sakura blinked, then scrambled to catch up as I began walking towards the door. Naruto, similarly dumbfounded, followed on her heels. “Ts-Tsukimi-chan, wait up! Isn’t ramen kind of…” She seemed to be looking for a diplomatic way to express her feelings, before giving up and merely lowering her voice as we entered the courtyard. “Aren’t you worried about the calories?”

I gave her a long stare, because I didn’t want to deal with this shit for very long and needed to nip it in the bud. “No,” I said shortly. “I train, so I need those calories anyways.” Also, I had skipped a few meals over the weekend. It was a bad habit from my normal life that I would need to curb if I was expected to maintain an active lifestyle.

She didn’t seem to know how to respond, which hopefully meant I had given her something to think about.

I was conscientious enough about my own dining abilities to remove my scarf after ordering. Naruto and Sakura hadn’t stopped staring at me, one way or another, since I first spoke to them, but apparently had so rarely seen me without an Uchiha-styled shirt that they were content to gape awkwardly until our food arrived.

“Is there something the two of you want to say?” I asked as I cleanly split apart my chopsticks and thanked the chef.

“What the hell’s with the sudden buddy-buddy act?” Naruto asked, suspicious even as he started to slurp up his meal. “You’ve barely ebber tal’ghed to anyone shinsh you joined th’clash, ’ddebayo.” …’joined the class’? What?
Sakura apparently misconstrued the faint look of puzzlement my face fell into at that. “Naruto! Don’t be rude. Swallow before you try talking to a lady.”

“I said it before,” I shrugged easily, plucking up a piece of pork. Mindful of the image ‘Uchiha Tsukimi’ needed to protect, I primly chewed and swallowed before continuing. “We’ll be working together from now on. A good working relationship is an essential component of a successful team.” I took a mouthful of noodles and fought the urge to close my eyes in bliss. If the chef’s—Teuchi, I remembered—proud expression was any indication, I wasn’t entirely successful at hiding my pleasure.

“Huh.” Naruto leaned forward to narrow his eyes at me, vacuuming up noodles all the while. In deference to Sakura’s temper, he swallowed before speaking. “S’that why we’re suddenly worth your time, hime?”

“Naruto!” Sakura raged, chopsticks creaking dangerously between her fingers.

“I didn’t go to the Academy to make friends,” I freely admitted. Technically, I never went. “I have a goal, and I’m working hard to achieve it.” Survival. “I don’t have free time to waste on people I might never see again after graduation. I’ll be with the two of you at least until we’re Chuunin, so I can afford to spend time getting to know you.”

“Tsukimi-chan…!” Sakura’s eyes turned dreamy as she clasped her hands in front of her. “That’s so sweet!”

She was probably internally rejoicing that I wouldn’t pay Ino much attention, I ruefully concluded.

“…you look like a doll, but you’re pretty blunt when you open your mouth,” Naruto said. He looked as though he was in the midst of an earth-shattering revelation. “You always seemed kinda bitchy before, but—”

“Na-ru-to…!” Sakura, apparently unable to restrain herself any longer, swiveled in her seat and socked him in the gut with a nice, meaty thud.

“G-Guh!”

I winced slightly in sympathy, because Naruto probably hadn’t deserved that one. All things considered, the original Uchiha Tsukimi more likely than not had been kind of a bitch, if she bore any resemblance at all to her original, male counterpart.

“S-Speaking of your appearance,” Sakura rejoined, fixing a sweet expression in place and trying to act as though she hadn’t lashed out viciously just a moment before. “Tsukimi-chan, I love your new outfit! It’s super cute!”

“It’s functional,” I said, outwardly indifferent even as I preened internally. My own mixed feelings about my disgustingly attractive good looks aside, it was always nice to have my efforts appreciated.

“I’m small, so I need to capitalize on that and my flexibility, now that our opponents won’t just be other students.”

And I was small. As we had walked to the Ichiraku stand, I had been appalled to find out that I was actually shorter than Naruto. Even more galling was that I had previously barely had an inch on the future Hokage; given that I had stopped growing at five feet previously, I didn’t have much hope for this body, either.

I leaned back, peering around Sakura to see that Naruto was still folded over, groaning pathetically. Something niggled at the back of my mind when I saw his drawn expression and poor complexion.
“Are you okay?” I asked, trying to remember why this seemed familiar.

“Buh…”

“Hm?”

“B-Bath…room…!” With that said, he lurched unsteadily off of his stool and stumbled desperately for the closest public restroom, clutching his stomach all the while.

Ah, right. He would have downed some spoiled milk this morning, I remembered.

“Oh, gross,” Sakura complained. wrinkling her nose in distaste. I thought that was particularly unkind, given the role she played in his misfortune, but that took a backseat to my next freshly excavated memory: Kakashi and the Hokage poking around Naruto’s apartment and finding the spoiled milk in question.

They were, I realized, probably going to inspect my townhouse as well.

I suddenly had a flash of something I hadn’t felt since my dorm-resident days, when fire-safety inspection time came around. Was it clean? Had I left any laundry strewn around? Were the dishes out of the sink? Had I flushed the toilet the last time I went, or did I just assume that I had, because it was a reflex by this point? Had I turned the faucet all the way off when I brushed my teeth?

Most of those irrational fears were immediately assuaged, because the original Tsukimi had carved such an overpowering, nigh-military sense of order into that home that I hadn’t dared mess up the preexisting system. My dishes were drying in the rack, I had tidied up the bathroom after my daily ablutions, and my laundry was in the dryer after my little taijutsu mishap with the punching bag. The only things with the slightest chance of being out of place were—

Ah, shit. The books.

The little square breakfast table in the kitchen was still laden down with piles of books and tidy binders of notes, though they were all neatly stacked to one side. They were all fairly eclectic choices, since I had already studied and replaced the basics, so a part of me couldn’t help but wonder what conclusions my superiors might be drawing about me.

Their first thought probably wouldn’t be ‘body-snatching infiltrator,’ I reassured myself. After all, that clan was loyal to Konoha, even if Ino was still unsettlingly interested in me. Que sera sera I tried to tell myself. There was nothing I could do about that state-sanctioned home invasion now. I should just focus on getting on better terms with Naruto and Sakura for now. Kakashi could come later—it was a fitting sentiment, given his habitual tardiness.

I blinked, realizing that I only had broth left in my bowl. Sakura, who had apparently been content to gaze at me as we silently ate, was almost finished despite the birdlike way she had been going at her food when we first received it. I lifted up my bowl and drained it, setting it down with a satisfied sigh before gesturing towards Naruto’s still-empty space.

“Can I get his put in a to-go container?” I asked Teuchi.

“Sure,” he agreed, smiling. “I’ll add it to his tab.”

“No, today is my treat,” I insisted, ignoring the high-pitched noise of delight from Sakura, since I was about to crush her little date-fantasy under my heel. “It’s to commemorate the three of us becoming teammates.”
He was silent for a moment, but his smile didn’t waver when he nodded. I had the strangest feeling that I had passed some sort of test. Our empty bowls were taken away and the to-go container was quickly assembled, and I shelled out the cash for the bill. My inner miser whined a little, because I still had to get snacks and go grocery shopping, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

I put my scarf back on, hooked the bag over my wrist, and ambled over to a nearby store. Sakura scurried along after me, gushing about my generosity, and I made some noncommittal noises while allowing her to fill in the greater part of our ‘conversation’. After a bit of perusing, I bought a small package of over-the-counter stomach medicine, two water bottles, and a few snacks that looked interesting.

“Ts-Tsukimi-chan shouldn’t wait outside a boy’s bathroom!” Sakura murmured after she realized where I was headed next. She looked stricken, as though the very thought was some crime against nature.

“I don’t intend to do that,” I assured her.

Her relief only lasted as long as it took me to slip into a nearby alleyway and emerging as a freckled dirty-blond boy. I ignored her sputtering and casually walked into the men’s room, following the miserable moans and groans to the corner stall.

“Uzumaki,” I said, knocking on the door.

He immediately fell into a suspicious silence, and I belatedly realized that my voice sounded totally different. I swallowed back a sigh.

“It’s your not-a-bitch teammate. I bought you some medicine, and had your ramen boxed up. Haruno and I are going to head back to the Academy. Come back when you feel better, but try to do it before our hour is up.” I slid the medicine and one of the water bottles under the door with my foot. “You’ve got another twenty minutes.”

I turned to leave, and was halfway out when I heard him pick them up.

“Thanks,” echoed quietly behind me.

“We’ll be working together from now on,” I told him again. “It’s normal to take care of my teammates.”

Somehow, it sounded like an oath as I stepped back outside, shading my eyes against the afternoon sun.

Three hours later, I was into my second package of snacks, Sakura had brought out the bento that she had originally packed, and Naruto had demolished his Ichiraku leftovers and started helping chip away at my supplies after I made the offer. We were all sitting on the tiered desks Breakfast Club-style, with Naruto and I cross-legged on one and Sakura primly perched on the next one up.

It seemed like food and not-being-a-bitch would be enough to lay the foundations of a better dynamic with him, which only left me with the Sakura issue to worry about. She made me particularly uncomfortable, to be brutally honest. Back when I was just a reader and a spectator, I had adored her—as a character. As a character that grew and evolved, to be more specific, and
seeing her now, fawning and young and naïve, it was…

It was a shitty way to feel, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to get close enough to know her as a person. I had effectively robbed her of her happy ending; I would never be able to see her as more than a friend or have a child with her, just based on my personal preferences. I couldn’t return her feelings, and having them so blatantly showered upon me made me unspeakably uneasy. Selfishly, I wished there was a way to just fast-forward her to the brutally effective medic-nin I knew she could someday become.

But, just by being me, I might have already robbed her of that, too.

I had no reason or intent to defect from Konoha, after all. Maybe just seeing the distance between herself and Naruto—and me, once I figured out how to consciously access my Sharingan and used Magical Eye Bullshit to cheat my way towards excellence—maybe that might be enough to galvanize her into committing herself more fully and finding her way to Tsunade.

If Tsunade even ended up in Konoha. It was entirely possible I might mess that up too, somehow.

“Oi.”

I let out a soft, primal squeal of surprise when Naruto broke me from my musings by poked at my ribs, shying away from his finger.

“What?” I huffed, curling a hand over my side protectively.

My teammates were staring at me with the same wide-eyed, bitten-lip expression. Naruto’s unfurled into something devious, while Sakura’s bloomed into something that should have been directed at a puppy or a duckling.

“Hey, hey, are you *ticklish*, Tsukimi-hime?” His grin was wicked, but the suffix had lost its bite sometime between lunch and our current position.

“Everybody is.” I sniffed, working hard not to be overly-defensive. That would only invite further attacks, so I tried to divert him instead. “What did you want?”

He gave me a look that said in no uncertain terms that we would be revisiting this subject someday soon, but went along with it. “Where’s your forehead protector?” Naruto adjusted his own, fingers rubbing the edges almost reverentially. Given how long it took him to get it and the situation that lead up to receiving it, I supposed it made sense.

“Right here,” I said, lifting up my loose tank to show where I had tied it through the large loops of my shorts as a makeshift belt. Getting the plate fastened to a larger black cloth had been a complimentary service at the shop I visited for spending so much at one time. The forehead protectors, unlike the shiny, mirror-bright accessories commonly sold at anime conventions, were a dark, brushed metal. I tapped a finger over the engraved swirl once, before dropping my shirt hem again.

When I looked back up, my expression flattened. Both of them had one of their hands raised towards their eyes, fingers splayed but eyes wide and uncovered.

“I’m wearing both stockings and shorts,” I said slowly, now comfortable enough to use tones of ‘are you stupid?’ with them.

“Your shirt kinda hides the shorts,” Naruto argued weakly, but he dropped his hand and looked abashed at his reflexive action. “Don’t do that around people, ’ttebayo.”
“He’s right,” Sakura agreed, pink-cheeked and nodding along firmly. “Tsukimi-chan is really cute, so you need to be extra-wary of perverts.”

This time Naruto nodded along, expression firming up. “Yeah, Sakura-chan’s right, ’ttebayo. You can’t just go around going into men’s rooms and stuff like that, even if it’s to help me. It’s dangerous.”

I was knocked off-kilter, because I had no idea how this sudden switch in subjects came about. “You were the only one in there,” I pointed out. “And I looked like a boy when I did it, anyways.” Not even a particularly attractive boy, at that, because I hadn’t wanted to wear the face of the boy that should have been living this life.

“Still,” Naruto insisted. “We’re getting a guy for a sensei, make him do that sort of stuff instead.”

“My, I haven’t even properly met you yet and you’re assigning me responsibilities?” A lazy voice drifted over from the window, making all of us jump. “And here I was thinking I’d be the one in charge.”

“In the absence of a leader, a proper squad should have enough independence to function on its own,” I said, basically babbling with a straight face as I tried to get my wildly beating heart back to some semblance of a normal rate. I had suspected that his entrance would be different, given that Naruto was too engaged to rig a prank out of boredom, but I hadn’t expected that.

“You were very absent,” Sakura joined in, with poisonous sweetness.

“Yeah,” was Naruto’s two cents, as he scowled up at the bushy-haired shinobi lounging on the open windowsill. “Late people shouldn’t complain if they get extra work!”

I had the feeling that particular pearl of wisdom was one Iruka had given him several times before.

“Well, we’ll see,” Kakashi said in a mild tone, shifting into a more comfortable position. “But, now that we’re all here, why don’t we start with some simple introductions?”

“Like what?” Sakura wanted to know.

“Oh, you know,” our teacher shrugged. “Your likes, dislikes, dreams for the future, hobbies… Stuff like that.”

Man, it was downright surreal, hearing this part. Everything up to this point had been, in its own way, but this part especially so.

“Well, you do it first!” Naruto decided, crossing his arms stubbornly.

Sakura nodded, mouth pursed. “You look pretty suspicious, you know? Give us something to work with.”

“Well, okay.” He sat up and swung both feet inside the classroom, rolling his shoulders. “As you should probably know, my name is Hatake Kakashi. I have absolutely no interest in telling you guys about my likes or dislikes.” I saw his fingers drift over a pocket in his vest, briefly, and wondered if that lack of interest was partially to keep this little tête-à-tête kid-friendly. “Dreams for the future… Well, I have a lot of hobbies.”

“That just tells us your name,” Sakura grumbled under her breath.

“Anyways, that’s me done,” Kakashi said, rubbing his neck as though he was trying to work out a
“Your turn. Let’s start with the only boy and work our way around.”

“Tch.” Naruto wrinkled his nose. “I’ll do it way better than you, ’ttebayo!” He pointed straight at the Jounin. “My name is Uzumaki Naruto! I like cup ramen, but the Ichiraku Ramen stall is the best place in the whole village; Sakura-chan and Tsukimi-hime can back me up on that one. I hate waiting the three minutes it takes for cup ramen to cook. My dream is to become Hokage!” He clenched a fist. “Then, everybody in this whole village is gonna have to acknowledge me, ’ttebayo!” He paused, losing some of his steam. “As for hobbies, uh… I like pulling pranks, I guess.”

“Okay,” Kakashi said, projecting an air of complete disinterest. “Next.”

I straightened my posture as Naruto silently fumed at the snub. “My name is Uchiha Tsukimi,” I told him. “I can go either way about a lot of things, but I particularly dislike it when outsiders pry into my affairs or mess with my plans. I don’t know whether I should call it a ‘dream’ or not, but…” I folded my hands in my lap and raised my chin. “In the future, I’m going to build a family and live a peaceful life with them, no matter what I have to do.” That skirted the Itachi issue well enough, I thought. I doubted I could escape reviving the clan and didn’t really mind the thought of doing so in the far off future, but it could easily be assumed that I still fully intended to kill my ‘brother’ to ensure that safe little life. “The closest things I have to hobbies are studying and training, but I intend to learn more recipes in the near future.”

“I see,” Kakashi nodded, and I was disgruntled to find that Sakura’s baby-duckling look was back. I wasn’t even sure where to begin deciphering Naruto’s expression, so I didn’t bother. “Well,” our teacher-to-be said, looking at my pink-haired admirer. “That just leaves you.”

“Right!” Sakura brushed a lock of hair behind one ear, apparently pumped up by my introduction for reasons I did not care to fathom. “My name is Haruno Sakura! The per—um! I mean, the thing I like to do is read, like Tsukimi-chan!” Oh God, this was uncomfortable. The dewy glances she was shooting my way made my stomach squirm. “I hate it when Naruto goofs off and gets the rest of us in trouble, and my dream for the future…”

Stop looking at me, I silently begged her.

“It’s a secret!” She giggled, burying her face in her hands for a minute.

I wanted to die. Thankfully, Kakashi stopped her before she could sink too deeply into her fantasy.

“…right,” he said, after a short pause. “Well, that’s enough of that for now. We’ll start our duties tomorrow, with something just for the four of us.”

“Oh, awesome!” Naruto perked back up, apparently done wallowing over Sakura’s barb. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Survival training.”

“What kind?” I asked, playing my part. “We covered something like that in the Academy; are we going outside the village, or to a different type of terrain?”

“It’s a special type of training,” he hedged, his visible eye creasing in what I assumed was a smile. “I’ll tell you more about it tomorrow; for now, I’ll leave the basic details with you, on these printouts.” He pulled a thin sheaf of papers from his vest and set them on the desk—by coincidence or design, it was the place I had been sitting this morning. “Make sure to bring all the tools and supplies you need, and eat a good breakfast.”

…wait, what?
“I’ll be assessing you guys personally, so come on time and be prepared to give it everything you’ve got. If you’re going to be Genin, then I need to have a fair picture of what I’m working with.”

What?

“So…” Kakashi trailed off. “Yeah, that about does it for today. Team 7, you’re dismissed. I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning!” And with that said, he disappeared with a small puff of smoke and a few whirling leaves, leaving us staring, dumbfounded, in his wake.

No threats, no misleading statistics, no establishing a clear or present danger of failure…

As Naruto and Sakura began to discuss the man who would be our direct superior for the near future in heated and caustic tones, I merely sat there, quiet and more than a little worried. What the hell had I done in the past few days to cause that much of a change in script?

And more importantly, was the change for the better, or worse?

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: I was combing through the first few chapters of the manga, and from what I could see on the grainy panel of Iruka’s clipboard, it looks like the teams skip from two to four, which could help account for why there are 27 graduates but also a Team 10. That, or Kishimoto made two mathematical errors that happened to cancel each other out.
In which I am playing with the big dogs now

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we see children acting a lot more mature than they should have to, and also Kakashi is making things up as he goes along, probably.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was lost in thought after leaving the Academy, printout in hand. I barely remembered saying my good-byes to Naruto and Sakura, too worried about the implications of Kakashi’s radical change from the source material to focus on much else. I found myself in front of a grocery store by the time I came back to myself, and once again thanked whatever sadistic higher power landed me here for the power of habitual consistency.

I nodded my greeting to the elderly woman at the check out counter and hefted up a basket before setting out to explore the aisles. I wished that I had thought to make a proper list of what I needed, but I simply hadn’t had the time; not when I was so busy making sure I wasn’t going to get caught out as a fake. I would just have to rely on my impulse control in order to make sure I only got the essentials.

Naturally, that meant that thirty minutes later I was staggering out of the store laden down by four heavy bags: two that were plastic hanging from my forearms, and two that were smooth, brown paper that nearly obscured my vision entirely.

For the record, that was not my fault. That old woman—Mitsuba-obaachan—was a crafty one. She had an unbeatable gauntlet of deals and sales, and then had the gall to give me a free tomato and an extra 10% off for officially becoming a Genin. I was an innocent victim, helplessly entangled in her ingenius mercantile web. I would probably be set for at least a month, maybe two, given that I stocked up on my nonperishable goods, and found the milk with the longest expiration dates.

Well, I would be set if I could find my way home without going tumbling, I admitted to myself sheepishly.

“What the… Tsukimi-hime? S’that you, ’ttebayo?”

“Uzumaki?”

I craned my neck and caught sight of blond spikes floating above the loaf of bread at the top of one of my paper bags. “Hello. I didn’t expect to see you again tonight.”

“You kinda still haven’t. Why the heck are you carrying so much?” Rough hands gently eased one of each type of bag out of my grip, giving me a more secure grip on my remaining load and a much wider scope of vision. Naruto peered down at me, obviously confused and, I was equal parts pleased and embarrassed to find, a little concerned.

“I cleared out my pantry this last weekend,” I admitted. “And I said I was interested in learning how to cook new things, didn’t I? I need more food on hand for that.” I gave a slight shrug, since the
reduced load let me. “What brings you to this part of town?”

“Yeah, about that,” Naruto gave me a look that was surprisingly shrewd for somebody fandom liked to laud as the village idiot. “See, I went to go pay Teuchi-ossan for my lunch since I skipped out halfway through.” He paused for a moment, then scratched the back of his head and started walking. “Y’know, you didn’t have to pay for me, right? I’m a regular there. I’ve got a tab and everything. Iruka-sensei treats me every now and then too.”

“I paid for Haruno as well,” I told him, taking the lead and starting to head for home. He followed along at an easy pace. “You two are my teammates, now. I wanted to start off on a good note.”

“Free Ichiraku’s is about as good as it gets,” Naruto agreed. “Still, after we start doing missions and getting paid and stuff, I’m returning the favor, ‘ttebayo.”

“Do what you want,” I told him. “I won’t turn down a free meal either.”

“Guess you are pretty smart after all.”

“It takes more than a pretty face and a shockingly un-bitchy attitude to be the Rookie of the Year,” I shot back evenly.

“Ah, geeze, quit saying ‘bitchy’! Sakura-chan’ll seriously pummel me into next week if she hears you saying that all the time, ‘ttebayo.” He puffed out his cheeks at me. “Look, if I hurt your feelings or something—”

“Uzumaki,” I cut him off, deliberately making eye-contact. “I’m messing with you. I know exactly what I probably seemed like to you and the rest of the class.” I pursed my lips, rethinking that last part. “Well, some of them more than others, I suppose. It’s something I accepted a while ago.” ‘Saturday’ counted as a while ago, I was pretty sure. It already felt as though I had been stranded here forever, at least.

“You’re so weird,” he complained, but there wasn’t any ill-intent behind it.

We fell into a companionable sort of silence while we walked after that. Naruto started getting fidgety around the time the occupied businesses started fading out and we got closer to the District, and I couldn’t blame him. He struck me as a boy who didn’t particularly appreciate silence in large doses. Once we hit the large, faded gateway and entered the District proper in all its creepy, tomb-like glory, he couldn’t hold his tongue any longer.

“You live here?” He looked around, aghast.

“It’s the Uchiha District,” I said, hiding my true, similar feelings about the place. “And I’m the last one left in the village. If I don’t live here, who will?” For all that space was a premium in a walled-in village, I couldn’t blame him. He struck me as a boy who didn’t particularly appreciate silence in large doses. Once we hit the large, faded gateway and entered the District proper in all its creepy, tomb-like glory, he couldn’t hold his tongue any longer.

“You live here?” He looked around, aghast.

“It’s the Uchiha District,” I said, hiding my true, similar feelings about the place. “And I’m the last one left in the village. If I don’t live here, who will?” For all that space was a premium in a walled-in village, I couldn’t see many people clamoring to redevelop the scene of a relatively recent, gruesome genocide, especially since I was pretty sure the buildings counted as ‘historic’, given that the District had been laid out when Konoha was first founded. Maybe after—if—Pein leveled most of the village, but that was a big, far-in-the-future ‘if’ I wasn’t going to worry about now.

It was entirely possible I could die well before that point, after all.

“…I never realized how many of you there used to be,” Naruto commented in a surprisingly subdued tone as we passed what had once been some sort of confectionary shop.

“We were pretty young when it happened,” I reminded him, skillfully dodging the fact that I had no concrete idea of just how young that had been. “I can’t blame you.”
He grunted something vaguely affirmative and we fell into another, far more stilted and awkward silence until we hit my townhouse. Thanks to him carrying half my burden, I had no problem digging out my key and unlocking the door. We toed our shoes off in the foyer and I hit the lights, but he only went inside far enough to place his half of the groceries on the coffee table in the sitting room.

“Did you want to stay for dinner?” I asked, mindful that he had probably gone well out of his way to help me.

“Nah,” he waved me off. “I ate at Ichiraku’s with Iruka-sensei. Thanks, though.”

“Mm.” I shrugged, even as my brain made a few connections. If Iruka had been there, then he had heard about me buying lunch and they had likely discussed me, and my recent behavior as well. That might explain why Naruto was acting like this now. “Well, thank you for your assistance.” I said, walking him back to the front hall.

“Yeah, no problem,” he said, pulling his sandals back on. He hesitated before leaving, and turned to pin me with a searching look. “Hey, Tsukimi-hime…”

I was a bit apprehensive at that sort of lead-up. “Yes?”

“Even if you’re the only one who lives around here, make sure you lock your doors and stuff, okay?”

“What?”

“I mean it,” he said, somehow managing to pull off a stern look and even going so far as to wag his damn finger at me. He was twelve, for God’s sake. “You gotta be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” I insisted. “And of course I lock my doors. How long do you think I’ve been living on my own?”

“Keep it up,” he told me with an encouraging nod, before slipping back outside with a wave.

I locked the door behind him, baffled and somewhat irritated at the implication that I needed to be reminded about basic things like that from a boy who had just this morning chugged spoiled milk. I used that ire as fuel to do the responsible, grown-up thing and put my groceries away immediately, before getting dinner started: a nice pot of stew that should last me the rest of the week via leftovers. While *that* was cooking away, I finally got around to cleaning up the books I had left on the table.

Halfway through, I came across something that made me want to bash my head against the nearest wall.

It was a photocopy of an edited and minimally redacted file about the Legendary Sannin that I hadn’t got around to reading before leaving for the Academy, with a stamp of approved release on the front from the archives. It was resting on top of one of the shorter stacks, and I hadn’t even thought twice about it.

Logically, it made sense that Tsukimi would be interested in any and all strong ninja produced by Konoha; heck, even her original male version had probably had this stashed away somewhere. But, with a sinking feeling, I scanned the first page and confirmed my suspicions. The introduction mentioned the team’s original formation under the Third Hokage, Sarutobi Hiruzen. It also went into shallow detail about their initial skill assessments, and the method he had used to determine if they could properly function together as a unit.
The damned bell test.

I wanted to laugh, or cry, or maybe put my face against the table and hide behind all those stupid books. Of course Kakashi wouldn’t give us the bell test if he and the Hokage had seen that lying out in the open. There was no point in giving us the test if he thought one of us already knew the trick to passing it—and I did, just not from the source he thought I had learned it from—so he hadn’t used it. And if he had shadowed us at all, even during the hours we waited for him at the Academy, if nothing else…

Ugh. Ugh. I didn’t regret trying to make friends with Sakura and Naruto, not at all, but it was scary to think about how thoughtless, innocuous actions like this could tear away what little familiar ground I had in this world.

I heaved a small sigh, stood, and went to put my books back where they belonged.

“The first thing you need to be prepared for in the field,” Kakashi said, once he finally deigned to show up, two hours later than the paper he had given us specified, “is more often than not the absolute last thing on your mind.” He glanced at us, drinking in two incredibly unimpressed faces and my own blank expression, which hopefully masked some of the nervous tension jittering through me. “For example: dogs.”

“Dogs?” Sakura parroted, not following.

“Dogs,” Kakashi confirmed, before slamming his hands through a series of seals so fast I couldn’t catch most of them. But, when he finished by smacking a palm to the ground like that, I really, really did not need to know the signs that he used. Of course I knew that technique; any halfway committed fan of the series would know it.

“Get back!” I snapped out, moving on autopilot. I fisted a hand in the backs of each of my teammates’ shirts and dragged them with me as I leapt away in order to put some distance between us and the sudden cloud of smoke. I let go only in order to blindly whip out a weapon—a kunai, simply for the fact that it was easier to follow through on the movement to reach my thigh, rather than to twist an arm to pluck out a shuriken—and settled into a defensive stance, eyes flicking from the smoke to our surroundings and back again.

‘Look underneath the underneath’ was supposed to be Kakashi’s motto after the whole teamwork thing, wasn’t it? Did that mean that the cloud was a distraction? Was he setting up some trap for us now, as we—I—scrambled to react? I mentally cursed myself again for not finding some way to practice recognizing genjutsu. I doubted my perceptions of the world on a daily, sometimes hourly basis these days, and I honestly did not have the chakra to waste checking every time so I had uneasily pushed the issue to the backburners.

My heart was pounding wildly, but I forced myself to breathe as evenly and quietly as possible. Being lightheaded on top of a base, fight-or-flight mindset wasn’t going to help me.

Help us.

I glanced from side to side, noting that both Naruto and Sakura had followed my example. I was a bit too wound up to be properly relieved about that, but when the first snarling figures burst from the fading smoke I didn’t have the time to worry about anybody other than myself, since one was
making a beeline straight for me.

No, I corrected myself. Make that three.

A gigantic black dog, a pug, and what appeared to be a greyhound were headed for me, while a pair of dogs—one with glasses-like markings around its eyes, and one legitimately wearing sunglasses—aimed for Sakura, and the last three—an angry-looking one, an ironically fox-faced one, and one that was sporting a Mohawk, of all things—seemed to have Naruto in their sights. In very, very little time, they ate up what little ground I had managed to gain for us, and pounced.

I lost a little time, at that point.

I was running on pure instinct, I knew that much. Everything was a blur of abortive motions that shied away from becoming proper blows to avoid a snap of shockingly, intimidatingly sharp fangs, of sweeping kicks that seemed entirely ineffective against the nimbleness of the smallest dog—Pakkun, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind—or the sheer girth of the biggest dog—Bull, I remembered, because it had been a fitting name—or the surprising flexible dexterity of the decoratively bandaged greyhound, whose name I had no clue about. I was barely holding my ground, and I had a vague, sinking feeling that I was only doing that much because they allowed it.

Then I heard Sakura scream, and my priorities shifted in a swift, mechanical manner that I wasn’t even remotely in control of.

My eyes slid over to see Sunglasses with his jaws clamped down on the front flap of her dress and Spotglasses similarly attached to the back flap. My moment of inattention cost me, allowing Pakkun to snap his own jaws shut on one of the large, loose sleeves of the overshirt. There was something primal that cut through the fog then, something that furiously overwrote my body’s self-centered survival mode to the tune of ‘That twelve year old girl is getting menaced by vicious dogs.’

In that moment, I conveniently forgot that I too was a twelve year old girl getting menaced by vicious dogs.

I ducked one shoulder and slid my arm out of Pakkun’s sleeve, quickly spinning around to free my other arm while simultaneously swaddling the little dog in the dark fabric, finishing off the surprisingly smooth maneuver by lobbing the entire, squirming bundle at Sunglasses. I heard them connect with two startled, canine whines, but I didn’t have time to see what Sakura made of the opening I had given her. Bull and Bandages were unsurprisingly unhappy with my little stunt, and dove at me with renewed vigor.

I caught sight of Naruto as I frantically twisted and dodged their snarling maws, and got a glimpse of three, then five, then two, then four of him facing off with Foxface, Angry-Eyes, and Mohawk on arguably reasonable terms, new clones getting conjured up almost as soon as the old ones were defeated and dispelled by the dogs. He would probably beat them out of sheer endurance. I, on the other hand, couldn’t afford to be a one-trick pony. I could feasibly slide out of my tank top as easily as the overshirt and continue on in my camisole, but it wouldn’t be anywhere as easy, I’d lose visibility for a few short, crucial seconds, and the tank top wasn’t anywhere near big enough to hinder Bull or Bandages the same way Pakkun had been.

Luckily, I was both creative and my conscience was firmly out to lunch in the interest of getting out of this mess without my pale, vulnerable forearms getting chewed to ribbons.

I was breathing hard at that point, and only managed to gather enough air to balloon my cheeks, so I waited until Bandages had taken his turn at lunging for me before I spat out a small but potent gob of fire. It landed on his eponymous fashion choice and quickly began to eat along the linen, forcing the
greyhound to fall back with an alarmed noise and begin to roll around on the ground. It left me Bull as my sole opponent, and his snarl grew more pronounced.

His sheer size meant that the way his muscles bunched up beneath his dark coat gave me some advanced warning of when he would jump for me, and he was reasonably easy to dodge without the other two covering for him. My racing mind finally slowed enough for me to wonder if this whole situation wasn’t just a new way of hammering home the importance of working as a team, since Kakashi had been robbed of his old standby thanks to my frantic studying.

And then, as if summoned by the mere thought of him, Kakashi dropped down from a tree along the side of the clearing.

He shifted into an aggressive stance, rather than a lazy slouch, and his gaze was trained on the writhing mob of orange and defiant growls that was Naruto’s fight. Just as before, a switch was flipped thanks to my twenty-two year old instincts triumphing over muscle memory.

*That man is about to attack a twelve year old boy,* I thought, unreasonably, exceedingly horrified, and then promptly substituted myself with a shadow clone on the edges of the tussle just in time to catch a punch to the gut that lifted me clean off of my feet. I saw stars and felt my breath leave me in a sad little *whoosh* as I folded over Kakashi’s fist, and then went limp.

I choked desperately, trying to suck some oxygen back up after being so thoroughly winded, but only managed a few pathetic wheezes before I felt something connect with a particularly painful spot on my neck, and everything went dark.

---

I was welcomed back into consciousness by a cool cloth being patted against my cheek.

“How long was I out?” I slurred before I finished opening my eyes, squinting blearily up at a giant blur of pinks, reds, and orange. My first thought was that it was sundown, meaning that I had slept nearly twelve hours, but then my mental and visual clarity re-established themselves and I realized that I was actually looking up at Naruto and Sakura, who were crouched over me worriedly.

“Like five minutes or something, ’ttebayo,” Naruto assured me, shooting a glare somewhere behind Sakura, who I belatedly realized had my head pillowed in her lap. “Not that long. Kakashi-sensei told us that you were his hostage, so we had to give up.” He looked strangely subdued and incensed, which confused me since I thought he would be more vocal about being defeated like that. Then a fragment of memory drifted across my somewhat groggy mind.

*Sakura, kill Naruto or he dies,* Kakashi had said in another life, pinning down the boy whose place I had taken during the bell test and threatening him with his own blade. Had he used me to establish that same chilling life lesson, simply substituting in a kinder condition? Defeat versus the death of a comrade certainly seemed like it would be something he was interested in posing to us early on.

“…sorry.” I realized I had fallen into my own thoughts again and offered up a belated apology.

Naruto’s expression twisted up, but surprisingly Sakura was the one who beat him to the punch—and not just figuratively.

“Stupid!” Sakura flicked me on the forehead with a severe, upside-down frown. It stung a lot more than I thought it would, having only seen the move done from a distance before. “Tsukimi-chan, you
have no reason to apologize at all! The entire time, you were… even though you had your own fight, you were trying to protect us too!"

I blinked owlishly up at her, rubbing my forehead in surprise. For somebody who was supposed to be utterly infatuated with me, that had been a lot more aggressive than I expected. Maybe, I reflected, it was part of the gender-standard. Sexual inclination didn’t seem to be nearly as stigmatized as the culture I grew up in, but there were still physically and gender-based stereotypes that had doubtlessly cropped up over the years in this world. I wasn’t a boy, and I hadn’t upheld the untouchable excellence that her original love interest had.

“That’s right,” Kakashi agreed, ducking his head over Naruto’s to—presumably—smile down at me. I thought it was a smile, given his tone, but I really couldn’t be sure, given the way the fabric of his mask seemed to absorb light and blur his facial features, despite being skin-tight and thin enough not to muffle his voice. “Given the fact that you’re all fresh from the Academy, you performed just fine. Like I said yesterday, I just wanted to see where we were all starting from.”

Not a bad plan, if he was telling the truth, I had to admit. After all, originally Kakashi had been surprised by the fact that Naruto had the Shadow Clone Jutsu in his repertoire, and that the other boy on his squad had—

Oh. Oh, shit. I felt a belated, crushing sense of horror and guilt.

“I’m sorry I set your dog on fire,” I blurted out. “Is he okay?”

“I’m fine,” said a smooth, entirely new voice, and I reluctantly rolled over to find eight entirely unthreatening dogs sprawled a few feet to my left, watching me with open fascination. The greyhound—sans bandages but only slightly singed around the edges—nodded at me in what seemed to be approval. “It was a smart tactic in that situation.”

“Ūhei isn’t one to hold a grudge,” Kakashi assured me, before leaning forward and offering me a hand up, planting his other elbow on Naruto’s head and eliciting a round of loud complaints from the blond.

I reached up, working on something half-remembered and half-instinctual from years of physical repetition, and wormed two of my fingers around two of his in a lopsided Seal of Reconciliation rather than simply accepting the tacit offer. Naruto’s complaints trailed off into grudging silence and Kakashi paused for a moment before easily levering me up, expression still inscrutable but somehow exuding a faintly pleased aura nonetheless.

Still, the animal-lover in me was not so easily pacified.

“I… tried making fried chicken for lunch today,” I said awkwardly. I hadn’t been sure of whether my stew would keep in a thermos so I cracked open one of the cookbooks I had unearthed during my cramming sessions and found something that looked somewhat familiar. I wasn’t quite sure enough in my cooking skills to outright offer it as compensation as there hadn’t been enough time for me to properly taste-test the final product, but I had followed the recipe to the letter.

“Girlie,” came from a deep voice that I tracked to the pug still wrapped in my discarded over shirt and apparently entirely comfortable being there. “You’re really speaking our language. Keep up the sweet-talk and I might just let you touch my paw-pads.”

“W-Wait a minute…” Sakura butted in shakily, standing up. “Tsukimi-chan’s homemade bento—you’re….” She stumbled over herself, shaking her head. “You can’t just give it to the dogs!”
Ah, there was the fangirl I knew and privately despaired over.

Chapter End Notes

To augment your reading and visualizing experience, I made a version of Tsukimi’s normal outfit using Selfy Maker (the still-operational Japanese counterpart to Tinier Me), which you can see right here. She loves her layers, that girl.
In which I reap the benefits of domesticity

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we skip through a bit of Team 7's new lifestyle. Also, Tsukimi tries to be standoffish and it backfires somewhat spectacularly.

As it turned out, my fumbling first attempts at cooking something that wasn’t rice, pasta, or a basic hamburger dish passed muster with the dogs’ surprisingly high standards.

Which is good, because they didn’t seem inclined to un-summon themselves any time soon. Whether it was part of some strange training plan Kakashi had settled on as an introductory unit, or if they had simply taken a shine to us, the pack was waiting for us at the start of our next training session, even if Kakashi himself was entirely content to continue his legacy of tardiness. And the one after that. And the one after that.

And every one after that one, too, with no indication that they would be bowing out any time soon.

Overall, it was actually a very effective little system. Pakkun, Bull, and Ūhei were my personal critics and oversaw the lion’s share of my personal conditioning. Bull either was a dog of few words or simply couldn’t speak, but his comrades seemed to have no problem translating for him whenever he saw some flaw in my stance or thought I was wasting energy during laps. That was fine though; the fact that he was big enough and willing to literally carry me home if I overexerted myself made up for a lot of the indignity of being bossed around by animals.

I was, at the very least, better at going along with this strange tactic than Sakura, whose one-time aggressors, Akino and Bisuke—Sunglasses and Spotglasses, respectively—seemed to find so much wrong with her that they were often hoarse at the end of the day from barking out corrections. Still, they were gentler with her than Urushi (Angry-Eyes), Guruko (Foxface), and Shiba (Mohawk) ever bothered being with Naruto.

The fact that he could take all of the abuse those three could dish out and come back for more was immaterial. I didn’t think I would ever become comfortable with seeing a child being attacked by dogs, but without Kakashi oozing Killing Intent like a leaky faucet I was at least able to consciously remind myself that none of us were likely to be mauled—the dogs’ motivator of choice seemed to be carefully moderated pinch-like nips and excessive slobber.

Despite every expectation I had—all of which, I soon came to realize after taking a good, hard introspective look at my reasoning, were based off of flashback images and other people’s headcanons—Kakashi did take an active part in training us as well. Granted, he still refused to teach us even the most minor jutsu, no matter how much Naruto whined or badgered him, and I was increasingly curious as to why. It had struck me as strange, given the pace of the rest of the series.

Perhaps that was just part of the dubious benefit of knowing about the shitstorm waiting in the wings for us all, I mused darkly.

“It isn’t that weird,” Pakkun told me, as my furry little squad of overseers walked me through the new flexibility routine Kakashi designed for me. It reminded me of some of the exercises from different ballet classes I had taken over the years. “He’s still gotta build you girls up a little and get
Blondie to stop spewing chakra like a fire-hose before he invests time in walking you through real techniques, you know.”

I hummed thoughtfully, sinking into a side-split and gradually leaning forward, arms extended. Bull thoughtfully leaned some of his bulk across my back, while Pakkun sat his silky soft little paw-pads over my fingertips. He was too light to properly pin them down, but the warm, soft feeling helped anchor my attention there so I wouldn’t unconsciously backslide. Ūhei circled around, inspecting my form with a steely eye.

It was, I reflected, probably better for Sakura and Naruto to have another girl on the team; if a majority of the squad needed to build up natural chakra reserves, then it probably effected Kakashi’s general guiding plans. Naruto had the opposite problem, gratuitously more than most boys normally would, so it was just economical to have him work on his finesse at the same time and have us all meet somewhere in the middling zone of competency.

Also, I reflected, there was probably a certain political pressure bearing down on Kakashi because of me. There likely had been similar expectations in the case of the original Last Uchiha, as well, but I simply had different requirements attached, due to my differing physical and developmental needs.

I sighed slowly, forcing back a reflexive noise when Ūhei poked his nose against my ribs. Naruto had snitched about my ticklish spot early on.

“Watch your breathing,” the greyhound warned, and I obligingly forced myself to inhale and exhale on the assigned rhythm that my question on the subject had disrupted. He backed off, satisfied, and I made the executive decision to shelve my other concerns—until I was no longer skirting the risk of a cold, wet nose, at least, since I had been divested of my overshirt and scarf for the moment. It left me particularly vulnerable to Ūhei’s tender mercies.

“Worried, Tsukimi-chan?” Kakashi asked me later once I cycled over to him for running and dodging drills. “Sensei is doing his best for you kids, you know?” He feigned an injured tone.

“I don’t know what’s normal.” I said, and then I focused on my breathing as I shot around a tree and used my momentum for a tight, tumbling roll that I broke straight into a run from. The maneuver was already becoming less clumsy; I couldn’t call it smooth, not really, but I was growing more comfortable, bit by bit. “Outside of the Academy,” I tacked on, once he signaled that I could stop for a few sips of water.

“There is no real norm,” Kakashi admitted. “Jounin all have different experiences that shape them and their principals. Some things might gradually trickle down from their teachers, but on the whole we’re allowed to do just about anything, as long as it gets you kids field-ready. There isn’t a particular rush, since we’re at peace.”

“Mm. I see.” I set my water back down and rolled my shoulders. It was actually sort of true, this time; logically, not having to churn out soldiers in quick succession had doubtlessly slowed down training rates for the sake of quality. And it wasn’t as though he could hide our rate of progress, since we usually practiced in an open field. If somebody higher up the chain of command felt that Kakashi needed to be doing something else, they wouldn’t hesitate to let him know.

“You three are doing fine,” he told me, before putting his book away—which, strangely, had always had a striped paper cover on the front rather than being left flagrantly bare—and pulling out a handful of shuriken. “I promise. In fact—” Here he gestured for me to return to my drills, idly flicking weapons for me to avoid by using the different maneuvers I was learning. “—you guys are just about ready to start going on missions.”
Oh, wonderful, I thought, with only a touch of sarcasm, as I ran and wove through the trees. It was somewhat reassuring to become more prepared, and I would hardly turn my nose up at a paycheck, but this was an unavoidable reminder of the fact that even if I had some leeway right now, I was on a set track I wouldn’t be able to get out of for anything short of death or retirement for the sake of homemaking.

There was nothing for it. I would just have to do my best.

I loved D-Rank Missions and I wanted to do them for the rest of my life, I decided within a month. Our first official mission—painting a fence—had infuriated Naruto and obviously underwhelmed Sakura, despite the lengths she went to in order to maintain her stiff, polite smile in front of the Hokage. Kakashi had looked on with an air of muted satisfaction as his students’ glamorous dreams of what it meant to be a ninja crashed down around their ears.

I had done my best to shove down the reflexive elation at the time, for two main reasons: one, it was inexplicable for me to be delighted about menial labor far below my recorded skill level, and two, because there was no way to explain that I had recently figured out, because of the way the leaves were beginning to turn, that I had at least five months before I had to deal with the Land of Wave issue.

It wasn’t a perfect system, to be honest. My memory was sketchy, so it had taken a full three weeks of training to the point of exhaustion before I had my epiphany. It came while I was sprawled out on my bed, staring blearily up at the ceiling and trying to concentrate on what I remembered about the Chuunin Exams.

An image of Sakura and Ino’s vicious double-knockout blow inevitably came up, and if it hadn’t been for the fact that I had been literally running on fumes I might have sat bolt upright.

It was damned hard to remember specific dates in this series, but certain moments—scenes—were so picturesque, so damn iconic to my previous self, that they were seared into my memory. That fight had been a blur, but one of the most relatable to the middle-school self of mine that first watched it, because it was brutal and emotional the way fights always were between girl friends. Ignoring the body-jacking, the final punch was memorable enough that a niggling, important detail all but smacked me in the face now that I was looking for it.

_Sakura’s dress had been sleeveless._

Currently, and during the Wave Arc, she wore short sleeves. Presumably, that meant it was an autumn-and-spring outfit, and _that_ meant that the Chuunin Exams would be taking place this coming summer. I remembered that Team 7 had returned to Konoha a short time before then, and fuzzily recalled that there had been an awkwardness that settled between the end of the mission and when Kakashi passed out the application forms for the Exam. Extrapolating from that…

It had snowed, briefly and abruptly, when Haku and Zabuza had died. Depending on how much time actually elapsed between their death and the completion of the bridge, the normal climate of Wave, and exactly how long it took to travel between there and Konoha on foot, that meant the mission took place in mid-to-late springtime, with one unseasonable cold-snap possibly provoked by excessive water jutsu and Haku’s bloodlimit. Possibly.
Nature-based bloodline abilities only really got explained—for a given definition of ‘explained’, anyways—in the second part of the series, when Mokuton and the Senju clan became relevant beyond Sannin-centered shenanigans. So I might have been reaching on that explanation, but it gave me a workable window of time for what could be a pivotal moment in my short life.

More importantly, it gave me an estimate of just how little I had to worry for the next few months. As long as there was snow, I would be safe from the dirge-like toll of the story’s stations of canon. I could calm down and *acclimatize*, finally, and the omnipresent sick, strangling sensation of scrambling to catch up might actually abate by the time that fraudulent C-Rank hit the missions desk.

I wouldn’t hold my breath on that last part, but my mood always perked up every time we went to the Tower and walked out with a D-Rank. Today was no different.

“…didn’t we catch this cat like two weeks ago?” Naruto asked, squinting suspiciously at Kakashi as he handed out earpieces.

“No, that was Tora,” our instructor explained. “Madam Shijimi’s other cat. They’re littermates, but Shishi here is a boy. See how the ribbon around his neck is green, instead of the bow on Tora’s ear, and how there are slight differences in the stripes along the forehead?” He pointed out the specific areas on the glossy, professional photo we had been given. “Totally different. As a shinobi, you need to work harder at discerning details like that in the future, okay?”

“Geh…” Naruto made a face as though he had just bitten into a lemon.

“Also!” Kakashi clapped his hands together in front of him, his eye creasing into a merry smile that put the three of us totally on edge. “This time, you won’t have the pack backing you up. They’re taking the day off.”

“Oh, *what,*” Sakura protested loudly, thankfully before she turned her headset on. “That isn’t fair at all, Sensei! Tora was bad enough, and she would have mauled Naruto if Bull hadn’t stepped in.”

“It’s better to practice tracking a possibly hostile target when they’re only at the level of a pampered cat,” I interjected, fiddling with the fastenings of the black band around my neck. “The dogs are specifically contracted with Kakashi-sensei, after all. If we’re ever on a mission without him, or he is somehow incapacitated—” Like, for no particular reason at all, he passed out from chakra exhaustion, just as a *totally random example,* “—then we won’t have the luxury of their presence.”

“I love the doubtful way you say that,” Kakashi told me, ruffling my hair fondly.

I kicked up less of a fuss than Sakura or Naruto whenever he did so, mostly because everybody was so respectful of my historically-established personal bubble on the daily that I was desperate for any sort of non-violent, non-canine physical contact. Also, I had always loved it when people played with my hair, and it was now so silky and soft that not having somebody touch it felt like a crime.

The worst part of it was that Uchiha Tsukimi used a cheap, standard, unscented two-in-one shampoo. The first few days I had the energy to care enough to examine my hygiene products in detail, I had been filled with knee-jerk, vicious resentment. I was not only unsettlingly pretty; it was effortless.

“Don’t be rude, *Sensei,*” Sakura huffed, bristling the way she always did when she felt that the male half of our team—male majority, if you counted the pack—was being too familiar with me or my person. “Oh, but Tsukimi-chan is right, of course,” she agreed once I turned my attention to her. The pace of her mood swings was still unsettling, but altogether hadn’t been that difficult to get used to. The sweetness level had decreased from shameless fawning to mere bright-eyed admiration, at least,
so I had some hope for the future.

“Obviously,” Naruto added under his breath, earning himself a punch to the ribs.

I had noticed, during our time together, that he would pass little remarks like that without thinking. There was no malice behind them—certainly, he still followed Sakura like a lovesick puppy when she did the same to me—but they came out at the strangest times. It occurred to me, after the third or fourth time, that it was a habitual impudence he had probably developed solely for the sake of grabbing attention. He didn’t have any ill intentions, he was just making it impossible to ignore him.

“…right,” I said slowly, stepping away from our instructor. “Let’s rotate the sectors we covered last time, with Tora,” I suggested. I glanced at Kakashi from the corner of my eye, but he either had no problem with my taking charge or was waiting patiently for it to blow up in my face as some sort of life lesson, like the Smoke Bomb Incident last week that I refused to think about.

“Fine by me,” Naruto grunted, rubbing his side tenderly.

“No problem, Tsukimi-chan!”

“Then, we’ll make contact in fifteen minutes or if we find a lead.” I glanced at Kakashi again.

“Mm. Sounds good to me. I’ll hang back and listen in.” He beamed at us. “When you finish, Sensei will have a special surprise for you, so work hard.”

I bit back a petulant groan, because that meant he was going to nitpick every possible flaw and probably make us do laps too, and nodded impassively. “On three, then,” I said, readying a small field-timer alongside Naruto and Sakura. “One, two three—"

“Sync,” we said, hitting the buttons, and then leapt off towards our respective territories.

None of us found Shishi during the first fifteen minutes, or the fifteen after that. The village wasn’t exactly small, and there were plenty of cats wandering around—and, more significantly, plenty of little nooks and alleys for cats to squeeze into. And while Naruto and Sakura combed through theses areas of their sectors, I found myself waylaid by an entirely different category of obstacle.

Happy customers.

“Uchiha-chan, working hard again today?”

“Ah, Uchiha-chan, thank you again for your help the other day—my garden hasn’t looked so lovely in years.”

“Nee-chan, Nee-chan, Momma’s gonna go visit Aunty again next week; can you come play with me again? Puhleeeeease?”

“Ah, Atsuro, that isn’t how it works, sweetie. Sorry, Uchiha-chan! He’s been hoping to have you and your team come over again ever since he found out I put in another request at the Hokage’s Tower…”

“Uchiha-chan, are you on another mission? Good luck, dear!”
There was a saying to the effect that when it came to working hard, you generally got out what you put in. My enthusiasm for D-Ranks—for a safe, common selection of tasks I could handle with everyday knowledge from my old life—had culminated in the birth of a new facet for my unstoppable reputation. I had worked with children at my job, so child care was comfortably nostalgic; I had pet sit for neighbors, and looked after Bull when he thoughtfully escorted me home, so pet-care was similarly old hat; and my parents had always ensured I knew how to take care of myself and basic household chores.

Weeding, picking up trash, moving and assembling furniture, taking stock and organizing old storerooms, cleaning gutters, sorting and taking away trash… I did it all with a song in my heart and a smile—a small one, tucked safely behind my scarf—on my face.

And despite my careful reticence, the clients all noticed, in their own little ways.

Maybe it was my own fault, or maybe it was born from a barely-restrained curiosity about the Last Uchiha, or maybe civilians that grew up alongside ninja were just more perceptive on the whole; whatever the reason, I found myself with a growing fanbase among the nonmilitant portion of our population. While that had certain perks that I ruthlessly took advantage of when it came time to go shopping again, at the moment it was impeding my current goal.

I murmured my hellos and offered some noncommittal answers, and slipped away as soon as possible, meandering down side streets and checking in once again when I felt the timer buzz against the thin skin of my wrist. None of us had anything to report, other than Naruto getting mauled by a couple more cats that were unrelated to the mission. Animals… animals didn’t like Naruto very much, I had come to realize during our time together.

Even the pack had taken some time to warm up to him initially. I wondered from time to time if it was because of his natural inclination towards dominance via aggression, his shrill voice, or perhaps some primal wariness sparked by the being sealed away in his belly. It wasn’t anything serious, though, so I was able to shelve my musings on the subject once again with minimal effort.

Also, I was distracted by something infinitely more appealing. It was edging towards noon, and something smoky and deliciously spiced wafted through the air.

“Oh, it’s the little miss,” An old man squinted at me from the back porch of his house, fanning away at a little grill. “Fancy seeing you here.”

After a quick mental search, I pegged him as a retired fisherman we assisted with a haul two days ago.

“Good morning, Fushimi-san,” I greeted. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Hard at work again?” The old man shot me a perceptive look. “Seems like you and the other two young’uns are always flitting about.”

“Our teacher doesn’t believe in idling away,” I lied flagrantly. Or perhaps not so flagrantly—I wasn’t entirely sure about Kakashi’s views on that particular issue. While on a personal level he seemed entirely willing to laze around, I had noticed that despite how often we hit up the Tower for missions, we never managed to cross paths with any of our former classmates. Perhaps we were ahead of the curve, in that respect.

“Well, can’t work on an empty stomach,” Fushimi said with a firmness almost alien against his reedy voice. He pulled out a small sheaf of wax paper from his sleeve and began transferring some of what was on his grill into it. Once finished, he folded it and waved me over.
“I couldn’t possibly impose,” I tried to demure, but the old man wouldn’t have any of it.

“Bah,” he scoffed, and waved harder. His boney hand looked like a rusty hinge about to snap off, which hastened me over more than anything else. “You’re too thin by half,” he chided me, pressing the wax paper into my palm. “Nothin’ but skin and bones under all those layers, don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said politely, cradling the hot paper bundle in my hand. A quick peek allowed me to deduce that he had given me four seasoned and smoked little sardines, and a few squid legs. “Thank you for your generosity, Fushimi-san.”

“Bah,” he said again, and waved me off. I noticed a bit of pink in his weathered, tan cheeks. “Go back to work, missy. S’nothin’ more than a bit of gratitude for the work you’n yours put in. Money’s all well and good, but there’s nothin’ like tasting the real fruits of a day’s work!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I told him, then bowed and bid him farewell.

“I never get free fruit, ’ttebayo,” Naruto grumbled out of the blue as I poked around a park.

“I didn’t get any fruit,” I said, peeking at my still-cooling snack. “And we’re supposed to be maintaining radio silence outside of check-ins and updates.”

“Ugh, fiine.”

I heard a rustling, and stepped back against a stone bench, peering up at the trees above. They were thick with rich, colorful leaves, which made it particularly difficult to discern whether or not a tabby cat was hiding among them. I paced around the park, keeping my eyes sharp for any movement as my perspective rotated.

“…So, what did you get, Tsukimi-hime?” Naruto asked, derailing my train of thought.

“Naruto, Tsukimi-chan already told you to shut up!” Sakura snapped.

“Fish and squid,” I answered idly at the same time.

An awkward silence settled over the channel, which allowed me to hear the rustle again.

“Tsukimi-chan, I—”

“Shh,” I said, tilting my head and slowly crouching down. “I think I might have a lead.” I saw a flash of green when I looked under a bench a few feet away, and carefully began to unwrap my little gift. I had hoped to eat it myself rather than eat out again today or trudge home to make something before evening training, but since I had left my communicator on like a total idiot I would have to at least pretend I had more noble intentions. I silently mourned my could-have-been snack and nudged the open parcel halfway between myself and the bench.

Shishi hesitated, but once the faint breeze picked up and carried over the scent, he slunk out of his little hideaway.

“There’s a good boy,” I crooned, gentle and inviting. I made sure to rub some of the oil and seasoning onto a couple of my fingers before he reached the fish. “That’s right, eat as much as you want, honey.”

He made short work of the old fisherman’s gift, lapping hungrily at the wax paper. After a moment of haughty indecision, the portly cat strolled over to nose at my fingers. I held them still as he...
dragged his rough tongue over them, and tentatively reached out to gently stroke him.

“Such a handsome boy,” I cooed, softly digging the fingers of my free hand into his plush coat. “You must worked up quite an appetite since you slipped away yesterday; Madam Shijimi probably spoils you rotten. No rats or sparrows for her darlings, I’m sure.” He finished his licking and butted his head against my wrist, purring like a broken motor. “You’re a charming one, aren’t you?” I scooped him up as smoothly and mindfully as possible, but he seemed less tempestuous than his sister.

Or maybe it was just because he was used to being fawned over by girls.

Whatever the reason, he didn’t kick up much of a fuss, and allowed me to cradle him against my shoulder like a baby. I was gentler than his mistress probably was about it, so he was kind enough to spare me from his claws. I murmured words of thanks and sweet, doting compliments as I stood up, but went stone still when I turned to leave the park.

I stared at my teammates, who were staring right back at me with hands clapped over their mouths and identical baby-duckling expressions.

“…shut up.” I ordered them sternly, and swept past them in a desperate effort to get ahead of them before the blush I could feel creeping up could become too apparent.

“A-Ah, Tsukimi-chan, wait up!” Sakura was the first one to snap out of it, surprisingly.

“We didn’t say anything, ’ttebayo!” Naruto chipped in, dogging after us. But I could hear the laughter he was choking back as clear as day, damn him.

I maintained a stony silence all the way back to the Tower, despite their best efforts, and held it even as we reunited with Kakashi and waited for the Daimyo’s wife to arrive. Shishi yowled and tried to cling to me when I went to hand him over, and the betrayed looks he shot me as his mistress coddled and squashed him stabbed at my heart, dispelling my humiliation at last.

I’m so sorry, I tried to tell him with my eyes, but my attempts at telepathy were derailed when the door behind us slammed open.

“Rejoice, fair Madam, we have found your beloved Tora—in record time!” A boisterous voice boomed out.

No. Way.

A part of me knew what I would find even before I turned to look, but somehow I was still thunderstruck by the four people—and one vaguely-traumatized cat—standing in the doorway. The speaker, however, seemed even more shocked than I was, going so far as to stagger back.

“No…” his voice softened briefly, before he threw one—very green—arm out, finger jabbing in Kakashi’s direction. “How can this be? It seems you somehow beat us and won yet again, my Eternal Rival!”

“We were competing?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up. I only realized how cruel that might sound when Gai—who else could it be, really?—clutched at his chest dramatically.

“Kuh…” He clenched a fist. “To think that you’ve already imparted so much of your cool and hip attitude after such little time together!”

“Surprise,” Kakashi told us, idly flipping a page and ignoring the newcomers entirely.
Because we were meant to be respectable, dubiously competent young shinobi and kunoichi, we managed to derail the dramatic confrontation until the cats had both been wrestled into their wicker carriers and we had gotten paid, though Madam Shijimi looked a little disappointed about missing the show.

Once we had relocated to a small, deserted playground, however, Konoha’s Beautiful Green Beast picked right back up where he had left off.

“Well, well, well—as expected of you, Kakashi!” He posed, with one hand propped on his hip and an index finger pressed between his honestly impressively thick eyebrows. Rather than the disgust I remembered other characters responding with, I found myself thinking that they suited him. I was surprised to find that his nose was a little crooked, but given his specialty and how often he had probably broken it, I really shouldn’t have been. It added a certain kind of dramatic flair when paired with his high-cheekbones. He had a nice smile, too, the kind that made you want to smile back without thinking.

I kept a weathered eye out for any sparkles or sudden shift in scenery.

“Yes, yes,” Kakashi sighed, finally shutting his book and putting it back in his vest. “What have I done this time?”

My teammates were nowhere near as composed as our instructor. Sakura had one hand knotted in the sleeve of my overshirt, peering suspiciously at the other squad. Naruto was doing the same, shoulder to shoulder with me and squinting over at them rudely. His arms were folded and his mouth was twisted into something I now knew to be a thoughtful pout, but what an outsider would probably take as pure provocation.

“My Rival, there’s no need to act coy!” Gai shook his head and grinned at us. “I’m impressed! Even with a year’s head start, your squad managed to apply themselves admirably and triumph over my own. And to think, I nearly offered you a head-start as a handicap… We shall do ten laps around the village for our loss!”

That didn’t seem very fair, considering how little effort we actually put in. I would have said as much, but something in me shied away from the thought of just blurting that out. Gai’s team was already staring me down intently enough as it was.

“Something you want to say, Tsukimi-chan?” Kakashi asked, tilting his head towards me knowingly.

“You never told us we were competing, Sensei,” I said, trying to remember how to speak Hotblooded Shounen Protagonist. “It feels disrespectful to our senpai—” Gai had mentioned ‘a
year’s head start’ so I felt safe enough using the term. “—to count this as a team-versus-team victory when we didn’t face them head-on.”

“If anything, it’s a Tsukimi-chan-versus-team victory,” Sakura chipped in, undermining the point I had wanted to make quite capably. The grip on my sleeve had turned proprietary rather than wary, which probably meant she had finally gotten a good look at either Neji or Tenten. I was putting that off, myself.

“How unpleasant. That’s even more disrespectful,” I told her, my voice turning sharp for a moment. Sakura wilted and let my sleeve slip from her suddenly slack fingers, but I refused to feel bad. I had no intention of rewarding that sort of behavior. “Sorry, sir, sometimes she doesn’t realize how insulting some of her compliments can be.” I bowed my head before Gai.

A moment later, Sakura followed suit, mumbling apologies of her own. Good, I thought. She was learning.

“Ah, no, think nothing of it, Uchiha-chan,” Gai assured me. I straightened up, and again had to fight off the urge to return that infectious smile. “Having pride in one’s teammate is no sin.”

In this case it was, actually, I mused. Several at once, if you wanted to split hairs. Pride, envy, lust…

“Thank you, sir,” I said, folding my hands in front of me.

“…AH!”

I nearly jolted out of my skin at his sudden exclamation of dismay.

“Kakashi, could it be…!?!” Gai swung his head around to stare at Kakashi, totally aghast. “Have you neglected to inform your students about our Eternal Rivalry? Do they know nothing about myself or my team? Have you not instructed them to gather intelligence on us?”

...say what now?

“Hey, wait,” Naruto said, in his own special version of sotto voce. “Tsukimi-hime, does that mean they’ve been stalking us?” He eyed the older genin with deep and readily apparent uncertainty.

“Not necessarily,” I told him, burying just how unsettling I found the thought. “We graduated recently, so they might have simply tracked down our records. If they expect a long-term relationship of any sort, reconnaissance is a good first step.” I was reasonably sure I had stolen that turn of phrase verbatim from a little ‘Introduction to Sleeper Agents’ leaflet that was marking my place in a thick manual about wire traps at the moment.

“Just so!” Gai flashed me a thumbs-up. “Forgive me for my presumption, Uchiha-chan. I am Maito Gai, a long-time contemporary of your instructor. Since he has been remiss in his duties, allow me to introduce my precious students to you!”

“Rude,” Kakashi said.

“Team 7, meet Rock Lee!”

“A pleasure to meet you!”

“Tenten!”

“I’m… I’m sorry about them. But it’s nice to get a proper introduction.”
“And Hyuuga Neji, our very own prodigy!”

“…a pleasure,” the final member of their squad said, with obvious reluctance and only after a pointed jab from Tenten.

Sakura and I returned the greetings, and she bullied Naruto into following suit. He still eyed them with great distrust, though, and edged in front of me and Sakura as though he expected them to whip out peeper-cameras at any moment or ask about our three sizes.

I fought down the urge to roll my eyes, but just barely. Instead, I glanced at our teacher suspiciously.

“This is because I asked about standards of progress for genin, isn’t it,” I said to Kakashi. It wasn’t a question, because this sort of timeline-jumping meeting could only be my fault, somehow, and that was the latest incident to jump to mind.

“Sometimes it’s better to see these sorts of things for yourself,” Kakashi told me. It wasn’t quite an agreement, however, and I narrowed my eyes at him. If I had been totally right, he would have praised me and patted my head, regardless of the fact that we were in public. It was personal pride that drove me to reason out the rest and absolutely nothing else. I would swear that up and down.

“…the first thing you need to be prepared for in the field is more often than not the absolute last thing on your mind,” I threw his own words back at him. “Like a rival faction you don’t know about pursuing the same goal?”

“That’s our very own prodigy,” Kakashi praised me, ruffling his fingers through my hair. I bore it with an air of injured dignity, but some of the tension in my shoulders melted away despite my best efforts. “You three have been blowing through D-Ranks without much fuss, so I thought we could use these guys as a first step towards getting you ready for a C-Rank. Other villages don’t really give us a fair warning as to where or why they dispatch their own teams, you know.”

“I’ve heard rumors of a genius in the years below us,” Hyuuga Neji commented, apparently of his own volition this time.

“No, that’s more likely to be Nara-san, even if he sabotaged his own rankings,” I corrected him immediately, searching for a way to kill any line of conversation about my alleged competency before it could go to far. “I’ve simply been chasing the back of somebody far worthier of the title since birth.”

An awkward silence immediately descended, and I basked in it. Also, I reveled in the fact that it gave me a reason not to directly look at Neji for a while, because his eyes were unspeakably creepy to me for some reason. They looked totally blank, which shouldn’t have unsettled me so much considering all the CGI and special effects some of my favorite movies and shows used. But there was apparently a world of difference between white contacts and truly unblemished eyeballs.

It might have been less of an issue if I had been standing close enough to see some of the fine veins in them, or it might have been substantially worse. I found that I wasn’t willing to make that gamble.

“Whoa, you’ve got somebody you look up to that much?” Naruto asked, looking impressed. From the corner of my eye, I caught the exact instant that Team Gai came to the awkward realization that my teammates hadn’t done any internal intelligence gathering, either.

“Don’t be rude, Naruto!” Sakura huffed, but there was a bit of curiosity in her own gaze. “Tsukimichi may be amazing, but even she has people she aspires to be like, stupid.”

“Well,” I said, voice dry. “I’m not sure I would go that far. Konoha only has so many prestigious
clans left. I doubt anybody would appreciate me going the way of my brother.”

“You…” Naruto trailed off, a complicated expression flitting over his face. “But that day, when I walked you home, you said—” He cut himself off, and then his eyes went hard. “That fucker—the one who went crazy and killed everybody and ran off—he took away the person you looked up to?”

Sakura clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes going huge and horrified, possibly figuring out the truth of the matter, but equally as likely as to be following Naruto’s train of thought. I suddenly felt very keenly that I should have offered Team Gai popcorn before I forced them to play audience to this dramatic little scene.

“I suppose you could say that,” I said. “I mean, he was that fucker who went crazy and killed everybody, so you aren’t technically wrong.”

Perhaps that had been a bit too cavalier, I reflected as my teammates gaped at me, silent and aghast. I wasn’t sure if I liked that look more or less than the gooey gazes my little moment with Shishi had inspired earlier.

“O-Oi, watch your language, Tsukimi-hime!” Naruto was the first to snap out of it, and steamrolled into a suitably stupid ice-breaker that roused Sakura as well.

“Na-ru-to…” She must have gotten pointers on growling from Akino and Bisuke, I reflected, because the menacing timbre of her voice actually made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. “How dare you make Tsukimi-chan dirty her mouth with that kind of language!”

“What? No, Sakura-chan, I didn’t—!”

“She only ever says things like that after you say them first!”

Kakashi and I idly watched the usual back-and-forth banter and beating break out between them. “They’re going to be at this for a while, if we don’t distract them,” he sighed.

“Mhm,” I agreed.

“Ramen, do you think?” He kept his voice low, so Naruto wouldn’t rabidly latch onto the word.

“Haruno was complaining about going to the same place too often just yesterday,” I disagreed. I wanted to shake my head, but he hadn’t moved his hand from my head yet. I could only imagine what impressions Gai and his team were forming about us. “It might only prolong the fight.”

“Ahh, why can’t they be more like you? Tsukimi-chan never gives Sensei this kind of grief.” We both elected to ignore the fact that I was usually the point of contention in these cases, if not the direct instigator.

“Mm.” I lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“Right, right. Let’s see… hey, Gai I don’t suppose you know any decent restaurants around this area?”

“I do indeed!” To his credit, the man didn’t miss a beat. And the noontime sun really did glint off his teeth, this time.
We ended up shuffled off to what was essentially a Chinese restaurant, sans the normal cultural association but somehow retaining all of the more common paraphernalia. The booths were large and offered a nice, private atmosphere.

“Please allow me to assist you if you have any questions about the menu!” Rock Lee offered, and probably would have thrown in a thumbs-up if we had the space. He and I were seated across from each other, against the wall. “I have frequented this establishment for years, you see.”

In contrast to Neji’s legitimately alien eyes, I had no trouble meeting Lee’s gaze. On paper, they were depicted as cartoonish—literally so, in the opinion of many fans who recalled the old character of Betty Boop. In the flesh, there was no trace of that resemblance.

Instead of Boop, it was much more apt to say that he had Bette Davis eyes,—and damn it all, I was going to have that song stuck in my head for the rest of the day.

They were a bit rounder than mine, but his lashes were thick and fanned out in a way that said he had all the necessary potential to be a looker given a few years and a decent haircut that didn’t make his head look like a slightly misshapen cannonball. He had nothing on Neji’s creepy, doll-like beauty, but he wasn’t ugly by any stretch of the imagination. If he wore something more flattering than a onesie and groomed his eyebrows a bit, I thought even Sakura wouldn’t turn her nose up at him, even if he did have particularly thin lips.

“Thank you, Lee-senpai,” I nodded to him as I removed and folded my scarf, tucking it safely between my hip and the wall. “Do you have any recommendations?”

I listened with half an ear as he rattled off different dishes and their descriptions, taking stock of the situation around the table from my periphery. Naruto was next to me, with Kakashi acting as a buffer between him and Sakura. Across from her was Tenten, who had engaged her in conversation. I wasn’t sure what common ground they might have, given how… different their priorities could be.

Naruto was staring down Neji, and—

“So like, you’re related to that Hinata chick that was in our class, right?”

…holy shit, thank God Kakashi and Gai were sitting right next to them.

“I don’t believe that’s the type of intelligence-gathering Maito-san meant,” I interjected, when Lee tripped over his own tongue after hearing that particularly unfortunate ice-breaker. “Why don’t you start with something less personal than family, Uzumaki.” He didn’t bring up yours, I tried to convey with a little nudge. “Something like, ‘Lee-senpai, have you found your specialty yet?’” I turned to the other boy, assuming a look of polite interest.

On the other side of Naruto, I felt more than saw Kakashi shift around and thought: good. He deserved to feel a little uncomfortable about us blundering into tender subjects, after springing all of this on us.

“I have devoted myself entirely to the art of taijutsu,” Lee said, surprisingly tactful as he followed my efforts to be a good example. “In fact, I had hoped to try challenging you, as I have been hoping to widen my experience against all-rounder opponents such as yourself.”

He’s precocious, and he knows just what it takes to make a pro blush—wait, no.

I fought back the wave of flattered appreciation that welled up, because when he challenged me,
wasn’t he supposed to make some confusing argument about measuring a natural genius against being a genius of good, old-fashioned grit and elbow grease, or something?

“I would love to,” I said automatically, before I realized that I had just willingly consigned myself to hell and would probably be a giant, whimpering bruise in the aftermath, because Rock Lee did not fuck around in a fight and never had. “Though I don’t know if I can confidently call myself an all-rounder. I don’t have my Sharingan yet—” Or at least, I couldn’t independently activate it. “—and Sensei hasn’t taught us any new techniques just yet. I would likely benefit far more than you, Senpai.”

Neji made a faint noise in the back of his throat that I didn’t care to decipher. Probably he had just finished choking back his reflexive, traumatically misplaced rage after the mention of Hinata brought it bubbling to the surface.

I ignored him utterly, because I was in the middle of a conversation with somebody who didn’t make me feel queasy wen I looked at him head on. “If you still want to, I would appreciate the opportunity. I know that the number of dedicated taijutsu practitioners willing to fight me will rapidly diminish once I do have full use of my dojutsu, so I hope to make the best of what time I have left.” I was completely bullshitting at this point, four parts in the hope of putting him off and one part making a complete leap of intuition based on the results of the pre- and mid-Exam matchups with Lee I recalled.

“It’s a little scary, how thorough she is at preparing for the future,” Kakashi lied straight to Gai’s face, because I was not and probably never would be.

“Tsukimi-chan is so capable,” Sakura sighed dreamily. “Diligent, too! She never complains, no matter how many boring missions Sensei sticks us with.”

“Hey,” Kakashi protested half-heartedly. “That’s not fair. Blame the people manning the Missions Desk, not me.”

“Pakkun says fairness is a feeble construct that people cling to in order to make themselves feel better,” I offered, taking a sip of water.

“…Pakkun’s gotten a little cynical in his old age,” Kakashi commented, after a short pause.

“More like gluttonous,” I disagreed. “He said it after he had swiped half of Guruko-san’s lunch.”

“…still can’t believe you make those for the dogs…” I heard Sakura grumble.

“Hey, Tsukimi-hime, why don’t you ever cook for us, ’ttebayo?”

“Pay me for the ingredients and I will,” I said, going back to looking at the menu. “I don’t have a problem with making extra in the mornings.” My wallet did, though. Kakashi, despite his bill-dodging ways, never failed to slip money into my weapons pouch at the end of the week for taking care of his ninken.

“…what, really?” Both of my teammates turned to stare at me, Sakura leaning out in front of Kakashi to do so fully. “Tsukimi-chan, can we really get your handmade bento so easily?!”

“….don’t make this weird,” I warned her, eyeing her warily. “I can and will rescind the offer.”

She popped back into her seat with an alarmed little squeak, and I swallowed back the huge sigh I wanted to heave. Despite my best intentions, when I rolled my eyes they ended up locked with Neji’s creepy blank gaze.
“You are not what your records and peers led us to expect,” he said shrewdly.

“Tsukimi-hime didn’t want to waste time with friends ‘n stuff at the Academy,” Naruto said. He almost sounded as if he were boasting. “But she thinks we’re awesome so we get special treatment.

“I went to the Academy for a reason,” I explained to Neji’s eyes, because dear God I couldn’t look away. It was like a trainwreck, or a magnet. A really, really unpleasant magnet. “I didn’t have so much free time that I could afford to waste it on other students who would mean nothing to me after graduation. I’ll be with this team until we’re Chuunin, so there is a professional benefit in establishing a rapport.”

“…Tsukimi-chan’s gotten a little cynical in her old age,” Kakashi commented. There was a short scuffle, presumably Sakura trying to kick him beneath the table in order to defend my honor.

I grabbed the opening desperately, peering at him from beneath my lashes before my unwilling staredown with Neji was getting uncomfortably intense. “Sensei, if your rivalry with Maito-san is so longstanding, then… there is a professional benefit in establishing a rapport with him and his team too, isn’t there?”

I had been hoping to ruffle his feathers and get some sort of awkward rejoinder so somebody else could have a turn in the hotseat, but found myself disappointed.

“As expected, it’s hard to get much by you.”

…wait, what? I pursed my looks and pinned him with a blank stare.

“Sorry for meddling, but you really do need to interact with somebody other than customers, the team, and food vendors,” Kakashi told me, reaching over Naruto to ruffle my hair. “It makes Sensei worry.”

“I interact with more people than that,” I protested, wondering where this angle came from.

“The old woman at the grocery store doesn’t count either, Tsukimi-chan,” he told me gently.

“You take that back,” I snapped, because Mitsuba-baachan was the best. She always had a kind word to say and had free food to give me out of concern for my health. She totally counted. She was easily the most socially and emotionally well-adjusted person I knew.

“Okay, okay.” He was laughing, hands raised defensively. “Still, it can’t hurt to have more people your own age around that you’ll actually deign to speak to, can it?”

“Mm.” I gave him a noncommittal grunt and hid behind my menu.

“That means she’s fine with it,” Naruto translated. “She’d rip you a new one and leave if she really didn’t want to,” he explained.

“Naruto has to pay for and carry the supplies if he wants a bento,” I idly decided.

“Eh? No way, Tsukimi-hime, that isn’t fair at all!”

“Shut up, Naruto, Tsukimi-chan can add whatever conditions she wants!”

“How noisy,” I barely caught from Neji, beneath the ensuing argument.

“How inspiring!” Lee exclaimed, setting off Gai and spiraling into a tangent I chose not to listen to, despite its high volume.
“It looks like you have some troublesome circumstances of your own, huh, Uchiha-chan?”

I decided that I liked Tenten, catching her knowing gaze from over the top of my menu. She seemed like a very down-to-earth person. I resolved to get to know her a little better from here on out.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you unfamiliar with the song Tsukimi got stuck in her head, have a listen. It's an oldie-but-goodie. I was humming it off and on the entire time I was writing this chapter.
In which I socialize, mostly via silence

Chapter Summary

Not today, Shoujo. Not today.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Uchiha-san,” Neji said after our meal was over, nearly overshadowing my request for leftovers. “After this, I would like a moment of your time, if possible.”

I tossed an arch look at the boy standing between me and my God-given right to cold lo-mein, then glanced at my instructor for permission. He was smoothing the seam of his mask into place, but bodily turned to glance back when he felt my gaze, since I was on his covered side.

“We’ll just be starting with basic training again today,” Kakashi said. “Since you usually finish that faster than the other two, it’s fine if you take a little time to yourself first, just this once.” He brightened when two stacks of boxes, already trussed up in brown paper bags and stapled shut, were delivered to the table. “Ah, and once you’re finished chatting, you can tuck Sensei’s leftovers into your fridge until after training too! How crafty, Tsukimi-chan.”

As stipulations went, that wasn’t so bad. I had half expected some sort of penalty, and had half-hoped I might be able to use that as an excuse not to go off with Neji. What if he wanted to challenge me to a spar, the way Lee had been supposed to? Chakra exhaustion had majorly sucked; I didn’t even want to imagine what having my tenketsu blocked up might feel like.

“But Kakashi-sensei—!” Sakura began to protest, before Naruto uncharacteristically clapped a hand over her mouth and hissed something in her ear. She, even more uncharacteristically, did not punch him into next week, and even subsided into silence.

“Thank you,” I said politely, as my paranoia skyrocketed. Were they going to levy their own consequences for this special treatment? Given Naruto’s proclivity for pranking, I would have to be on my guard. He had been well-behaved for so long that I had almost forgotten what a hell raiser he could be when he put his mind to it.

Once our instructors paid the bill, they took our teammates and shuffled out, leaving only Neji and I by the large booth.

“I just need one moment,” I told him, pulling a thin-tipped marker from the same compartment I kept my wallet in, and quickly differentiated my bag from Kakashi’s, with a quickly scrawled out fan and a henohenomoheji respectively. I capped the marker and put it away before picking up my bag, but I found myself beaten to the punch when it came to the other one.

“Allow me,” Neji said, though it sounded more like an order than an offer. I ceded it gracefully, because it was less of a hassle and I could hardly complain about him trying to be chivalrous. I felt too bad about my kneejerk reaction to his eyes to honestly protest that I could handle it.

“Thank you,” I said again. “Do you mind if we drop the food off first, or would you rather we
address whatever it is you want to say immediately?"

“It might be best if we attend to these before anything else,” he said, shifting the bag in the crook of his arm as he walked out. My suspicions of a challenge being delivered in my near future grew exponentially. It seemed that merely getting my ass kicked across a training field by Lee wouldn’t be enough; Neji wanted in on the action as well.

Well, I made my bed, and now I would eventually have to just heave my bruised, suffering body into it. In a best-case scenario, having to deal with both of them might actually be distressing enough to kick-start my Sharingan.

An almost companionable silence descended between us as I brooded over my imminent and most likely highly painful losses. I was roused from my rapidly blackening mood when I caught sight of Mitsuba-baachan’s store. She caught sight of me through the window while talking to some customer I couldn’t see, and gave me a little wave. I returned it, and lifted my chin out of my scarf so she could see the small smile my mouth curled into.

“That would be the grocer woman, I take it?” Neji broke the silence at last, once we had passed the shop window.

I nodded, tucking my mouth back under my scarf. “Mitsuba-baachan has always been very kind to me,” I explained. “She also has very reasonable prices and weekly sales.”

He made a noise of polite interest, and we turned quiet once more until we reached the gates of my District. From there, I noticed that his shoulders grew tenser and tenser the deeper in we went, and I couldn’t blame him. Just based on my own reactions, and Naruto’s too, I felt that he reacted the same way any normal person would, when walking through a modern-day ghost town.

Inexplicably, that tension flowed out of him as soon as I turned onto the small rock path leading to my townhouse. When I worked up the courage to glance towards his face, I saw his head was turned in the direction of the main house. He turned his head, catching me looking, and in that moment I wasn’t sure which of us felt more awkward.

“I apologize,” he said, his voice going stilted for a moment. “We kept our observations professional and were instructed to stop at property limits. We had been concerned that you might… It was an improper assumption,” he interrupted himself. “You are fully capable of choosing where to live, and nobody has the right to question that.”

Oh. Gai’s team thought that I might actually live in the place where Itachi had murdered ‘our’ parents. I… I wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about that, so I shelved the matter entirely and lifted one shoulder in a shrug, instead focusing on fishing out my keys.

“It’s fine,” I said, opening the door and stepping inside. “That would be pretty alarming, if I did live there after all this time. When I’m older, I might move back, but it would need to be cleaned and remodeled first.” And possibly exorcised, because Jesus Christ, even if I had no memories of them, people had been murdered by their own son in that house. Possibly, the former residents of my current residence had been murdered as well, if it had been occupied during the Massacre. But if they had, I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to know, either.

Strangely, like Naruto, Neji also refused to come in, merely holding out Kakashi’s leftovers for me when I propped the door open with my foot.

“I’ll wait out here,” he said, and I realized it had to be some sort of pervasive, cultural thing, especially if even Naruto observed it the exact same way. I found it a bit ridiculous—we were twelve
and thirteen, what did they think would happen?—but I merely nodded and took the bag, letting the
door swing shut behind me.

In the epicurean cycle of my kitchen, my refrigerator was currently in its waning crescent stage.
While it meant that I would once again need to go shopping—especially if Sakura and Naruto made
good on my offer for making them lunch—it made it particularly easy to rearrange what food I did
have and pull out two of the shelves so that both bags of leftovers fit inside. I left them neatly stacked
on the counter beside the refrigerator and headed back out, not rude enough to drag my feet just
because I was privately dreading the upcoming conversation.

“Sorry for the wait,” I apologized anyways, and he merely nodded in acknowledgement before
beginning to walk back down the road.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather talk about this matter…” Neji paused, waiting for me to catch up
before he resumed his steady pace. “Somewhere else. I don’t wish to seem insensitive, but—”

“It’s fine, I know it’s creepy here,” I assured him, going so far as to pat his shoulder in
commiseration. “It’s literally a hundred times worse after night falls. I’m not offended at all.”

‘Then why the hell do you live here?’ I was sure he wanted to ask, from what I could translate of his
mostly unreadable expression. The only answer I could give was ‘I have no idea how to move while
still pretending I’ve always been Uchiha Tsukimi’ and I couldn’t actually
say that. He’d think I was
insane.

Thankfully, his prudence allowed us to settle into another silence—I supposed it suited our perceived
characters—and I was more than content to let him take the lead. He stopped in one of several public
parks that were dotted through the village, filled with resplendent, crimson-topped maple trees and a
crumbling stone marker proclaiming it —ma Memorial Park, half of the title obscured by thick moss.

Apparently Gai had instilled his flair for the dramatic in at least two of his students.

“Uchiha-san,” he began, once we seated ourselves on one of the weathered stone benches beneath
the largest tree at the center of the park.

“Hyuuga-senpai,” I prompted, when he fell silent, apparently contemplating how to cordially request
the honor of beating me like a rug at a later date.

“Uchiha-san,” Neji began again. “I would like to take this opportunity to gauge your interest in a
possible courtship between the two of us.”

As soon as the words actually registered, my body froze but my mind began racing. Did he just ask
me out? was my first coherent thought, followed quickly by I need an adult, and then the rapid
realization of but I’m an adult, finished off with Maybe he needs an adult, right now. And then I
remembered just who the foremost adults in his life were.

It was probably clan politics that drove him to do this, I told myself firmly, because otherwise I was
going to stand up and run like hell, the same way I did when Sakura blushed and drew circles in the
dirt with her toe and breathily asked me if I had free time after training. And that would be rude, after
he had been nice enough to carry Kakashi’s food.

“I am very flattered by your apparent interest,” I said, when I was sure my voice wouldn’t squeak
with gut-wrenching horror. “But currently, I am focusing all of my interest into my career.” I kept my
eyes firmly locked on the leaves gently drifting down in front of us.

“I thought as much,” he said, toneless. “And if I asked about the future?”
There is so much more to worry about in the future than dating, especially for you, I thought, a touch hysterically.

“While I don’t know you personally enough to know if it would be worth changing my mind,” I began, latching on to a sudden burst of inspiration and running with it. “My initial response would still be ‘no,’ if only because I have a duty to rebuild the Uchiha clan in the future, and there’s no telling what abilities a future child of ours might have.” That was a lie, because I vaguely recalled reading somewhere that Kishimoto had said such a child would have one Sharingan and one Byakugan. “As it stands, it’s possible that such a union would merely produce a second Branch family for the Hyuuga.”

It was a low blow. It was a really, really low blow.

But it worked.

“I see,” he said, after a brief, thoughtful moment. Then, “I understand. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me on this matter.” I thought there was a touch of honest gratitude in his voice, and when I cautiously glanced at him, his mouth had a faint, blink-and-you’ll-miss-it curve.

“It was no trouble,” I assured him, nearly giddy with relief. “You have been incredibly… poised,” I said carefully, “compared to what I’m used to in this regard, at least.” That was pure speculation, but the memory of the fallout from my accidental nap the day of team assignments wouldn’t be fading anytime soon.

“I must admit to some similar experiences,” Neji said. “And, as you might have surmised, my interest in you is not exactly romantic in nature. With this, however, I can report back to Hiashi-sama that I made every attempt and was still respectfully rebuffed.”

Nailed it. Thank God.

“I thought so,” I admitted. “But it’s a relief to hear you say it. I don’t particularly enjoy being stalked before a confession of any sort.” I kept my voice carefully neutral, because I wasn’t sure if we were at a point where deadpan humor was acceptable or not.

“Ah,” he said, and his lips curved into an actual smile. He really was very good looking, for a kid, I thought. In a completely aesthetic sense of course, since, again, he was a kid, but it was getting easier to look at him without being transfixed by his freaky eyes. “I was wondering whether or not you had sensed them.”

…wait, what?

“Dammit,” I heard Naruto hiss from one of the nearby maples, because of course they had followed us. Why in God’s name had I ever even assumed that they wouldn’t? I kept my face blank as Naruto dropped down from the boughs of the only type of tree that could ever honestly camouflage him, and Sakura sheepishly emerged from a bush. Kakashi was just suddenly right there, one hand already fluffing through my hair.

“I am so sorry,” I apologized to Neji quietly. “…but it would have been worse if we went somewhere they couldn’t follow,” I realized, a touch ruefully.

“I thought so,” he admitted, just as quiet. “But it’s a relief to hear you say it. I don’t particularly enjoy being publically rejected.” There was no mistaking the smirk on his face this time.

I swallowed back a laugh, glancing at him from the side. Your sass has been duly noted, Senpai, I thought. I would keep that in mind for the future, since Kakashi seemed intent on me making friends
‘my own age’.

“Okay,” I said, stepping forward and letting my hands settle on my hips as I corralled my expression into something approaching stern. “The show’s over. Time for training.”

“Eh, but—” Sakura’s hands fluttered up in some strange gesture. “But, Tsukimi-chan, aren’t you—I mean, I thought—”

“Time,” I said, in a tone that was pure Pakkun, low and unyielding. “For training.”

Kakashi laughed, and Neji took the opportunity to leave, never looking back.

The next morning, I walked downstairs still in my pajamas and found Kakashi sitting at my little table with his mask around his neck and crunching on cold pork fried rice with obvious relish.

*I feel you, bro,* was my first, honest reaction, followed quickly by, *I forgot he had that mole.* Then I rubbed at my face with one long, sinfully soft flannel sleeve and sighed, before heading over to the refrigerator. When I swung the door open, I found—obviously—that Kakashi’s bag had been popped open and was half-empty, suggesting that he had been enjoying the tranquility of eating in my kitchen for some time before I got up. Also, the remaining shelves were flush with ingredients I knew for a fact hadn’t been there when I made dinner yesterday night.

*Don’t think about it,* I advised myself, then tore open my bag and dug out the lo mein. I found that I had been given all of the fortune cookies for some reason, and after a moment of contemplation I dug two out and dropped them in front of Kakashi before going to fish out a pair of chopsticks from my cutlery drawer. I stabbed them into the carton and nearly groaned in bliss once I slurped down the first mouthful.

“We’re going back there again, right?” I asked, plucking up a piece of chicken and chewing it as slowly as possible to savor it. There was nothing, I reflected peacefully, on Earth like good Chinese leftovers.

“As long as you play nice with Gai’s team,” Kakashi stipulated, which I could respect. Bribery wasn’t something I was too proud to accept, in this case.

“Deal,” I said, raising my carton as if in a toast, and he bumped it with his own.

We finished our respective cartons in satisfied silence, him getting up at one point to fish out a container of what I thought was Crab Rangoon, which he finished before I got up to wash and throw out the oily cardboard remains of my so-called breakfast. He was still there when I finished showering, brushing my teeth and getting dressed, but his mask was up and the book was out.

He had either changed volumes or changed covers, this time pastel blue with cute white spots.

I thought back to the case of the mysteriously well-stocked fridge, now that I was fresh and ready to face the day. “I take it I’ll be making two lunches today?” I asked, moving over to my pantry to heave out the huge bag of rice.

“What a sweet, generous student I have,” Kakashi said, pressing his open book to his breast as though honestly touched. I rolled my eyes and got cooking, more than happy to ignore him for the
Aside from a pointed reminder of, “Don’t forget the pack,” that had me quickly assembling some meatballs, he was happy to let me work in silence, accepting his finished bento with a happy eye-crease, and sauntered out after me. I went to lock the door and when I turned around, there was only a swirling cloud of leaves behind me. I was left alone on my own doorstep, with the feeling that something momentous had just occurred but unable to put my finger on the exact reason as to why.

God, that man was weird.

I stretched until something in my back popped and set out on my own, idly enjoying the cool autumn weather as I went. For a major military power, it was all too easily to enjoy the quiet, peaceful air here, though much of that might be attributed to Naruto being run ragged to the point where he didn’t have the time or inspiration to get too mischievous.

I left the District while still wrapped up in those thoughts, so it was a purely physical reflex that kept me from going tumbling when a small figure crashed into me as they rounded the corner of a side street. I saw something go tumbling from the corner of my eye and effortlessly snatched it out of the air, feeling a crisp, telltale crunch as my fingers pinched the corner, even as my free hand steadied the child that had barreled into me.

I saw a bushy, ponytail at first, and thought Nara? before it occurred to me that few Nara would ever zip around like that, from my understanding of their family. Then I saw the long, trailing scarf.

Not Nara at all. An entirely different animal, as it so happened.

“You should be more aware of your surroundings, even if you’re running late, Sarutobi-kun,” I informed the Honorable Grandson himself. I stepped back when he seemed as though he had his balance, and when he opened his mouth to argue I popped the toast I saved inside instead.

Then I smiled despite myself and patted his head, because I was an absolute sucker for young children.

“Good luck getting wherever you want to be on time,” I gently reminded him, and continued walking. After a beat of stunned silence, I heard him yelp through his toast and scramble off. I had to stifle a laugh and shook my head, continuing on. For whatever reason, I had a feeling it would be a good day today; maybe not having to eat breakfast alone had something to do with it.

I resolved then and there never to even think that in Kakashi’s presence, because the man wore his smugness like a crown. I had mostly only observed him acting that way towards Naruto, and Sakura once or twice, and I wanted no part of in that.

“Tsukimi-chan, about yesterday,” Sakura started to say, jumping up as soon as she saw me enter the training grounds. “I’m really—ah!” Bisuke yanked her down by the back flap of her skirt, interrupting her.

“Yesterday was none of your concern,” I told her firmly. “And frankly, it’s over and done with.” I placed my lunch with theirs and went over to my own band of four-legged tutors, kneeling to smooth a palm over Pakkun’s back and shifting my head minutely in order to drop a discreet kiss between Bull’s ears. Ūhei got a respectful nod of acknowledgement, and I settled down to wait for Naruto, leaning into Bull’s warm bulk and pleasantly ignoring Sakura’s frequent anxious, wounded looks in my direction.

I didn’t care that she had spied on me.
...well, I mean, I did, but Kakashi and Naruto had done it too. Kakashi had probably ordered them to do it, as if the two of them had needed the encouragement. My problem was the fact that Sakura somehow felt like she had breached my trust, as though she had any exclusivity with me that would merit suspicion or a lack thereof towards Neji.

I couldn’t encourage things like that. Maybe it was a bit cold, to say that my romantic life didn’t concern her, but it was a truth she needed to face. She had been making progress lately, and I didn’t want any backsliding; the bento offer, I knew, had been pushing things.

“Mornin’!” Naruto grinned, bounding into the clearing. “Man, yesterday was pretty weird, huh? I would’ve totally pinned that Fuzzy Brows guy as the love-at-first-sight type, not Hyuuga.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong, I thought wryly as Sakura and I stood up, Guruko, Shiba, and Urushi bolting towards Naruto as soon as his lunch was safely stowed away.

“It wasn’t love,” I reminded Naruto. “You were there. Hyuuga-senpai only asked me out because his Clan Head told him to, that’s all.” ūhei butted his head against my hip pointedly and I obligingly began going through my upright stretches.

“Oh, is that what that meant?” Naruto twisted and lunged, then flipped to get free of his three tails—no pun intended. “He talks too much. He could’ve just said that to start with, couldn’t he? Didn’t need to take you to some pretty park and shoo us off, ’ttebayo.”

“He sure made it look like he was interested,” Sakura murmured snidely, before letting out a gratifying yelp when Akino tackled her mid-forward stretch, forcing her torso against the dirt.

“Less chatter, more training,” he said, firm but not unkind.

“That goes for you too, heartbreaker,” Pakkun added, pawing at my ankle as I lifted the other one as high as it could go, hands braced against the dirt.

“I’d say that you don’t get the meatballs I made today for that comment,” I murmured to him, my hair falling down like a curtain. “But then you’d just poach from poor Guruko again.”

“Smart girl,” he said, pressing his cold, wet nose against my unprotected neck because he enjoyed being a smug brat exactly as much as his summoner did.

We didn’t see the man himself until well after noon, when we were permitted to break for water, before Sakura and I would go onto taijutsu practice and Naruto would be forced to meditate while trying to maintain the leaf trick without destroying or dislodging the leaf. We looked up and suddenly he was there, as was his custom, and we could practically feel the smugness bearing down upon the three of us like a physical weight.

“What did you do?” Sakura asked, immediately readying herself to be devastatingly aghast.

Kakashi shot her a wounded look. “So suspicious,” he sighed, shaking his head. “And here I was, just reflecting on how proud you’ve made your sensei.”

“...holy shit, what did you do?” Naruto slowly put his water bottle down, eyeing Kakashi with obvious suspicion. “Are... are we gonna have to do something? Did you sell us?”

I did not want to know what was going through his head.

“Nothing like that,” Kakashi audibly pouted. “Sensei just had a little get-together with the Hokage and the teachers of some of your other classmates, you know, talking about progress, mission
records…” He shrugged one shoulder. “We were talking things over all morning, and even kept talking while we ate lunch.” He beamed at me.

And the penny drops, I thought, biting back an amused smile. He could be pretty petty when he wanted to be, our Kakashi-sensei.

“They were all terribly jealous that I had such a cute, caring student who even went so far as to make me a bento.” Kakashi rubbed the back of his head.

“You bought and carried the groceries,” I told him with a shrug. “And I offered.”

“…that’s worse than feeding the dogs,” Sakura huffed.

I ignored her, even as Akino bodily tackled her against a nearby tree, instead opting to go find my dogs before they decided to find me.

Chapter End Notes

SO AN AMAZING THING HAPPENED. I received my first real fan art for this story, a lovely portrait of Tsukimi! You should go check it out and shower praise on the artist.
In which I crush dreams and make poor life choices

Chapter Summary

Tsukimi gives Sakura the Talk, and then gets smashed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Within a week of meeting Team Gai—during which our lunch breaks overlapped twice more—I came to a very, very unfortunate decision.

I was going to have to sit Sakura down and actually confront this whole… thing of hers, head on. I had absolutely no problem with her liking girls, or guys, or both, or whatever her inclination was; if she was pursuing literally any other person on the face of this Earth, I would cheer her on wholeheartedly. The problem was, I did not like girls that way, and letting her pursuit of me go on—with her suspiciously glowering at any reasonably attractive kid who glanced my way, like Tenten or Neji—wouldn’t be good for either of us, in the long run. Especially considering how centric this interest was to her life and development as a person. Furthermore, I had the mental experience of a twenty-two year old young woman, and she was twelve. It was a very simple choice to make, put that way.

Except, as of late I had gotten a bit too comfortable with putting off my problems and then approaching them circumspectly whenever I could work up the drive to do something about them. So it was another few days and missions past forming that resolve before I mustered up the nerve to actually do something about it.

“Haruno,” I said, at the end of training that day, when I couldn’t drag my feet any longer. “I need to ask a favor of you.”

“Of course, Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura’s entire face lit up. “Absolutely! Whatever you need, just ask.”

“Arrange a meeting with Yamanaka-san tomorrow,” I told her, nearly flinching at the way the light shuttered out of her and she seemed to sag at those words. “I have something to say to the two of you.”

“O-Oh…” Sakura mustered up some semblance of a smile. “Yeah. I can do that. I’ll, um.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll let her know.”

“Good,” I said, then continued packing up my supplies as I tried not to feel like a total scumbag. There were probably less stressful ways to spend my day off from training, up to and including cashing in on that promised fight with Lee, but I couldn’t let myself continue running away from this. It wasn’t fair to Sakura, or to me, or even to Ino; their friendship was strained from competing over something that was, frankly, impossible. Really, it wasn’t fair to any girl that currently liked me in that sense, but Ino and Sakura were the only ones I knew by sight and name.

“About damn time,” Pakkun muttered to me as I stood up, Bull lumbering to his feet right alongside me. “You’re worse than Kakashi ever was about clearly setting boundaries in that area.”
“Shut up,” I suggested lightly, resting a hand on Bull’s broad back. “I had to consider my options before I committed to anything. She’s my teammate, after all.”

“Keep telling yourself that, girlie.”

“It’s the truth.” It was the truth. But it was also entirely true that my omnipresent fear of fucking everything up was turning me into even more of a procrastinating nervous wreck than I had been to begin with. I would really need to work on that; once spring came, and we started taking missions outside of the village, I wouldn’t have the luxury of being so wishy-washy; there would be real, true fights to be had in the outside world, not just tweenage interpersonal drama. Hesitation could be deadly, instead of just depressing.

So in the end, I sucked it up, finished training, and went home. I took a long bath, ate nothing but cheap, instant soba bowls and cookies, because I wouldn’t deserve this self-indulgent wallowing later, and then went to bed. The next morning, I gave myself exactly fifteen seconds to contemplate faking a terrible fit of illness, then reminded myself I was at least technically an adult and got up to face the day.

Training was…

Training was strange, that day. There was a certain tension in the air—even Naruto must have felt it, because he was unusually quiet, for once—as we split into our individualized groups. Lunch could have taken place in a funeral home, for all the lines of conversation that died off into silence, despite our efforts. Well, their efforts. I had reverted to hums and grunts, because I felt like if I opened my mouth for too long I’d end up nervously babbling about all sorts of things. This was a big step for me.

For once, I was knowingly and consciously making a choice that diverged from what I knew of the source material. I had no way of knowing how this would ripple out, either. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but letting things continue as they were just didn’t seem right to me.

So, when Sakura lingered at the entrance of our training ground at the end of the day, I fell into step with her.

“Tsukimi-chan, I…” Sakura started, then stopped herself, squeezing her hands together in front of her as we walked. “Why did you ask me to do this?”

“Because,” I said, beginning to feel the nervous clench in my stomach that usually only came with public speaking assignments. “I have something to say to you, and Yamanaka-san should probably hear it too, at some point. I might as well get it out of the way all at once.”

“Oh.”

“But,” I returned to the safe ambiguity of guttural noises, frantically beating off the mounting panic. I didn’t have to do this, a babyish, skittish sector of my brain told me. I didn’t have to do this. I could go back to gradually conditioning Sakura to be less of a fangirl and slowly prod her towards friendship, rather than love. But, I rebutted, I already decided to suck it up and rip the Band-Aid off. There was no point in chickening out now, either way, because around then we turned a corner and there was Yamanaka Ino, standing outside a restaurant called Yakiniku-Q and bouncing on her toes with barely-bridled excitement.

She had made the effort to doll herself up even more, I noted miserably. She was wearing a cute, short dark purple dress, her hair was left down in a shining gold wave that had obviously been brushed to perfection, and there were slight but obvious signs of make-up on her face. Not too much
—she didn’t look like a little girl playing dress-up—but enough to make her look a little older, while
emphasizing her youthful prettiness.

“Tsukimi-chan!” She clapped her hands together, beaming, looking even prettier with the joyful
glow that stole over her. I felt Sakura—ragged and a little gnawed around the edges from training—
shrink miserably beside me. I suddenly couldn’t breathe, couldn’t remember where I had wanted to
originally take them to talk about this. I blanked, and I clutched desperately at the familiarity of past
experiences.

“Follow me,” I said mechanically, turning on my heel and walking off before the blonde could
swoop in for a hug, or something worse. I lost a little time, buoyed by the sound of the crowd and the
hissed insults of the girls following me and the mounting panic churning furiously in my gut.

I only realized where I had taken them when I saw the trees, still flushed in gorgeous shades of red.

—ma Memorial Park, the mossy stone marker reminded me.

“Sit,” I told them, and they sat as far apart on the bench as Neji and I had not so long ago. Sakura
had a look of budding, sad understanding on her face, which I resolutely ignored. Ino had a look of
budding, excited expectation, which I similarly tried to ignore, but had a little more difficulty with as
it compounded the guilt prickling at the back of my eyes.

Uchiha Tsukimi is not known for being a crybaby, I told myself sternly. I didn’t have the right to
burst into tears, not when I was the one who was going to do the rejecting.

“I…” I stalled for a moment, looking between them, but didn’t let the silence linger for too long. I
had no idea if there was a gentle way to do this, but I decided at least if I was brutally honest I
wouldn’t reflexively apologize for my own feelings. “I like boys. Sorry.”

Dammit.

Ino’s sweet, waiting expression had frozen, going stiff at the ends.

“That…” Sakura seemed similarly thunderstruck. “Tsukimi-chan, that isn’t usually what you say,
when you, when you, um, reject people interested in you. I-I mean, from what… what other people
have said,” she rushed to explain, with suspiciously bright eyes. “They, they always say that you
say you have, that you have no time for a boyfriend or a girlfriend, not that…”

“I don’t,” I admitted, feeling like absolute trash. “But since I spend all my training time with you, that
probably didn’t sound like much of an excuse, did it?”

Sakura looked down, which I was privately thankful for. It was torturous, looking either one of them
in the eye right now.

“But—!” Ino finally burst out. “You always got perfect scores, when it came to acting like a couple
with anybody, boy or girl! You were… you were always nice, and considerate, and warm…”

“I’m the Rookie of the Year,” I reminded her, inwardly reeling because what the fuck? What the
actual fuck? I had found notes about acting like that, yeah, but what the hell was Konoha doing,
having literal kids practice that sort of thing? The source material had never mentioned anything like
that! I mean, it went a long way as to explaining why so many people seemed interested in the
original Tsukimi, who likely had as little interest in romance as her original male counterpart, but
still. These girls weren’t even proper teenagers yet. “You don’t want just an act from me, though.”

“…no we don’t,” Sakura agreed, a rueful twist to her lips that was probably keeping them from
trembling.

“And you two used to be friends,” I went on, feeling two inches tall. “I’m not—I won’t—” I searched desperately for some way to put this that wouldn’t make me feel like scum. “It’s fine if you still want to fight, but if it’s only over me then there’s no point.” I wasn’t sure that made sense. I was sure that I didn’t want to be here any more. “So. You two... you should probably talk. I’ll see you tomorrow, Haruno. Thank you for your time, Yamanaka-san.”

I gave them each a perfunctory bow and fled, at an unhurried pace even if I wanted to run like the very hounds of hell were on my heels. I had exactly one plan of action for where I wanted to go next, but I only made it halfway before my pace abruptly stopped and I lost all control of my body.

It was an experience that was hard to properly convey in words; I wasn’t paralyzed, exactly, because I could still feel everything just fine—my scarf against my cheeks, my hair shifting in the cool wind, the faint ache in my knee from where Ūhei had fastened his jaws as punishment for messing up a simple taijutsu stance more than five times in the same hour. I had been a little off, today, for reasons that were understandable but not acceptable, apparently.

“Something I can do for you, Nara?” I asked, once I noticed the defined slouch I had fallen into, and realizing that at the very least I could control my own respiration and voice. It was a realization I clung to in order to avoid panicking, because this was an unspeakably unsettling situation to be in.

My head nodded, and I fought the urge to scream when he finally spoke up, not too far away and somewhere behind me to my left.

“Yeah,” Shikamaru drawled. “Got a question for you, Uchiha.” His voice was gruff and lazy, for a boy who hadn’t hit puberty just yet. Something about it set me on edge, as I felt my head tilt to one side in a parody of curiosity.

“I’m listening,” I told him, as if I had a choice in the matter.

“If you were apparently so worried about their friendship, why didn’t you have this little talk with them years ago?”

Shit.

Shit. This was exactly the kind of question I had been dreading; somebody smart enough to notice I was acting different than I reasonably should, and cynical enough not to accept the whole ‘turning point’ excuse. If I had the ability, I probably would have gone tense, but my body stayed damning loose in a pose of casual expectation. I was going to have to wing this. I didn’t have any other believable excuse readily available, so I fell back on half truths.

“Because,” I said slowly, in a manner that suggested pulling teeth was easier than getting the words out. “Until recently, I didn’t care enough to make the effort. The state of their friendship didn’t matter to me at all.” They had been fictional.

There was a long moment of silence, save for the wind rustling the remaining leaves of nearby trees.

“Yeah,” sighed Shikamaru, and I nearly stumbled forward when I suddenly regained control of myself. “That’s about what I figured.” I turned and got my first good look at him since the day of team assignments, and found myself pierced with a flat look. “You know, Naruto’s been raving about how nice you are? Says he pegged you all wrong, and you aren’t half the bitch some of us thought you were.”
His expression conveyed just which opinion he held on the matter. I refused to feel hurt at that. I was an Uchiha, and he was from a clan old enough to have plenty of ingrained ideas about members of the Uchiha, and the original Tsukimi probably had been a bitch, besides.

...it still hurt a little, because I was an emotionally vulnerable little wuss, but I forced myself to meet his eyes and soldier on, unflinchingly. I was a grown-ass woman, and he was just a kid, I reminded myself.

“Uzumaki and Haruno are my teammates.” I said simply. “They matter to me now.”

“Just like that, huh.”

“Not all of us are bred according to a schedule and shoved into a ready-made set,” I reminded him in a deceptively mild tone, because his attitude was starting to piss me off a little and if he already decided I was a callous bitch then I might as well meet his expectations, just this once. “Some of us need to actually put effort into creating a worthwhile dynamic.”

He snorted, and pushed off from the fence he had been leaning against. “Nice to see you haven’t lost your touch, Uchiha,” he told me, before turning and walking away. “I was beginning to get worried.”

What the fuck had Tsukimi originally been like? I had apparently hit the right ratio of respectful and cutting this time, but I wish she could have left a diary or something behind. I continued walking, my thoughts a mess, and only looked up from my unsettled musings when I heard the telltale yells and sounds of battle that told me I had reached the right place.

When I stepped onto the decidedly rough-looking training ground, those sounds abruptly stopped.

“Hello, Tsukimi-chan!” Gai greeted me boisterously, releasing Lee from what looked like the painful lovechild of a sleeper-hold and a suplex. Off in the distance, I felt more than saw Neji turn to look at me, effortlessly deflecting a spray of weaponry from Tenten at the same time. “It is wonderful to see you again! What brings you to visit us today?”

”Good afternoon.” I raised my chin, and decided to follow through on my plan, somehow needled by that brief interlude with Shikamaru. “I wanted to know if Lee-senpai was still interested in that spar.”

Lee’s eyes sparkled. Gai looked close to tears.

Behind them, the sunset painted the sky a bloody, foreboding red.

The next morning, I was incredibly proud that I managed to stagger out of bed, and even managed to make some rough approximation of a lunch by weakly scraping rice out of the cooker and into a box and then dumping some pre-chopped vegetables on top. In the unforgiving light of day, my regret over challenging Lee completely eclipsed my regret of saying something so hurtful but undeniably necessary to Sakura and Ino.

My body, however, was just as unforgiving as the light of day. One cheek was bruised, and I saw that my entire stomach, chest, and back were a mosaic of different shades of red, purple and yellow when I showered and changed. My arms looked like a toddler had finger-painted over them, given
the remnants of Lee’s crushing grappling grips.

I managed to make it to the red bridge before anybody else and collapsed against the cool, solid wood in relative privacy.

“Holy shit,” I heard Naruto gasp at some point, and reluctantly forced my eyes open. “You look terrible, Tsukimi-hime!”

“Thank you,” was my wooden reply, as I got to my feet with gratuitous assistance from the nice, stable bridge. “I’ll take that as a compliment, since I feel much worse than that.”

“Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura shrieked from the edge of the bridge behind me, before he could respond. “You—”

“Look like shit,” I finished for her, nodding and then immediately regretting it. “I know. Naruto was just telling me.”

“Naruto! How dare you say that to a lady!”

“I didn’t!” Naruto raised his palms in clear surrender, backing away. “I swear, I just told her she looked terrible!”

“You idiot!” Sakura howled, and then lunged past my swaying, regretful self to pounce on him.

“Oh,” I noticed as I finally got a clear look at her, my voice sounding faint to my own ears. “You cut your hair.”

“Y-Yeah,” Sakura immediately dropped Naruto, mid-throttle, to finger the ends of her newly trimmed hair. “I… figured it was time for a change.” It was different from the one she should have—might have?—given herself during the Chuunin Exam; if anything, it was closer to the post-series look she had sported, short with a sleek, inward curl instead of the spikiness most prominent before and during Shippuden. The lone difference—aside from about twenty years and a Byakugou seal—was that her hair was still parted in the middle, with the front sections tucked behind her ears and the rest sweeping forward to frame her face.

“It suits you,” I told her, and then a large hand clapped against my back and my world descended into a blur of pain and regret. So, so much regret.

“Tsukimi-chan decided to have a brawl with one of Gai’s kids yesterday,” Kakashi declared from somewhere above me, and I had a moment of pure embarrassment as I realized that I had collapsed with my face pressed against the curved floor of the bridge at some point in the last minute.

“Oh, Tsukimi-chan," I heard Sakura say, in a voice that was thankfully entirely horrified concern rather than opportunistic simper.

“Why?” Naruto wanted to know, and I saw his legs bend into a crouch from my skewed point of reference. “Tsukimi-hime, we trained with them for a day; you saw how brutal Fuzzy Brows and that Hyuuga were with each other!”

“Because I felt like getting pummeled,” I snapped, but it wasn’t a lie.

“Well, whatever the reason,” Kakashi said, clapping his hands together. “We can’t exactly go on a mission like this. So, because Tsukimi-chan can’t take care of herself—” Rude, I thought. “—you kids are going to get the day off.”
“Wait,” I realized, even as I Kakashi shift and smack his palm against the bridge. “Sensei—you’re on time?”

“Holy shit, he is,” Naruto gasped, as Bull’s face eclipsed my field of vision entirely. He nosed at my cheek with worry obvious in his big, dark eyes, but I didn’t have the energy to bat him away.

“Gai’s fault,” Kakashi informed us, heaving me onto the large black dog’s back with minimal jostling. “He told me that one of my cute students had pushed herself to the very limits to keep up with his Lee, and that she was probably facing some pretty severe chakra exhaustion after such a serious fight.”

That was pure bullshit. Lee hadn’t even taken off his weights, which I knew because I felt them slamming into my ribs every time he kicked me. It had taken everything I had just to react and score a few pathetic, glancing blows of my own before Gai called the match out of mercy for my battered self.

“Tsukimi-chan, you need to think these things through!” Sakura burst out. “This is so boneheaded it seems like something Naruto would do!”

“Hey,” I protested half-heartedly, but secretly I was just happy that Sakura seemed more worried than awkward around me. Mission accomplished.

“Rude!” Naruto chimed in, outraged. “But yeah, Tsukimi-hime, you gotta know your limits; isn’t that what that bandaged coach of yours is always telling you? Not to over-reach and stuff?”

Oh God. Ūhei and Pakkun were never, ever going to let me forget this one. I was going to be lectured so bad the next time we trained together, I could feel it. I let out a low noise of distress.

“On that cheerful note,” Kakashi said, a smile obvious in his voice. “I’m going to take Tsukimi-chan here to the hospital, to make sure she didn’t break her ribs with this little stunt. We’ll meet back here tomorrow, and try again. Dismissed.”

“Can we come with you?” Sakura asked. “Tsukimi-chan is… I’ve never seen her like this.”

“I’d be worried about Academy sparring policy, if you had,” Kakashi remarked. “But no. It’ll be quicker if it’s just the two of us. Enjoy your day off, Sakura-chan. Ah, Tsukimi-chan’s right, by the way; that’s a good look for you.”

I felt Bull start to trot beneath me, then tense. I clung to him as he broke into a high, long leap, bouncing off of a nearby wall and landing on the adjacent rooftop. He had been being careful—he always was, when carrying me like this—but the movement still sent a few pointed ripples of pain through my battered body.

“Really, this is something I’d expect from Naruto,” Kakashi sighed, once he joined us. “You’re supposed to be the good one, Tsukimi-chan.”

“I am,” I grumbled, as Bull started jumping again. I braced myself against the expected pain, but it didn’t hurt any less for the effort. “Shush.”

“Don’t shush your Sensei,” he scolded me, mock-stern, and I obligingly stayed quiet for the rest of the way. I had to actually stand, once we reached the hospital, but Kakashi helped me hobble into the lobby and scribbled into the clipboard that the receptionist handed us. He even helped me shuffle into the examining room, when I was called, and leaned back in the corner when the medic began examining me.
“Thanks,” I remembered to tell him, and then nodded off a few minutes after gloriously cool medical chakra began passing over my abused muscles.

Chapter End Notes

I got more fan art; marmaroth drew a fantastic rendition of the park scene between Tsukimi and Neji! Check it out and shower it with all due praise.
In which I speak softly and wish for a big stick

Chapter Summary

Some things are unavoidable but frequently put off, like winter chores and talking about feelings. Luckily, Tsukimi is a responsible young lady.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When I woke up next, it was in my own bed. I reluctantly rolled over and batted at my little alarm clock, absentmindedly noting that it had been set an hour earlier than usual before heaving myself up with a notable lack of pain. I smiled to myself, stretched, and then nearly toppled over when I glanced past the glass doors to my balcony and found it dusted in a thin but noticeable layer of snow.

I got to my feet, noting that I was still in my clothes from yesterday, as expected—Kakashi might be a pervert, given his choice in reading material, but he was no child predator—so I grabbed a fresh set and ducked into the bathroom for my daily routine. It had been getting colder lately, I noted to myself as I waited for the water in my shower to heat up. Today was actually the beginning of December, so from what I remembered from the almanacs, it had been an unseasonably warm autumn this year.

When I made my way downstairs, I found the kitchen empty as usual, but my refrigerator was papered from top to bottom in bright green sticky-notes. I stopped and just stared for a moment, hands on my hips. That was honestly impressive, though it also explained the change with my alarm clock.

There was a single white sticky-note in the dead center of my freezer door, so I plucked that one off first.

‘Lee found out about your trip to the hospital,’ it said, in a familiar scrawl. ‘He insisted on apologizing. Gai and I talked him out of kneeling dogeza-style in front of your door until you woke up.’ It was signed with a little henohenomoheji. I pressed my thumb against the strip of stickiness on the back and peeled it off, repeating the motion several times as I continued to drink in the sight of my lime green refrigerator. There had to be at least a hundred little notes. I heaved a sigh and picked one off, scanning it and feeling tired already.

‘I am truly ashamed of my actions—’ I read, before shaking my head with a sigh and plucking off another, stacking it on the first. I continued removing the apologies, each one flowery and all but dripping in sincerity—I had the horrifying suspicion that some of them were actually stained with real tears—and had a staggeringly thick sheaf by the time my refrigerator door was clear once more. I’d have to sit Lee down and make sure he knew it hadn’t been his fault; I could have given up at any time, after all. I sighed again and stuffed the apologies down next to my wallet, before heaving the fridge open and getting started on my breakfast and lunch.

Once that was finished, I hesitated at the front door, glancing out at the snow-dusted district from one of the front windows. Reluctantly, I doubled back and rumbled through a hall closet until I pulled out a large, quilted hanten coat. It was a dark blue and had a huge fan emblem embroidered on the back, but it kept me nice and warm as I briskly made my way down the street, nose tucked securely
in the safety of my scarf. My toes were nowhere near as safe, left exposed to the elements as they were.

Surprisingly, the solution for that problem presented itself once I arrived at the bridge.

“Hyuuga-senpai,” I greeted, surprised. “Tenten-senpai. Good morning.” I wordlessly settled into place between Sakura, who was wrapped up in a cute, black knit cardigan and biting her lip like she wanted to say something, and Naruto, who was squatting and hugging his knees miserably. He scooted a few inches closer to me, and his shivering abated slightly. “I wasn’t aware we would be meeting up today.”

“Gai-sensei woke us up while he was on his early-morning run around the village and told us we’d all be sitting for our snow-socks today,” Tenten explained helpfully, and I felt my teammates perk up beside me.

I parted my lips in a silent ‘ah’ of understanding, even if I understood nothing about that sentence. There hadn’t been any notes on ‘snow socks’ that I could recall, but I could at least guess that they were something that would keep us from losing our toes to frostbite in colder climates. And that was something I could get behind whole-heartedly, because open-toed shoes were not going to fly if we ever needed to slogs through slush for a mission.

I was roused from my dark, chilly musings by a dual Dynamic Entry, with Lee and Gai backflipping onto the bridge, probably for no reason other than that they could. Whatever the case, I forced myself to step away from the loose huddle my team had fallen into in order to make use of my hanten and slightly higher than average body temperature, easily ignoring Naruto’s whine of protest for the moment.

“Lee-senpai,” I said.

“UCHIHA-SAN,” he bellowed back, immediately dropping to his knees, legs folded like a samurai about to commit seppuku. “I AM SO VERmmph….hmphry…?” I pressed my palm against his mouth more firmly, watching those large, mascara commercial-worthy eyelashes bat up and down in absolute shock.

“Lee-senpai,” I said again, keeping my voice gentle as I fished out his sheaf of apologies with my free hand. “There’s no need to go this far. It was a match we both agreed to, wasn’t it?” With my hand still firmly in place, he could only nod his head, though I could see protest shining in his dark eyes. I pressed on, while I had the advantage. “And if I had forfeited at any time, you would have had enough control to stop immediately, right?” Another nod. “And at the end, we did a Seal of Reconciliation before I left, right?” He nodded, now looking sheepish. I pulled my hand back, smiling faintly as I shook the stack of sticky-notes. “So, is there any reason for this?”

“…” Lee pursed his lips, then surprisingly gave another nod. “Just one.”

“Okay,” I nodded briefly myself, plucking one note off the top and handing him the rest. “Then I’ll accept an apology for whatever that reason might be,” and it was probably something silly or sweet, given what I knew about Rock Lee as a person, so I wouldn’t ask, “and you can save these for some other time, if you ever really feel the need to apologize.”

Lee hesitated for a moment, then accepted the sticky-notes and hopped to his feet, a familiar light burning in his gaze. “Agreed!” He declared, carefully tucking away the bright green stack.

Gai, who had been unsettlingly silent up to this point, planted his fists on his hips and grinned brightly, nodding to himself. “Excellent,” he boomed, beaming at me. “You see, Lee? I assured you
that Uchiha-chan was a reasonable young lady!

“You did, Sensei!” Lee agreed fervently, raising a fist. “I shall keep this lesson in mind for the future!”

“Great,” Kakashi said, popping up in the abandoned space between Naruto and Sakura with a puff of smoke. “Maybe your next lesson should be on not screaming to the heavens this early in the morning.”

“Well,” I quipped, “Lee-senpai at least doesn’t need to learn about punctuality.”

“Hey,” my teacher said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “I’m not that late.”

He actually wasn’t, I noticed, glancing at the tiny watch I kept tied to one of my belt loops. Lee and Gai had been exactly on time, and dealing with the extra apologies hadn’t taken very long either. He was only about ten minutes late, altogether, and it disturbed me on some level I couldn’t properly describe.

“Right on time yesterday, only a little late today…” I hunched my shoulders and buried my face in my scarf, narrowing my eyes suspiciously. “…What were Haruno and I drinking the first time you met us?” I demanded, sliding back a step. Sakura and Naruto immediately stepped away from him, circling back to my side slowly.

“That hurts, Tsukimi-chan,” Kakashi informed me, tapping his chest woefully. “Right here. But if it will put you at ease…” He sighed. “You and Sakura-chan weren’t drinking anything; she was eating her lunch, and you were eating snacks with Naruto.”

“It’s him,” Sakura noted, looking puzzled. “…maybe he’s being nice since it’s gotten so cold?” Her tone was doubtful, but I couldn’t fault her reasoning.

“It’s probably for the dogs’ sake,” Naruto suggested.

Sakura and I made noises of vague agreement and comprehension, because that made much more sense. Kakashi had once kept us waiting for nearly six hours, which had culminated in the Smoke Bomb Incident we had agreed never to talk about again. He wouldn’t leave his pack to suffer in the cold with us, so coming a bit earlier didn’t sound outrageous.

“That’s probably it,” I agreed, and easily avoided our instructor’s flat gaze, instead turning to Gai.

“Are we waiting on anybody else, or can we set off?”

“We are all present and accounted for,” Gair affirmed, shooting Kakashi a proud, beaming smile and a thumbs up. “Onwards, dear rival and students! Follow me!” He bounded off down the bridge at an easy gallop, Lee dogging after him with a cry of delight. The rest of us traded tired looks and started running.

---

**KYOKUDO OUTFITTERS**, the front of the shop Gai led us to all but screamed at us, the characters painted in a lurid, day-glow yellow that popped out almost offensively from the black background of the cloth banner spread across the front of the multistoried building. It was exactly the type of place I could imagine him frequenting, some sort of mix between a military surplus store and a sports-intensive retailer.
Also, it was literally a place called ‘Extreme Outfitters.’ I had been fighting the urge to grin since I first stepped inside.

To keep that from happening, I busied myself with looking around as we drifted through different departments. By Sakura and Naruto’s obviously fascinated expressions, they hadn’t ever been here either, but I kept my own expression nonchalant just in case. There was an entire corner of the first floor that was devoted to what I identified as skin toner, with palette posters and helpful application tutorials dotting the walls. We passed by several aisles full of all sorts of camping equipment in all different shapes and sizes. Circling past that, there were shelves and shelves jammed full of what a placard claimed were jars of a highly effective, long-lasting and scentless sunscreen. Before we hit a large staircase, I could see a few tables of what I thought were either soaps or candles.

The second floor seemed to be entirely devoted to protective clothing that was tailored for different climates and cultural styles, and seemed to be our destination. Gai strolled on by displays of what looked like miniature scuba-diving apparatuses, emergency flares, and jumpsuits disturbingly similar to his own, but in far more palatable colors and paired with more fashionable over-clothes. He stopped at a long counter near the back and delicately tapped a small silver bell before falling into some sort of parade rest as he waited.

I stared down a strange little cartoon character on a keychain near the cash register while I waited. I had seen it several times, on all sorts of promotional and informational posters around the store. It was a round sort of thing, with a ball-like body. It had yellow dots for eyes, and a pointed, downturned mouth that was probably meant to express its determination. After some careful study I found that the figure was wearing tiny, puffy grey pants tucked into his boots and a sleeveless top with mesh in the front, like some stereotypical shinobi, even though its arms were stubby and ended in oversized fists. The look was somewhat ruined by the fact that the aforementioned boots, the puffy boxing-gloves its hands were curled in, the sash at its round waist, and the scarf knotted at its neck were all the same bright yellow as the shop sign and the figure’s eyes.

“Ah, interested in our Kyoku-tan, are you Uchiha-san?” A young man with tanned skin and a smile to rival Gai’s bustled up from behind us, vaulting the counter with practiced ease. “He’s the mascot of Kyokudo Outfitters; he absorbs the danger from whatever environment he’s thrust into, and adapts seamlessly. He’s a huge hit with the kids. We’ve got more merchandise with him on the ground floor, if you’d like to look around later.”

“Mm.” I said noncommittally, finally tearing my eyes away from Evil Ninja Kirby. I briefly wondered how the man knew me on sight, then realized that it was likely because I was accompanying Kakashi and the rest of my team, one of whom was infamous to nearly every citizen, and because for once I had my clan emblem emblazoned on my back the way I was supposed to. “Maybe later, then.”

I sounded unfazed, but I was dead serious. *Hell yes* I wanted Evil Ninja Kirby memorabilia.

“Right,” Kakashi said, after a short pause. “Anyways, we’re here to get the kids outfitted with their snow-socks. Gai made an appointment, probably.”

“Yes,” the man behind the counter nodded, skimming a hand through his shaggy, platinum blond hair. *Tatsuki,* his name tag read, eye searing yellow on black. “Come on back, everything’s all ready for you.” He gestured to a curtained doorway to one side of the counter and we all filed through. There were two long benches lining the room and the floor was tiled, almost reminiscent of a locker room but lacking lockers of any sort whatsoever.

There were a bunch of small tubs full of some sort of strange, viscous-looking material, and footrests
beside each tub. I copied our upperclassmen as they sat down on the bench across from us and took off their shoes and other assorted leg-accessories, hooking the stirrup-parts of my leggings and rolling the thin material up my shins.

“Okay, so, you kids have probably used the civilian formula for snow-socks up ’til now, since you’re Academy-fresh,” Tatsuki said, sitting on the bench next to Gai. “Dump the powder into warm water, stick your foot in, pull out, and get a nice thin pair of snow-grade tabi thirty minutes later, right?”

“Yes,” Sakura said, her mouth twisting in distaste. “My father is a Chuunin and my mother used to be part of the Genin corps, so they have nice, heavy-duty ones with separate toes for traction, but they always said that civilian-grade was good enough for Academy students.”

“Cheaper, too,” Tatsuki agreed. “Our snow-socks can take a real beating, as long as you aren’t insane like our favorite customer here,” he clapped Gai on the shoulder, who looked proud. “But kids’ feet grow pretty fast between winters, so cheap civilian-grade is the smarter choice. If you don’t run around the village ten times a day, ours can last a couple years before they wear out.”

“As you might have guessed, our pairs from last year are totally torn up,” Tenten remarked dryly.

“Anyways, our process is a little different from the directions on the packets you’re used to,” Tatsuki explained. “Your teachers are footing the bill for this one, pun totally intended, so all you kids have to do is stick your feet in those buckets, focus chakra in your feet, and then heave ’em out and wait for about ten minutes.”

I felt like the manga or anime should have definitely mentioned this. We still hadn’t learned tree-walking, but this sounded like it could have been a great analogy for Sakura to make while lecturing Naruto during the Training Montage in Wave.

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked Naruto quietly, before taking the plunge myself.

“Yeah,” he agreed, apparently not needled by my concern. “Sensei made me do the leaf exercise all over my body; I won’t explode the tub or anything, don’t worry.”

“Good,” I sighed in relief. I was sitting right next to him, after all. I shifted, ready to get started, before my attention was caught once more.

Neji was kneeling in front of Lee with his Byakugan activated, his hands wrapped around his teammate’s legs a few inches above Lee’s ankles, and glowing faintly blue. I was proud that I was still able to remain blank-faced and unruffled in the face of those disquieting, bulging face-veins of his.

“I’m facilitating chakra-circulation via his tenketsu for him,” Neji explained quietly, undoubtedly able to catch traces of my interest through the back of his head. “It’s a technique unsuitable for fast-paced conflict, but it has its uses.”

“I am very grateful for Neji’s assistance!” Lee insisted, flashing a dimpled grin as he lifted his feet out, now coated in something rubbery and mostly transparent, settling his untouched skin on the foot rest.

“If I didn’t, he’d train with sub-optimal protection and be out of toes by now,” was Neji’s faintly acidic rejoinder as he finally moved to his own tub.

“Oh,” I said, nodding along before finally sticking my feet in my own little bucket. I immediately had to school my features in order to avoid making a grossed-out face like Sakura, because good Lord
that felt slimy. It was relatively warm too, but I wasn’t sure if that lessened the grossness or made it that much worse. I wriggled my toes and quickly began focusing my chakra, because I wanted this over with as soon as possible. I felt a thick layer of sliminess cling to my feet with a more purposeful stickiness, and quickly drew my feet out, settling them on the footrest.

“Ick,” Naruto gagged, following my lead. “It's like stepping on a frog.”

“Do we want to know what’s in this?” Sakura asked, eying her own propped up feet with a faint look of distrust.

“Trade secret,” Tatsuki told us brightly, before the soft, tinkling sound of the bell on the counter out front. “Ah, that’ll be the next group. Be right back.”

“Thanks,” Kakashi said, nose tucked into his book and legs crossed at the knee as his own feet dried.

I noticed that while the thick film coating my feet seemed do be drying and smoothing out, becoming less skin-tight, the warmth didn’t abate at all. This was made especially apparent when Team 8, of all the goddamn people in the village, walked in after Tatsuki and the air in the room promptly went arctic. I slid my hand along the bench and prodded his pinky with mine with low-key, frantic little jabs until he looked at me, a greeting shout already forming on his lips.

I pointedly slid my eyes to Neji, who was as tense as a bow-string pulled to the breaking point, and then to Hinata, who seemed to shrink in on herself even more than usual, with the presence of both her long-time crush and her cousin crushing down on her all at once. Then I slowly, incrementally shook my head.

Naruto nodded just as imperceptibly, barely more than a tensing of his jaw to show that the topic, which he had so easily raised at our first meal with Team Gai, shouldn’t be touched. Or at least, I hoped that was what he took away from the signal. Either way, when he summoned up a bright grin and raised a hand, he at least broke the ice with a neutral party.

“Yo, Kiba!” He called. “Been a while, ’ttebayo!”

“Not long enough,” Kiba jeered back, but there wasn’t much bite to the insult since he flopped down on the bench beside Naruto.

“Aburame-san,” I greeted softly, as those two devolved into noisy chatter. “Hyuuga-san.”

“I-It’s been a while, Tsukimi-san,” Hinata greeted me with a small smile, which came as some surprise. Maybe, I reflected, since I was a girl the two of us had played together once or twice when we were younger, at clan functions. Or maybe the original Tsukimi had just been polite to the other quiet girl in class. Neji hadn’t known me beforehand, at least, so I was leaning towards the second option.

“It has,” Shino agreed, adjusting his sunglasses. “From what Kiba has told us, you have been well. Why? Simply, because Naruto has been effusive in his praise of your team, so far. Certainly, the number of missions you have been on is impressive, if he has not exaggerated.”

“We’ve only been doing D-Ranks,” Sakura sighed, but there was a touch of pride in the set of her shoulders. “It feels like every other day there’s a mission for us. Luckily, it seems like Sensei is finally prepping us for C-Ranks.”

“Hey,” Kakashi protested, poking her in the side as he flipped a page in his book. “A little less sass, Sakura-chan. Some Genin go more than six months on nothing but D-Ranks.”
Sakura mimed zipping her lips, green eyes wide.

“You cut your hair,” Hinata noticed, as Shino drifted over to Kiba’s other side. I couldn’t be sure where her eyes were looking, given their creepy, hereditary blankness, but I thought she might have glanced between Sakura and I, if the uncertain look was any indication.

“I thought it was time for a change,” Sakura said again, the words flowing off her tongue easily. “It’s easier to deal with in the morning, and it looks way cuter, right?”

“Yes,” Hinata agreed, before scuttling off to squeeze between Kiba and Shino.

For a while, an uncomfortable silence settled over the portion of the room that wasn’t Naruto or Kiba, though Lee looked as though he dearly wanted to join in on their boisterous little chat. Across from me, I saw that Neji’s knuckles were white against the wooden bench he was clutching, despite his blank, nearly serene expression.

“I’m done,” he declared a short time later, probably after counting down from ten minutes in his head, second by second.

“We started before him, so we probably are too,” Tenten followed up easily. Lee nodded alongside her, still uncharacteristically quiet.

“Right,” said Tatsuki, who had already given Team 8 his spiel. He bent over and formed a few hand seals I couldn’t quite catch, and then knelt down and pressed a glowing fingertip around the edge of the coating that covered Neji’s ankles, repeating the process with Lee and Tenten. Our upperclassmen wriggled their toes—well, the latter two did, at least—and then pulled their shoes back on, snow-socks and all.

“You weren’t far behind them,” the shop assistant noted as he finished up with Gai. “Your snow-sock aren’t machine-washable, so just rise them with warm water and whatever soap you’ve got on hand about once a week, okay?”

I carefully rolled down my leggings and pulled them back in order once he finished with me, then slid my feet back in my sandals and stood. My feet were still warm, which boded well for the next time I went outside. “Sensei,” I asked, something occurring to me. “Are we doing anything else today?”

“No,” Kakashi shook his head as he wrapped the ankles of his pants down with quick, efficient motions. “You and Gai’s kids have the rest of the day to yourselves. We just came here so early since the Genin Corps and the Chuunin will be swarming this place later on in the day, since it’s the first snowfall.” There was a heavy hint in his words, and if I wasn’t going to do so anyways I might have ignored him entirely out of spite.

“Then, Haruno, Tenten-senpai,” I started. “Would you mind accompanying me for a while? There are some things I want your opinions on, if it isn’t an imposition.”

“Fine by me,” Tenten agreed, looking intrigued.

…I didn’t have anything else planned,” Sakura said, after a noticeable moment of consideration. It was a huge relief, to see that instead of the starry-eyed, instantaneous agreement she might have replied with a few days ago. “Sure.”

“Good,” I said, and then shrugged out of my hasten and tossed it to Naruto, who nearly fumbled and dropped it since he was heading for the door. “Take that,” I told him. “Your jumpsuit’s too thin, and I’m planning on buying a new winter coat anyways.”
“I can’t—” Naruto started to protest, even as he cradled the quilted jacket close, like it was something unspeakably fragile or precious.

“You still owe me ramen,” I interrupted him. “We can do lunch or dinner later, if Haruno and Sensei aren’t busy. Take the hanten and give it back to me when you have a jacket.”

“…fine.”

“Four o’clock?” Kakashi suggested.

“Six o’clock it is,” Sakura decided, easily ignoring our instructor’s wounded look. “So, we’re going shopping Tsukimi-chan?”

“That’s what I want your opinion on,” I agreed, noticing Tenten hide a grimace. “Senpai, I wanted to ask you to help me with a weapon I’m trying to learn how to wield, and maybe ask a few questions about storage seals, after that.”

Tenten noticeably brightened, waving goodbye to Neji as he quickly ducked out, Lee and Gai in tow. “I can definitely help with that.”

“Good,” I said again, then nodded goodbye to Team 8, who were still drying; Kakashi, who hadn’t moved to stand just yet; and Naruto, who had carefully pulled on my hanten.

“Oh my god,” Tenten breathed, looking at the stacks of weaponry in my makeshift storage room, a few hours later. I had left Kyokudo Outfitters with a few pairs of woolen, stirrup-style leggings that were thicker than my current fare but just as black, a dark, short jacket that was somewhat reminiscent of a peacoat, and a thicker, knit infinity scarf, as well as two and a half bags’ worth of Kyoku-tan merchandise, which Sakura was currently arranging in my room with barely hidden giggles I could hear clear across the hall.

“I’m trying to work with these,” I explained, heaving a set of giant, four-bladed monstrosities off the nearest wall. “I can handle the weight pretty well, but I figured you might have some handling and transportation tricks that might make that a little easier.

“Those are Fuuma Shuriken,” Tenten said slowly, running her fingers over the weapons almost reverently. “Good ones,” she amended. “They could use a little maintenance, but the collapsing mechanism is absolutely gorgeous; it probably slides like a dream.”

“I’ve only practiced throwing them, so far,” I admitted bashfully. “I thought it was best not to try anything too complex until I had the supervision of somebody who knew how to properly use them, or I might ruin them.”

“God, that would be a crime,” Tenten swore, aghast at the thought. “It’s practically a sin that they haven’t seen much action—there are so many beauties here;” she sighed, gazing at the room of sharp pointy death with dreamy eyes. “I’d love to buy some of this off of you, if you’d be willing.”

“Um,” I said, feeling awkward.

Tenten glanced at me, then seemed to snap out of her weapon-happy daze, blanching. “Shit,” she swore. “These are your clan’s—I mean, of course you wouldn’t want to sell them off. Sorry, that
was insensitive. I get a little carried away sometimes. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “I understand.” I wouldn’t mind selling them off myself, since I wasn’t getting any use out of them, but if I did I’d be facing the same dilemma as moving out of the District: it didn’t fit the established behavior and preferences of Uchiha Tsukimi.

“I’d be happy to help,” Tenten said, carefully stepping past the awkward silence that tried to crop up. “I can give you and your team a crash course in storage seals tomorrow and the day after, and we can talk to our teachers and work out a time to work with these babies, okay?” She tapped the blade of one folded up Fuuma Shuriken gently, like a peace offering.

“Sounds good,” I said.

“Tsukimi-chan,” Sakura called, mirth obvious in her voice. “Where do you want Volcano Kyoku-tan?”

“In the chair next to the TV!” I called back. “Blizzard Kyokutan can go next to him, and Samurai Kyoku-tan can go on top of one of the bookshelves.”

I turned back and found Tenten leveling me with her own baby-duckling look, her faux-pas all but forgotten.

“Shush,” I told her sternly. “You can inspect whatever you want in here, even if I’m not willing to sell it.” That knocked the gooey look off her face in favor of sparkly-eyed eagerness, and allowed me to escape.

I crossed the hall and found Sakura sitting on the edge of my bed, idly squeezing the large Original Kyoku-tan body pillow I had purchased, in all its rotund squishiness. There was a pensive, almost melancholy look on her face as she did so, which meant I should probably intervene.

“Something on your mind?” I ventured, tentatively sitting down next to her.

“…Why did you fight Lee?” Sakura asked me, still looking at Kyoku-tan’s scowling, righteous expression as she squashed and released him in habitual turns.

I breathed in through my nose, slowly. I should have probably expected that question earlier, but she had the tact not to bring it up directly in front of Team Gai. “…I…” I sighed. “Sometimes, even when you try your best, and do everything you possibly can to succeed, you still fall short.” I fiddled with the hem of my tank top. “I figured it was only fair I got a taste of that too. I needed the reminder anyways, and it helps to have a concrete goal to strive for.”

“Well, you certainly looked like you hit the pavement a few times,” Sakura quipped.

“Hey,” I protested half-heartedly, inwardly bolstered by the joke.

“Sorry,” Sakura laughed, finally glancing at me. The smile on her face was a bit crooked. “…You know, you make it really hard not to like you sometimes, Tsukimi-chan.”

“I know some people who might disagree with you there,” I told her, thinking of a lazy, sneering expression and the feeling of being completely at somebody else’s mercy as they judged me.

“Then they’re even more stupid than Naruto.” Sakura told me quietly. “Thank you for treating me so well, no matter what I’ve done or said. It’s been hard on you, right?”

“You’re my teammate,” I said, and wondered if I was on the cusp of coining a catchphrase given
how often that had become my go-to answer for my behavior. “It’s normal to take care of you. Both of you. I haven’t made things easy for you either, have I?”

“Oh, not at all,” Sakura said, snorting faintly. Her smile was a bit warmer when it reappeared this time. “What with all the hand-made food, and concern, and trying to intervene if you think we need help in free-for-all-spars, and—”

“Shut up,” I told her, and hit her with one of the long pillows stacked at the head of my bed.

“You shut up,” Sakura scoffed, beaning me in the face with Kyoku-tan.

“You realize,” I told her softly, giving the spherical body pillow a gentle squeeze. “This means war.”

“Planning a war without your senpai, huh?” Tenten stood in the doorway, arms akimbo. There was a throw-pillow from the sofa downstairs tucked in the crook of one elbow, and a plush, grim-faced and fluffy-maned Kabuki Kyoku-tan in the other. I tried not to think about what that implied in regards to how long she had been listening. “Well, we’ll see about that.”

She wound up and lobbed the pillow, and the battle began.

Chapter End Notes

So, here’s either the first or last update of the year, depending on where you live, and we’ve broken 2,000 hits. Happy New Years, everybody!
In which I am cruelly kicked out of the nest

Chapter Summary

Team 7 finally starts getting serious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Surprisingly, when Tenten joined us for dinner and had us do some basic stroke-practice while we waited for our ramen, it became apparent that Naruto would have the hardest time creating seals.

In retrospect, I probably shouldn’t have been surprised at all. For all that he was a Titular Main Character, with all the rapid growth and ultimate victory that came with such a role, he was also very much a twelve year old boy who had flunked his graduation test three times, and hadn’t even known much about chakra until our third time training together as a team. His penmanship was *deplorable*.

“Hey, hey, Tsukimi-hime,” Naruto whined, leaning on me so heavily that he nearly slipped off of his stool. “How come yours are so good? It’s like a perfect copy!”

*Because I’m anal about my handwriting,* I didn’t say. Truth be told, it hadn’t been a conscious effort. The original Tsukimi had been, from what I could gather, rigid and exemplary in every aspect of her life that she could possibly be. Her closet, her home, her penmanship, her notes… I wasn’t quite as stringent, but it was still easy enough to fall back on this body’s habits.

“Sharingan?” Tenten guessed, eyes narrowed. “Did that fight with Lee finally activate it?”

“Unfortunately not,” I said, offering a faint smile of thanks when my ramen was set down in front of me.

“There’s that word again,” Sakura huffed, opening her chopsticks with a sharp *snap*. “I’m guessing it’s something like the Byakugan for your clan, Tsukimi-chan, but shouldn’t you have been born with it?”

I set down my own chopsticks, frowning thoughtfully, and traded a glance with Kakashi. I cocked my head to one side inquisitively, he shrugged a shoulder, and I realized that neither of us had actually sat the other two down and explained about my bloodline at all. I was certain Naruto, at least, would be brash enough to bring it up before now if we hadn’t, but in retrospect circumstances had arranged themselves so that the conspicuous absence of my dead family had been rubbed in his face.

Even he could be tactful, it seemed.

“All Uchiha are born with the ability to later trigger the Sharingan,” I began, picking up my chopsticks again. “But, even the Byakugan can only be intentionally activated after an instinctual activation—it’s the same with my eyes. Traditionally, the Sharingan is activated by some overwhelming moment of emotion—like, say, fear or horror. After that, the wielder can activate and deactivate it at will.”

“It’s a *super* cool dojutsu,” Tenten cut in, after an enthusiastic slurp. She waved her chopsticks in
eager, slashing gestures. “It can copy justu, and body-language—handwriting too, hence my question—it can break through genjutsu, and it can even be used to implant subtle genjutsu in a target with practically no hand-signs!”

I felt my eyebrow rise. “…what she said,” I blinked, tapping the counter with my free hand. “I’m assuming that was part of your initial intelligence gathering results?”

“Yep,” Tenten nodded, blushing faintly. “It’s all pretty standard info; we asked a few of the older jounin, who were more familiar with the Military Police.”

I made a noise of vague understanding.

“So…” Naruto set down his bowl, already empty. “What you’re saying is, we should start spooking you so you can get a totally awesome power-up?”

“I’d rather not,” I said awkwardly. “That is… most reliably, it activates under desperate circumstances, so, you see—”

“Oh, never mind then.” He wrinkled his nose. “I can’t trick you into thinking we’d ever try to kill you, ’ttebayo.” he huffed, brightening up when his bowl was promptly replaced.

“Touching,” Kakashi commented dryly, smoothing his mask back into place over the bridge of his nose.

“Ah!” Sakura said suddenly, breaking her normal meal-time silence. Her hand shot out, pointing at our teacher dramatically. Poor Tenten had to lean back. “Sensei, you did it again!”

“Ah!” Naruto stiffened, hands flying to fist in his hair. “Dammit, we forgot to watch!”

“…What?” The weapons expert looked as confused as I felt. “What did he—woah!” She glanced past me and blinked. “You finished your food that fast? …Is that healthy?”

Well, Naruto could handle it, I rationalized, glancing at the drained state of his second bowl. Kakashi was a Jounin, so I wasn’t sure why his eating speed was such a—

“Ah,” I brought a hand to my mouth, mid-chew, as a few things clicked into place, belatedly roused by the situation. That was right, there had been a whole filler episode dedicated to Team 7 trying—and failing—to see Kakashi’s face. It had come after the Chuunin Exams, I knew, because Sakura had been short-haired, but obviously it had been a long-standing point of curiosity.

Just not for me, since I had seen his true face, both in ink and in the flesh.

I slid my gaze to our teacher, who was watching the other three with palpable amusement. For a moment, I considered informing them that the mystique had been dispelled for me—a few times, in the wake of lunches with Team Gai because Kakashi was apparently too lazy to bring home his own left-overs—but then decided against it.

“…maybe next time,” I placated them, artificially optimistic once I had finished chewing and swallowing.

“Focus on eating your own food before you start harassing people about how they eat theirs,” Kakashi chided, but I felt his fingers ruffle my hair. If he had two eyes, I had the impression that I might have earned myself a conspiratorial wink. “That’s basic etiquette, isn’t it?”

Classic Kakashi, I thought with a touch of fondness as Tenten laughed and my teammates began
sputtering with outrage. You couldn’t set a watch by him, in any sense, but there were some things—like tormenting his students over petty, hypocritical technicalities—that he could always be relied on for.

“What do you mean, you won’t be coming with us on this mission?” I demanded, a few weeks later. I was perched on the railing of our bridge, hunched into my nice, thick coat and staring at Kakashi as though he had lost his mind. It was as much to preserve warmth as it was to keep my heart form beating its way out of my chest like a jackhammer. I was not completely successful at keeping the stress out of y voice, either, if Naruto and Sakura’s startled expressions were any indication.

“I haven’t been directly leading many of your missions at all, lately,” Kakashi pointed out, his visible eyebrow raised. “Really, Tsukimi-chan, I don’t see—”

“It’s our first C-Rank,” I said, hands fisting in my pockets so tightly that my hands were shaking. I was torn viciously between soul-crushing relief that we had diverged from the path that would lead us to the Bloody Demon of the Mist—probably—and the soul-crushing terror of what might happen instead.

“You don’t even know the details, yet,” Kakashi told me, a faintly amused note in his voice that grated against my frayed composure.

“Are we leaving the village?” I demanded.

“Well, yes—”

“Then what do you mean, you won’t be coming with us?” I had regained control of my expression, blanking it out only to be betrayed by the frigid, accusatory cast my voice had taken on. “We’ve only ever worked inside the village boundaries, it’s only natural we’d need you,” I went on, fighting against the urge to hop down and start to pace. Down that path lay ranting, and ranting wouldn’t convince Kakashi that he was the irrational one here.

“Aw,” said Kakashi, pressing his book—now covered in a soft, rosy floral print paper—over his heart. “That’s so sweet. But really, you have no reason to worry; I have full faith in you three.”

“That’s not the point.” I snarled, then took a deep breath.

“Tsukimi-chan…” Sakura put a tentative hand on my back. “This is… I’m a little nervous too, but don’t you think you’re over-reacting a little bit? We’ve been chomping at the bit for a C-Rank for ages.”

“We can totally handle it!” Naruto told me, slapping my back and nearly knocking me off my perch. “’Mon, Tsukimi-hime, have a little faith; you and Sakura-chan and I have gotten a whole lot stronger, and you were awesome to begin with! You’ve totally got this, don’t be nervous.”

Aw, that was sweet. Sadly, sweetness wasn’t enough to choke out my anxiety.

“Really, he’s right,” Kakashi assured me, his tone turning a little gentler and a whole lot more awkward, book now tucked safely away. “You’re the last one who needs to worry about this one, in particular; it was actually requested for whatever team you were on specifically—”
“Hold up,” Naruto interrupted, his head snapping towards Kakashi along with Sakura’s, both of their eyes narrowed. “Wait a minute, some random dude is asking for Tsukimi-hime to show up specifically?” He threw his hands up when Kakashi nodded. “What the hell, Sensei, you should totally come with us then! What if it’s some old pervert?”

“Tsukimi-chan is the last of the Uchiha Clan,” Sakura reasoned out slowly, in a neutral, uncertain tone that probably meant she was trying to figure out who to support in regards to this new information. Reluctantly, she seemed to come down on Kakashi’s side. “The village wouldn’t just send her off to some sketchy person obviously interested in her without some sort of confidence that she’ll be safe. She’s a precious village resource.”

Ouch, I thought. Sakura wasn’t wrong, and probably hadn’t meant anything bad by it, but that was still a heavy thing to say.

“She’s a kid!” Naruto snapped. “The whole point of having a teacher is so they can deal with adult crap! Iruka-sensei would never let us wander off with some random creep.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to talk about clients like that,” I commented, in lieu of opening the squirming, parasitic can of worms that was Konoha’s vetting process for clients. “What did you mean, I’m the last person who needs to worry about this mission?”

“It’s one you’re plenty familiar with,” Kakashi informed me, resting a hand on top of my head. “In fact, I’m told that you went out to meet her for similar tasks all the time when you were just a little girl.”

Something tickled at the back of my brain as I chewed on that, brows knitting together thoughtfully.

“Nekobaa informed the Hokage that she was looking forward to seeing you again,” Kakashi said, with a theatrical sigh. “But, if you really think you can’t handle it…”

“The Pawprint Encyclopedia?” I asked, without thinking. I was completely taken aback. That was… well, that was a flashback filler episode. I didn’t remember much about it, past getting some major The Cat Returns vibes here and there, but I did remember that it was another event that was meant to have taken place after the Chuunin Exam, thanks to Sakura’s hairstyle. I was also reasonably sure it had happened in the summer, not midwinter, but I don’t think there had been any liberal applications of Chidori, Rasengan, or even wall-walking.

We… might be able to handle that, I realized. I couldn’t remember how the original Uchiha had beaten the boss cat, but he had tried to do it solo at first and I had zero compunctions about making this a team effort.

“The hell is a Pawprint Encyclopedia?” Naruto asked.

“A collection of paw prints from different types of cats,” I explained as Kakashi ruffled my hair, apparently reading my new, tentative confidence in my body-language. “I’m guessing that this mission is for one of the stronger ones?”

“A giant beast of a thing called Nekomata,” our teacher affirmed, letting his hand drop. “Nekobaa will have more information about the circumstances and specifications for you once you reach her base in Sora-ku.”

“Well, if Tsukimi-chan knows the client, that’s totally different.” Sakura tucked her hair behind her ear, smiling at me encouragingly. “So, you think we’ll be okay on our own for this one?” She peered at me, alert for any sign of hesitation.
Something in me rankled at needing that sort of concern from somebody ten years my junior mentally. “We won’t need an adult if that’s the mission,” I said, curling my toes in my snow-socks. They certainly hadn’t in the original episode, and the lion’s share—no pun intended—of the encyclopedia entries had been collected by a bored five year old as busy work.

“It’d be kinda cool, meeting somebody who knew Tsukimi-hime way back in the day,” Naruto stroked his chin thoughtfully.

That was a strange way to put it, I thought, but maybe he was trying to skirt the noticeable lack of adults familiar with me who weren’t teachers.

“I’ll look forward to some interesting tales, then,” Kakashi said, cheerful. “Tell me something about her that Gai’s team didn’t know first. It’s honestly insulting that Lee knew her favorite ice cream flavor before you two.”

“He cheated!” Sakura snapped immediately. “Tsukimi-chan never went for ice cream publicly before, so nobody knew!”

“Haruno,” I cleared my throat pointedly.

“Um, I mean,” she coughed, cheeks pink as she beat off the flagging impulses of her former days. “He specifically invited her out after their second match, and Naruto and I still had to deal with extra stealth training. He had an advantage we couldn’t beat, in that sense.” She sniffed imperiously. “Who even gets ice cream in winter?”

“Don’t judge,” I said mildly. “It isn’t as though we were eating it outside. And Sensei, you only knew that before Uzumaki and Haruno because you snooped through my freezer.”

“A shinobi uses any tactic at his disposal,” he insisted, shameless. “Remember that while you’re hitting up that old woman for stories.”

“Heh, this is gonna be a cinch,” Naruto grinned, hooking his arms behind his head.

“Holy shit, this place is creepier than where you live, Tsukimi-hime.”

A day later, when we had arrived in Sora-ku, Naruto’s normally unflagging optimism took its first major hit.

“Naruto!” Sakura snapped.

“Thank you,” I said idly, eying the looming, abandoned buildings with some trepidation of my own. The whole image of urban decay really gave off a Zombie Apocalypse sort of feeling, and given that we lived in a world where a canonical Plant Monsters versus Zombie showdown could feasibly occur, I was not handling the situation with as much grace as I might have otherwise.

“Tsukimi-chan, don’t thank him!” Sakura threw her hands up. “He just told you that your home was creepy!”

“It… is creepy, though?” I cocked my head, eyes narrowed. “I mean, you've been to my house before, haven’t you? Maybe Tenten-senpai distracted you. Remind me when we get back, you can
Sakura opened her mouth, then closed it after a moment, apparently struck speechless by my nonchalance.

“Let’s hurry,” Naruto said with a shiver that likely had nothing to do with the gusty, snowy weather. “I wanna get inside as soon as possible, ’ttebayo.”

“Agreed,” I nodded, entirely because of the gusty, snowy weather. A good coat and scarf really only did so much, after a few hours of traveling. I kept a sharp eye out for the marker, and quickly made a bee-line for the doorway once I caught sight of it.

“Team 7 reporting in,” I said dutifully as I stamped my feet on a welcome mat in the front hall, my teammates just a step behind. “It’s… been a while since I last saw you, Nekobaa.” A while since I picked up the manga or bothered to watch the anime, that was.

“What, if it isn’t Tsu-chan,” a creaky voice split through the air. I turned to see a wizened old woman with the most amazing hair I had ever seen in my entire life, and smiled despite myself. It earned me a snap of laughter from her. “My, but you’ve gotten even prettier than you were the last time I saw you, haven’t you?”

“If you say so, Nekobaa,” I replied dutifully, falling back into the bittersweet comfort of a habit formed from years of dealing with my great-aunts and godmother. “I hope you’ve been well.”

“Oh, well enough, well enough.” The old woman beckoned me closer, the ears of her cat headband appearing to twitch in the somewhat dim lighting. “Come closer, child. It’s been far too long.”

“Yes, Nekobaa,” I nodded and toed out of my sandals, padding forward in just my snow-socks so that I was within poking-and-prodding range.

“When, um,” Sakura started, then coughed, obviously feeling a little awkward as I let myself be fussed over by somebody who was a stranger to my teammates. They weren’t used to me having acquaintances I hadn’t met alongside them, understandably. “When exactly did you last see Tsukimi-chan, ma’am?”

“It’s Nekobaa, dear girl,” our client told her as she cupped my face in her hands and inspected it with warm, narrow eyes turing in laugh lines. “Yes, you’re the spitting image of your grandmother, these days,” she confided to me. “On your father’s side. A great beauty, that one. I can hardly believe you were still in pigtails, the last time I saw you.”

“Pigtails?” Naruto gasped, clutching at his chest as though in pain. Sakura didn’t look far behind him, eyes clouded over as she pictured the image.

That had to be an overreaction. I frowned at them, but didn’t pull away from the warm, leathery hands tilting my face this way and that.

“See for yourself, if you don’t believe me.” Nekobaa gestured somewhere behind me. “Tamaki, bring out the Encyclopedia, there should be a picture near the front.”

“Yes, Granny!” A sweet voice echoed out from some other room, and its owner quickly appeared, heaving a large book on her way out. She was a relatively cute brunette about our age, and she flashed me a bright smile and a wave when she caught me looking.

“Nice to meet you,” Sakura greeted politely.
“Likewise,” Tamaki said, with a deep bow. “It’s an honor to meet Tsukimi-sama’s teammates. Please look after her in the future.”

“We totally will!” Naruto beamed. “So, it’s fine to let us get a glimpse of her in the past, right?”

I heard the sound of pages turning.

“Wow, Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura marveled. “There are so many… and some of these are really, really big! I can’t believe a little kid managed to collect all of these.”

“Tsu-chan has always been highly skilled,” Nekobaa informed them, releasing me. “She met genin standards even at that tender age. Finding a challenge to keep her busy while her minders negotiated for weapons was a task and a half, before we thought of the Encyclopedia.”

“Are these her minders?” Sakura asked, peering at what could only be a photograph with curious, gleaming eyes, Naruto peering over her shoulder eagerly.

“Yes,” Nekobaa said, just as I moved over to look at it myself. “Her elder cousin Shisui and her brother Itachi rarely ever let her out of their sight, back then. Watching them wait for her to come back each time was quite entertaining.”

Naruto and Sakura went stiff, allowing me to tug the glossy paper out of their limp fingers as they digested that little revelation. I was fascinated myself, because that seemed to be one of the first major past discrepancies from what I knew about myself, aside from my gender. Shisui… that had been Itachi’s best friend, I knew, but I didn’t think Tsukimi’s original male counterpart had been particularly close with him, before his death.

I peered at the photograph, honestly interested, and my mind went abruptly blank.

Dimly, I noted that the disgustingly adorable little girl triumphantly holding up a roughed-up looking cat was undoubtedly Tsukimi, albeit bright-eyed and beaming in a pale purple sundress and gray leggings. The pigtails were high and tight, paired with straight bangs I still sported, and if the little girl and cat had been the only subjects the photo would have been unbearably precious.

The other two boys in the picture, however, somewhat spoiled the effect.

From a purely compositional standpoint, they probably improved the image. The younger boy, with a gentle smile and his arm around little Tsukimi, all but radiated a warm sort of pride, and the older boy, curly-haired with a crooked grin, had his hand splayed on top of her little head, nearly engulfing it entirely in one broad palm. It should have been a touching image, if you were oblivious as to where the models were now, barring perhaps the disgruntled cat.

It really should have been. Instead, all I felt was a choking, all-consuming terror as I looked at it.

“I-I need some air,” I heard myself say, as if from a far ways off.

Exiting the building was a strange affair that I was only aware of in peripheral, disjointed, stuttering flashes. I glimpsed Naruto and Sakura looking worried, I felt the photo slip from my fingers, I was staring at my feet, somehow already in my shoes, my eyes stung and watered, presumably from the cold, and I found myself crouched next to a random frozen fountain.

I couldn’t think properly.

I couldn’t breathe properly.
I knew I was breathing, because I could feel the cold air stinging my throat and I could feel the almost painful shudders of my chest, but beyond that I was... not numb, exactly, but somehow outside myself. It was as though I had been walled off from myself with a pane of glass, caged in with a mess of incoherent terror, the mindless desire to run as far and fast as possible, and the numbing, crippling uncertainty that kept me paralyzed.

I was crouched down with my hands fisted in my own hair, trying frantically to calm down and failing spectacularly when Naruto and Sakura caught up to me, some indeterminate time later. Maybe they had chased after me immediately, maybe Nekobaa had given them some exposition about how close I had supposedly been with my brother—I had no way of knowing.

I felt dizzy, and sick, and I could only count time in strange increments if I tried really, really hard to focus. It took forty-seven slow, tight circles rubbed between my shoulders by a slender hand before I could see straight again. Rough, calloused hands squeezed mine tight, then tighter, then tightest before going slack and then repeating the process nine times before I stopped shaking. Their voices were one long indecipherable ebb and flow, gentle and soothing and soft until finally, finally words started to make sense again.

“...in, two—three—four, out, three—two—one, in, two—three—four, out...” Sakura was saying, at that point. It took a few cycles before I could start following her advice. I saw her shoulders shudder once, relief clear on her face, but she kept up her chant.

Naruto’s running commentary was more to the tune of nervous word vomit, but it was no less soothing.

“—and then we’ll go to that grocer lady who you like and you can give her a hug too, and Fuzzy Brows and you can have, like, a hugging competition ’cause he’s totally trying to stealth-claim you as his Eternal Rival, only you’ll totally win that one ’cause that old lady loves you, ’ttebayo, she really does, and you won’t go back to your creepy ghost town, we’ll make Sensei take you home, or Sakura-chan can, or I can, or somebody can—”

I tried to say something and sniffled, and then I realized I must have started crying at some point because my face was wet.

Immediately, they both fell silent.

“S-Sor-ry,” I croaked out, when I was able.

“Shut up,” Naruto said, fierce but somehow fragile. “You’re not the one who—...just... Don’t worry about it, Tsukimi-hime.”

“That’s right.” Sakura’s voice was thick, but firm. “You’re our teammate.” She swallowed hard, and sniffled herself. “It’s only normal for us to take care of you.”

I hiccuped and my vision blurred again, my eyes going hot. It took a few more minutes before I was composed enough to go back inside.

Chapter End Notes

So! We’ve broken 3,000 hits, and I have more fan art! Addendum's Team 7, in all their casual glory.
In which I take a step forward

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, well... they split the party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So,” I said, smoothing down my coat and not quite looking Nekobaa or her granddaughter in the eye. “Our instructor told us we would be targeting Nekomata. What can you tell us about him?” I pursed my lips, not having to fake the furrow my brow fell into. “…her? Them?”

“Him,” Nekobaa told me, her husky voice kind. The Encyclopedia—and the picture that had set me off, for that matter—was nowhere to be found by the time we had tromped back inside. “He’s the boss of the main syndicate of nin-neko. Luckily, he doesn’t move around much; his stronghold is fairly famous around cats as an unparalleled resort.”

“Okay,” Sakura said slowly, not relaxing the deathgrip she had on my hand. “That seems… strangely straightforward, even for a Genin-only C-Rank. What’s the catch?”

“‘Boss’ isn’t just a title for show, you know?” A high voice purred, as a large cat strolled into the room. “He’s super strong. Itachi-san and Shisui-san didn’t want little Tsukimi-nyan anywhere near a monster like that on her own.”

“We’re way stronger than a five year old,” Naruto protested, one arm looped through mine and both hands buried sullenly in his pockets. “We could take him! It’s only a paw print, anyways; maybe if we ask he’d be fine with just giving it to us.”

“Not a chance,” another cat shot him down, cleaning his whiskers once he had hopped onto the arm of Nekobaa’s huge chair. “For a cat, getting your paw print taken is super humiliating. It’s like getting stripped and photographed for a human.”

“Difficult,” I mused. “But not impossible. We shouldn’t rule diplomacy out entirely, but we should be prepared for a fight no matter what, to be on the safe side.” In the original canon material, that option had been discarded immediately, which was par for the course for the boy who might have lived this life. “It explains why Kakashi-sensei isn’t here, though.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Sakura laughed, a bit of the tightness receding from her eyes. “Can you imagine a dog summoner just strolling into some feline pleasure palace?”

“…way too easily,” Naruto sighed. “I’m half expecting him to pop up ‘coincidentally’ anyways, ’ttebayo.”

“He would,” I muttered, shaking my head ruefully before forcing our conversation back on track. “Is Nekomata’s stronghold in a location you intend to divulge to us, or will you be transporting us to it directly?”

“Transport,” Nekobaa said firmly. “This is a business, after all, Tsu-chan, and current circumstances aside, Nekomata is a highly valued customer and has been for many years. Once we’ve properly
equipped you, these two can take you to where you need to go.”

“I’m Hina,” the first cat introduced herself, rising onto her hind-legs and dipping forward in an approximation of a bow. “It’s been a long time, Tsukimi-nyan, so you might not remember us. You’re looking well.”

“Thank you,” I said, politely nodding my head in return. Naruto and Sakura mirrored me, but seemed unwilling to let go of me for a proper set of bows.

“Hmph,” the other cat, the one with the character for ‘shinobi’ on his forehead, seemed less forgiving. “After taking our paw prints so eagerly, you’d think she would at least remember our names!”

“I…” A touch of heat darted over my cheeks, because I was certain the original Uchiha had remembered them. “I’m very sorry. That time… it’s… I have difficulties thinking back to that period.”

“…Well, I’ll let you off easy this time,” he sniffed, turning his head. “The name’s Denka—don’t let it slip your mind again, Tsukimi-nyan, or all the nice things we’ve said about you and that brain of yours will sound like lies. We’ve got reputations to protect here, y’know?”

“I’ll remember it, Denka-san,” I promised, as meek and agreeable as I had been while Nekobaa originally fussed over me. “Thank you for your patience.”

“Well,” his fur fluffed and he dropped down, darting towards the door. “Well! Y-You’d better! Hina, I’ll go set up the seal, get these kids kitted out in the meantime, yeah?” He slipped out of the door before any of us could say anything, but I was left with the distinct impression that I had embarrassed him.

Hina raised a paw to her mouth and giggled. “He was so excited to hear we’d get to see you again,” she told us conspiratorially. “Itachi-san and Shisui-san let us watch over little Tsukimi-nyan when she was filling up the Encyclopedia, even though we were basically kittens ourselves. He was the biggest so you used to call him ‘Denka-taichou’ and treated it like a real ninja mission every time. It was adorable.”

I felt the flush in my cheeks deepen, and swore I heard Sakura coo delightedly. “Right.” I coughed, and wriggled out of my teammates’ well-intentioned grips. “Um, as much as I would enjoy reminiscing, he said something about getting ‘kitted out’ with something?”

“These,” Nekobaa spoke up, and I turned to see exactly what I had been expecting: three pairs of white, fluffy cat-eared headbands.

“…I’m going to assume those do something,” I said shrewdly.

“They’ll allow you to speak the language of the cats at Nekomata’s hideout,” Tamaki assured me. “And they’ll make it so that you all look like cats too!”

“That’s amazing,” Sakura said, taking one and trying it on. “Is it seal-work?”

“Trade secret.” Nekobaa shut that line of questioning down, and passed the remaining headbands over to me and Naruto. I slid mine on without a hint of shame or hesitation, because I had already started going to anime conventions when I was actually twelve. This sort of thing didn’t faze me in the slightest anymore.

“Shouldn’t Tsukimi-hime get a black pair?” Naruto asked, shifting his headband this way and that,
apparently uncertain as to how it should properly sit. I batted his hands away and took over the task, tugging it off and carefully sliding the arms of the headband underneath the fabric of his forehead protector, for added security. Sakura watched and tucked the ends of her own headband underneath her forehead-protector too, somehow finding a happy medium.

“The color doesn’t matter,” Tamaki said. She flashed us a thumbs up and a smile. “They work just fine, right Hina?”

“Absolutely,” the nin-neko agreed. “You all look very presentable.”

“What do we look like?” I suddenly wondered. “I mean… Uzumaki and I are one thing, but is Haruno a pink cat?”

“More of a white-and-peach,” Hina told me. “Very pretty, very neat. Uzumaki-kun is a bit fluffier, golden with some markings. And Tsukimi-nyan has such a lovely, silky coat…” She trailed off with a jealous sigh, before turning mischievous. “Better be careful, or you might end up with a few suitors; there are cats of all ages at the castle.”

“Would not surprise me at this point,” Naruto said frankly, apparently unfazed by being referred to as fluffy. “I swear everybody we know is a little in love with Tsukimi-hime, ’ttebayo.”

“Not everybody,” I said automatically, grimacing despite myself.

Sakura turned and looked at me with a narrowed gaze, her head tilted as if she was trying to puzzle something together. “Tsukimi-chan, that reminds me of something you said earlier, about knowing somebody who didn’t like you… Is it somebody we know?”

“I—” …had no idea what to say to that honestly, because there was a gleam in her eyes I wasn’t sure I liked.

“Are you being bullied?” Naruto jumped in, his eyebrows furrowing as if the very thought was inconceivable.

“No.” I insisted, because the last thing I wanted to do was start shit with a member of Team 10 when Sakura and Ino had only just gotten the opportunity to reconcile, just because they were worried I was still feeling fragile in the wake of my little… episode, with the photograph. “Look, it isn’t a problem. I don’t need to be universally liked. And this isn’t the time for something like that, anyways. We do have a mission to complete, remember?”

“Tsukimi-nyan’s right,” Hina jumped in, padding for the door. “Let’s go; Denka should be done by now, and it would be best to get you kids over there before it gets dark.”

I followed after he, and the others were forced to do the same, dropping that line of questioning for the time being. I had no doubt we would rehash this another time, possibly with Kakashi and the pack weighing in on the conversation as well, but I was more than willing to ignore that for the moment.

I had more immediate concerns.

“Meet us back here once you’ve got the print,” Denka instructed as we glanced around the wide field
we had been transported to. He had shifted sometime between activating the seal matrix and our arrival, and now stood a full head taller than me. “Nekomata’s castle is about half a mile past that grove of trees; you can’t miss it.”

“Yes, Denka-san,” I said, as Naruto and Sakura gaped at the similarly re-sized Hina.

“And remember the advice Hina gave you about the guards,” Denka continued. “They’ll throw their weight around, but line their pockets and they’ll melt like butter.”

“Yes, Denka-san.”

“And remember, just because he isn’t a human, that doesn’t meant you can afford to underestimate Nekomata—”

“I think they get it, Denka,” Hina stopped him, gently placing a paw on his shoulder. “We should let them get started.”

“…Right.” Denka turned his head to one side. “Go on then, you three. Don’t make us wait any longer than we need to. It’s winter, you know?”

“Yes, Denka-san,” I said again, smiling slightly. “Thank you for all of your help. We’ll do our best to make sure you don’t have to freeze out here.”

“You better!” Denka huffed, fur puffing slightly as he folded his paws crossly. Hina laughed quietly behind him, and wordlessly ushered us off.

Naruto, Sakura and I darted over the frozen ground quickly, not exactly eager to be out in the cold any longer than strictly necessary. To their credit, the two of them managed to restrain their urge to tease until we hit the copse of trees Denka had mentioned.

“You sure you’re ready for this, Tsukimi-nyan?” Naruto jabbed as we hopped between naked, snow-laden boughs. “We can go back so Denka can finish his lecture, if you want.”

“Oh, hush,” Sakura scolded him, too far away to hit him but obviously thinking of it. “I think it’s sweet. Like her little dynamic with that grocery store lady.”

“Mission,” I reminded them. “We are currently on a literal, paid-for-by-a-client mission.”


“Whoa,” Sakura breathed, as we cleared the trees and got our first good look at Nekomata’s castle. It was as large and cat-shaped as I fuzzily recalled, and lit up as brightly and gaily as any resort I had seen in my previous life. There was a crowd of cats—all our size or taller—gathered at the front gate, which we mixed into. A guard came around and fashioned us into a more orderly queue.

“You sure you’re ready for this, Tsukimi-nyan?” Naruto jabbed as we hopped between naked, snow-laden boughs. “We can go back so Denka can finish his lecture, if you want.”

“Oh, hush,” Sakura scolded him, too far away to hit him but obviously thinking of it. “I think it’s sweet. Like her little dynamic with that grocery store lady.”

“Mission,” I reminded them. “We are currently on a literal, paid-for-by-a-client mission.”


“Whoa,” Sakura breathed, as we cleared the trees and got our first good look at Nekomata’s castle. It was as large and cat-shaped as I fuzzily recalled, and lit up as brightly and gaily as any resort I had seen in my previous life. There was a crowd of cats—all our size or taller—gathered at the front gate, which we mixed into. A guard came around and fashioned us into a more orderly queue.

“Next!” A mewing voice ushered along the line, one by one, until it was our turn. A set of armored cats inspected us, and I covertly returned the favor. I couldn’t call myself a master of animalistic expressions, but given my limited experience with Kakashi’s pack and my limited contact with Hina and Denka, I thought there was a certain tired haggardness in these feline faces.

“Haven’t seen your faces before,” one of them said.

“Three more visitors,” I said, keeping my voice smooth and gentle as I passed over a small pouch that Nekobaa had provided for this very purpose.
“That’s it?” The cat asked, and my stomach plummeted. He checked the contents, eyeing us. “No sob story, no bluster, just a…” He let out a pleased purr as he hefted the pouch in his paw. “A humble request for entry?”

My pulse began to pick up.

“Yes, sir,” Sakura answered for us, looking up at them with eyes so big and green that I prayed the headband properly translated them into her illusionary form.

“Ha!” The other one pounded the butt of his spear into the ground, shaking his head with a laugh. “What good kids. Always nice to see young’s that know the way the world works. Head on in, we’ve got a lot more cats to get through before we can head in to enjoy the festivities ourselves.”

“Thank you,” I said, and bowed before following the cats that had been let in before us.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Naruto told us, probably substituting that last word for ‘easy’ since Denka’s preparatory lecture had covered the enhanced hearing of the average nin-neko. “So, how do we wanna start?”

“Well, there’s so much to see,” I murmured, glancing around. “How about we each take a building, do a little sight-seeing, and then meet back here in the courtyard in about an hour?”

“Just looking?” Sakura slanted a glance at me.

“Yeah,” I rolled my shoulders, tightening the grip I had on the straps of my pack. “Just looking. We’ll meet back up and see what we want to do when we have a better idea of where everything is. We’ll waste less time that way.”

“Sounds good to me,” Naruto agreed.

“Okay,” I thought. “Haruno, you take the left paw, Uzumaki, check out the right, and I’ll poke around the head. Remember, one hour.” I bounced one toe against the ground in a beat, and we used it to sync our timers. “See you then.”

“See you.”

“Take care, Tsukimi-chan.”

“Mm.” I took a deep breath and mixed in with the crowd milling around stalls that had been set up in the spacious courtyard. I tried to quell the nervousness that flared up as my teammates melted away off towards their own destinations; I wasn’t a little girl, and they weren’t normal kids. These weren’t normal cats, either, but I was confident we could handle this.

I’d be more confident if I could remember the specific details of the damn episode we were living out, but life wasn’t perfect. I’d just have to make do. I had, at this point, exhausted all of my foreknowledge—I knew what Nekomata had looked like in the anime, yes, but beyond that… I thought that he should be in the cat-shaped ‘head’ of the castle, but I wasn’t certain. It fit a certain narrative flow, but this was a different time of year from the original mission.

There hadn’t been a festival going on in the original episode, that much I was certain of, and that meant I couldn’t be sure Nekomata himself would be where I thought he was. I had exactly zero intention of going the lone wolf route on this mission.

If I did come across our target, I would double back and wait for Naruto and Sakura, as planned.
“Such a splendid place,” a large, chubby cat—some variation of bobtail, I thought—sighed beside me, as we milled into a grand entryway as she pressed a paw to her full, whiskered cheek. “Such an amazing opportunity, wouldn’t you say?”

“Unquestionably,” I agreed, glancing around. I looked past the glittering chandeliers, beyond the gleaming cat-statues and richly colored paintings lining the walls. It reminded me somehow of the Las Vegas hotels I had visited over the years with my parents, but I violently beat back the flash of nostalgia. This was not the time.

I resolutely did not think about when ‘the time’ would come. As always, I had to deal with the issue at hand before I could worry about that.

I let the natural bustle and flow of the sightseeing cats buoy me around the large room, until I was left on the edges of the crowd. And, more importantly, when I was brought in range of one of the doors overshadowed by the lavish decorations. At that point, I shifted from passively allowing myself to get pushed around and started moving with purpose.

Body language, I had learned while trawling through about six years’ worth of notes, could often be a ninja’s greatest tool in the field. I strolled straight through the door as if I did it every day and let it close smoothly behind me. I kept walking down what was obviously a service hall, but nobody burst in after me. I followed the hall until I hit a stair case, and then took the steps at a leisurely hop.

I glanced at the timer hooked at my waist, and felt a bit of the tension melt out of my shoulders. I still had nearly fifty minutes left before I needed to meet Naruto and Sakura.

The landing I found there seemed to be a set of servants quarters. They were empty, all their occupants busy handling the massive crowds still spilling into the castle grounds. I didn’t spend much time there, heading back to the stairs and heading up once more. The third level was also servants quarters, but some familiar metallic scents led me to conclude that it was for guards. I didn’t inspect it closely either, worried about getting caught by any off-shift guards who might have snuck off for a cat-nap.

The fourth floor…

Now, that had a touch of opulence to it. The halls were as silent as the ones below and there was still at least one more floor above it, but I took more time to explore. The floors were a glistening, dark hardwood covered with a long, plush rug, and the sliding doors were vividly painted with stylized, monstrous looking cats. A whole six panels depicted a scene of—presumably—Nekomata fighting a band of tiny, dark figures I thought might supposed to be shinobi.

“Is that Kyoku-tan?”

I jolted and clutched at my chest, whirling around.

Somehow, a cat had snuck up on me. Well, kitten, I corrected myself, given the soft, young voice and the fact that he only came up to my shoulder. His fur was snowy white and his large eyes were even bluer than Naruto’s, a level that I had previously thought impossible. I had no idea how he had managed to fool me, but the thick carpet and my moment of inattention certainly hadn’t helped.

Belatedly, I actually registered his question.

“Kyoku…” I trailed off, my mind still flailing for direction, before clarity snapped into place. “Oh! You mean my bag?” I shrugged out of one strap and slung it around, so it was between us. The pack was black and somewhat oval in shape, with two yellow buttons for the top flap, and an upside-
down V-shaped zipper pouch below. It was subtle enough that Naruto and Sakura, who didn’t understand my deep appreciation for Kyoku-tan’s adorable charm, had yet to notice the resemblance.

“Yeah!” The little cat’s eyes seemed to glitter in anticipation. “From Kyokudo Outfitters in Konohagakure, right? I have an auntie and an uncle who always get me Kyoku-tan stuff when they visit, but I didn’t know there was a bag!”

“It’s new,” I told him, hugging it with a touch of pride. “They just hit the shelf a week ago.”

“Lucky…” The cat sighed. “I wish I could go to the village on my own, but Dad’s too overprotective.”

“I know the feeling,” I sighed as well, remembering Naruto and Sakura beginning to catch wind of the Shikamaru issue.

“Oh!” The cat bopped one paw between his ears, which pressed down against his skull guiltily. “I’m sorry, miss. I was taught better. My name is Kasha.” He bowed, precise and proper, before lifting his head and shutting his eyes in a sweet kitty-grin.

I want to pet him, my brain screamed.

“My name is Tsukimi,” I told him before I could bother thinking of a cover story. “It’s my first time here, so I’ve been admiring the artwork.”

“It is pretty nice, isn’t it?” Kasha tilted his head towards the illustrations. “Dad always lets me attend the big festivals here every year, but I usually spend my time down near the booths.”

“Oh?” I looked up, mentally fist pumping. Of all the felines that could have gotten the jump on me, the son of some bigwig was practically a windfall. “So, you know a lot about this place then?”

“Sure do!” Kasha puffed up his downy little chest. “Are you looking for some place in particular, Tsukimi-san?”

“More like someone,” I told him. “My friends and I were hired to negotiate something… kind of delicate with Nekomata-sama,” I divulged. “It’s not exactly something you haggle over in public, I can say that much. But, we’re all first-timers here, so we don’t know where to go in order to meet him, or if there’s somebody we need to talk to in order to get a meeting.”

“Hm…” Kasha pressed a paw to his chin, expression turning thoughtful. “Let’s see… I could probably help you sneak in, if it’s really, really important, but…” He shifted from side to side, hemming and hawing. Occasionally, he peeked out at her with those big, luminous blue eyes.

It was incredibly assuring that he was so easy to read, when I was feeling so out of my depth. I tapped my fingers against the side of my thigh as if I was weighing my options, before setting my pack down on the floor and unbuttoning the top. My essentials were sealed away on a little square of yardstick in the zipper-pouch at the front.

“You know,” I said slyly, “I got more than just this pack a week ago.” I pulled out something I had packed on a whim.

“A Kyoku-tan temari ball?” I had been wrong before. Now his eyes were glittering, practically shimmering with pure, childish need.

“Exactly.” I hefted the ball of intricately woven black and yellow thread. His shimmering, bright gaze followed the motion. “Tell you what, Kasha-san. If you help me and my friends get a one-on-
“Deal!” Kasha agreed enthusiastically. “Um, can we…” He fidgeted. “Can I, um…”

“You want to play a little bit?” I guessed.

He nodded, ears twitching bashfully.

“Well…” I checked the timer at my waist, warring between my shrewd, compulsive need to be on-time with my overwhelming desires to play with a cute cat. According to the little timepiece, I still had thirty minutes, so there was no conflict after all. “We have some time. Is it alright to play here, or should we go somewhere else?”

“Here is fine!” Kasha beamed.

I had played Kemari—a simple game where the biggest rule was to keep the ball from touching the ground by any means—plenty of times during D-Rank babysitting missions. Kasha had apparently had fewer opportunities, but I was well-versed in the art of easy transfers. Between the two of us, we managed to volley it back and forth for nearly twenty minutes with minimal fumbles.

“Okay,” I sighed, catching the ball instead of bouncing it when there were about ten minutes left on my timer. “I think that’s good for now. Can you help me now, Kasha-san.”

“Sure thing, Tsukimi-san!” Kasha was practically bouncing, he was in such good spirits. “I’ll take you to him right now!”

“Uh—” I tightened my grip on the Kyoku-temari, briefly caught off-guard. “Well, maybe not right now, Kasha-san; I still need to find those friends I told you about, first.” I had no intention of doing this on my own. I had no plan for doing this on my own. I needed time to emotionally prepare myself, and I needed Naruto and Sakura as back-up, in case that wasn’t enough.

“I’m sorry, Tsukimi-san,” Kasha rubbed the back of his neck, looking up at me with soulful, sad eyes. “But it’s too late for that, you know?”

My blood turned to ice, and the hall around me shifted in a blur of color that snapped itself into a different room entirely. The carpet beneath my feet became stone, and the illustrations popped into flickering oil torches. There was a hulking figure behind a slatted curtain, and I couldn’t see Kasha any more. His words, however, echoed hauntingly as the giant silhouette shifted, one massive, clawed gray paw pushing it aside.

“He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh, there's almost 5,000 hits. I'm happy you guys are enjoying it!
Chapter Summary

This is the one where Tsukimi finally loses her cool.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh,” I said weakly. “…Oh.”

This was normally the part of a suspenseful confrontation where a functional human being scrambled to keep calm, panicked, felt betrayed, or otherwise reacted to the sudden reveal that the tables had been turned on them. I, being a *dysfunctional* human being, was still drawing a blank, even after the curtain was fully drawn aside and the gigantic, gray longhaired monster-cat himself made eye-contact.

“…You can blink, kitten,” the *gigantic monster cat* told me in a voice like a landslide, and I realized that I had been staring, frozen, long enough for my eyes to start watering. Also, I was hyperventilating.

I took a moment to blink, breathe, and remind myself that even to him I looked like nothing more than a cat. I hadn’t done anything wrong, except nose around his private dwelling and bribe a kid to help me swing a meeting, which I got in the end. Things were okay. Not good—I wanted back-up, goddammit—but okay.


Nekomata blinked his giant, feral-looking eyes slowly. I had the terrible suspicion he was amused.

“You have something to say to me?” He prompted, folding his paws in front of him and tapping a long, needle-like claw.

“I do!” I nodded. I kept nodding, getting tongue-tied despite my best intentions. I forced myself to stop nodding, so I didn’t seem any weirder than I did already. I reminded myself to blink again. “I wish I had note cards for this,” I mumbled under my breath, before gripping the straps of my pack for dear life and soldiering on. “I… am…”

“You are…?” Nekomata twirled his claw in a motion that pretty much screamed ’spit it out’.

“I’m here to talk to you about the Pawprint Encyclopedia!” I blurted out, wanting to run away. “I’m sorry!”

Damn. I had managed to go a full month and two weeks without tacking on an unnecessary apology. There went my record.

“What.”

Oh, right, I was in the middle of something important that could possibly turn violent.

I shrunk back as Nekomata bristled in shock, his eyes glinting dangerously.
“I—my friends and I, we were hired to approach you about it,” I babbled. I was probably breaking Ninja Rules left and right by being this forthright, but he was scary and I didn’t want to get caught in a lie if I could help it. “Nekobaa is looking to complete the collection, and you, um. Yours isn’t, uh. We—we’re supposed to…” I shrunk in on myself even further, yearning to unseal the Fuuma Shuriken from my thigh holster, if only so I had something big and sharp to hide behind. He was huge. And scary. And given what vague notions of proportionality I had, this situation made it abundantly clear that I was so utterly **fucked** if I survived long enough to meet a Biju.

“And you think I’m just going to **give** it to you?” Nekomata seemed incredulous, which had me on tenterhooks. That could slide into outrage or amusement easily, but I had no idea which way the metaphorical wind would blow.

“Well, no,” I admitted. “We actually had no idea how this would go, I’m so sorry, we just—”

*Brr-ing. Click. Brr-ing. Click.*

Shit.

“My timer,” I said automatically as I turned it off, like a dumbass. He eyed me dubiously, and I scrambled to follow up. In for a penny, in for a pound and so on, right? “I, I wasn’t supposed to be meeting you alone,” I explained, gesturing vaguely. I had no idea why I was gesturing, or if it added anything to the overall presentation of my case, but it made me feel marginally more in control, somehow. “My friends and I split up to find out how to meet with you, and we were going to meet back up in the courtyard and then plan out what we were going to say and I—I’m just really, really sorry.”

“So you’ve said,” Nekomata snorted. “Multiple times. At least you understand the gravity of what you’re asking. My pride won’t be sold cheaply, little kitten, I’ll tell you that much right now.”

I felt a spark of hope. That wasn’t a no. It wasn’t a yes, either, but it seemed like diplomacy might actually be an option. I let out a shaky, relieved sigh. “Um, then, is it alright if I go down and get my friends? They’ll be worried if I don’t show up.”

“No, you stay here,” Nekomata shot me down without hesitation. “I’ll send guards down to fetch them. What’s your name?”

“Mitsuba,” I said on a whim. “If you tell them Mitsuba is waiting for them up here, they’ll come without any trouble.” I hoped. I really, really hoped. “I hope.”

“You hope.” Nekomata echoed flatly, but seemed to be edging back towards amusement now. That was… probably a good thing, I decided, and a little bit of my thunderous panic receded.

“I—” *Crap crap crap*, I chanted internally. He should already know Itachi, and that meant he’d know my name too. “Mitsuba,” I said on a whim. “If you tell them Mitsuba is waiting for them up here, they’ll come without any trouble.” I hoped. I really, really hoped. “I hope.”

“You hope.” Nekomata echoed flatly, but seemed to be edging back towards amusement now. That was… probably a good thing, I decided, and a little bit of my thunderous panic receded.

“They worry too much,” I mumbled, looking down. “They… **should** come quietly?” If they were together, Sakura’s cooler head had a good chance of prevailing over Naruto’s hotblooded instincts—or, well, Sakura’s scolding fist had an excellent chance of winning over Naruto’s complaints and skull. As of late they had taken to turning to me to break the tie of whatever they fussed or bickered
over, a wide range of topics encompassing food, which D-Rank missions to take, and what should be in the next day’s bento, among other things. In my absence, I wouldn’t be surprised if they reverted to old habits.

An awkward silence settled. I fought the urge to pull out my little timepiece and see how fast or slow the time was passing. It felt like a small eternity was creeping by, with a monster peering down at me in this dim, eerie room.

Naturally, the alarms waited until I had opened my mouth to try and break the ice before they began to blare.

I briefly closed my eyes in resignation.

“It would seem your hope was misplaced,” Nekomata noted. “How unfortunate, Uchiha Tsukimi.” My eyes popped back open.

“I told you to call me Mitsuba,” I said slowly, casually sinking into a stance that gave me more options in the way of fight and flight.

“You told Kasha something else entirely.” Nekomata pointed out. “You had less reason to lie to a child, and it’s hardly a common name, among cats.” He still hadn’t made a move towards me, even as I silently swore up and down at my damnable weakness for cute animals. Conversely, it made me tense up even more. Could I trust his apparent ease? I had trusted a seemingly innocent little cat, and had reaped the consequence of that lapse.

Pakkun and Ūhei were going to give me such a talking-to if I survived this mission. Kakashi might even be galvanized enough to finally give us the ‘underneath the underneath’ spiel, which I was still waiting to hear.

“Do I look like an Uchiha to you?” I demanded, grasping at straws.

“You told Kasha something else entirely.” Nekomata pointed out. “You had less reason to lie to a child, and it’s hardly a common name, among cats.” He still hadn’t made a move towards me, even as I silently swore up and down at my damnable weakness for cute animals. Conversely, it made me tense up even more. Could I trust his apparent ease? I had trusted a seemingly innocent little cat, and had reaped the consequence of that lapse.

At the very end of the episode, there had been a shot of little Itachi—and thinking of him made my stomach lurch, though I ignored that for now—after beating Nekomata into submission. Little Itachi in damnably, adorably fluffy white cat ears. I had officially lost every aspect of the element of surprise, and I had nobody to blame but myself.

“I’m—” I began to say, until I was cut off by the sounds of a nearby fight echoing up from what I assumed was the direction of the stairwell, and an all-too-familiar, all too anguished shout.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and I jerked towards the door.

“Naruto! Look ou—” I heard Sakura’s muffled voice ring out, before she cut off with a pained grunt.

“Ah, it looks like your companions have found out how we feel about humans nosing around where they aren’t welcome,” Nekomata chuckled, even as the blood drained from my face.

“Let them go,” I snapped out, forcing myself not to slip back into a shallow, scared breathing pattern. Anger was better than fear, and this was like the Dog Test; for all that they fussed over me, Naruto and Sakura were kids. I flinched violently as a high, girlish scream bounced up from the stone halls. “We haven’t done anything to you, just let them go!”
“You have broken into my home,” he said, and sent a piercing, accusatory stare my way. I took no
mind of it, too preoccupied with a wet-sounding snarl from Naruto in the background.

This is a filler episode.

“We walked in the front door!” I took a step towards him, because if I didn’t I’d end up bolting for
the door, mindless and desperate to grab Naruto and Sakura and get the hell out, no matter how
many cats stood between us and freedom. “Your own guards waved us inside!”

I am not getting us killed during a goddamn filler episode.

“You came intending to wrest my pride from me!” Nekomata thundered, two high, hurt, childish
cries cutting against the timbre of his low roar. “I will not be bested by a mere child!”

“To hell with your pride!” I snarled, patience snapping when the sounds of a fight fell into unsettling
silence. “Let them go!”

“Make me,” he goaded, baring a mouthful of needle-sharp fangs at me in a cruel grin.

I was leaping at him before I knew what I was doing, unsealing one Fuuma Shuriken and swinging it
up to meet the claws waiting for me. The clash sounded more like steel screeching across steel, and
sent me tumbling back with the force of it. I rolled with it and got back on my feet with a fluidity that
was entirely thanks to Kakashi’s careful tutelage and drills.

I threw my arm to one side and the shuriken’s blades fanned out with a nearly silent snap. Tenten
had put me through my paces the last few weeks, so I knew how to dash forward without the bulk of
it slowing me down too much, allowing me to dodge and weave past the follow-up blows he rained
down on me. ‘Let the edges work with you,’ she had said, and I twisted the angle of the shuriken to
cut down on wind resistance as I stabbed towards what would have been the Achilles tendon on a
human opponent.

It was nothing more than luck that I bent back enough to miss getting kicked across the room. This
was somehow a thousand times faster than any spar I had taken part in, even counting Lee. In the
heat of the moment, I swore to myself that I would be fighting with that boy so, so much more often,
if I got home alive, no matter how exhausted or aching it left me.

It also didn’t help that there was a hell of a lot more than just some bruises riding on this fight, I
mused. I glanced at the gouges he left in the ground as I skipped away from one of his swipes and
dodged the following spray of splinters and aged stone as he yanked back his paw.

“What a desperate little brawler,” Nekomata mocked, as his claws gripped one of my oversized
blades. I twisted to wrench it back, but ultimately I was tossed away as if he were bored with my
efforts. “If there were any other of your ilk left, I’m sure they’d die with shame.”

I grit my teeth, unbothered by the opinions of people I never knew, but unappreciative of the
sentiment all the same. “Pride this,” I grunted. “Pride that. Is that the only thing you know how to
talk about?”

“Oh, forgive me.” He pressed a paw to his heart and bowed facetiously as I circled around him. He
batted away a kunai I sent whistling towards his eyes as if it were no more than a pesky fly and
leaving it buried in the vaulted ceiling. “I forgot, shinobi are mindless automatons. But surely, even
you ninja know the meaning of pride. Pride in one’s family, in your beloved village…” His maw
seemed to curl into something cruel and expectant as he pointedly glanced behind me. “In your
fellow shinobi, even.”
Everything in me screamed not to do it.

Nevertheless, I still turned and looked.

A scream caught in my throat, knotted there with horror and denial.

The doors at the back of the large chamber had been opened, and there was a small crowd of heavily armored cats gathered there, two small, bloodied figures collapsed on the floor in front of them and held at multiple spearpoints.

That was good, a small, muted part of my brain whispered beyond the screaming chorus of *no, no no, no NO NONONO NO* currently echoing around my skull. It meant they were still alive enough to need that sort of violent precaution. Sakura, I noted in an unsettlingly detached manner, had so many cuts on her arms that her red coat had turned a wet maroon from the blood.

Naruto’s arms were bent the wrong way.

A choked, wounded noise hiccuped out of me, and I saw red. The soft, logical part of my brain was niggling again, trying to tell me something important about what I was seeing, but I instinctively shied away from examining the bloodied and broken *children* any further, shooting kunai and normal shuriken at Nekomata with wild abandon.

He dodged them all, but that was exactly what I had expected.

I leapt towards him again, twisting to avoid one of his paws and not quite managing it. I ignored the flaring sting of razor-sharp points slicing cleanly through my coat and shirts to bite right into my flesh and followed through on the maneuver, flipping over his shoulder and heaving on the nearly invisible spool of ninja wire I had been carefully weaving, anchoring it in the back wall with a heft of my Fuuma Shuriken.

I hadn’t had the time to get a loop around his neck—not with Sakura and Naruto so limp and listless and… and I needed to *stop thinking about that*, I needed to fight instead—but his forepaws were snapped back against his sides, and when I dove past his split tail to bodily tackle one of his knees, he went down like a rotted tree.

I stood up, panting, but none of the cat-guards seemed inclined to attack, merely watching impassively. Nekomata shifted with a low groan, opening his mouth again.

“I don’t care,” I cut him off before he could even start. “I don’t care about pride. I don’t care if it’s yours, or mine, or Konoha’s, or anybody’s. Let. Them. Go.” I unsheathed another kunai and used my free hand to put some pressure on the gash he had slashed into my side.

“You may be the first ninja I’ve ever met so willing to toss aside their mission,” he laughed, an ominous cackle that only lost some of its bite due to his trussed up position.

“No mission is worth their lives!” I snapped, aghast at how cavalier he was. “Not one!”

He kept laughing. “You weren’t joking about a lack of village pride,” he chuckled, now sounding impossibly, utterly at ease. He still held two major trump cards against me, so it was understandable.

“Oh MY GOD,” I shouted, nearly delirious with stress and anger and pain and disbelief. “Stop talking about pride! Just! Stop!” I threw down my kunai and fumbled through my holster, unsealing the thick, folded-up sheaf of paper I had been given by Nekobaa to take Nekomata’s paw print. I lifted the hand pressed against my wound and slapped my bloody palm against the thick paper. I tossed the entire sheaf at his head, stooping to scoop up my kunai and snap the wire binding him.
“What are you—” he began to ask.

“Take it,” I bit out. “There’s my ‘pride’ and the only way I had to take yours. That’s it, so just… just take it, and give me back my friends!” My voice went a little shrill, cracking at the end.

Nekomata gingerly picked up the pad between two claws that dwarfed it, as though it was something excessively delicate or precious, completely at odds with everything he had done until this point. The calm, rational part of my brain politely prodded at me, easing past the adrenaline and frustrated pain to tug at the inkling I had pushed aside earlier.

“Tsukimi-chan…”

I turned, my breath hitching awkwardly as I twisted my hips and aggravated my wound, somehow knowing what I would see and not trusting myself to be right, just in case I wasn’t.

The gaggle of cats was still gathered at the door, but there wasn’t a spear in sight, and two of them bore a striking resemblance to the crumpled, bloody figures on the ground. Sakura and Naruto were missing their cat ears and were gaping at me, but were otherwise entirely untouched. Naruto was even holding what looked like a skewer of grilled squid, which he nearly dropped when his wounded doppelgänger shimmered and wafted into non-existence like a wisp of smoke.

_Fucking genjutsu_, I wanted to say. I should have known the second that Naruto hadn’t started healing or leaking out monstrous chakra. “You’re okay,” I whimpered instead, my eyes burning. My knees nearly buckled as relief hit me like a physical blow, but I couldn’t bring myself to blink, staring at them and drinking in every possible detail even as tears welled up and my vision blurred.

“Tsukimi-hime, your eyes,” Naruto started to say, but I was already darting forward, cats parting before me so I could tackle my totally untouched teammates into a hug.

“Tsukimi-chan, your side!” Sakura gasped.

I squeezed them tighter, shaking like a leaf.

A little under an hour later, several things were readily apparent to me.

The first was that Sakura and Naruto had come quietly, fully trusting that I had managed to find a nonviolent opportunity to accomplish our mission. The trouble had come when a little kitten that Naruto had been playing with hadn’t wanted to lose her playmate or get off of his shoulders, knocking off his ears and exposing him to a crowd of cats who had innocently been enjoying the festivities. From there, he and Sakura—who had been relieved of her ears as well in the ensuing panic—were ushered up to Nekomata by the guards, while the rest of the guests were evacuated to some human-free safe zone.

The second was that Kasha wasn’t just the son of some bigwig cat. He was the son of _the_ bigwig cat. Even now he was seated next to his father at the head of a massive, private feast, showing off the Kyoku-temari I had passed to him while I was getting patched up and he had come to deliver a kimono to replace my ruined shirt. Next to him were two suspiciously familiar-looking cats, with striped brown fur and damningly identifying bows at their ear and neck respectively.

Auntie Tora and Uncle Shishi made periodic stops to see their honorary godson when away from the
daimyo’s wife’s tender affections, it seemed.

The third revelation was that I had finally activated my Sharingan. It had happened as soon as I realized Naruto and Sakura were safe and sound and not beaten bloody because of my incompetence. I was… trying not to think too deeply about that, horrifically embarrassed by the fact that they had basically heard me spit on everything they had ever been taught about being ninja while throwing a panicked tantrum, but they hadn’t stopped giving me soft, dewy-eyed looks when they weren’t busy fussing over me and loading up my plate.

The fourth revelation was that Nekomata had already been aware of all of the previous three circumstances, and had pushed me with the apparent goal of forcing me to finally use my bloodline ability. He was still massive and looked every bit as imposing and threatening as he had when I first clapped eyes on him, but he had cordially invited Hina and Denka to enjoy the festival while the three of us enjoyed his personal hospitality, so…

Well, honestly, I had no blessed idea what was going on in that massive head of his.

“You are not what I was expecting,” Nekomata rumbled, and I looked up from the third helping of chicken hot pot I had been picking at. He had my bloody handprint in his claws again, and was examining it with an unreadable expression. Kasha waved at me when he saw me looking, and I mustered a faint smile in return.

“I… see.” I said slowly, not seeing where he was going at all.

“It’s a compliment,” he told me shortly, before flicking out the sheaf of paper to its full, massive size. “It’s been a long, long time since I’ve met an Uchiha capable of choosing to toss their pride aside at the first hint of danger to others.” He laid the paper on the floor beside him, behind his son.

I felt myself flush hotly and folded my hands in my lap, acutely aware that Sakura and Naruto were once again looking at me in that strange, excessively gentle manner. “I… They’re my teammates.” I stopped short, and looked down, feeling the fiery blush flare up to my ears. “They’re my friends. That… You can’t call that a choice.”

Two different hands crept over and gripped my own, tight and firm and wonderfully strong.

“It’s always a choice,” he disagreed, something cold entering his voice even if his eyes were surprisingly gentle when I peeked up through my bangs. “You would be surprised how many of your kin have made the opposite one in the past, though you might be alone in that surprise.” He held my gaze, and drew one long claw across his paw-pad.

“What are you…” I stiffened, bewildered as he smeared the blood that welled up over his paw.

“You may have no trouble parting with your pride,” Nekomata said, as he firmly pressed against the spread out paper. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be proud of yourself, Uchiha Tsukimi.” He lifted up the paper and expected his work with a short nod of approval. The other cats in the room seemed to be holding their breath, spellbound by the sight of the massive paw print juxtaposed against my tiny handprint.

I was completely knocked for a loop.

“Why?” I managed to ask, reeling. “Nekobaa and the others said—I mean, I didn’t even beat you, not really, I just—”

“Not every battle is won through a victory,” Shishi purred, smoothing out his richly embroidered robes. He and his sister—as nin-neko and not just pedigree pets—seemed to be able to size-shift just
like the rest. For the first time, I had the presence of mind to wonder if this was something I should report, or if the daimyo and Hokage were already aware. It did add an extra layer of protection that nobody would see coming, so it was possible.

“…We probably should have asked for our ears back,” Sakura murmured to Naruto behind me.

“Yeah, all I heard was mrow-meow-nya from that one,” Naruto admitted. “Why do only the big one and his kid speak our language?”

I ignored them, unable to act as a translator because Nekomata was beckoning me forward with one quickly-cleaned claw. I eased myself up, breaking up my teammates’ whispered discussion as I gingerly slid past them and headed for our gigantic, confusing host. He gestured for me to sit on his other, unoccupied side, and tapped a claw against the table.

Three cats slipped into the dining hall, one holding a tray with a small, decadently decorated cup, and the other two bearing a much larger version. Nekomata easily scooped up the big one, and nodded his head at me. Hesitantly, I picked up the cup and brought it to my mouth, taking a small sip.

I nearly spat it out, as it was more or less like being punched in the mouth by crème de menthe’s stronger, meaner brother. But, mindful of the fact that he didn’t have to give me his paw print or even let us eat with him, I politely swallowed the mouthful I had taken, and quickly set the cup back on its’ tray.

“I’m—” underaged, I wanted to say, to dodge having to finish even that small cup, but before I could Nekomata took a gulp from his own cup, carefully pinched my cup between his other claws and knocked it back, and then held his massive cup out to me, an expectant, almost predatory light in his eyes. Kasha shot me a delighted, encouraging look from his father’s other side. If he had them, I thought he might have even given me a thumb’s up.

The quiet, rational part of my brain was trying to get my attention again as I stared down the gilded lip of the cup tilted for my convenience. This was important I knew, as I took in the way the light played across the strange, minty alcohol. There was something I was forgetting, something about having my blood and his stamped on the same paper, something about switching cups—

I drank anyways, too mentally and physically exhausted to properly worry about it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so for my readers who like visual aides, this is an example of the size difference between Tsukimi and Nekomata and this is the paw print in comparison to Team 7. You’d stutter when talking to him all alone too, I’d bet.
Warm, was my first, vaguely pleased thought as the first tendrils of wakefulness wormed their way in.

Soft, was the second.

Ow, came a close third, abruptly followed by the faint ache that inspired it blooming into something far more insistent. The dull throb chased away the dreamy daze I had been enjoying. It left me feeling inexplicably irritable, up until I finally blew out a sigh and pried open my eyes. As I registered the familiar sight of a noontime-sun filtering in through blinds, I understood my soul-deep resentment instantly.

I had finally managed to sleep in, for the first time since becoming Uchiha Tsukimi.

“Oh God,” I croaked, with feeling, screwing my eyes shut before they could properly focus.

I had also managed to get spectacularly hung-over, moreso than I had ever managed to be in my original body. All of this, I reflected in a moment of deep and profound self-hatred, despite being physically a child.

“Go back to sleep, Tsukki,” came a soft mumble from the direction of what I tentatively identified as the direction of my knees. I tilted my head weakly to look but found myself blinded by a mass of fluffy, black hair—mine—and a plush, pink quilt of some sort—also mine. The quilt was thick and blessedly soft and warm, but there were pockets of weight dotted over it here and there that led me to believe there were things—cats, I corrected myself—settled on top of it.

I was drawing a blank on a lot of things, up to and including where exactly I was, but not the cats.

“Mmmno,” I mumbled, reluctantly wriggling out of my half-curled sleeping posture and sitting up. “M’late.” I squinted into what I now saw to be a large, if somewhat dimly lit room. The futon I had been sleeping in was, in a strange twist, pale pink and dotted with rose-print, while the pillow and quilt were a solid, darker pink. The bedding itself could have probably held my entire team at once, including Kakashi’s pack.

Instead, it seemed to just be me, and half a dozen normal-sized cats, all of whom seemed to be drifting out of various stages of inebriation. I tentatively identified the one that had been curled up on top of the comforter, tucked against the curve of my legs and barely bigger than my forearm, as none other than Kasha.

“Impo-o-o-ossible,” Kasha yawned, as he languidly uncurled and stretched. “You’re a guest. Guests are never late.”
“I’m… not sure that’s how it works,” I said distractedly, taking in the room around me with a new degree of scrutiny. There were stenciled paintings of trees on the screen walls, but the light was too poor for me to discern just what type of blossoms they bore. Plum or cherry blossoms, I was willing to bet. The rest of the decor seemed to follow the general theme of what I had seen—pink and feminine. I wasn’t sure if this was a guest room, or one that had been waiting for me—for Tsukimi—for years.

I did know which answer would unnerve me the most, and resolved not to ask just in case.

“…did I make a blood pact last night?!” I asked, jarred into recollection of another, very recent and unnerving occurrence. My hand went to my side, and I belatedly realized that I had either changed or been changed into a yukata—three guesses as to the color, and the first two didn’t count—and my wound wasn’t hurting as much as I thought it should.

I remembered some sort of herbal salve had been applied before the bandages went on, and wondered if I could get Nekomata to pack some up for me to take home.

“Uh-huh!” Kasha shifted fluidly out of his stretch, bounding across the covers and over a snoozing tabby to settle in my lap. “Dad says it’s been forever and ever since we’ve had a summoner, so you’re super, suuper special Tsukki!”

“Tsukki?” I finally managed to ask, instead of the breathy, charmed coo that wanted to erupt in the wake of such hyper-concentrated adorableness. He seemed even whiter when contrasted against the flushed shades of pink.

“You, um, well,” he coughed gently, ears flicking bashfully as his enthusiasm banked. “Last night, you kept calling me ‘Kacchan’ and all, so I thought it would be okay if I… I mean, if you’d rather I be more formal, then certainly I’ll—”

“It’s fine,” I said, feeling my heart give a hard throb. I finally gave in and ran two fingertips over the velvety-soft fur between his ears. “I don’t mind if you don’t, Kacchan.”

“I don’t!” The little cat beamed at me, expression turning guilty when the other five cats began to stir.

“Young Master is awake?” The tabby nearest to me staggered to her paws and then seemed to shimmer, growing until she was even taller than I was. The calico near my hip gave a demure little gasp and followed suit, and in no time at all I found myself surrounded by a gaggle of ashamed feline handmaidens.

“Terribly sorry—”

“—must think the worst of us—”

“—forgive the impudence—”

“—make up for this Tsukimi-sama!”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Sure.” I rubbed my eyes, because somehow it still felt too early for all of this. “First, though, could you get my teammates?”

My teammates. I paused my rubbing, feeling something tug at the back of my mind. Mindful of yesterday’s events, I followed up on it immediately, wracking my brain for any explanation for the strange, unsettled feeling clenching through my shoulders. Something about my teammates… Or not?
“…We probably should have asked for our ears back,” Sakura had said.

My hand flew from my eyes to the top of my head, where I felt nothing but silky, fluffy bedhead. “Where,” I asked slowly, “is Nekobaa’s headband?”

“Oh, we couldn’t let you sleep in that,” the calico cat waved me off. “After such a day—and, well, evening, for that matter—we wanted you to have the best possible rest, Tsukimi-sama!”

“So why can I still understand you all?” I asked, my tone perfectly even. I was downright conversational.

“You’re the summoner Dad approved of,” Kasha told me with an air of sage patience. “There’s no point to a contract if the ones signing it don’t benefit somehow, you know? And Dad doesn’t do things by halves.”

I’ll bet.

“Good to know,” I said out loud. “Now, Kacchan, I think the nice ladies here are trying to find a polite way to toss you out.” I nodded to the increasingly troubled-looking maids. “How about we let them do their job, and we’ll talk more later?”

“Okay.” He nodded docile and padded out of my lap, shifting as he went until he was the size I had first seen him in. He bowed and beamed at me. “I’ll go let Naruto and Sakura know you’re awake. They didn’t end up drinking, so they’re probably already up and enjoying the daily festivities!”

“Thank you,” I said with a mild smile, trying to contain the horror that dawned as I realized that I had gotten blackout-drunk in front of two impressionable children last night. If Kasha was any example, I had been an affectionate drunk, but beyond that…

“How was yesterday evening?” I asked the calico as the crowd of cats helped me up and ushered me towards a large bathroom. “I’m afraid everything’s a little…fuzzy, after Nekomata-sama offered me his cup.”

“It was an amazing celebration!” A gray cat gushed, clapping her paws together. “Nekomata-sama had a bunch of performers come and show off after your oaths were exchanged, and your teammates kept checking on you to make sure your battle wound was still holding up. Really, you’re all such sweet children, Tsukimi-sama. If you weren’t so capable, I might have never guessed you were ninja.”

“Really, we should expect no less from the people surrounding somebody Nekomata-sama has chosen to recognize,” the tabby mentioned, as she began tugging off my yukata. It took more willpower than I thought it might to keep from flinching away for modesty’s sake, but I managed.

“Oh, absolutely!”

“Yes, yes, but it’s still so exciting! A human summoner! Why, it’s been an age and a half, it has…”

“Not to say that you didn’t make a perfectly gorgeous little cat, Tsukimi-sama!”

“Oh, of course! I caught a glimpse of you in the foyer last night, and before I knew better I was positively sick with jealousy.”

“Our Nekomata-sama has the best taste, inside and out!”

I let the effusive chatter wash over me as they readied my bath, and prayed that my day might start
making a bit more sense once I was reunited with my team.

“Not gonna lie, we were seriously worried you married a cat for like, a whole half an hour last night,” Naruto told me bluntly, after I had been cleaned up, my wound had been redressed and I had gotten my freshly mended and laundered clothes back.

“Naruto!” Sakura slapped the back of his head sharply, huffing out a sigh. “Don’t tell her that!”

“What?” Naruto wrinkled his nose at her and puffed out his cheeks, pouting. “It’s true! You were the one having a conniption over it, ’ttebayo.”

“You don’t even know what that is,” she hissed, her tone positively waspish.

“I do too!” Naruto folded his arms smugly. “It’s when you get super angry or panicked. Like you were, last night, when you had a conniption.”

There was a brief, impressed silence.

“So, what happened after that half an hour of worrying, Uzumaki?” I asked, hoping to move things along before Sakura ceased wavering between pride and annoyance at Naruto’s surprisingly well-rounded vocabulary.

“Your new best buddy Kasha clued us in on the whole summoning thing,” Naruto went on blithely, hooking his arms behind his head and rocking back on his heels cheerfully. “Said a bunch of stuff about how rare it is for his old man to give a damn about humans, and so on, and how cool it was he actually swallowed his pride to put down a paw print, and about how nice you were.” He shrugged. “Y’know, stuff we already knew, ’side from the whole ‘contracting’ thing.”

“Well,” Denka muttered dryly. “It wasn’t exactly something I thought I’d need to warn you kids about.” He and Hina looked exceptionally well rested, and the tomcat who I had only seen as surly and standoffish the day before now seemed to be the very picture of lazy contentment. “I probably should’ve, in hindsight. Even way back when she was little, Tsukimi-nyan had a way of making her other hunts for the Encyclopedia… interesting, to say the least.”

“Oh yes,” Hina laughed, glancing at me affectionately. “Each one was an adventure.”

“Well, I don’t think I’ll be topping this one any time soon,” I said, and it tasted like a lie. Probably because this wouldn’t even be a drop in the bucket come next summer and the madness that the Chuunin Exams would undoubtedly usher in, with or without my meddling.

“I should hope not,” Nekomata rumbled from behind us, making the entire group jump. Somebody so big, I swore to myself as I turned around, composed and outwardly unruffled, had no business moving so silently. “Unlike some others, I won’t take kindly to you frivolously signing away your allegiance to any other clan of summons. Am I understood, Uchiha Tsukimi?”

“Perfectly, Nekomata-sama,” I said as dutifully as I could manage. “Thank you for your generosity, and your hospitality.” I touched the pocket of my jacket that held a photograph of the paw print I had gone through so much turmoil to receive. The original couldn’t be parted with, I had been informed by a scholarly looking cat in tiny, round spectacles that it would be the height of impropriety to have the original copy of my sacred contract in the hands of an unrelated third party.
“Hmph.” He crossed his paws and looked aside, glaring at the stonework of his own front gates. “Spare me the pleasantries, and merely remember the kindness I offered you while my son is in your care.”

“…while your…” I parroted the words faintly and blinked, at first not understanding his words. “Kasha-san is coming with me?”

“You did make the offer last night,” Sakura reminded me quietly. I had some vague recollections of a promise to show the little cat my budding Kyoku-tan collection that was blurred together with images of a fire-eating tabby in a grass skirt, but I hadn’t been entirely certain as to whether or not it had actually happened until this moment.

“He will be your instructor for summoning our nin-neko,” Nekomata told me, in a tone that made it clear that refusal was not an option. “And genjutsu, for that matter. Even without those eyes, it’s deplorable that somebody of your lineage was so deeply caught in one of my weaker illusions.”

I did not flinch at the barb, even if I really, really wanted to. “I don’t intend to make excuses,” I said. “You’re right. Our instructor opted to work on our physical abilities, chakra reserves and ability to use both efficiently rather than just handing us techniques to work on. Thank you for offering me the chance for some extra tutoring.”

“Still so humble,” he sniffed as I bowed to him, prim and proper, and then shook his massive head and turned his piercing yellow gaze to his son. It didn’t soften, but some of the sense of imposing danger evaporated around him. “It will be your first time out of our holdings, Kasha,” Nekomata said. “The outside world won’t cater to your whims, and things work a bit differently among humans. But it’s fine to rely on her, since she’ll be relying on you. She’s one of our people now, so make use of her and protect her as your own. Understood?”

“Understood,” Kasha said with surprising firmness, and then shifted mid-leap to land on my shoulder, as small as he was when I first woke up. He was warm, and surprisingly heavy. But it was a strangely reassuring feeling, even as my stomach clenched up in anxious knots.

Everything seemed to be happening so fast. It was all I could do to simply go with the flow, at this point.

“We’ll send his things along to your home,” Nekomata said after a short pause.

“Oh, of course,” I said, because of course a young noble-cat would have luggage. “I live—”

“We know where you live, Uchiha Tsukimi,” Nekomata said with an unmistakable tinge of amusement. “Shishi and Tora are far from the only eyes we have inside of your village. We’ll have his things delivered by the time you return.”

“Of course.” I bit back a resigned sigh, and noticed that Naruto had begun fidgeting with the straps of his pack. I bowed again, careful not to dislodge Kasha as he wormed his way underneath my scarf. “Thank you again, Nekomata-sama. We’ll be off, now.”

“Safe travels.” It sounded more like an order or a threat than a well-wishing, but I accepted it with a smile and turned to follow Hina and Denka back across the clearing and forest towards the sealing matrix, my teammates in tow.

Mercifully, they stayed silent until the familiar desolate skyline of Sora-ku loomed above us.

“So, it was kind of creepy, that whole ‘we know where you live thing,’ right?” Naruto wanted to know, as we ambled back towards Nekobaa’s place. “Like, it’s not just me, right? That was creepy.”
“Dad’s kind of got a way about him,” Kasha hedged, having snuggled himself into a safe little pocket of warmth between my hair and scarf. “Most things he says come out that way. He meant well, though!”

“I’m sure he did,” Sakura assured him warmly.

“Uchiha Tsukimi,” Nekobaa intoned as we entered the main room. “What on earth did you get yourself into this time?”

“Nothing bad,” I said automatically, in a knee-jerk reaction to disappointment from a maternal figure. “Really.” I dug out the photograph I had been given, and held it in front of me like a peace offering. Or a shield. “We successfully completed our mission. Sorry for the delay.”

Nekobaa squinted at the picture as Hina returned our cat-ears to a fascinated Tamaki. They had been given back to us after lunch, before we had headed out to the front gate to set off. I saw the moment she noticed the tiny handprint in the bottom corner.

“You have the devil’s own luck, child,” she sighed heavily and shook her head, but she was smiling as she held out a sheaf of paperwork, presumably confirming our objective’s completion. “I swear.”

We didn’t linger for very long afterwards, Sakura tucking the papers away as we set off again. In the way of all trips, the journey back seemed to take half as long as the original trek to Sora-ku had, especially, with Naruto and Sakura enthusiastically telling Kasha about all the exciting sights and stores waiting for him in his new home. The Hokage’s Mountain, the training grounds, the view from the roof tops, and of course Ichiraku’s, all of them were described in glowing, gushing terms.

I was still occasionally dazzled by Konoha, in all its sprawling, shockingly real glory, but seeing the walls loom up ahead as we dashed down the main road inspired a warm, aching feeling in my chest I stubbornly refused to identify. It felt too much like acceptance—like defeat—if I did.

It was already dark when the guards verified our identities and ushered us through, and I quickly found myself dazzled by the much less worrying but no less unexpected flash of a camera.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura whined, reeling back and blinking her eyes rapidly. “What was that for?!”

“Just documenting my cute students’ first successful C-Rank,” Kakashi told us cheerfully, lowering a clunky monster of a polaroid camera and plucking out a nostalgically familiar square, shaking it as it developed. “Look at you all, on your own and in one piece and not unharmed because I smell blood,” he prattled on blithely, his tone not changing even as his intended words changed on a dime. “Why,” he asked slowly, his photo-shaking slowing. “Do I smell blood?"

“Um,” I said eloquently, shrinking as his eye snapped to me and roved over my body with terrifying intensity.

“There were some… unforeseen complications,” Sakura said, still blinking away after-images. “But we did complete our mission!” She brandished the paperwork Nekobaa had given us.

“We did,” I agreed.

“Complications,” Kakashi repeated, just a beat behind.

“Oh, and Tsukimi-hime totally activated her Sharingan!” Naruto added.

“I did,” I affirmed.
“Sharingan,” Kakashi repeated, his hand totally stilling. Just as well, really; I couldn’t see the details clearly, but it looked as though the picture had more or less finished developing.

“We’re also very pleased to welcome her as our new summoner,” Kasha piped up, popping his head out of my scarf and beaming sweetly at our worryingly still teacher.

“That happened too,” I said. “After the Sharingan. Which is probably part of why you smell blood, really.”

“Tsukki let Dad score a hit in their battle so she could gain the upper hand,” Kasha said, giving a little wriggle of excitement. I passed a hand over his little ears, ignoring subtlety in favor of cutting that line of conversation off before Kakashi could parrot the word ‘battle’ or ‘summoner’ at me with deadpan incredulity.

“I think we should probably turn Nekobaa’s confirmation in at the missions desk,” I said instead.

“You know,” said one of the gate guards to the other, “I thought Hatake was just being a mother hen, hovering out here all damn day, but I kind of get where he’s coming from now.”

“Seriously,” muttered the other one. I swore that I should know their names, but I just couldn’t recall them. Right now I was too busy trying not to shift around nervously.

They shut up when Kakashi pinned them with a gimlet stare. “We’ll do that,” our teacher said at length. “And then we’ll all find somewhere nice and cozy for you to give me a rundown of exactly what happened, since missions that are C-Ranked or higher require after-action reports. Sensei will be nice and help you write out your first ones.”

He beamed at us, and I fought the urge to shrink into my scarf. The tail Kasha wrapped around the back of my neck felt surprisingly reassuring.

Later, when Kakashi was walking me home and Kasha was dozing and curled around my neck, I found myself wishing that he would say something. Anything, really, as long as it broke the silence that had settled between us since we parted with Sakura and Naruto after a very belated dinner at the Ichiraku’s stand.

“She screamed at him that no mission was worth our lives, and threw it right his face!” Naruto’s words echoed dammingly in my head, over and over again. Try as I might, I couldn’t manage to think of anything to say. My hands were buried in my pockets to keep them from shaking.

This was like Shikamaru, but flipped around in the scariest sort of way.

I had finally done it. I didn’t know if I could go so far as to say I ‘broke character,’ because I wasn’t exactly the world’s greatest actress and most of the time I only held my tongue and made the choices I wanted to make. But Uchiha Tsukimi had built up a reputation as a hardworking, devoted young kunoichi, the kind that excelled in the values and skills taught at the Academy.

And I was fairly sure normal Rookies of the Year didn’t loudly—hysterically—thumb their noses at the basic premise of their vocation. The success of a mission was meant to be paramount. That’s what all our textbooks said. That was what our Academy instructors had drilled into us, from a young and tender age. There were probably banners dedicated to that ideal hung up somewhere in
the Uchiha District, for that matter.

Kakashi was supposed to be a goddamned genius. He had made Chuunin at six. I may have dodged a bullet with Shikamaru, but I had the terrible, dawning certainty that my number was up.

“Tsukimi-chan.”

I went rigid as his voice finally cut through the gloom, sucking in a breath and bouncing my eyes between lampposts as we ambled along. If he was still using endearments, I rationalized, then he probably wasn’t about to bundle me off to Torture and Interrogations. Probably.

“Yes, Kakashi-sensei?” I managed, in a tone that was almost level.

“You’re a good girl,” he told me, and settled his hand on top of my head.

“Thank you.”

“A very sweet girl, too,” he continued, ruffling my hair slightly.

“Thank you… very much?” I said, a touch uncertain as to where he was going with this.

“I wasn’t anywhere near as good or as sweet as you, when I was your age,” he went on, and I wanted to weep with relief as I finally realized what was happening here. “I,” Kakashi said shamelessly, “happened to be a total brat. It all started with losing my father, I suppose. It kind of tapered off when I lost a teammate.”

If he wasn’t the catalyst for literally almost every terrible thing that would happen to me in the future, I reflected, I could almost be happy that Uchiha Obito existed. Almost.

“Kakashi-sensei,” I said gently, interrupting him as I drew to a stop. I turned to look at him seriously. “I’ve… I’ve lost my father too.” That was true, if not in the way he might think, and I kept talking because if I didn’t I felt like an avalanche of prickling, white-hot anguish would finally tumble loose. “I’ve lost a lot more than that, actually. I won’t lose a teammate. I’m not going to lose any of you.”

My eyes stung, and everything grew sharper, clearer, more vibrant in a way I knew to be Sharingan-induced thanks to a very interesting game of ‘I Spy’ on the journey back to Konoha. Not for the first time, I cursed how much of an easily-moved crybaby I could be.

“You’re all,” I plowed on, “going to live. That’s not negotiable. We’re going to grow up, and go to Naruto and Sakura’s weddings, and you and Gai-senpai are going to grow old and and retire and make cracks about how things were different back in your day, and you’ll always be two hours late to every Early Bird special but they’ll serve you anyways because you’re the Hokage’s teacher.”

I took a deep breath to try and calm down, because that was getting a bit too emotional. And personal. I had taken to the habit of daydreaming about fast-forwarding past all the insane tasks awaiting Team 7, because it was the only alternative to worrying myself into an anxious mess over it.

“I’m not losing any of you,” I said again, lifting my chin defiantly.

Kakashi stared at me for a long moment, the flickering light of the nearest streetlight casting strange and alien shadows over his face. “Can’t argue with that,” he said after a moment. He moved his hand from my head to my shoulder, gently ushering me back into a slow walk. He squeezed gently, tentatively, as if uncertain how to deal with that sort of belligerent hope.
Maybe he was. I was only twenty-two mentally, and I had no idea how I’d react if a middle schooler had flat out told me something like that, before all of this had happened. A twenty-six year old probably didn’t have much more of a clue, I realized ruefully. Still, it seemed like a good reaction, more or less.

“There are some things you kids don’t necessarily need to put in your reports,” Kakashi told me as we passed through the now-familiar gates of the District. “When you guys give me your first drafts later today, I’ll help you parse it down to the, ah… necessities.”

No need to flaunt my beliefs to our chain of command, then. I held back a huge sigh of relief.

“Later today?” I asked in lieu of that, tilting my head fractionally so I didn’t disturb the sleeping kitten warming my neck.

“It’s two in the morning, Tsukimi-chan,” he told me with a chuckle as we paused outside my door. I fought the urge to pull a face at the snow that had piled up in the scant two days I had been gone.

“Oh,” I murmured.

“Yeah.” He took his hands back and slid them into his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “You know, even if it doesn’t make it into the official documents, that Nekomata wasn’t wrong. “You should be proud of yourself.”

I am, hung silently between us, and I swallowed thickly.

“Speaking of which,” Kakashi continued brightly, completely disrupting the nice little mood we had going on. “I’ll do you a favor and break the cat news to the Pack before training tomorrow.”

And with that said, he made a sign and disappeared in a gust of snow, leaves, and winter air, leaving me alone.

Kasha gave a full-body shiver and shifted, rubbing his whiskered face against my cheek tiredly. “S’cooold, Tsukki,” he whined pitifully.

“I know, Kacchan,” I soothed him absently, trying not to think about what Pakkun and Ūhei might have to say about my shocking new status. I did not actually know what their stance on cats was, I realized with some surprise as I fished out my keys and unlocked my front door. “Don’t worry, we’ll be nice and warm in bed soon.”

“M’kay,” he murmured.

I shut the door behind me, not bothering with the light switch since my eye-sight was currently good enough to pick out the fine details of my living room. I was unsurprised by the foreign shape of what was presumably Kasha’s promised luggage, stacked neatly beside my couch. I ignored it and headed straight for the stairs, unwinding the bandaged around my thigh along the way.

I transferred Kasha to my pillows and stumbled off to change in the bathroom, all but crawling under the covers soon after. It wasn’t as decadently warm or soft or floral scented as the futon at Nekomata’s place, I reflected as I deactivated my Sharingan, but there was something undeniably comforting about sleeping in your own bed.

I was asleep before that feeling of proprietary comfort could unnerve me.

When I jolted awake later in the morning, shaking and sweating with a scream waiting on my lips and a red moon dancing behind my eyes, I had much bigger things to worry about.
I can't believe this story has managed to get over 100 comments. Thanks for all of your support, everybody! And, for your viewing pleasure, here's more or less what the beginning of this chapter looked like. Also, an amusing little factoid for you all: this chapter was finished and posted at two in the morning. I feel Tsukimi's exhaustion keenly right now.
In which I am fine, really

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we settle back in at home, and Tsukimi makes some questionable life choices. I know, I know; I'm just as surprised as you are.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a moment, it was all I could do to gasp for breath, clutching at the sheets and staring up at the ceiling of my bedroom without actually seeing it. It was pure muscle memory that drove me to relax one hand and turn off my alarm.

“Tsukki, why are you crying?”

I jolted slightly, finally coming back to myself, and sat up unsteadily. “…Why are you in my shirt?” I croaked out in response, prodding at the lump of warmth underneath my flannel pajama top. I noticed now that the bandages previously dressing my wound were lying loose around my hips, but I wasn’t in the right state of mind to properly connect the dots.

“Treating you,” Kasha explained, wriggling out onto my bedspread to give me a worried once over. He stuck out his tiny tongue, which promptly began to glow a familiar minty green. “The salve helped, but Dad and I thought it would be a shame if you ended up scarred for life.”

I let out a short, sharp laugh. “Too late for that,” I muttered, only realizing my mistake when the shadows still looming at the edges of my consciousness flared back to life. My stomach lurched threateningly and I shot out of bed, bolting for the bathroom.

From the very first moment, I had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. My father had a saying he particularly liked—many sayings, actually—but the one that had been hovering at the back of my mind for the last few months was this one:

‘There’s no such thing as a free lunch.’

Becoming Uchiha Tsukimi had been a suspiciously easy process. I had thought my panic attack at the sight of Itachi might have been the price tag for that ease, and had finally started to relax my guard a little. That, I knew now, as I splashed water onto my face, had been a mistake. The Itachi thing was part of it, obviously, but the mechanism that had allowed Uchiha Tsukimi to not suddenly become a complete failure when I entered the picture had finally revealed itself as the double-edged sword I had expected it to be all along.

“Fucking Magical Eye Bullshit,” I swore under my breath as I turned off the faucet.

“Tsukki…?” I glanced over my shoulder and found Kasha hovering by the doorway.

“Sorry, Kacchan.” I rubbed a hand over my mouth. I hadn’t retched when I stumbled from my bed to the bathroom, but God, had I wanted to. “I’ll watch my language in the future.”

“Tsukki, you were crying.”
I grimaced. I had been crying again. Ugh.

“I’m afraid I do that a lot more often than my reputation might suggest,” I told him, slowly drying my hands with a towel and trying not to think of bodies I felt I should recognize laying sprawled on the cold, dark ground. “But it isn’t anything terrible.”

That was a lie.

“That’s a lie,” Kasha told me, wrinkling his nose at me in tooth-rottingly cute disapproval.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Yeah, it is. It’s really just a Sharingan thing, basically.”

“I never would have guessed,” Kasha murmured, rubbing up against my shins comfortingly as I left the bathroom. “What with the whole ‘cursing at your eyes’ thing.”

“Watch it, Sassy-paws.” I smiled despite still feeling like somebody just scraped me off the bottom of their blood-soaked shoe and bent to scratch under his chin. I felt more than heard the purr that rumbled in his throat, and something bruised and cold began to unclench in my chest as I finally moved back into my room.

“Sorry, sorry,” he butted against my ankle and batted his eyes at me, obviously not sorry in the least.

“…Is it a bad Sharingan thing?”

I paused in the middle of rummaging through my drawers for a fresh change of clothes. “There are some things,” I said at length, “I really wish I didn’t have burned into my brain in excruciating detail.” The evening chill. The unnatural quiet. The feeling of shaking over a dozen heavy, cooling corpses before finally giving up and running for what should have been safe. The sound of tiny feet slapping and scrabbling against tatami.

The glint of a sword. The sound as it fell.

The suffocating fear of a little girl who couldn’t believe her eyes, and the sound of her screaming.

Feeling that scream rip out of my own throat.

“That makes sense,” Kasha hummed, thankfully rousing me from those dark thoughts before I could backslide into the shaking mess I had been when my alarm clock mercifully woke me up. “We’ll just have to burn new things over them, then.”

I paused, fully dressed and halfway down the stairs. “That,” I decided, continuing on. “Is actually a very interesting idea.” Also, the wording jarred with his cute appearance something fierce, but I could ignore that for the moment. “We’ll talk about it more after we get home, while we unpack your things. Are you hungry?” I wasn’t sure whether he had signed on to be the sort of omnipresent companion that Akamaru was to Kiba, for example, but I was slightly more certain that leaving him unattended in a ninja village was a recipe for trouble.

“I could eat,” Kasha said, loping down the stairs behind me. He managed to beat me to the kitchen and scale the refrigerator by the time I got there, peering down at me with bright-eyed innocence. “If you’re offering, of course.”

We bantered our way back and forth through the time it took me to cook up breakfast and throw a few lunch boxes together. I still felt raw around the edges, but as time went by the nightmare—memory?—seemed to fade more and more. It was like my day-later left-over breakfasts with Kakashi, in a way. It always surprised me, what a relief it was to have somebody—anybody—with me in this house.
I always felt silly for being surprised soon after, though. I wasn’t exactly a social butterfly, but being so isolated was unsettling an upsetting if I stopped to think about it for too long. Luckily, I had all sorts of strange and exciting events to take my mind off of relatively minor problems like that.

Lucky, lucky me.

“Well,” I said, once everything was packed and my dishes were soaking in the sink. “Time to face the day.”

“And the dogs,” Kasha murmured, wriggling under my hair and scarf again. “That teacher of yours pretty much reeks of them, you know? And Auntie Tora says he has a whole bunch of them.”

Ah. Yes, Tora would remember the pack, I reflected. They had helped us track and corner her the first time we undertook the mission to retrieve her. “Do you not like dogs?” I asked, shutting the door and locking it behind us. It might have just been in my head, but today the walk from my front door to the District gates seemed shorter than usual.

“I don’t… not like them?” Kasha scrunched his nose against my cheek. “I’ve never met a dog. Dad doesn’t let other animal clans come to the castle when he deals with them, and this is the first time I’ve ever gotten to leave it.” I could feel his head swivel this way and that, drinking in the early-morning sights and sounds of the village shaking itself awake. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

“I see. Well, I like them,” I told him, smiling and offering a small wave to Mitsuba-baachan as she opened up shop for the day. “And I like you too. I think you should be able to get along.” I hoped, at least.

Kasha tilted his head, staring at the grocery store as we passed. “You like her too,” he noted. “Who’s she?”

“Mitsuba-baachan,” I told him. “I’ll introduce you when we go shopping tonight.” I wasn’t entirely sure what nin-neko ate outside of the sumptuous feast Nekomata had dazzled us with. Fish seemed like a safe bet, but beyond that I’d be relying on Kasha’s own tastes as guidelines before I could get my hands on a book regarding the care and feeding of average cats. “…after we stop by the library,” I amended, remembering just how manipulative kids could be when they had a new, oblivious caretaker.

“Okay,” Kasha agreed docilely, before turning his attention elsewhere. “What’s that?”

“A bookstore,” I said, following his line of sight as best I could given his proximity.

“Oh.” He nodded once, and stuck his head under my chin to study the other side of the street. “So, what’s that?”

“A flower shop,” I told him, and casually quickened my pace. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t avoiding Yamanaka Ino, I had to admit, but honestly our paths had very little reason to cross given our conflicting, busy schedules. I just made an effort to make sure they didn’t accidentally cross, either. I knew Sakura was beginning to spend more time with her old friend after training, and I didn’t want to risk jeopardizing that, either.

“Oh. We have gardens, at the castle.” His head swiveled again as we turned a corner. “What’s that?”

“The Hokage Mountain,” I said, after a moment of uncertainty.

“Why does it have people-faces on it?”
“Why does your castle look like a cat?” I asked in return, taking to the rooftops with a few nimble leaps.

“It was modeled after Grandpa,” Kasha explained. “To honor him.”

“Well, those are our past village leaders,” I told him, filing that little tidbit away. “We put their faces up there to honor them too.”

“Grandpa hates it.” Kasha confided.

“It’s an ugly mountain.”

“You know, this place might not be as different from home as I thought it would be,” Kasha mused. I could definitely relate to that sentiment, I reflected ruefully as I continued onwards.

Once we had arrived at the usual training grounds, several things became abundantly clear to me. One was that either Naruto or Sakura had welched, because Pakkun and Ūhei were pinning me with dead-eyed, unamused stares. If they were human, I half-expected one of them would be tapping his foot expectantly. I fought the urge to shrink into myself, and tried to inwardly prepare for the impending lecture on situational awareness.

The other was that Bull was every bit the sweetheart I knew him to be and more, and seemed to adore Kasha at first sight.

The little kitten was now curled up on his broad, dark back, making his formal introductions to the rest of the pack. I was reminded vibrantly of a few old Looney Tunes shorts I had once enjoyed called *Marc Antony and Pussyfoot* with a similar image, and the cuteness warmed and bolstered my heart.

“You know what you did wrong,” Ūhei said. It wasn’t a question.

“Tsukimi-chan didn’t—” Sakura started to say.

“Yes,” I said. I thought of the genjutsu, of how I didn’t even think to try dispelling it when faced with something I didn’t want to believe was real. “Broadly, at least. Several things come to mind.” Losing my temper, abandoning the mission, crying and tackling Naruto and Sakura when Nekomata might have changed his mind and had the guards attack us…

Yes, several things certainly did come to mind.

“You gonna do ‘em again?” Pakkun asked, scratching at his ear with one hind leg.

“I can give a definite ‘no’ to one of them,” I said honestly, rubbing the skin under one of my eyes. “But as for the rest… I can say ‘probably’ and that I will do my best not to.” I didn’t want to lie to them, after all. I knew I was ill-suited for the emotional aspects of this job; unlike the original Tsukimi, I lacked the childhood conditioning that might have made this sort of thing easier for me in the long run.

“I suppose your best is all we can ask of you at this point,” Ūhei sighed, obviously reluctant. “And we’ll do our best to badger Kakashi into letting you kids practice your damned genjutsu before you leave home again.”

“That’s part of why Kasha is here,” I mentioned, shifting in place. “Well, for me, at least.”
“I got her with a genjutsu too,” Kasha said. I stared at him in shocked betrayal.

“You did?” Naruto asked, shocked.

“Well, yeah. She didn’t want to go see Dad alone, you know?” Kasha flicked his tail and settled on top of Bull’s head so he could speak to Naruto more easily. “Originally, she just wanted me to help set up a meeting for you guys. I led her right up to him while we were playing with the Kyokutemari ball she bribed me with.”

I closed my eyes, deeply embarrassed at how easily I had been fooled by the cute and innocent act. Kasha was cute, honestly, but it was becoming increasingly more apparent that the innocence was only in odd patches due to his cloistered upbringing. Everything else, I was willing to bet, was something he used as a tool. I held no illusions that this would stop me from getting suckered by him in the future.

“I see,” Sakura murmured. When I opened my eyes again, she was smiling in relief. “So you really didn’t go off to fight him on your own. We were a little worried.”

“Of course I didn’t go off to fight him on my own.” I huffed, a little offended. “I didn’t want to fight him if we didn’t have to. That wasn’t in our plan.”

“You mean our plan to split up and then meet up and make a new plan?” Naruto asked, hooking his arms behind his head.

“It was a good plan,” I said, defensive.

“It was a good plan,” Sakura soothed me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll put that in the report. It’s important not to just rush into things. You did your best.”

“And we finished our mission just fine,” Naruto added helpfully, bumping my hip with his. “So it’s not like the Old Man has room to complain, you know?”

“Let’s not get too carried away,” I sighed, my tone dry. “I think ‘fine’ might be a bit too optimistic. ‘Satisfactorily’ might even be pushing it.”

“Now who’s getting carried away?” Naruto snorted. “It wasn’t that bad, Tsukimi-hime.”

“When he’s right, he’s right,” Kakashi added his two cents to the mix, suddenly leaning up against a nearby tree, book in hand. “Nekobaa was satisfied, and you came out of it with a highly exclusive summoning contract. All in all, it will look very good on paper.”

“Report time?” Sakura asked, perceptive as ever.

“Report time,” Kakashi confirmed, closing his book with a soft snap and tucking it away in favor of pulling out a sheaf of official-looking papers.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” the librarian told me hours later, adjusting his glasses and nodding perfunctorily before heading back to his desk. He was a somewhat pudgy man in his late forties, his brown hair beginning to gray at the temples.

The report writing hadn’t been half as harrowing as I had been expecting. Kakashi corralled Naruto’s
more… colorful impulses, and Sakura’s bookworm nature came out in full, textbook glory. The results were sparse and clinical, and probably not going to get me ninja court-martialed. Kakashi told me I might be called in with Kasha to explain the contract in more definite terms, but that would be days away at the earliest.

After some basic physical and chakra exercises, we had eaten lunch together and gone to submit our paperwork, before ending early for the day. I made good on the promise I made to myself, and tracked down a book on cat-care. While browsing the stacks, Kasha’s earlier suggestion had popped back into my head.

I eyed the thick scrolls on the table in front of me, my mouth settling into a determined line.

There were several possibilities, concerning my nightmare. One was that it had been triggered by the photograph of Itachi, and would fade with time. Another was that it had been a by-product of using my Sharingan. If the former was true, then I would just have to soldier through, or look into sleeping aids if the issue persisted. If the latter was true, it might have been so vivid because I had so little information copied with the Sharingan. It might have been because of a lot of things, really, because I understood jack shit about Magical Eye Bullshit.

But if I could bury the inherited trauma under new memories, then it was worth a try.

A high school and college education had exposed me to a reasonably wide range of topics, and I knew immediately which would be most effective at smothering my physical and emotional energy. It wouldn’t be pleasant. It wouldn’t be fun. It would be a chore in every sense of the word. But, for the sake of not waking up a trembling, teary mess on a day when Kakashi was lurking in my kitchen, I had to try.

“What’s all this, Tsukki?” Kasha murmured.

“The most up-to-date copy of the Constitution of Konohagakure,” I said grimly, already feeling my heart wither with dread.

I had never met a government or law class that hadn’t had assigned reading drier than the Sahara. It was inherently different from history, from prose, from any other sort of text. I took a bracing breath, began unfurling the first volume, and activated my Sharingan.

I made it three lines in before I closed my eyes, heaved a sigh and got up to ask the librarian for a dictionary with antiquated legal terminology. Once that was sorted out, I sat back down and started reading again. It was somehow even worse than I had expected, but I forced myself to keep going.

Line by line by line…

“Uchiha-san?”

I jolted in my seat, looking up. My neck protested the motion with great prejudice, and my eyes stung once I deactivated my Sharingan. Kasha was a heavy, warm weight in my lap, his side rising and falling in a telltale rhythm. I had no idea exactly how long I had been here, but there were only a few more sections left in the last scroll.

I blinked slowly, fighting the urge to rub my eyes and crawl under the table to join Kasha in dreamland. “Yes?” I finally said. “Is it closing time?”

“No,” the fatherly-looking man told me. He smiled gently. “There’s another half-hour before then, but I noticed you seemed to be swaying in place while I was shelving some books. Have you eaten recently?”
“I had lunch,” I murmured, dipping my head towards the scroll. “I’m almost done. I’ll make sure to find something else afterwards. Thank you for your concern, sir.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen an Uchiha in here,” the man mused with a faint smile. “It always happens just after you kids get those eyes. I can’t tell you the number of your cousins I used to find just flipping through dictionaries.” He chuckled, before turning back to his push-cart. “I’ll circle back around when it’s time to close up for the night.”

“Thank you,” I said, inhaling through my nose and scraping the chakra together to turn my Sharingan back on. I powered through the last few inches of the scroll, before carefully rolling it and the rest of the Constitution up and gently prodding Kasha awake.

“Are you done?” He yawned and hopped up onto the table, stretching out.

“I feel dead inside,” I confided. “And I’m probably going to collapse after we eat, so yes. I’m about as done as I can get.” Pakkun and the rest of the Pack were usually attentive enough that while I ended many training sessions so physically drained that I needed Bull’s help getting home, I never ended up back in the choking grasp of chakra deprivation.

I hadn’t hit this particular low since my first few frantic days in this world had left me collapsed on that dock. If anything, I mused as I slowly gathered the dictionary and scrolls into my arms, I had actually gone lower. I knew that my chakra reserves had grown since Kakashi had let the Pack take us in hand—er, in paw—so that rate of chakra consumption was probably something I should look into at some later date when I didn’t feel like becoming one with the carpet.

“Have a good evening, Uchiha-san,” the librarian bid me, accepting my stack and sending me off with a genial smile. “Come back any time.”

“Thank you,” I said again, and reluctantly sloughed out into the cold December night. It had started snowing again, sometime since I cloistered myself away, and Kasha hissed disapprovingly at the light flurry. I was half tempted to follow his example, honestly, but I just tugged my scarf up higher and tried to quicken my sluggish pace.

When Mitsuba-baachan’s store came into view, still lit up but with the sign flipped to ‘CLOSED,’ I very nearly teared up in frustration.

The jingle of that door opening was possibly the sweetest sound in the world.

“Tsukimi-chan, you’ll catch your death out here!” Mitsuba herself shuffled forward, her normal kimono covered with a thick, knitted shawl as she beckoned me inside. “I heard you got back late yesterday, and I just knew you’d leave your groceries to the last minute again.”

“Sorry,” I murmured, shuffling into the blissfully warm shop.

“Goodness me,” Mitsuba sighed, cradling her faintly-lined cheeks in her hands. “If you weren’t my favorite customer, I wouldn’t worry half so much, you know.” She shook her head, her loose up-do bouncing with the motion.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, switching tracks when I felt my passenger poke his head out from the safety of my scarf. “This is Kasha, my new summons. Kasha, this is Mitsuba-baachan.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Kasha said, tilting his head slightly and using his cuteness to his advantage. “Tsukki speaks very, very highly of you, ma’am!”

“What a sweet little thing you are,” Mitsuba laughed, ushering us further into the store. “Come now,
let’s get you children fed.” She opened a door behind her register, beyond which I could see a staircase. I realized, belatedly, that she probably lived above her shop.

“Oh, we couldn’t,” I began to protest. Mitsuba was having none of it, however, and quickly cut me off.

“Nonsense,” she said firmly. “I might have retired some forty years ago, but it hasn’t been so long that I don’t know what it means when an Uchiha is squinting and staggering around like a drunkard. You have no business cooking in that state, miss, and we both know it.”

I hunched my shoulders, trying and failing to hide the blush that bloomed at the admonition. “…Thank you,” I said in lieu of arguing with her. It took more effort than I thought it would to get up the stairs, which was honestly just another point in her favor. Mitsuba had included little handmade goodies with my purchases from time to time—some onigiri, some hand-made sweets—nothing particularly special time-consuming to make, but enough to let me know the she was a fairly good cook.

“Let me guess. Dictionaries?” Her tone turned teasing as she ushered me into her kitchen.

“The Constitution,” I corrected her, and magnanimously ignored her resultant laugh at my expense.

“The more things change…” She sighed, wiping at her eyes as she reigned in her amusement.

I felt a mixture of guilt and anticipation as I all but collapsed into a homely wooden chair. I had gotten so used to either eating out or cooking for myself that I couldn’t remember the last time somebody who wasn’t a cat made me a meal.

“You said you were retired?” Kasha asked, as Mitsuba shuffled around checking pots and pans that had been left warming on her stove as she waited for me. My heart gave a sharp throb at the sight.

“Yes,” Mitsuba hummed something soft and gentle under her breath as she piled up a plate. “I was active for the Second Shinobi World War, but I took over my family’s store not long after it concluded. I damaged my chakra pathways near the end of it all.” She set the plate down before me, and then went to open her refrigerator. “Do you like smelt, Kasha-chan?”

“Very much,” Kasha nodded, looking up from where he had been snooping around the honestly delicious looking stir-fry in front of me. I gently shoved his face away from my food, before he could get any ideas.

“And milk?”

“Mhm!”

“Good, good.” Mitsuba set two saucers down on the table, one piled with fish and the other filled with milk. “I’ll get some tea,” she told me, heading back to the stove. She poured two cups, one for me and one for her, and slid into the seat beside me with a gentle smile. “Please, dig in.”

“Thanks for the food,” Kasha and I chorused, before digging in.

I hadn’t realized just how hungry I was until I took the first bite. I practically inhaled the entire plate, scarfing it down just slow enough to enjoy the taste. It sat warm and heavy in my belly, and I set my chopsticks down with a satisfying click before picking up my tea.

I colored when I saw that Mitsuba was looking at me fondly, cradling her own cup.

“Thank you,” I murmured again, taking a sip. Kasha paused from lapping up his milk to make a
“Any time, Tsukimi-chan,” Mitsuba told me. There was a serious weight to her words that jarred with her soft, genial voice, but there was no mistaking how sincere the offer was. “You know I’ve never been happy with you off on your own. Humor me every now and again, won’t you?” She set her cup down with a soft clink. “It’s all well and good to be independent, but it’s fine to rely on others too, every now and then.”

“I’ll remember,” I said, hiding behind my cup. I drained it slowly and set it down. My eyes felt heavier, now that I was warm and full. I found my head dipping forward slightly, and straightened up. I still had to get home, I reminded myself.

…Through the snow, I remembered with reluctance. The snow, and the cold, through my creepy, creepy District, which would be dark and silent, just like in the nightmare. I bit my lip, gripped by indecision. A glance at the window over my hostess’s sink tipped the scale.

“So, when you say every ‘now’ and again,” I started to say, dragging my finger over the enable of the teacup shyly.

“I’ll go set up the spare futon,” Mitsuba told me, squeezing my shoulder as she stood up.

“You are the best,” I informed her, with feeling.

“So I’ve heard,” she laughed, heading into a nearby hallway.

I was asleep with my head pillowed in my arms by the time she came back.

Chapter End Notes

Over 7000 hits! I have a bunch of goodies for you guys, to celebrate. There’s a small comic I made, a visual reference for the illustrious baby-duckling look, and a reference for Mitsuba-baachan. Enjoy, and thanks for all your support.
In which I yield to the wisdom of my elders and betters

Chapter Summary

I just want you all to know, I sorely considered doing a prank chapter, but I respect you all too much.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning I awoke to a faint chiming. I tossed out a hand blindly, but after several moments of flopping my arm around, I was forced to actually open my eyes. Once that hurdle was cleared, I realized that I was not in my bed, and the gentle ringing noise wasn’t my clock. After a bit of bleary-eyed squinting, I realized that the sound was coming from a metal wind chime outside of the window in the guest room I had no memory of entering last night.

When I forced myself to sit up, I found the Kasha had once again worked his way underneath my shirt. As I was still in the same clothes I had been wearing yesterday this meant that he was sandwiched between my tank and undershirt, and the grumpy noises of dissent I earned as I shook him out led me to believe that we had both made it through the entire night without issue. I felt a small smile tug at my mouth, even as I rapidly became aware of the lingering stiffness clinging to my neck and shoulders.

Driving myself to distraction like this on a regular basis would probably be a bad idea, I knew.

I also knew that I was probably going to do it again anyways, as many times as I felt necessary.

“Go back to bed,” Kasha commanded, with more imperiousness in his small voice than I thought he was capable of mustering. He then yawned, his tiny pink mouth gaping wide, and utterly shattered the moment. His eyes stayed mutinous blue slits, even as I stood and cradled him in the crook of my arm. I had wondered when the effects of a spoiled young master being thrust into the real world would kick in.

“I still need to get back to change and shower,” I told him softly.

“Go back to bed, Tsukki.”

“Not happening.” I told him, a bit too amused at our predicament. I gently petted him as I found my way down the short hallway to the room I last remembered being in before sleep got its claws into me. “It’s time to greet the day, Kacchan.”

“It’s still dark out,” he complained.

“It’s December,” I reminded him, perfectly reasonable. “It was dark when we left yesterday, too.”

“Tsukkiiiiiii,” he whined, pressing his nose up under my ear. I magnanimously did not shove him away, even as his whiskers tickled my neck.

“You can nap while I’m getting ready,” I soothed him, after a glance at the kitchen clock. “We have an hour and a half left.”
“Or we could go back to bed,” Kasha challenged.

“Why don’t you two have breakfast here?” Mitsuba compromised, smiling up at me from where she had been nursing a cup of tea at the table.

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” I said.

Mitsuba raised her brows meaningfully, and I recalled her stance from last night.

“But if you’re offering, it would be silly to refuse,” I conceded with a sigh. She rose from her chair and guided me into it while she made her way to her refrigerator, humming a merry tune underneath her breath. Kasha flopped onto my lap and stuck his head under my shirt, ostensibly to catch a few more minutes of sleep while we waited for our food. Left without that option, I turned my thoughts to the woman now busying herself with cracking eggs and slicing fish.

Murata Mitsuba, as far as I could tell, had been a fixture in Uchiha Tsukimi’s life long before I ever entered the picture.

Calling her ‘Mitsuba-baachan’ hadn’t been a decision on my part—it had been an instinct ingrained so deeply in the body I had found myself in that I had greeted the woman almost before I finished going through her door for the first time. There were receipts from her store dating back years, the oldest tucked away safely in a book I found a few days later in the drawer of my bedside table. There were notes written on the back in neat, elegant script.

Simple recipes. Notes of encouragement. Advice on household chores.

Mitsuba, I had come to understand, had literally known Tsukimi since she was still in Mikoto’s belly due to the general proximity of the grocery store to the Uchiha District. She was the closest thing Tsukimi had left to a guardian, and their previous interactions had probably averaged out to somewhere around twenty to forty minutes a week, always inside the store. And even Mitsuba hadn’t seemed to see anything amiss with the unavoidable shift in attitude I had caused. She had just been happy that I finally seemed to be coming out of ‘my’ shell and that ‘I’ was finally reaching back when others reached out to me.

There was something unspeakably sad about that.

I tried not to think about it, most days.

“There,” Mitsuba said, setting a steaming plate down in front of me, as well as I slice of toast slathered in jam. “That should tide you over until lunch.”

“And then some,” I murmured, eyeing the heaping serving with some trepidation. I hadn’t been the heartiest of eaters even in my original body. While I often worked up an appetite after training, beforehand I often had to force myself to eat something in the mornings. “Kacchan, up and at ’em.”

“Mmmno,” he sighed, burrowing further under my shirt.

“Hey.” I poked his belly. He twitched and curled up into a loose, lazy ball. “Hey.” I dragged my finger down the curve of his back, following the loop of his tail until I reached the tip. For the first time, I realized that it had a split. It wasn’t the steep pronged divide that his father sported, but a small little cleft that resulted in a near heart-shape with two tips about as big as the first joint of my thumb. I spent a brief moment digesting this new information.

Then I tickled his tail-tips.
“Tsukki!” Kasha yowled, popping out of my shirt and onto his feet in an instant. I felt the warning prickle of his claws through the wool of my leggings, but I let out a quiet giggle at his reaction all the same. He shot me a wide-eyed look of deep offense.

“Mitsuba-baachan took the time to make us a meal, Kasha,” I chided him. “It would be rude to ignore that, don’t you think?”

“Fine,” he pouted, jumping up onto the table and carefully making his way over to his own plate.

“Thank you for the food,” I told Mitsuba sincerely. Kasha echoed me far more grudgingly, but I doubted our hostess would hold it against him in the long run.

“Any time, my dear,” Mitsuba told me, settling in across from me and picking her tea back up with a warm smile.

We passed a good fifteen minutes in companionable silence, before I managed to clear my plate and pry Kasha away from the table he had begun to doze on once again. Mitsuba waved us off as we ventured back out into the cold, Kasha sulking deep in the safety of my coat.

If I said I wasn’t a little nervous about seeing the District after dark—or rather, before morning light crept its way over the horizon—I would be even more of a liar than I normally was these days. I tilted my head back and exhaled slowly as I walked, letting the white vapor billowing up take the lion’s share of my attention. Still staring skyward, I saw the grand gateway come and go, letting my feet follow the familiar path back to my town house.

I was halfway there before I felt brave enough—and my neck protested fiercely enough—to tilt my head back down and face the music, so to speak.

My resultant sigh of relief clouded my eyes for a moment. It was still creepy. Still far, far too still and quiet. But it was the normal, creepiness, and I didn’t feel as though I was going to spiral into a panicked tailspin the way I had after seeing that photograph back in Sora-ku. I was okay.

I was okay.

“Are we there yet?” Kasha’s impatient huff roused me from my thoughts. I shoved one bare, chilled hand down the front of my jacket and reveled in his panicked yowl.

“Yes,” I told him serenely, unlocking my door with my free hand as he squirmed desperately away from the other. “We are.”

“Tsukki!”

“You’re late,” Kakashi told me, looking every bit as uncomfortable with this role-reversal as Naruto and Sakura were. Gai, on the other hand, looked deeply concerned, and Lee looked two steps away from picking me up to visibly check for some life-threatening wound, leading me to believe that my teammates had snitched yet again.

“I got lost on the Road of Life,” I told him, because… well, because I had to. Kakashi had used that old stand-by several times on us, before his strange near-punctuality had started up.
Neji snorted and Tenten hid a grin behind her hand.

“Tsukki takes *forever* in the shower,” Kasha grumbled.

“I spent the night at somebody else’s house, so we were a little late getting ready,” I amended. We also still had yet to unpack Kasha’s luggage, so I made a mental note to set aside enough time to get that done tonight. “Also, you didn’t seem too upset napping on the tile while I was taking *forever*, Sassy-Paws,” I prodded my passenger in the side pointedly.

He huffed and hid his face in my scarf, ignoring me.

“Either way, I apologize for the inconvenience. I won’t let it happen again.”

“It’s fine, Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura assured me, waving her hands in front of her. “We were only waiting a few minutes, after all. How is Mitsuba-san, by the way?”

I almost asked why she assumed that was where I had been, but then I remembered that everybody else I might have trusted enough to have a sleep-over with was already here. “She’s well,” I said instead. “I’ll let her know you asked after her the next time I see her.”

“Well, now that we’ve gotten *that* settled,” Kakashi said, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I think you kids should know the drill by now. Naruto, you and Lee take the north section of the training field. Sakura-chan and Tenten-chan, you take the south-east. Tsukimi-chan and Neji, south-west. In an hour, we’ll have a ten minute break and then rotate partners counterclockwise, understood?”

“Understood,” we chorused, and broke off into our assigned groups.

“I heard that congratulations are in order,” Neji mentioned as we loped off towards our allotted sector.

“You heard right,” I told him once we were in position, starting to limber up.

“Well then,” he hummed, stretching out with smooth, practiced motions. “Congratulations on your new contract. My condolences on your impending chakra exhaustion and eye-strain.”

“Way ahead of you,” I told him, then very nearly blanched when I looked up and found him staring me down, face-veins bulging and eyes narrowed.

“So I see,” he said, pursing his lips in clear disapproval. He kept his Byakugan activated for another moment, before the veins receded. The disapproval stayed right where it was. “Uchiha-san, you understand that I am loathe to overstep my boundaries, yes?”

“I had some inkling, yes.” I mentioned, rolling my head back and forth to ease some of the strain on my neck muscles.

“Forget that for today,” he ordered me. “And leave your afternoon free. At your instructor’s request, I have set up several pertinent medical examinations on your behalf.”

“What?” I blinked, honestly taken aback.

“You heard me,” Neji said. His disapproval deepened. “By all rights, you *should* have been examined directly upon returning to the village, especially as you were already wounded.”

“I got better,” I defended weakly.

“…to a point, yes,” he allowed grudgingly.
Kasha popped his head up, his ire finally switching targets. “I fixed Tsukki up perfectly,” he insisted, ears flattening and eyes narrowing.

“I have not noticed any lingering damage to your side,” Neji admitted. “But the delicate and untrained chakra channels surrounding your eyes have obviously seen some abuse very recently. Your medical appointments, one would hope, will educate you on how to properly maintain your eyes and discourage such misbehavior in the future.”

I bit my tongue. I knew better than to make a promise I knew I wasn’t going to keep, especially to him. “One would hope,” I echoed instead, before quickly changing the subject. “I think I’m ready to begin.”

Neji sighed through his nose, but obligingly raised one hand palm-first and settled into his starting stance. “Very well,” he said. “Whenever you are ready, Uchiha-san.”

“Hang on, Kasha,” I advised, before darting forward to swipe at Neji. He twisted away, naturally, but for once when he whipped back around I was fast enough to dodge myself. With my eyes undoubtedly spinning like pinwheels, he actually seemed to be moving at a normal pace, rather than the lightning-fast monster I had grown accustomed to facing down in these occasional match-ups.

“ Couldn’t help yourself, could you?” Neji’s voice was tinged with amusement. His expression might have been too, but I was too busy jerking my head back to avoid a chakra-infused uppercut. I half-flipped onto my hands and sprang back, kicking him in the chest with both feet and knocking him back a good two yards.

It wasn’t a clean victory, by any means; I bounced on my toes, trying to ignore the pins-and-needles sensation in my left foot after he had gotten a glancing shot at my ankle.

“Were you able to, the first few times?” I challenged, without thinking.

I wanted to throttle myself when I saw his expression cloud briefly, remembering all too late just what activating his Byakugan had meant for him.

“I suppose not,” he conceded quietly, one corner of his mouth quirking faintly. “However, I at least had the excuse of being a child.”

“We’re still children, Senpai,” I said, my voice firm. I shot him an apologetic look.

“I suppose we are,” he conceded, and a moment later he was far too close, one hand gunning for my solar plexus. I made sure I wasn’t where he was aiming by the time the blow would have landed, darting backwards.

For the first time ever, I actually managed to go the full sixty minutes without being knocked out or incapacitated. I only lost control of my right arm from the forearm down and the rest of my left leg up to the knee, so this time it only took a few jabs from Neji to get me back in shape once we had wound down.

“Not bad,” he praised grudgingly. “You’ve adjusted well enough, I suppose.”

“You were still holding back,” I noted shrewdly.

“Of course,” he said without a hint of shame. “You may have improved, but that hardly means you have no room for further improvement. If you want me to stop holding back, you’ll need to make me stop.”
“Yes, Senpai,” I sighed.

“And rest those eyes before we leave the others this afternoon,” he reminded me, glancing over his shoulder.

“Yes, Senpai,” I nodded, taking a few small sips of water.

“I’m off to destroy Haruno now,” he told me, adjusting the bandages running up his arm. “She nearly broke my wrist the last time we sparred, and I don’t want her to get unduly confident over a lucky shot.”

“She might surprise you,” I said, feeling the need to defend my teammate. Even with all possible notions of romance dispelled—for both her and Neji—Sakura had always thrown herself into her spars against him with a vicious determination that honestly impressed me, no matter that fact that it always left her exhausted and bruised in the aftermath. “But thank you for being so concerned about us, Senpai.”

“Uzumaki’s next,” he continued almost conversationally, as though he hadn’t heard me. “He got the jump on me once with that underground trick, but it won’t happen again.”

“He’ll definitely surprise you,” I said, still not certain as to what ripple effects that particular timeline-jumping match might have further on down the line. “They don’t call him the Number One Unpredictable, Knucklehead Ninja for nothing, you know.”

Neji paused, turning bodily to look at me with bafflement painted clearly across his face. “…nobody calls him that,” he said slowly.

Shit.

“Well, they should,” I said, keeping my pokerface even as I swore a blue streak at myself inside my head. “He’s crafty.”

“Right,” Neji said, eyeing me with palpable disbelief.

There was a pause.

“I hope Haruno almost breaks your face this time,” I blurted out, looking away as my cheeks burned. Neji snorted in amusement. By the time I looked back, he was gone.

“I’m going to be honest,” Kasha said, breaking his silence for the first time since Neji dared to imply his healing was sub-standard. “I did not understand more than half of what you two were talking about that entire time.”

“Long story short?” I sighed, shaking my arms out and generally making sure that I was as ready for Lee as I could get. “The Hyuuga Clan is problematic in some really worrying ways.”

“How worrying?”

“Branding-ninety-percent-of-their-members worrying.”

“That’s pretty darn worrying,” Kasha remarked, his voice hushed. His ears twitched, and he perked up slightly. “Also, you’ve got somebody incoming.”

“Gooooooood morning, Uchiha-san!” Rock Lee called out, bursting from the treeline like a bullet. He skidded to a stop before us, hands on his hips and teeth positively gleaming. “And good morning to
you too, Kasha-san! Uzumaki-kun and Haruno-chan have spoken quite well of you, so I look forward to getting to know you in the future,” he added, toning down his grin a little and tossing the kitten a thumbs-up.

“Morning,” Kasha greeted, after a moment of stunned silence. I could relate. The Maito-Rock brand of social enthusiasm was a little overwhelming, the first time you were exposed to it.

“Yosh!” Lee raised a fist, eyes practically burning. “Once we warm up, let’s both do our best!”

“Let’s,” I murmured, glancing away.

All too soon, we settled into our stances and started exchanging blows—by which I mean, he doled them out, and I mostly took them like a chump, just like usual. To his credit, Lee lasted a full ten minutes before he just stopped, dropping his arms and looking at me in confusion.

“Uchiha-san,” he said slowly. “Why are you holding back. Now that you have your Sharingan, we can push each other to new heights!”

“I would never,” I said, honestly aghast at the thought.

“What?” Lee blinked, cocking his head to one side. “Why not?”

“Why not?” I parroted, straightening up. I kept one hand pressed to my ribs, which were already starting to feel tender. “Senpai, I am not going to steal your moves.” I set my jaw, trying not to think of the Chuunin Exam episodes. “Not ever. You’ve worked so hard, and you’ve put out so much effort—” I stopped when my voice broke, clearing my throat quietly and switching tracks. “I respect you too much to just snatch from you.”

Lee’s gaze had softened more and more with each syllable out of my mouth, until the familiar sheen of tears was glossing over his eyes. “Uchiha-chan…” He reached out and gripped my shoulder gently. “While I am honored to hear that, it will be a while before your body is in any condition to attempt any of my more advanced taijutsu forms. I don’t mind—”

“Well I do,” I cut him off, looking down. “I mind. I’m not using my Sharingan on you.” I nearly flinched when I saw him wilt in disappointment. “…Academy forms only,” I said, grudgingly. “You’re still faster and stronger than I know how to compensate for, so we’ll start on the basics.”

“Of course!” Lee lit up like a Christmas tree, practically bouncing up and down on his toes.

“And I haven’t changed my mind about the advanced forms!”

“Yes, yes,” Lee agreed, sliding back to his starting position and beaming at me fondly. “I understand, Uchiha-chan.”

“You better,” I huffed.

The ensuing fight was…

Well, honestly speaking, it was just as brutal as it ever was, when I was pitted up against Konoha’s Beautiful Green Beast. But, similar to my bout with Neji, I actually survived up until the end. Being able to actually see a Rock Lee-grade strike coming didn’t necessarily mean I was always able to dodge it, or that he slowed down enough for me to get any critical hits of my own. I was able to pick up the normal Academy-style pattern and use it to my advantage, and for once when we stopped, Lee had to rub some aches and pains out of his ribs and forearms.
“Excellent!” Lee snapped off a salute on his way to rotate, laughing joyfully. “Absolutely stupendous, Uchiha-san! We’ll have so much to work on, next time!”

“I mean it about the advanced forms, Lee-senpai!” I hollered after him.

“He seemed… nice,” Kasha hedged. “Is he always like that?”

“Pretty much,” Tenten sighed, hopping down from a nearby tree. “You two went over by about fifteen minutes, by the way.”

“Haruno is probably going to thank me for that,” I mused.

“Probably,” Tenten agreed. “She had Neji last, right? I’ve seen pit fights nicer than their spars. She broke a stone bench and tried to crush his wrist with the rubble last time.”

“I’ve never understood it,” I confessed.

“Right?” Tenten agreed. “And they’re always so nice and polite afterwards. It’s creepy.”

“Alarming,” I concurred.

“I’ll have to watch them next time,” Kasha commented, sounding unsettlingly interested.

“Oh, speaking of alarming,” Tenten snapped her fingers and then pointed at me. “You need to keep those eyes black. Neji threatened to notch every third blade in my collection if I didn’t make you rest before he nannied you off to the doctors.”

“That’s… surprisingly proactive of him.” I managed.

“What can I say?” Tenten shrugged. “He’s used to managing schedules for this sort of thing. It’s not like his uncle can take time out of his busy schedule when his cousins need to get check-ups. He can be a bit anal about the little details, though. So, for the sake of my babies, I’m gonna have to knock you on your ass if I see a flash of red. You understand.”

“Yes, Senpai,” I said, dutifully nodding my head and filing that new information away for later contemplation. It was a sudden and not entirely welcome revelation; I was, in fact, more or less Hinata and Hinabi’s equal in terms of status, but understandably vastly more liked by Neji. I honestly did not know how to deal with that fact, or what it might mean for the future.

If I had my way, Team 7 would not be attending the Chuunin Exams. Truth be told, I knew that changing things so dramatically would have consequences, but I was only human. I was selfish, and constantly overwhelmed as I struggled to roll with the punches of my everyday life. If I tried to plan for every eventuality, I would only drive myself insane in the long run.

If fate or some other machination won out, and Hinata really did end up hospitalized at Neji’s hands, without Naruto present and incensed enough to swear vengeance…

Well, I’d deal with what might happen when it happened, and try my best to loosen up my poor, misguided Senpai in the meantime.

“I like her,” Kasha decided, forcing me to shake off that daunting train of thought for the time being. “She seems very—”

“Down-to-earth?” I supplied.

“It’s a nice change of pace after the Dramatic Duo,” Kasha agreed.
Tenten burst out laughing. It took nearly a full minute for her to being in her merriment, and once she did a few sniggers still slipped out here and there. “Oooh, I like you too,” she said, slipping out a kunai and twirling it with ease. “Even if you are a shameless swindler according to Naruto and Sakura.” I felt my eyebrows raise at that conflicting report, but I didn’t have a chance to follow up on it. “Get your Fuuma Shuriken out, Uchiha-chan,” Tenten advised. “I also heard that you could use more practice with it. Good work with the wires, though.”

“Thank you, Senpai,” I sighed, digging in my pouch for the proper seals. “I’ll do my best.”

“Do better,” Tenten advised, fanning a few shrunkens between her fingers. “That’s the Team Gai motto, I’ll have you know.”

“I expected some mention of Youth to be in there,” I said, honestly surprised.

“That’s the abridged Team Gai motto, I’ll have you know,” Tenten amended without missing a beat. Kasha made a noise of confusion in my ear, but I didn’t bother explaining. Once he was around Gai and Lee long enough, he’d understand. “Kacchan,” I said. “Take my scarf and go find somewhere else to sit for this one, okay?”

“Really?” Kasha twisted around to blink at me, eye to eye. “You let me stay for the last two fights.”

“Lee-senpai and Hyuuga-senpai actively avoid going for my neck and face, even if they don’t realize it,” I told him. “Tenten-senpai doesn’t hold back with me.”

“Damn right,” said Tenten, obviously in good cheer. “They baby you too much, if you ask me.”

“If that was babying,” Kasha said, beginning to tug my scarf over my head with his mouth. “Then I really will sit this one out.”

“Smart cat,” Tenten praised as he got the infinity scarf off with minimal help from me, and bounded off towards the trees.

“Yeah,” I said, watching him go before turning my attention entirely to her. She had somehow procured what looked to be a short-handled sickle in the short span of time I had looked away. I unsealed both Fuuma Shuriken. Their bulk did not actually make me feel safer, this time. I took a deep breath, and got ready for another rousing game of ‘Try Not to Get Gutted,’ Tenten Edition.

Chapter End Notes

Happy April Fool's Day, and shout out to kimchi759 for blitzing through this badboy and commenting on every single chapter along the way. You made my day yesterday.
In which I make some progress

Chapter Summary

And we are moving onwards, even if Tsukimi might prefer for time to stand still.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As it turned out, having access to the Sharingan changed things a lot more than I had expected it would. In retrospect, that was a stupid thing to be surprised by, but in my defense I hadn’t fully appreciated just how much of a hack my eyes truly were before experiencing them for myself. I hadn’t known just how useful a photographic memory could be in my daily life, especially when I had the mental equivalent of ‘Ctrl+F’ available whenever the need arose.

I certainly hadn’t expected just how easy learning jutsu would be. Even with the academic knowledge of how my eyes worked, even with memories of watching Kakashi and the various Uchiha men fighting in the anime, the reality of it somehow hadn’t clicked. They were all geniuses, in one way or another, I had thought. It would be harder for me, I had been sure. It wouldn’t be that different.

In reality? It was like night and day.

Kasha ended up teaching me five simple genjutsu inside of a month, one for each of the senses, with only a few demonstrations a piece before I picked them up. I had never needed more than a single attempt to dispel any of them. When I tried to teach them to Naruto and Sakura in turn, with Kakashi looking on with an air of expectant amusement, I was given a stunning example of the new disparity between us.

Sakura took a full day to manage the first, simple illusion.

Naruto took a week.

It was a sobering experience, to say the least.

Aside from Kasha’s tutelage, Kakashi himself finally seemed to think we were ready for the next step in our training. On the very first day of the new year, instead of struggling through crowds and crowds of cheerful shrine-goers, Team 7 spent a full three hours climbing trees. Sakura and I managed it on our first try, but coached Naruto until he caught up as well. Then, apparently not wanting us to rest on our laurels, Kakashi dragged us off to a not-quite-frozen river to learn water-walking too.

I got it on my third try, but helping Sakura and Naruto catch up kept me occupied until nightfall.

The following two months of training set my teeth on edge. Kakashi gave me a few tips on how to gauge how much chakra I was channeling to my eyes, and afterwards let me use them however I pleased. Two things stopped me from using them for absolutely everything: the fear that Naruto and Sakura might grow to resent my prodigious pace, and the fear of Neji.

The former never seemed to bear fruit, since Naruto and Sakura appeared to have expected me to
bound ahead of them all along, and were now more worried about me exhausting myself after swiping a cautionary pamphlet I had gotten after a trip to an optometrist cleared to work with dojutsu users.

The *latter*, however...

Well. There may have been a few times I had disobeyed the advice I had been given and binge-read for a few hours with my Sharingan on. I had been disabused of the habit early on, because whenever I trudged home Neji seemed to appear out of nowhere, hoisted me up by my collar and carted me off to eat before I collapsed, while delivering a blistering lecture and small containers of medicinal moisturizer. After the third time, he had given me instructions on how to make the salve myself, with strict instructions to let him inspect the final product before using it, and then never accepting anything else from anyone who wasn’t a certified medical practitioner.

Apparently, my eyes were my responsibility, but somewhere along the line I had become *his*.

I was grateful for the salve, even if I could have done without the dressing-down. It soothed the ache of overusing my chakra channels, and also helped repair tissue damage. While I had no other nightmares, stress-lines seemed to be a normal side-effect of dojutsu-abuse. I might have poked fun at my stupidly pretty good looks every now and again, but that didn’t mean I wanted to *waste* them.

Other than the genjutsu and basic, rudimentary elemental jutsu from Kakashi, Kasha helped coach me through summoning different nin-neko under Nekomata’s command. It was kind of hit-and-miss on pulling *specific* cats, all things considered, but in a pinch I could summon at least four of them at once. On a related note, I became a frequent customer of Old Fushimi the fisherman, whose daughter and son-in-law ran a fairly popular stall in the fish market portion of Konoha’s main Shopping District.

But, all throughout the ups and downs of those months, one thing remained constant: Kakashi kept us on a strict diet of D-Ranks.

It brought back the old paranoia with a vengeance. Would we end up escorting Tazuna, no matter what? Would Naruto eventually grow sick and tired of being village-bound and explode, setting us on an unavoidable collision course with the Wave Mission? If I wasn’t so exhausted, between menial labor and training, it might have driven me insane.

Luckily, relief came somewhere in the final week of March, when Kakashi stopped our training—he had started us on weights similar to but less intense than Lee’s, and upped our normal routines—and sat us down for a team chat.

“So, we have some options for our next mission,” he told us brightly, holding up four scrolls. “We can clean trash out of the Naka River again because this village is full of filthy environment-hating pigs, we can stand in as sparring partners for the lower classes at the Academy if you feel like beating up tiny children, we can help clean the bath-houses—”

“Ugh,” said Naruto, wrinkling his nose. “Guys, no, that’s *so much work*, you don’t even know. I’ve had to do it as community service before.”

“Who knew your pranks actually had practical value?” Sakura rubbed her chin, honestly impressed.

"They're called practical jokes for a reason, 'ttebayo."

“What’s the last option?” I asked, trying to nip that tangent in the bud.

“The last option is looking into a recent outbreak of disappearances in a village up north,” Kakashi
told us, waggling the appropriate scroll temptingly.

“That does not sound like a D-Rank,” Sakura said, perking up. Beside her, Naruto’s expression began to lighten, like the sun coming out from behind the clouds.

“It doesn’t!” He scooted closer to our teacher, trying to peek at the scroll. “Hey, hey, Sensei, does that mean—?”

“Yes,” Kakashi held him off, tucking two scrolls under his armpit and planting a hand on Naruto’s head to keep him at bay. “If you want, we can take a C-Rank.”

“And by we, you mean…” I started to say.

“Yes,” Kakashi agreed, nodding his head and creasing his eye in a smile. “All of us. One big, happy team, sleuthing out clues and tracking down leads. Unless you’ve got your heart set on cleaning that river, of course. Sensei’s down for whatever.”

“…Never say that again,” Sakura requested after she and I traded a galled look. No matter what Gai seemed to think, Kakashi’s reputed ‘hip’ and ‘cool’ attitude was highly exaggerated.

“Rude,” Kakashi said before Naruto threw off his hand and sprang up, tackling him into an enthusiastic hug with a joyful yell.

Taira Village was an idyllic little place, all things considered. Less than a day’s trek away from Konoha, it seemed to be responsible for at least part of the produce we enjoyed on a daily basis, if the frequent caravans traveling from there to our home and back were any indication. It also happened to be about an hour’s walk from the Valley of the End. Kakashi filled us in on a few of the important details while we were en route.

“For the past month, a few of the young men and women of the village have been going disappearing; five in all.” He was reading, not even bothering to look as he nimbly jumped from bough to bough. “Two are female, and three are male. The first two to go missing were a young man and woman—a pair of sweethearts. The villagers initially thought they might have just eloped or gone on some romantic getaway, and the third to go missing was the head of a trapping and trading office who liked to go off on camping trips and had a history of losing track of time.”

“Which is why it took so long to ask for help?” Sakura asked, hardly out of breath and keeping up without trouble. She was still in her normal dress, having shed her winter coat, but there was a wiriness to her legs and arms that spoke volumes about how much effort she put into our daily training.

“Exactly,” Kakashi agreed, flipping a page and hopping over a bird’s nest without pause. “Now, the fourth missing person happened to be the son of the Village Head, which sent off the first major wave of alarm. The most recent was the daughter of the village doctor.”

“Any chance they eloped?” Naruto asked, squinting at the dossier we had each received and nearly taking a squirrel to the face before he ducked. “They both look kinda pretty, you know?”

“No, the doctor’s daughter is engaged to his apprentice,” I disagreed, taking a chance and peeking a
few pages in. “A Ms. Sasaki Kaede. But all the people reporting missing are conventionally attractive. It looks like the only real link, other than them living in the same village and venturing into the forest once the snow melted.”

“So, are we thinking a monster got them?” Naruto asked. “Like that one movie?”

“Like that every movie, you mean?” Sakura teased.

“I’d say it’s more likely that it’s just men, this time,” Kakashi said, suppressing a chuckle. “We’re pretty close to the Land of Rice, from here, you know?”

*God, don’t remind me.* I held back a shiver, and made a noise of vague agreement.

“What about it?” Naruto asked, wrinkling his brow slightly. “Do they have a lot of bandits or something?”

“Oh.” Naruto’s expression turned stormy, and he felt silent.

My mind helpfully supplied the *most likely option* for a local buyer of young, healthy individuals who might make good lab rats. I ruthlessly suppressed the thought. I had no idea where Orochimaru was, at this moment. There was one laboratory I knew of to the south, in the islands with that sea monster girl from the filler episodes. He could be in the Land of Wind, even now impersonating the Kazekage. Or, at the very least, meeting with him and setting up the negotiations for the invasion.

Not for the first time, I considered spilling everything to the nearest authority figure.

Not for the first time, I bowed to my own cowardly desire to keep my head down.

“Tsukki?” Kasha rubbed his cheek against mine, rousing me from my thoughts. “What’s wrong? You’ve been quiet, and you didn’t eat much at breakfast.” He paused, before nuzzling me harder. “You even let me have milk today.”

I had found out, once I actually had the time to crack that book on cat-care, that milk was terrible for cats, since most were lactose-intolerant. Kasha, as a nin-neko and… well, as whatever the heck it meant to be a bakeneko, was not as adversely effected, and could have dairy more often than the average cat, with even fewer side-effects.

I often withheld it all the same, out of paranoia. I was responsible for Kasha now; responsible for his health and happiness. I had a newfound appreciation for my mother’s rock-firm refusal to let me eat raw cookie-dough, even if I had pouted over it as a child time and time again.

“It’s a special occasion,” I said, tucking the dossier away and gently petting his head. The Valley of the End had been like a smack to the face, when I had first read the details of the mission. It was such a pivotal, important place; it felt strange for it to just be a side-note, like some road-side attraction. “I thought you deserved a treat.”

I had been forcefully and unpleasantly reminded of the fact that Orochimaru existed—of the fact that Obito was out there, masquerading as Madara and setting schemes into motion—of the fact that there was an unseen timer ticking away, even now.
Procrastination was not an easy process, I was miserably aware. Time was slipping by, opportunities were running out, and I might be jumping ahead despite my best, stubborn intentions. I knew all of this intellectually, but even as the pressure mounted none of it was ever enough to get me to make a move, one way or another.

“Is that all?” Kasha pressed his nose against my ear.

“I suppose I might be a little nervous,” I admitted.

“Oh, Tsukimi-chan,” Sakura fell back, briefly catching my hand with hers and squeezing it. “Don’t worry! We’ll all stick together, this time. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Unless Sakura-chan just jinxed us,” Naruto observed, grinning.

“Yes, a jinx might just throw a spanner in the works,” Kakashi shook his head. “Really, Sakura-chan, you’re usually so much more thoughtful. How could you say something like that?”

“Oh, come on!” Sakura leapt forward again, kicking Naruto in the back of the knee and nearly knocking him down to the forest floor. He came up laughing though, so I shelved my concerns. My own worries were going to have to take a backseat to our clients’ after all.

And it wasn’t as though there was a single blessed thing I could do if any of the major movers and shakers popped into my life ahead of schedule, anyways.

“I just feel like there’s something I should be doing,” Sasaki Kaede explained, dashing tears from her cheeks angrily. Sakura made a soothing noise of understanding, and handed her a tissue from her mission pack. The doctor-in-training accepted it with a weak, watery smile. “Mayumi is just… she’s out there, she’s been out there for days, and I’m still just doing my normal rounds here. I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Kaede, my dear, you have to stop doing this to yourself.” Her father-in-law to be, Dr. Takeuchi, put a comforting arm around her. “You know how important our work is around this time of year. The cliffs get dangerous, the animals start waking up, the paths are slick and—”

“—slushy and dangerous,” Kaede finished for him, sniffling. She was a tall, spindly woman, with dark hair pulled back into a tight bun and freckles dusted over her pointed nose. “And we’ve got the second-wave of colds and flus to deal with besides. I know, sir, I just…” Her mouth trembled, before she set her jaw stubbornly. “I hate feeling helpless.”

“I do too,” her mentor sighed, his shoulders sagging slightly. “I do too. But that’s why we asked for help.” He raised his head, and looked at us hopefully. “You said you needed something of Mayumi’s, right?”

“Ideally something that would have her scent,” Kakashi nodded, gesturing to Bull. He had explained before we arrived that civilians had certain expectations, so showing off the largest of his dogs would likely be reassuring. “The trail is probably in patches by now, thanks to the elapsed time and the weather, but if we have samples from all of the missing people, we might just be able to piece those patches together.”

I was almost certain tracking didn’t work that way, but I held my tongue and simply cradled Kasha.
even closer than I had been before. This was... raw, honestly. Grieving families, worried neighbors, and an overwhelming sense of communal misery hanging over the entire settlement like some swollen, chilling cloud.

A part of me wanted to know if, back in Florida, my friends and family were feeling a fraction of this.

I crushed that part ruthlessly, and stroked the back of Kasha’s neck in thanks when I felt the silent, comforting rumble of his purr against my clavicle.

“We’ll find her,” somebody said, with a brutal, unflinching certainty. After a round of startled glances, I was surprised to realize that it had been me. I had been so wracked with indecision for so long, I hadn’t realized I could actually sound like that.

“Thank you,” Kaede said quietly, before pulling something soft and pink out of a dark bag at her feet. “This is... This is her favorite shawl. I, um. I made it for her, when we first started dating.”

“She must be missing it then.” Naruto reached forward to take it, and gripped her hand at the last moment. “We’ll make sure she gets it as soon as possible, ’ttebayo.” His blue eyes seemed darker, in that moment; more earnest, more open than I could remember seeing them inside of Konoha’s walls.

When we left the doctor’s office and regrouped at the room that had been provided for us at the local inn, we took stock of the other items that had been collected. From the Village Head, we had received Ninomiya Takumi’s pillowcase. From the secretary of Fueguchi Trading, we had gotten one of Fueguchi Rikiya’s work gloves. From the parents of Toyama Heitaro and Minase Higoko, we got a matching pair of braided red thread bracelets, snipped off a few weeks prior before they could become too tight.

“I used to make these with Ino and some other girls when we were younger,” Sakura mused, peering at the bracelets as the rest of the dogs clambered over one another, committing the different scents to memory. “We used lots of different colors, though. We even made up our own codes with them.”

“Mm.” I had made bracelets like that too, during summer camps and grade school playdates. “Minase and Toyama are sixteen and seventeen respectively, according to the file.”

Still young. Still just kids.

“Stop being sad, Tsukki,” Kasha demanded crossly, nipping the finger I had been using to tickle his belly as we waited. “You said you’re going to find them already. There isn’t any need to mope if you already know what you’re going to do about the problem, is there?”

“...I suppose not,” I said after a small pause. I ran the backs of my knuckles underneath his jaw and smiled faintly. “You’re a sweet boy, aren’t you Kacchan?”

“Don’t you patronize me,” he huffed and turned his head dismissively, but the lazy curl and flick of his tail told a different story.

“If you two would like to take a break from being adorable, we need to work out how we’re divvying up this search,” Kakashi said dryly.

At those words I went rigid, and was gratified to see Naruto and Sakura reacted just the same.

“What do you mean ‘divvy up’ the search?” Naruto demanded, screwing his face up as if getting ready for a fight. I felt Sakura’s hands curl around the back of my chair as she moved away from the wall she had been leaning against. “That’s not what you said before, Kakashi-sensei!”
“We’re going in pairs, with four dogs each,” Kakashi explained, not batting a lash.

“And me,” Kasha butted in.

“And Kasha-kun,” Kakashi added agreeably, not missing a beat.

Naruto’s righteous indignation seemed to deflate at that, but suspicion was still painted clear across his face. “Okay,” he said, with obvious reluctance. “I guess that’s not as bad.”

“We do want to find these people as soon as possible,” Sakura sighed. “Two groups will double our chances, ideally.”

“Also there might be a monster to fight off,” Naruto said. “We’ve learned our lesson. No doing that alone, right Tsukimi-hime?”

“I thought we were going with bandits?” I asked, dodging his jab.

“I’m gonna expect monsters until we actually see some bandits,” Naruto told me, setting his jaw stubbornly. “And then if we do see them I’m gonna kick their stupid kidnapper heads in for ruining my chance to be a real-live movie hero, ’ttebayo.”

“And for being stupid kidnappers?” I asked.

“Well, that just goes without saying,” Naruto scoffed.

“Right,” Sakura sighed. “Tsukimi-chan, you don’t have to humor him all the time, you know that, right?”

“I know,” I said.

“Rude,” Naruto huffed at the same time, crossing his arms petulantly. “Sensei, I don’t wanna be on Sakura-chan’s team, she’s being extra mean today!”

“Fine, fine,” Kakashi waved a hand lazily. “You can go with Tsukimi-chan, then. Take Pakkun, Bull, Urushi and Gukuro with you, and the rest of the Pack can help Sakura-chan and I out. We’ll follow the strongest trails as far as we can, and either end up in the same area, or meet back at the inn before nightfall. Sound good?”

“Sounds good,” we chorused, even if the side-eye Sakura shot Naruto promised a violent review of his complaint in the near future.

“Alright, kiddies,” Pakkun said, hopping up on Bull’s head. “Let’s get one thing clear, yeah? You stay in our direct line of sight at all times, got it? Girlie knows that she’s on a short leach, but it goes for you too, Blondie. I will not hesitate to send Urusei and Guruko haring after all your clones if you get any big ideas, got it?”

“He’s so tiny,” Naruto murmured, taken aback at his first real up-close-and-personal with Pakkun. “But so harsh.”

We were generally split up and run ragged by our personal dog-trainers before the entire Pack left the training fields, so aside from the odd shared lunch—which the dogs spent chowing down, rather than conversing—and some lectures on technique, we rarely overlapped. As a result, I had no idea exactly what Guruko and Urushi were like, but the mean, anticipatory sniggers bubbling up from their throats gave me an inkling. They, and the eye-catching, Mohawk-sporting Shiba, had free run of Naruto, after all.
“That’s Pakkun,” I agreed with a sigh. “You’ll get used to it. Just do what he says, and things should be fine.”

“That’s our girl,” Pakkun praised.

“I think Dad might like him,” Kasha commented idly.

Bull made a soft grunting noise.

“Bull’s right,” Urushi cut in, his default angry expression relaxing slightly as he scratched behind his ear with a hind leg. “We’re burnin’ daylight. We good to go, Kakashi?”

“Oh, am I finally being included?” Our teacher shook his head in mock anguish. “I didn’t want to interrupt Pakkun handing out marching orders, you see.”

“Go ahead,” Pakkun said, as if extending a grand favor.

“Thanks,” Kakashi said dryly. He rested a hand on Sakura’s head, easily dodging the elbow she sent at his ribs in retaliation. “Well, there’s not much to really say, after that. Be good, listen to Pakkun, don’t get into dramatic monster fights, stick together, have the dogs signal if you find anybody… Yeah. Well, that’s it.” He creased his eye in a smile, and hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Let’s head out into the woods. We’ll head west, the way Minase, Toyama, and Takeuchi supposedly went, and you guys head for the eastern path Fueguchi and Ninomiya were last seen on.”

“Be careful,” Sakura cautioned us, taking another shot at Kakashi’s side and missing again.

“Sakura-chan, please,” Naruto snorted. “Now you’re just being silly.”

“We’re always careful,” I reproached her, clenching down on the paranoid worry that ‘careful’ wouldn’t be good enough. Again.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Sakura sighed, dropping her head and following Ūhei and the other dogs out of the room before either of us had time to make a rebuttal.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t really have much to add here, except that I’m still floored and very grateful that you’ve all stuck with me this long. Almost 9,000 hits and counting is a lot more attention than I originally thought I would get. Thanks, everybody.
In which I form some unwelcome conclusions

Chapter Summary

Our favorite team is back, and they find the culprit. Or... are found.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alright, Team Naruto, let’s do—urk!”

I muffled a snort as Guruko and Urushi headbutted Naruto behind the knees in a single, synchronized tackle, sending him sprawling into the slushy undergrowth. While I was sure we should probably be treating the situation with far more gravity—the memory of a tearful Kaede was sobering, and helped me reign in my knee-jerk amusement—Naruto’s natural inclination towards being a goofball helped ease some of the anxiousness that had tied me in knots.

“I think we’re more ‘Team Pakkun’ than anything, at this point,” I told him, bending forward to give him a hand up.

He pulled a face at me. “But I was having a moment,” he pouted.

“I know you were,” I soothed, stepping back to let him clap off the leaves and mud. “But dramatics don’t actually change the facts.”

“Ugh…”

“There will be other moments,” I promised him. He was the protagonist of both our lives. Of... well, of literally countless lives. There would be hundreds of moments for him to preen and posture, at minimum. “But right now, it’s Pakkun’s time to shine.”

“Damn right,” Pakkun grunted, pulling his muzzle away from some tree roots. “Like hell I’ll be doing all the work, though. Guruko, Urushi, quit clowning around with the kiddies and get to work.”

“On it.”

“Fine, fine.”

“So fierce,” Naruto repeated himself, leaning his elbow on my shoulder with a cheer I couldn’t help but read as false, given the circumstances. It was a familiar gesture, although not from him, and it took considerable willpower not to take a shot at his ribs out of habit. I never, ever struck Naruto and Sakura outside of spars, not even in a friendly way, as I had back in my former life and body. They were so small, despite being taller than me. So young.

It just never felt right to me.

Now, Kakashi, Kakashi I could elbow and shove all day long, despite how little he usually reacted. He was older than me and bigger than me in all senses of the word. Rough-housing with him wasn’t an issue. But my teammates...
I reached up and squeezed Naruto’s shoulder, very gently. “Hey,” I said. “Don’t forget what you promised earlier. We’ve got a shawl to return, right?”

His smile slipped for a minute, his eyes going dark the way they had in the doctor’s office a few hours ago, before being replaced by something a little crooked and heartbreaking old, but less forced. “Right,” he said, squeezing my fingers briefly before we separated and started to follow the dogs still carefully meandering their way down the slushy, beaten path. For a time, the only sounds were the natural background noise of the forest, some canine sniffing, and our own footsteps.

“She’s magic,” I heard Guruko mutter up ahead of us some fifteen minutes into our search. “We’ve never been able to get the kid to shut up for this long.”

“Screw you, ‘ttebayo!”

“Dammit Guruko, you went and broke the spell,” Urushi huffed.

“Sorry, sorry, my bad.”

“Get it together, you two,” Pakkun ordered, pausing to investigate a recently uprooted stump. “I think I picked up one of the older scents.” Bull grunted, possibly in agreement, and padded past the stump. The bushes behind it were crushed oddly, as though some animal had stampeded through them.

“Can you smell anything?” I asked Kasha, more curious than anything as Naruto and I picked up our pace so we wouldn’t get left behind.

“Not much,” he admitted easily. “Right now, I mostly just smell you and Naruto.”

That made sense, I reflected, given that Kasha was still cozied up around my neck, protected from the elements by both my hair and scarf. Still, I had a reason for asking, and I had finally found a semi-casual way of slipping it into the conversation.

“I see. So if Uzumaki or I were to, say, get kidnapped or something…” I trailed off, hopping over a fallen tree.

“I probably couldn’t find him,” Kasha said. “The dogs would be better at that. But I could find you anywhere.” I felt more than heard the purr rumbling through him. “You’re our clan’s sole contractor. There’s absolutely nowhere on this planet we wouldn’t be able to find you. If somebody took you away from us, we’d get you back.” He rubbed his face under my chin, purring louder. “We’d come for you, and we’d make them pay. That’s a promise, Tsukki.”

“…that sounded a little scary, you know that, right?” Naruto butted in, helping me clamber up a small rocky outcropping. “Like, you’re absolutely your old man’s kid, Kasha. That was creepy.”

“Oh, was it?” Kasha laughed it off, hiding his face against my throat in shy embarrassment. “Oops. Sorry, Tsukki. I just meant, you don’t have to worry about things like that. You’re precious to us, so we’ll take care of you no matter what.”

“It’s fine,” I assured him, feeling much more assured myself in turn. “I knew what you meant.” A weight was lifted from my shoulders, now. Even if this was the work of Otoyakure, I at least had the barest beginnings of an escape plan. That would have to be enough, because I wasn’t going to waste time thinking too deeply about contingencies for an event that might not even occur.

“Cats,” said Urushi with great feeling, shaking his head. “Hissy as anything if you take their things.”
“And don’t you forget it,” Kasha sniffed primly, before dissolving into soft laughter and snuggling down in my scarf.

“You’re lucky you’re cute, kid,” Guruko chuckled, circling around the edge of a thawing brook.

“I tell him that everyday,” was all I had left to say on the matter, before something caught my eye and I went still. “Uzumaki,” I said slowly. “Did you drop a kunai?”

“No,” Naruto said, after a quick pat-down of his holster.

“Did I drop a kunai?”

“Your equipment looks fine from where I’m standing.”

“So then where,” I asked, stooping down and plucking a slightly muddy blade out of the creek, “did this one come from?” My fingers were slightly numb from the water, but the coldness spreading through the bottom of my stomach had a different source altogether.

“…We should probably make contact with Sensei now,” Naruto said, his voice quiet.

“We’re in luck,” Pakkun announced gruffly, in a way that made me seriously doubt just how fortunate he thought we were. “Smells like he’s just up ahead.”

Naruto and I traded a glance and quietly fell in line, bounding after the dogs until we hit the end of the tree line and found ourselves staring at what had probably been a nice little clearing, once, nestled between the forest and a jutting cliff probably connected to the Valley of the End, somewhere along the way. Once, because there were some very clear signs of a fight scarring the area now—literally in some cases.

“Tsukimi-chan, Naruto!” Sakura waved to us from halfway up the cliff, where she was inspecting three deep gouges in the stone. “Kakashi-sensei’s up top, he’ll be back in a minute!”

The dogs settled down to wait after hearing that, idly inspecting some craters and skid marks in the ground. Naruto and I shared another glance, shrugged, and began to walk up the cliff ourselves.

“Do we have any idea what caused this?” I asked, feeling the numbness spread further up my spine.

“Well,” Sakura hesitated. “I mean, Kakashi-sensei hasn’t said anything one way or another, but it sort of looks a little bit like something I’ve been playing around with after training.”

“Oh yeah?” Naruto’s eyebrows shot up. “This looks pretty badass, Sakura-chan. You can do something like this?”

“Not this big,” Sakura waved him off, going pink in the cheeks. “It’s just a trick I sort of figured out how to do after fighting Hyuuga-senpai so much and learning how to climb surfaces with chakra.” She held out a hand, still crouched vertically against the cliff. Naruto and I leaned in, watching her finger tips glow blue with chakra. The blue glow increased upwards at a glacial pace, until we were looking at flickering blue claws a little under an inch long protruding from each finger.

Sakura slowly sank them into an untouched part of the cliff until the pads of her fingers hit rock, then yanked them outwards and down. The ‘claws’ were now shallow pieces of stone, and five little grooves were left behind.

“Holy shit,” Naruto whistled.
“Impressive,” I agreed, a little shocked. Somehow, when I hadn’t been paying attention, Sakura had begun to grow in directions I never even expected. I knew she occasionally became vicious and innovative from what I knew of how her spars with Neji ended, but I hadn’t realized she had been tinkering with chakra techniques in her spare time. It was a dumb thing to be surprised by, honestly; Sakura still had the best chakra control out of all of us. I was only more adept when I had my Sharingan activated, and that ran the risk of draining me if I relied on it too much.

“Yeah,” Sakura preened. “It is, isn’t it?” However, she deflated just as quickly. “But… well, obviously, the scale’s all wrong. You’d need some gigantic hands to make marks this big.”

“True,” I said neutrally, to keep myself from giving in to the urge to just put my face into my hands and scream in existential horror. My shoulder-blades twitched, and I fought desperately to think of anything other than gigantic hand-wings bursting out of them.

“Doesn’t the Akimichi clan have some jutsu like that?” Naruto speculated.

“They do,” Kakashi agreed, strolling down the cliff face with an unhurried slouch. “And it’s a good line of thought, but if one of them did this, or had been around these parts, it would have been in our mission parameters.”

“Do we have any ideas who did do this, then?” Sakura asked, shaking off the rocky remnants of her little demonstration.

“Well, given some of the traces of techniques still discernible,” Kakashi said, “Kumogakure was probably involved to some extent. We don’t see many adept Lightning types outside their forces these days, at least. It looks like there were only two sides, based on the way the damage is laid out, but one of them might have had access to Summons, or there could have been multiple assailants ganging up on one person.”

“All this happened back around the time the disappearances started, I’m guessing?” I asked dully.

“Thereabouts, yeah.” Kakashi ruffled my hair, despite the fact that we were all sideways and I hated every new detail he confirmed.

“Okay,” Sakura said slowly, placing her hands on her hips and furrowing her brow in thought. “So… we’ve got at least one Cloud-nin and some other party having a huge dust-up on the border of Fire and Rice, but no bodies?” She glanced at Kakashi inquisitively, and he nodded. “No bodies. I thought so. And then we’ve got the missing villagers, who all found themselves around this area before vanishing.”

“That’s what Pakkun and the rest seem to think,” Naruto agreed, crossing his arms.

“Okay, so that could mean that whoever won that fight has been coming back around here, maybe to look for something or maybe to hide that there was a fight here.”

“Except that if they wanted to hide all of this, they could probably use some jutsu to change up the terrain. And disappearances just catch more attention, ’ttebayo.” Naruto pointed out. “I mean, it’s the whole reason we’re even here.”

“Tsukimi-chan, you’ve been quiet again,” Kakashi gently jostled me. “You’re teammates are making some pretty decent headway, putting their ideas together. Why don’t you toss out a theory too?”

“It’s a trap,” I murmured, staring tiredly straight up ahead at the dark form of a bird cutting across the reddening evening sky. “Whoever won, the Cloud-nin or the… other party, they got a ninja out of it—either a corpse or a prisoner. The civilian disappearances could be bait to draw in more shinobi.”
There was a brief silence as a chilly wind kicked up.

“…Tsukimi-hime, are you okay?” Naruto put a concerned hand on my shoulder. “That was gloomy even for you.”

“Naruto!” Sakura hissed, smacking him sharply in the side. “Don’t be rude! She’s just being logical.”

“Cynical, but logical,” Kakashi agreed, his tone wry. “There’s definitely something strange going on, because all trails end here. Unless there’s some secret path we haven’t found yet, there might be a transportation jutsu of some sort behind this.”

“Seals, maybe?” I knew Orochimaru definitely had some experience with those, I reflected with grim humor, watching the bird cut back around before shaking myself out of that glum mindset and meeting Sakura and Naruto’s concerned gazes. “There might be a matrix that gets set and just keeps catching them, like rabbits in a trap.”

“If so, whoever’s doing that has either covered their tracks or hasn’t reset them,” Kakashi shot me down with a shake of his head. “The dogs and I haven’t found any traces of that. But we won’t rule it out entirely.”

A soft hoot echoed off in the distance as the four of us mulled that over.

Kasha popped his head out of my scarf, looking around inquisitively. “What was that?” His voice was soft and a bit suspicious.

“Just an owl, I think,” I soothed him, gently rubbing between his ears. “I guess there aren’t that many around your father’s castle or the District, come to think of it. They’re nocturnal, so it’s probably just an early-riser.”

“Tsukki,” he started to say, and I felt his little claws start to prick against my shoulder. “How big are normal owls?”

“It depends on the breed,” I told him, trying not to get impatient with the sudden line of questioning. It wasn’t as though our speculating would bear much fruit without a direct confrontation, after all. “Some are smaller than you, and some are about half as big as me, I think.”

“Okay, then we have a big problem,” he hissed, his fur standing on end.

It took a moment for that to register, and then all our heads whipped skywards, finally noticing the large, feathered form silently swooping down towards us. Another hoot echoed, deep and sharp and loud, like some great and terrible bell. I saw Kakashi start to shift in front of us, but I felt my eyes begin to sag shut just as quickly.

“K…Ka—” I heard Sakura start to say, as if from far off, before I heard the whipping flutter of gigantic feathers and something like vertigo gripped my stomach, before everything dissolved into darkness.

“…And what,” I heard a prim, female voice cry out as I slowly swam back into consciousness some indeterminate amount of time later. “Have you scrounged up for us today, Izuku?”
When I squinted into the dim gloominess of… wherever we were, it took a moment for me to register exactly what I was looking at. And even longer to accept it.

“Candidates!” A youthful, eager voice piped up as I shoved myself to my knees. I looked over my shoulder to see the goddamn giant owl that had swooped down on us, puffing himself up proudly. One of them might have had access to Summons, I heard Kakashi’s voice echo mockingly in my head, even though the man himself was tense and silent off to my left. I felt, suddenly and keenly, as though I had been betrayed by God, the universe, and most importantly every sense of narrative flow I had ever come across as a writer.

We had only just had a C-Ranked mission where the objective had been the head of a clan of Summons, and they were supposed to be rare to start with. In the original storyline, apart from the Pack and Gai’s turtles, Summons hadn’t even been mentioned until the Sannin had been introduced. This went against pacing, and while I knew intellectually that this was, more or less, real life and not some story…

Things like this still shouldn’t just happen. In a sick sort of way, after all my stressing and worrying, I felt cheated that I didn’t have to deal with the veritable shitstorm an early confrontation with Orochimaru would have dragged us into.

I quickly gave myself a mental slap, because that was the stupidest thing I had thought to date, and instead tried to feel grateful at this bizarre twist of fate instead. It was a bit difficult, given just how intimidating it was, having so many huge, luminous eyes bearing down on us at once.

“Good candidates,” the so-called Izuku added, the horn-like tufts of feathers at the side of his head fluffing up. “These ones can use chakra. I’ve seen them do it!”

“…well,” the first voice said, apparently belonging to the even larger, regal looking owl with a white face and an ashy, black-marked body. She had thick, long lashes that fluttered as she peered down at us with even greater scrutiny. “We do suppose that is an… improvement.”

“Yes, Milady.” Izuku nodded his head, eyes closing in a happy smile. “There’s a big one and three nestlings, like the flock Suzushi used to be in.”

“Their kind call it a ‘team’ we believe,” she told him grandly, as if imparting some great wisdom. “But it pleases us that you have taken our previous criticisms to gizzard. These candidates are indeed a cut above your previous efforts. Well done.”

“Thank you, Kyouhime,” our captor ducked his head bashfully.

“Candidates for what?” Naruto demanded loudly, to my right. I heard Sakura hiss at him to shut up from his other side, but he just lifted his chin and glared up at our feathery captors defiantly.

Given the way Kasha was tense and hissing like a quiet, furious kettle, I had an inkling.

“Candidates for our next Summoner,” a third owl, slightly smaller than the female, with a rough, aged voice and golden feathers. “Our previous one, Suzushi, died some time ago, and we began hunting for his replacement.”

“The civilian disappearances were your doing, then?” Kakashi asked, his tone deceptively mild. He was as tense as a bow about to fire, two fingers hooked into the back of my shirt if he needed to quickly move me out of his way.

There was a faint, embarrassed pause.
“Young Izuku was the last one our Suzushi summoned, before his passing,” the old owl said stiffly. “It was his first foray into the world of man, and while he is prodigious on the battlefield he is, perhaps… inexperienced when it comes to knowing all of Milady’s tastes and standards. But, as per the contract, he is the only one able to return to the place he was summoned until a new Summoner is selected.”

“Indeed,” Kyouhime ruffled her wings. “Though the peasants were pleasing to the eye, they were not worthy of commanding us, and were quickly turned loose.”

“Pleasing to the eye,” I heard Sakura say, as if something just clicked into place. “That’s why most of them were attractive and young!”

“But of course.” Kyouhime straightened up, her head tilted proudly. “They do say fine feathers make fine birds, after all.”

I saw her wing go up in slow motion, under-feathers turning towards us as she covered her beak. In my bones, I somehow knew what was coming. I couldn’t fully believe it, not really, but I knew it was coming all the same.

“It’s only natural, since owls are the finest birds, o~hohoho!”

This is my life, I reflected. I had expected to deal with an overpowered mad scientist, and found myself instead at the mercy of a feather-brained Ojou-sama. I could only hope to be so lucky in the future.

“With that said,” Kyouhime composed herself, settling on some grand perch I could hardly make out. “Nudge the pretty little one forward for further inspection. We are sick of slovenly men. Suzushi may have been fair of face, but he was a boor at heart.”

I slid back a step, and felt Kakashi’s grip on my shirt.

“She’s spoken for,” I heard Kasha snarl in a tone that was pure ice. “And we don’t share.”

“…What?” Kyouhime blinked for a moment, before flapping a wing dismissively. “Oh, no, not that one. She may have a glossy luster, but black is so boring. Perhaps the crows would flock to her, but we owls are of a more discerning eye, we think you’ll find!”

There was a moment of silence.

“You mean me?” Sakura asked after a moment, for clarification. I couldn’t decide whether I was affronted, relieved, or embarrassed we had all assumed they had been referring to me, given that they had said ‘little’. Sakura was still on her knees, so I supposed for the moment she was the smallest, and I had always considered her pretty.

Hell, all of us were pretty. Naruto had cheekbones some women would kill for.

“Yes, yes.” Kyouhime beckoned her forward. “Come now, dear fledgeling, stand before us.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Sakura got to her feet and strode forward, shaking off Naruto’s grab for her arm. The line of her shoulders was tense, no doubt remembering what Nekomata had put me through before he deemed me worth his time. I switched my Sharingan on, everything growing sharper and more defined despite the poor lighting, and tensed just in case she needed my help. We were surrounded, outnumbered, and way, way outside our weight class, but that didn’t mean I’d leave her in the lurch if any of them took a swing at my friend.
“Now,” said the owl imperiously.

I felt Kakashi shift his weight forward.

“Do a turn,” Kyouhime commanded.

“…excuse me?” Sakura’s voice was polite, but incredulous.

“A turn, fledgeling.” One wing was extended, a fanned out feather tracing a slow circle in the air. “Turn around for us.”

Bemused, Sakura did as she was bid and slowly rotated.

“Mm, yes. Good volume, excellent coloring,” the old, golden owl mused, bobbing his head and conferring with a rather fat looking barn owl. “Looks to be well fed, but not overly so. Big eyes.”

“Big eyes,” the creaky, apparently female barn owl agreed approvingly. “Bright and clear, too.”

*What the fuck,* Sakura’s expression seemed to demand as she glanced back over her shoulder at us. I shrugged helplessly.

“Wait!” A sharp, wheezy voice cut through the gloom, and a hunched, bug eyed little owl—still easily twice my height—hopped down from his perch. “Where does she roost? I refuse to deal with sandstorms every damn day, like the time where we answered to Mado! I won’t!”

There was a series of hurried, hooted agreement.

“Fukuroda-jii raises a compelling point,” Kyouhime agreed, pinning Sakura with a suspicious stare. “Fledgeling! Tell us, where do you hail from?”

“Konoha,” Sakura told them slowly, tapping her forehead protector with a blank, disbelieving look.

“Oh, the forests,” Kyouhime hummed appreciatively. “Yes, that should work. Fledgling!”

“…yes?” Sakura asked, in tones that betrayed just how much she wished she hadn’t.

“You are acceptable. Feel honored, for we shall allow you the honor of pledging yourself to us.”

“Just like that?” Kasha asked, in tones of polite horror. I remembered that he had said I was the first Summoner that his father had accepted in ‘ages’. I could only imagine how such lax standards offended the sensibilities he had been raised with. “You check her face and her homeland and it’s time to form a contract?”

“In time, you will understand that there are beings so sublime that they are impossible for you to understand, little cat,” the golden owl told him sagely. “Owls are such creatures.”

“Just go with it,” I murmured, gently curling a hand around him. Even if I was a bit miffed about that patronizing non-answer too, I wasn’t about to ruin what could be a very good thing for Sakura, not to mention our mission and… the chance to leave wherever we had been spirited away to, because I highly doubted we were still anywhere near the cliff.

Kasha grumbled, but settled back into sullen silence.

Sakura had a peculiar, calculating expression on her face. But, after a moment of thought, she nodded firmly. “Okay,” she said, setting her hands on her hips. “Fine. Where do I sign?”
Happy Fourth of July, fellow Americans. To everybody, though, thanks so much for all your support. More than 200 comments and 14,000+ hits is amazing, even given how many weeks it's been since I last updated. You all are great, and I appreciate your patience.
In which I do hard labor and hard drugs

Chapter Summary

In which everybody really, really just wants to go home, and Tsukimi remembers something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the appropriate scroll was carried out and Sakura reluctantly added her bloody signature to it, we regrouped and set ourselves to the mentally exhausting task of dredging the owls for information regarding our actual mission. After a brief, confusing exchange that wouldn’t have been out of place in an old-time comedy routine, we managed to suss out some helpful facts. As the parliament had claimed before, they had released the stolen villagers after they were deemed unacceptable candidates.

They just hadn’t thought to release them where they had taken the poor people from in the first place.

“Are you kidding me?” Kasha’s eyes were twin slits of frustration. I reached up and gently rubbed at the base of where his back met his tail until the prickle of his claws receded. I couldn’t blame him for getting worked up; Sakura looked like she was already regretting the life-binding contract she had signed less than an hour before. “You just… threw them out, into the wilderness?”

“Well, I found them in the middle of a forest,” Izuku huffed, fluffing up his feathers defensively as he flew us down from the copse of gigantic, hollow petrified trees the parliament—not clan, as we’d been so pompously corrected—used as its base of operations. “I figured it was their natural environment. Suzushi always insisted on staying at those loud perfumey houses all the time, and never the same one twice.”

“Perfumey houses?” I heard Naruto mutter behind me. “What does that mean?”

“Naruto—” Sakura started to say.

“Oh.” Naruto said. “Oh. Were they, uh… did they have red lanterns out front?”

“…I suppose they did, yes.” Izuku said, after a moment of brain-wracking. “Do you sleep in those too?”

“No,” Kakashi said, cutting off that line of questioning before it could devolve any further. I wanted to hug him for it, but instead focused on not thinking about how we were swooping down from a great height on the back of a proven idiot. “We live in Konoha, remember?”

“Right, right.” Izuku bobbed his head, and I swallowed back a scream. If not for the cast-iron grip Kakashi had on us, Sakura and I might have ended up sliding forward. Soon enough, thankfully, he landed and leaned down, one wing extended. “Well, here’s more or less where I dropped them off. I’ll catch a few winks while you go find them.”

“Sounds great,” Sakura muttered, helping me down with Kakashi’s help. Naruto leaped down with a wild, knee-cracking abandon that might have meant terrible things for his later years if not for his
special circumstances.

Izuku beamed at what he perceived as honest approval. “Thank you, Sakura-chan.”

I saw Sakura squeeze her eyes shut, visibly holding back from pinching the bridge of her nose or striking out at the gigantic bird. I took her hand in mine and mustered a small, comforting smile, which she returned with a far more tired version of her own.

“Right.” Kakashi heaved a sigh and worked through hand-seals that Sakura now paid special, if reluctant attention to. A moment later, there was a puff of smoke, and the Pack was with us once again.

“What, again?” Pakkun looked almost as aggrieved as Sakura did, perched atop Bull’s head and giving us all an expression of utter judgment. “Kakashi, when Aoba told you to hide your girls away before they got snatched up by monsters, I thought he was full of shit. After all of this… I might actually owe the guy an apology.”

“Sounds pretty full of shit to me,” I mumbled, now attached to my summons enough that I took offense, even if Nekomata was by definition a monster.

“Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura snapped, before backhanding Naruto right in the stomach.

He grunted and stumbled back a step, giving her a wounded look. “Geeze, Sakura-chan, the heck was that for?!”

“I…” For once, Sakura actually looked a bit embarrassed, and then out and out ashamed of herself. “Sorry Naruto, it was a reflex. Usually it’s your fault when she says things like that.”

Kakashi, paying no mind to their normally scheduled bickering, knelt down and set his dogs back to the task we had been trying to accomplish in the first place. “You all still remember those scents?”

“It’s been two hours,” Guruko scoffed. “Give us some credit.”

“Good. You should be able to pick some up fairly close by.”

“On it,” Bisuke answered for them all, and they put their noses back to the grindstone. Or rather, just the stone, as they wound their way sniffing around the clearing we had been let off in. It wasn’t long at all before they were bounding down a barely-beaten path off to—from my best guess in the fast-dying light—the western edge. We followed in hot pursuit, and in what felt like no time at all, the tell-tale light of a campfire was flickering through the unfamiliar, massive trees a mile or so in front of us.

There was a smattering of what sounded like human voices we could hear as we drew closer, and when the finally closed the distance entirely there were five slightly dirty, slightly disbelieving, utterly relieved faces waiting there to meet us.

“Konoha,” breathed a dark-haired, mutton-chopped man, before slapping his thigh and laughing, breathless and bright-eyed. “I owe you an apology, kid. Looks like your old man sprang for the good ones after all.”

“O-Of course he did,” a somewhat haughty-looking young man said, as if there weren’t tears welling up in his eyes. He was standing by a single, large tent and if I didn’t have my Sharingan activated, I might not have seen the way Ninomiya Takumi was trembling as he raked a hand through his rust-colored hair. “I told you, didn’t I? My father would do whatever it took to get me back. Us back.”
A dark-haired pair I could only assume to be Toyama Heitaro and Minase Higoko were much less restrained, with Higoko openly weeping into her boyfriend’s shoulder near a rough-hewn lean-to and Hietaro clinging to her just as desperately. A tanned, pleasantly plump brunette stepped forward, an only slightly tremulous smile on her face as she greeted us.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “We’ve been relying a lot on Fueguchi-san, but it’s…” She sucked in a quick breath. “It’s been a bit rough. I can’t say how glad we are to see you.” A cool breeze wafted through the trees, and she gave a slight shiver, coughing slightly.

“Mayumi-chan, go get the blanket,” Fueguchi told her, gruff but kind. “We don’t want that cough getting any worse, or Dr. Takeuchi will have my head.”

“Uh, actually—” Naruto reached over and rummaged in my pack, which I bore despite the deep-ingrained impulse to smack his hands away. He came out with the pink shawl we had been given only hours before, and held it out with a bright grin. “We kinda promised your lady we’d make sure you got this back. So…”

“Kaede,” she murmured under her breath, touching the soft material like it would fall apart under her fingers, before hugging it close as her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you.” She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. “So, so much. Thank you.”

“Just doing our job,” Naruto said, rubbing his nose and glancing away with a flush my enhanced vision caught perfectly.

“Well, you’ve done a damn good one,” Fueguchi said, with a short, hard nod. “Give us thirty minutes to pack our camp up and we’ll gladly let you finish it.”

“If it’s standard gear, we can help,” Sakura chipped in. Naruto and I agreed, and soon all of us were quickly disassembling the survivalist set-up that had served as their shelter for the better part of a month. When we back-tracked to where Izuku had well and truly nodded up, I couldn’t blame any of them for the flat and accusing looks that the oblivious bird garnered.

 “…Since I basically sold myself to these things, I guess I should try to defend him.” Sakura heaved a sigh. “He really is that stupid, I promise. It wasn’t deliberate cruelty.”

“Sold yourself?” Higoko covered her mouth and cuddled closer to Heisuke. “My goodness…”

“It’s not as one-sided as it sounds,” I reassured her, as Kasha poked his head up. “Lots of ninja have summon-animals, like Sensei’s dogs or Kacchan here. It’s part of why your abductions took place; the owls were looking for a new ninja to contract with.”

“Really, really stupid,” Sakura emphasized.

“….hmph… huh?” Izuku shifted and shook himself awake, blinking… well, owlishly. For obvious reasons. “Oh! Welcome back, Sakura-chan!”

“Hello, Izuku.” Sakura heaved a sigh. “Do you think you can get all of us back where you found us, now?”

“Oh, not at all!” Izuku said brightly, apparently oblivious to the way the atmosphere took a sharp, cold dive downwards.

“…what do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes, trying to phrase this in a way he would understand and clearly respond to. “You can’t take us back at all, or you can’t take back all of us?”
“The second one,” he said, with a bob of his head. “Since we’ve got a new summoner, I can only do the popping trick one more time before I’ve got to use her chakra, but I can only take… hm… maybe six of you? Maybe? Let’s say five. I like that number! I can take five people one time. Well, before sunrise.”

“Well, shit,” Naruto mumbled.

Sakura didn’t even bother hitting him, possibly giving him a pass for her early misfire as she bit her thumbnail thoughtfully. “Five of us… Kakashi-sensei, do you think if I was one of the five, and we sent him back, I could…”

“No,” I told her, already shaking my head. “Haruno, trust me, summoning takes a lot of chakra. You and I have built up our stores, but I can barely summon cats a little over my size without getting cleaned out.” I was reminded vaguely of a problem solving worksheet I had been given back in grade school, involving a fox, a hen, a sack of grain, and a single boat on a river. Except that took multiple trips, and we had… one. Maybe.

“Also, I don’t really trust this guy to remember what to bring over, even if we could get you enough chakra,” Naruto muttered.

“So, what, we’re stuck?” Takumi ran his hand through his hair again, cursing. “Awesome. Awesome.”

“Um…”

I shifted my head, eyebrows lifting. “Kasha?”

He pawed himself out of my scarf, and leapt to the ground. “Well, I… might have an idea. But I don’t like it. But it might work.” His ears flattened. “But I really don’t like it.”

“Well,” Kakashi said. “Let’s hear it anyways.”

“Okay, so I can… sort of… summon something too.” Kasha shifted from side to side. “It’s… a carriage? But, um. I mean, it’s big, but, traditionally, we only use it to carry back our summoners’ bodies to the castle if they fall in battle.”

“Oh, I did that with Suzushi’s body!” Izuku piped up. “We’ve got it in a glass case. We don’t know what to do with it, since we voted not to eat him. When we did that with Mado way back when, apparently the old Fukuro-ou got really sick. And died.”

Given that Mado had most likely been a Sand-nin, I automatically suspected that was due to some manner of poison, but I held my tongue. Kumogakure would probably like the body back, at some point.

“…Right.” Kasha eyed the giant bird with thinly veiled dislike. “So, it’s big enough for… hmm… ten humans, I’d say. Grandfather had it constructed so we could use it for funerals, and so the most loyal summons could watch over the body too.”

“Okay, so… what, you would summon that, and Tsukimi would be one of the first five, and she would summon you?” Sakura rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Would that take less chakra?”

“…no.” Kasha sighed. “I may not look like much now, but I am Dad’s son. Part of the reason I traveled with you guys back to Konoha is because there was no way Tsukki would normally have enough chakra to summon me at this point. That’s the part I really don’t like.”
“Not the creepy funeral cart?” Naruto asked.

“It is a great carriage,” Kasha said, puffing up indignantly. “We’ve used it for tons of things other than funerals!” He deflated soon enough, though, curling his tail around his paws. “There’s... something I can give Tsukki. It’s kind of like your soldier pills. It makes chakra levels skyrocket for a short period of time, but we don’t let anybody outside the clan use it, ever. If she takes it, and then... well, then summons me really quickly, it shouldn’t have too many side-effects. Probably. Maybe.”

“I see why you don’t like that part,” I said dryly. I nodded all the same. “Fine, let’s do it.”

“Wha—Tsukimi-hime!” Naruto whirled on me. “You can’t just—just—just *agree* to something like that!”

“We have until dawn,” I reasoned. “If the risk is minimal, and nobody else has any reverse-summoning secret techniques, it looks like it’s our best bet. Sensei?”

Kakashi was silent.

“Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura looked uncertain. “Do you really...”

“I’m thinking,” he said shortly. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought he might be furrowing his brow. After a quick glance at the poorly concealed expressions of apprehension on the faces of the civilians, he let out a sigh. “Kasha-kun, you said Tsukimi-chan won’t be hurt?”

“She shouldn’t be, but if she is, I’ll take her straight to Dad,” the little cat swore. “He’d definitely be able to fix anything like that.”

“That is not the ringing endorsement I was hoping for, Kasha-kun.”

“I told you, I *really* don’t like it.”

“But we’re all in agreement that it’s the best plan we’ve got?” I interrupted, wanting to be sure. I took the resultant, mulish silence as agreement. “Okay. So, I’m going, and...?”

“Take Mayumi-chan, and the rest,” Fueguchi suddenly spoke up. “If for whatever reason—and I know jack-all about how this ninja stuff works—but if for whatever reason your plan falls through, your team and I can probably handle bunking down here for a while longer the best.”

“Old man...” Takumi looked honestly moved, before he hastily pasted up his mask of haughtiness again. “God, what is it with you and assuming the worst?”

“I don’t assume the worst,” the man said levelly. “I just plan for it.” After that, Sakura and Naruto’s protests gradually tapered off, and it was finally agreed upon. Before that, however, Kasha had us back up and raised a paw to his mouth, nipping it and flaring his chakra in a way that made my eyes water before he smacked it onto the ground. A large cloud of smoke billowed up, and once it cleared we all found ourselves staring at a grand carriage hitched to a horse-sized kitten.

“You can get *that* big?” I asked without thinking.

“Tsukki.” Blue eyes the size of oranges rolled at my expense. “You’ve *seen* my Dad, and that’s not even the biggest *he* can get.”

“He can get *bigger*!” Naruto gaped. “But he’s already huge, ’ttebayo!”
“It’s bakeneko thing,” Kasha shrugged as best he could in his gilded leather harness. “And a ninneko thing, but a bakeneko will always be able to get bigger than those.”

“Good to know,” I said, my voice faint to my own ears. “And… the soldier pill substitute?”

Kasha let out a soft sigh and shifted, and suddenly a small object flopped onto the ground between us. I leant down and picked it up, finding myself holding something about the size of the eraser on the end of a pencil and wrapped in a twist of foil, like a piece of candy.

“Take that right before you summon me,” Kasha instructed, pinning me with a surprisingly effective gimlet stare. “I mean it Tsukki, I want you to use up that chakra as soon as possible. Humans only come in one size-range, and it’s the same for their chakra coils.”

I stared.

“You can change the size of your—” I cut myself off with a sharp shake of the head. “…We’ll talk about that later. Do I just… swallow this?”

“Chew, then swallow,” he instructed tersely. After a moment, he sighed, either in resignation or defeat, despite being the architect of this plan. “…so, if we’re going to do this, everybody not going with the dumb bird should get in now.”

Sakura and Naruto each squeezed my hand and offered worried looks as they shuffled towards the back of the carriage, covered with a finely crafted and lacquered bamboo curtain. Kakashi lingered, resting a hand on my shoulder.

“Sharingan off,” he reminded me, and I belatedly deactivated my eyes. I thought he might be smiling, even if he didn’t seem any more pleased by the situation than the rest of the team. “Be careful,” he told me, and then moved to enter the carriage himself. The Pack swarmed around me for a moment, snagging me in a vortex of canine admonishments and well-wishes before they settled down at the edge of the clearing closest to the rear of the carriage. I supposed Kakashi would just summon them once we were all safe.

“Right.” I carefully tucked away the little twist of foil and offered the most resolute expression I could muster to the four people left out in the open with me. “Izuku-san, I believe we’re ready. If you’d move down so we can get up…?”

“Oh, right.” Izuku bobbed his head and leaned forward, sweeping out a wing. I helped each of the civilians up, despite Heitaro and Takumi’s hollow posturing that they could manage on their own. While I could understand that the help of a tiny prepubescent girl wounded their manly pride, I was not prepared to stick around any longer than we had to now that we had a reasonably solid plan.

Solid-ish, anyways.

“Right,” I said, once we were all situated. “Let’s go.”

Izuku hooted once and took to the air, and I felt my vision go dark just like before. It was probably a genjutsu of some sort, I reasoned, but I didn’t dare break it even when I knew it was coming.

When it cleared, I found us all sprawled out at—

“Oh my god, that stupid idiot,” I murmured, shoving myself up on one elbow.

We were back.
At the top of the cliff.

I purposely shoved the pressing issue of just how, exactly, we were meant to get five civilians down, and focused instead on getting the rest of my team and that fifth civilian back to begin with. I forced myself to my knees, then dug into my pouch for the foil twist. At the same time, I snuck a peek at my timepiece and found that barely five minutes had passed between bidding my team goodbye. The villagers were beginning to stir as I shuffled off to one side and unwrapped the… tablet?

It was white, and circular, and I couldn’t be sure in this evening gloom without using my Sharingan, but I thought there might be something like a fish-shape stamped into it.

*My cat just gave me drugs,* I realized belatedly. Soldier pills were drugs too, but this was…

Something about this was very strange. I didn’t have the time to parse out the particulars though, and quickly popped the little tablet into my mouth, nearly gagging at the sudden surge of brininess sapping the moisture from my tongue. I crushed it quickly beneath my molars and swallowed as best I could, and then began slamming my hands through the appropriate signs, mindful of Kasha’s warnings.

Just before the second to last sign, as I was trying to focus on Kasha’s signature, I found myself sucker-punched by a veritable blast of chakra.

I wheezed once, feeling my vision swim, then squeezed my eyes shut and ignored the way my skin felt too tight and hot in favor of locking on to the familiar snap and flare of what was undeniably *Kasha,* further than I could ever recall him being before, like the flicker of a candle in a window down the street. I grasped tightly to that flicker, forced my fingers through the last few signs, and bit my thumb.

I had never been electrocuted, but when I slammed my bloodied hand into the stone of the cliff, it certainly felt like a surge of energy was coursing straight down, using my poor, rigid arm as the medium. The feeling of near-bursting subsided as a huge cloud of smoke erupted, and I was left feeling abruptly light-headed.

“Tsukki?!?”

A large, wet nose nudged around in the haze until it found my face, and then it was gone, replaced by a normal-sized kitten twining worriedly around my neck.

“Tsukki! Are you okay? Do you feel okay?”

“…fine,” I managed to mumble as the smoke dispersed. There was a small ruckus as the rest of my team pile out of the carriage, and the villagers united, all safe and sound, and time sort of blurred together for a few minutes. I found myself on my feet when it righted itself and flowed properly once again, Naruto’s bracing arm slung across my shoulder.

“We’re back,” Heitaro was murmuring into Higoko’s hair, the pair once again wrapped in an embrace. I could understand how people might assume that they had just run off for some uninterrupted quality time, even after only knowing them briefly.

“God, what day is it?” Fueguchi was saying, looking up at the sky and rubbing his neck. “My secretary is going to kill me either way, with how long I’ve been gone, but I should figure out just how many appointments I have to apologize for before I get back.”

“March 28th,” Kakashi told him. “For another four and a half hours, anyways.”
I frowned, feeling my brain twitch. Something about what he had just said was important, I realized. I couldn’t put my finger on what, exactly, or why, and that really worried me. Was it something to do with the Land of Rice? No, that wasn’t even a thing the manga had focused on, until what I had already identified as the summer months. Then, was it the Valley of the End? …No, I was pretty sure that fight had come relatively close to the end of the Chuunin Exams. An autumn event that would hopefully never come to pass, if I had my way.

So if it wasn’t either of those…

“Tsukimi-chan?” Sakura snapped lightly in front of my eyes, peering at me worriedly despite the fact that she probably had even more difficulty seeing in the dark than I did without my Sharingan activated. I focused on the expression of concern painted clearly across her face rather than the shaky, clammy feeling enveloping my entire body, and tried to remember what she and Naruto had been talking about.

I had to admit defeat after a few seconds of serious, fruitless effort, but within the next instant a metaphorical lightbulb went off inside my head, and I perked up despite how terrible I felt.

“Oh,” I heard myself murmur. “Yes, that was it.” I mustered up what I thought was a smile—an attempt was made at the very least— and gently shook off Naruto’s arm, clumsily pressing Kasha into her hands, which had been hovering between us uncertainly. “Happy birthday, Haruno,” I told her, inordinately pleased that I had managed to piece together that little riddle before the anxiety set in for once. Then an entirely different, entirely expected feeling welled up within me.

I staggered to the edge of the cliff, dropped back down to my hands and knees, and tugged my scarf over my head, tossing it over my shoulder weakly. That done, I carefully leaned forward and vomited, until there was absolutely nothing left in my stomach. I primly wiped my mouth and shuffled back, flopping into a sitting position.

“Don’t do drugs,” I’m pretty sure I slurred, shaking a finger in the general direction of my teammates before the world sagged side-ways and my vision went dark for the third time that day.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to Ghostbusters, because I went to go see that, came home, and slammed this chapter out in like eight hours.
In which I have a lot to digest, metaphorically speaking

Chapter Summary

Tsukimi rolls with a lot of punches, this time. In true shounen fashion, this can only mean the punches yet to come are even bigger wallops, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trek back to Konoha was not as quick as the journey over, mainly because I was still highly nauseous the next day and moving at high speeds only exacerbated the issue.

“Never again,” I swore as we paused for the fifth time in four hours, bracing myself against a tree as I dry heaved. “You hear me, Kasha? The alternative had better be death.”

“Oh, full name,” Naruto whispered somewhere off behind me. “She really isn’t doing too hot, is she, ‘ttebayo?”

“Obviously not,” Sakura said, a touch waspish. Despite that, her hands were gentle as they held my hair back, and didn’t let go until I indicated that nothing would be coming up this time. “She ingested something that wasn’t even meant for human use. It’s only natural that her body wants to purge it, even if it isn’t demonstrably toxic. Speaking of which!” She put her hands on her hips and turned to pin our instructor with a gimlet stare. “I was a bit too flustered to think about it last night, but Kakashi-sensei, why couldn’t Tsukimi-chan just use soldier pills? Aren’t they a part of the basic Jounin field kit?”

“Are you calling me basic, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi-sensei pressed his book flat against his chest, as if the gray paw-printed cover was staunching some gushing, grievous wound. “Belated birthday girl or not, I don’t know if I can stomach being disparaged so openly.”

“That’s not an answer, Sensei.”

“You do think I’m basic,” our teacher accused, shaking his head sadly. “I’m hurt. Gai never has to deal with this sort of thing from his cute students.”

“Maito Gai is the living, breathing definition of ‘extra’ and you know it,” I shot back, taking a few slow, careful sips of water.

“…More true than you know,” Kakashi said, huffing out something that could have just as easily been a sigh as the beginnings of a laugh. “Well, I suppose I do owe you kids an explanation, given the alternative we were forced to use. The short answer is that I do not carry soldier pills in my standard kit and have not for years. I am, in fact, under medical advisement to never do so, even for somebody else.”

“That’s strange,” I murmured, my brow furrowing slightly as I raised my canteen once more. “I thought the opposite should be true, given just how draining the Sharingan must be for you.”

“Sensei has a Sharingan?!”
I choked and sputtered, water going down the wrong tube and spraying right back up at the sudden outcry from my teammates. Both were gaping up at Kakashi, occasionally darting a stunned look at me but making no move to help as I grappled with the Herculean task of getting a decent breath back in. Once I managed that, I looked at him as well, honestly baffled by their apparent bewilderment. Kakashi cocked his head to one side inquisitively, I shrugged a shoulder, and I think at roughly the same moment we realized that neither of us had actually sat the other two down and explained about his inherited eye.

“Oh,” I said faintly. “Yes. He’s, uh. He’s rather well-known for it.”

“When we get back,” Kakashi said, “I am getting Gai’s kids to give you a report of what they dug up on our team before they met us. If this sort of thing keeps happening, we’ll never get anything done.”

“So, wait, does that mean you and Tsukimi-hime are related?” Naruto wanted to know, shaking off the shock. “If you are, then why the heck is she—”

“We’re not related,” I cut him off. “Konoha’s Hatake family was an old branch clan off-shoot from samurai nobility over in Iron, and the Uchiha have always been suspicious and selective when it came to marriages with outsiders.” That had been an interesting tidbit of information, which I had followed up on since the Hatake clan had been used as an example—possibly the first case—for a family from an entirely different country being legally accepted into the village. It explained a few points I had wondered about over the years, such as why a ninja would choose to commit seppuku of all things, but it also raised all sorts of new questions that I still hadn’t found the right time or reason to voice.

“…That’s true,” Kakashi said, shooting me a faintly surprised look. “The short answer to that is that the Sharingan I have was given to me by one of my teammates, before he died. And to get a little more back on topic, since you seemed so interested before, yes it does drain chakra quickly when I use it, which was how I knew enough to lecture Tsukimi-chan about her own chakra usage. But, shortly after I first received it, I relied too heavily on chakra pills in order to make as much use of it as I could. It backfired, eventually, and I got put on forced medical leave while my body worked through the after-effects of that bad habit.”

Kakashi went to rehab?

I was… well, a bit surprised, but less so than I thought the revelation should have merited. There were people who got addicted to prescription drugs all the time, so a chakra pill addiction wasn’t that far-fetched. Plus, I was reasonably sure Kakashi had been in ANBU during that period of time, on top of grieving for Rin, Obito, and then Minato all in relatively short order. Substance abuse under those circumstances was even less strange to think about.

“So, if the time ever comes that we need them, Tsukimi-chan and I will have to stock and pack them ourselves,” Sakura said, her expression thoughtful.

“What about me?” Naruto asked.

“In what universe will you ever need chakra pills?” Sakura demanded, incredulous. “You outlast Tsukimi-chan and I every time we practice jutsu. You summon literal mobs of corporeal clones daily. You won’t need them.”

“And Haruno and I have to deal with radically smaller reserves, paired with the demands of a very draining summoning process, if we need to use them in a particularly dire situation. Like yesterday, but during an ambush instead of a rescue operation.”
“Man,” Naruto folded his arms behind his head, kicking his heels out and pouting. “I can’t wait ’til our next C-Rank! It’s no fair that I’m the only one without cool animals I can call up.”

“…How does that factor into our next C-Rank?” I asked, recapping my canteen.

“It’s my turn next, ’ttebayo.”

“…What?” I blinked, not quite following.

“It’s my turn next,” Naruto repeated patiently. “First C-Rank, you got a contract, second C-Rank, Sakura-chan got a contract, and by next C-Rank, everybody will have a contract. S’basic pattern-recognition, you know?”

“Naruto, contracts like this… they’re rare,” Sakura explained, her tone turning gentle. “They don’t usually kit out a genin team with them. I think even the Sannin only started summoning after they became Chuunin.”

“Granted, they were younger than us when they became Chuunin,” I muttered under my breath.

“My point is,” Sakura continued, sending me a quelling look. “It’s probably not going to be that matter-of-fact, if you do want to track down a summoning contract. Just… keep that in mind.”

“…Oh.” A faint pout settled on his lips. At least, until Kakashi’s hand descended to roughly ruffle his spiky hair.

“Now, now,” our teacher consoled him, effortlessly avoiding Naruto’s flailing arms. “Don’t sulk. I’m sure you’ll find some way to make up for not having a giant, monstrously powerful beast at your fingertips.”

“SENSEI!”

Sakura and I blinked, equally taken aback by the equally aghast, equally furious, entirely unified roar that had just torn out of us. I knew why I was appalled, because I knew the punchline to Kakashi’s joke—though it was in detestably poor taste. For Sakura to get so upset…

Holy shit. This was jumping ahead of the plot by literal years.

“You know?” Sakura asked, green eyes going wide.

“I do,” I said numbly. “…You know?”

“I know.”

After a beat of silence, we turned to Kakashi, who was predictably hiding behind his book, and Naruto, who had gone dead white and was so still that I wasn’t entirely sure he was even breathing at this point.

“And… you knew we knew!” Sakura accused, hands falling to her hips.

“I knew,” Kakashi agreed, patting Naruto on the head gently. It seemed to shock him back to life, though he still looked about two shades paler than milk. “I figured he should know too, though.”

“You know?!” Naruto exploded, eyes darting between us and around, as if looking for the safest available escape route. My heart gave a sudden, painful throb at the reminder that he was, in fact, a twelve year old boy who had gone through all sorts of persecutions.
“Yeah,” I said.

“I figured it out a month ago,” Sakura admitted quietly.

“Well I don’t know.” Kasha butted in, as Naruto sank back into a state of wordless gaping.

“Anybody feel like sharing?”

“I’m pretty sure we’re all legally prohibited from doing that,” I told him, gently petting his ears. “So let’s just shove it under the umbrella of ‘Uzumaki clan secrets’ for now.” I was scrabbling for some way to table this discussion, but it was like trying to fight off an avalanche with a shovel. It was too sudden, and I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Granted, in Shippuden there hadn’t been all that much fallout from what I could recall, but it was unsettling and upsetting.

Naruto was just a kid. He shouldn’t have to deal with this yet.

“Ohhh, does this have something to do with what happened to the Kyuubi?” Kasha pawed the side of his nose twice and nodded sagely. “Got it, I won’t pry.”

Naruto tossed his hands up and looked up at the sky for a long moment, his expression intense but unreadable. He was overwhelmed, that much was clear, and my stomach twisted itself in knots just looking at him.

“Anymore show-stopping revelations you kids want to air before we get back to running?” Kakashi asked mildly. “I don’t want to give those vultures at the gate another show, so it can either happen out here or at somebody’s house. Sakura-chan?”

“Nothing jumps to mind,” she said, eyeing Naruto with palpable concern.

“Naruto?”

“Ghng,” came the reply as the poor, over-loaded boy struggled for coherence.

“We’ll try again later. Kasha-kun?”

“My enigmatic and untold past is one of my charm points.”

“Terribly true. Tsukimi-chan?”

I bit my lip.

“…Tsukimi-chan?”

This was it. This was an explicit, if not entirely sincere request to lay my cards on the table. I had more ‘show-stopping revelations’ than I cared to count at this point. I could tell them about the Wave mission that would be coming our way. About invasion in the works. About Orochimaru and his horror show of a village. About Itachi’s sacrifice. About the Akatsuki. About Madara, and Kaguya, and everything up until then that I could scrape out of my memories.

“Tsukimi-chan, Sensei is seriously starting to get a bit worried now.”

About Obito, I thought for exactly half a second. Then I looked up, met Kakashi’s eye—somehow both sharp and gentle as he assessed me—and I knew I couldn’t. I couldn’t do that to him. Strategically it might be a good idea, but I knew better than anybody that I was a softhearted crybaby, not some calculated grand chess-master. I selfishly cared more about protecting the fragile, warm bond we were gradually building than exposing an enemy I still hadn’t let myself fully accept.
as anything more than the shadow of a bogeyman in the far distance.

So after that suspiciously long pause, I simply shook my head.

“No. I think we should focus on getting home. Uzu…” I paused again, but this time much more briefly. “Naruto-san looks like he could use the distraction.”

“…What did you just call me?” Against all odds, that seemed to bring some life back into Naruto’s expression. I found myself fixed under impossibly wide, impossibly blue eyes, and had to fight the urge to fidget. I was so completely unprepared to deal with this issue. I should have had years to find a way to work up to this moment, to reassure him. Instead I only had a few months of personal effort under my belt, and the feelings of an emotionally fragile twelve year old hanging in the balance.

_God, I hope I’m not fucking this up,_ I thought desperately, before meeting his gaze with the thinnest veneer of serenity this world had ever seen.

“Your name. You and… and Sakura-san,” I stumbled slightly, too used to habitual formality by this point to smoothly switch gears, “are my teammates and have been for some time. I don’t have a physical birthday gift prepared, so I suppose sentiment will have to suffice until we return to Konoha. And it would be unreasonable not to extend the same courtesy to you both.”

“Yeah,” Sakura piped up, sounding a bit uncertain. “Don’t go thinking you’re _that_ special, Naruto. Tsukimi-chan’s saying that we’re just the same!” When I glanced at her, I found her chin raised and her jaw set, just daring him to argue.

My head was a mess. Everything was so, so jumbled up, but I tentatively decided it was a good thing.

Just this once.

“Yes, we’re all no better than we ought to be,” Kakashi said dryly, snapping his book shut. “Well, I’m glad we’ve gotten all _that_ squared away without anyone getting arrested for treason, but we are expected back sometime within the next few days. Shake a leg, kids.”

“Yeah.” Naruto, surprisingly, was the first to nod. “Yeah, we should… we should go home.”

For a moment he just shifted from foot to foot uncertainly and then in a blur of orange, he bodily threw himself at me and Sakura. I fought down reflexes I still didn’t remember acquiring as his arms snapped around us in the awkward embrace of a child utterly, painfully unfamiliar with the motion; a tight, bony cinch around our shoulders, desperate and just a bit too hard, as if he still hadn’t figured out how to gauge his own strength. The canvas of his jacket was cool and smooth under my cheek, and I was briefly overcome by the faint, floral scent of the Takeuchi household’s detergent.

The next moment, Naruto threw himself off of us as suddenly as he had come, bolting off into the treetops again.

After a long, stunned moment under Kakashi’s patient, pleased gaze, Sakura and I followed after him.

_What does it say about us,_ I wondered less than a week later, _that Kakashi’s Sharingan is more of a_
lasting shock than a Tailed Beast?

I mulled over that thought as I worked at the fresh, stubborn off-shoots of an invasive species that had begun to spread through of a client’s medicinal garden. I was willing to bet that a lot more was going on behind Naruto’s characteristic boisterous grin, but it seemed gauche to press the issue. After our return, I had found that all of us seemed more or less content not to bring up his… condition and the underwhelming reaction Sakura and I had towards it.

In a way, I supposed it could make sense. While the Kyuubi was a very big deal, and a very big secret for Naruto, it wasn’t one he had been aware of for all his life. He had only found out a few months ago, and other than having way too much chakra at his disposal, he still had yet to make any tangible connection with the fox. It probably still didn’t fully feel real to him, allowing him to settle into a vaguely accepting normality rather than him becoming consumed by the stark, terrifying reality of his position.

…Or maybe I was just projecting, and he had mountains of anxiety and top-tier bullshitting skills to match. It was even odds, probably.

Conversely, Kakashi’s offhanded explanation about part of his past had apparently caught both of my teammates’ attention much more effectively. We had only been back a few days, but it seemed as though Naruto or Sakura had some new question about the Sharingan and how Kakashi used it each time we saw him.

“Do we have to call Tsukimi-hime ‘Sharingan Tsukimi’ now?”

“Do you really know a thousand jutsu?”

“How come you can’t make it turn black?”

“Is it even possible to reconnect the optic nerve like that?”

“Why can’t you just use it to read that dumb book one time? S’what Tsukimi-hime does.”

“How many tomoe do you have?” Kasha asked today, from where he was sunning himself on the stone bench Kakashi had chosen to lounge on as he ‘supervised’ our D-Rank.

“Three,” our teacher replied sedately, one hand absentmindedly stroking my summon’s coat while he read. A soft, gentle purr fluttered through the brisk spring air.

“Ah,” Kasha sighed and stretched out, flexing his little claws. “Tsukki still only has two in each eye.”

“The optometrist said that was fine,” I reminded him shortly, stabbing into the dirt with my spade.

“She only started with three across both eyes,” Sakura rationalized, deftly tying up a bag full of previously torn up plant stalks. “Since it involves chakra channels, according to Hyuuga-senpai, it’s probably a good thing she’s developing gradually.”

“Yes,” chirruped Mimihime, nestled on top of Sakura’s head.

She was a tiny fluff-ball of a horned owlet—reportedly the smallest in the entire contract—but she was the most Sakura could consistently summon, and Kakashi had insisted that Sakura’s meager chakra reserves could only benefit from practicing. On a less tactical note, Mimihime had a lisp that could melt the stoniest of hearts, and a childish sort of logic that more or less surpassed the sum of her entire clan’s so-called rationale. “Mamma says that important things need delib…liberation!”
She also called Kyouhime ‘Mamma’—pronounced ‘Mi-mah’—which was the kind of dissonant, hoity-toity absurdity I had already come to expect as common fare for these birdbrains.

“It’s ‘deliberation,’” Kasha corrected her. He had been enjoying the feeling of being the less-sheltered baby for once, though I had noticed that he had a worrying—if only vague, at this point—tendency towards condescension when it came to her. The owls had left a rather poor impression on him, understandably, but I would have to keep a weathered eye out for any indication of bullying.

They were reasonably intelligent and able to use chakra, but at their core they were still a little bird and a spoiled cat. I had watched more than enough Looney Tunes in my day to know what a worst-case scenario might entail.

“Speaking of gradual developments,” I said, changing the subject as I brushed my bangs out of my eyes. “Are we, um… going to address the box slowly creeping towards us at any point…?”

“The…” Naruto trailed off, then looked over his shoulder when I gestured. A faint look of exasperation bloomed across his face and he sighed briefly. Then, he lifted his head and bellowed: “OI, KONOHAMARU!”

The box froze, as if the rocky camouflage had any benefit in a grassy field like this.

“We’re kind of working,” he continued, now that he had the boy’s attention. “A mission is a mission, ’ttebayo. We’ll be done in…” He glanced over at Sakura.

“Forty minutes,” she said, after a quick bit of mental math.

“Forty minutes,” Naruto reported dutifully. “Wait for us and we can talk then. It’s rude to the client if we slack off, you know?”

I felt a moment of profound pride at that reaction. Granted, it had likely been born from Sakura’s often violent reprisals towards him for my own lapses in courtesy, but it was still a marked improvement. I expected an outcry in return, some excited spiel and an extra-smoky explosion to mark the entrance of the Honorable Grandson and his teammates. I was honestly a bit startled when, after a moment of hesitation, the box merely began to scoot back the way it came with no muss or fuss whatsoever.

“Konohamaru, as in…?”

“Yeah,” Naruto nodded to Sakura’s question. “The Old Man’s grandkid. He’s not that bad, he just wants people’s attention.”

“Now why does that sound familiar?” I wondered, my tone entirely innocent.

“Shush,” Naruto said, throwing a fistful of weeds at me.

I watched them flutter down a foot and a half away, silent.

“…Double shush.” Naruto grumbled and turned back to his weeding, his ears and the back of his neck heating up. I swallowed back a laugh and considerably hid my grin behind my scarf, before following his example. Sakura, who had never stopped working, merely snorted at our byplay. If it weren’t for her tiny, fluffy passenger, I was willing to bet she would have tossed in a despairing shake of her head to boot.

Kakashi flipped a page in his book, and we all fell back into the quiet lull of our busywork.
By the time we had finished and gotten our proof of completion from the client, it was edging past noon. Unsurprisingly, Sakura’s calculations had panned out perfectly, and it was nearly forty minutes on the dot when we left the property. I stretched as we walked, twisting my spine this way and that to shake off the phantom ache of being bent over for so long. Kasha was slung around my shoulders, lazy and lax after a morning of sunbathing and pampering, courtesy of Kakashi.

Our instructor had up and vanished as soon as the client signed off on our work, so it fell to the three of us to meet up with him at the Tower, as per usual.

“I hope your little friend doesn’t have anything really pressing to talk about,” I murmured, dropping my arms and continuing to amble forward. “We never set a place to meet up.”

“Nah,” Naruto hummed thoughtfully, hooking his own arms behind his head. “He’ll track us down if it’s that important. He’s seriously persistent, ’ttebayo. And loud.”

“That sounds pretty familiar too,” Sakura remarked from between us, an unrepentant smirk flitting across her face.

Naruto hip-checked her into me with silent, injured dignity, then took off running when she lunged for him. I watched them go with a faint, warm smile, before darting forward. I caught up with them when the streets began to get more crowded around the shops and eateries beset by the noontime rush. For once, Naruto wasn’t sporting any signs of being beaten, and both were still in high spirits, sniping and snarking without real malice.

As we weaved through the hustle and bustle of Konoha, I found it harder than usual to school my expression back into the careful, calm facade of distant respect I had made my default. I managed it before we made it to the Tower, and just in time to hear—

“U…U-Uchiha-san!”

I paused, my hand falling away from the front door as I turned to the little boy that had finally shown up. I glanced at Naruto, but he seemed just as baffled about this turn as I was. Sakura, conversely, seemed to understand exactly what was going on, by the way her eyes were glittering. When I finally laid eyes on Sarutobi Konohamaru for the second time ever, I understood just as quickly.

Konohamaru had forgone his little cap today, and his bushy brown hair had been tamed back into a little bun that was already beginning to fluff and fray around the edges. He was dressed neatly, with his shirt tucked in and his face rosy from a recent scrubbing. Clutched in one pudgy, slightly shaky fist was a single carnation, wrapped in pink plastic and tied with a little white ribbon at the stalk.

“C-Can…” He faltered slightly, going bright red. A hissed out, hushed round of encouragement came from the box poorly hidden behind a nearby tree. He rallied himself and sucked in a breath, visibly rousing himself. “I can! I mean… Can I… t-talk to you…? J-Just! Just for a minute!”

Oh no. I bit my lip, trying not to coo. He was adorable.

“I think I can spare a minute.” I glanced at my teammates, and found Sakura all but shooing me off. “Our teacher won’t be showing up any time soon.”

Chapter End Notes
Man, this chapter was real hard to hammer out, mainly because it was transitional developments. Also, according to my computer, it was time to update the scene-break characters. Thanks for bearing with me, guys! Also shout-out to the basically perfect manga counter-part to our Tsukki that I stumbled over. I'll probably be reblogging panels of that over on my tumblr when they get really relevant.
In which I join a cult

Chapter Summary

Buckle in, boys and girls. It's C-Rank time again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, what can I do for you today, Sarutobi-kun?” I asked, generously ignoring the two children—five, counting Naruto, Kasha, and Sakura—watching from the nearby bushes.

“That…” Konohamaru dropped his gaze to the ground, the tips of his ears going an even brighter shade of red. His eyes caught on the carnation still in his fist and he thrust it out at me. “This! I-Is for you!” His hand was shaking, either from the tight grip or nerves, and if my heart hadn’t melted to goo already it certainly would have then.

I gently tugged it out of his hand and inspected it with a helpless, warm little smile, before carefully tucking it into one of the inner pockets hidden in my cardigan. “Thank you, Sarutobi-kun. It’s lovely. But, what’s the occasion?” I prompted him gently, since he had fallen silent again.

“I, um. I.” He sucked in a deep breath, looked me dead in the eye, and went so red it put my Sharingan to shame. “…C-can we… um, I-I mean, would you…” His mouth opened and closed a few times, before he finally forced out the rest. “—train to… together sometime?! With me!”

“Of course,” I said automatically, because with such a sweet, fumbling request I had absolutely no recourse but to accept. Unlike with Sakura, even with such an apparent crush I had no trouble on this front. He was six. Training could be fun, and I could bring Naruto and Sakura along if things ever got awkward. “When we have the time, we can compare our schedules and find a time that works. Is that acceptable to you, Sarutobi-kun?”

“…” For a moment, the little boy just stared at me, wide-eyed and stunned. Then elation spilled over his face like a crashing, unstoppable wave and he bounced on his toes, nodding his head so vigorously it nearly unmade his messy little bun entirely. “Yes!” He burst out. It was more a cry of victory than assent. After a moment, the high seemed to abate and he coughed slightly, trying to school his features into something a little more serious. “I mean. Um. Yes, that sounds good to me, U-Uchiha-san. My teacher’s name is Ebisu-sensei, so we can arrange things with him!”

“…” For a moment, the little boy just stared at me, wide-eyed and stunned. Then elation spilled over his face like a crashing, unstoppable wave and he bounced on his toes, nodding his head so vigorously it nearly unmade his messy little bun entirely. “Yes!” He burst out. It was more a cry of victory than assent. After a moment, the high seemed to abate and he coughed slightly, trying to school his features into something a little more serious. “I mean. Um. Yes, that sounds good to me, U-Uchiha-san. My teacher’s name is Ebisu-sensei, so we can arrange things with him!”

“What are you doing,” I heard a tiny, exasperated voice hiss from near the base of the bushes.

“We, we can all have a lot of fun!” Konohamaru rambled on. “And. And get a lot stronger! As comrades.”

“Noooooo,” The little girl I assumed to be Moegi bemoaned quietly. “No! You were so close!”

“I’d like that,” I cut him off before he could earn himself any more of a lecture. “Then, I’ll be in touch, Sarutobi-kun. Take care.”

“You too!” Konohamaru called after me, sounding giddy. He waited until I rounded the corner before letting out a barely-muffled cry of victory. And then, shortly after, a barely-restrained yelp of
pain, as Moegi doubtlessly made her disapproval known.

“No fair, Tsukimi-chan,” Sakura sniffed, faux-hurt. “You were so gracious to him. Your admirers from the Academy never got that sort of treatment.”

She and Naruto rejoined me seamlessly and without any trace of shame at their snooping, as was their custom. Kasha, as was his custom, had vanished. My initial unease at leaving him to his own devices for any amount of time had never fully abated, but Kasha was always utterly stubborn about not meeting with the Hokage. Apparently, it was a matter of status and decorum; even if he happened to be a highly decorated military dictator, Kasha was not permitted to appear subservient to any person that wasn’t me or his father.

“My admirers in the Academy weren’t six year olds,” I told her. I paused. “Not at the point where they actively sought me out, at least.” I clarified. “And besides, Naruto-san seems to like him well enough. Spending a bit of time together won’t be a chore.”

“You say that now,” Kakashi sighed, shaking his head at us from where, to our palpable shock, he had been waiting on us, leaned up next to the entrance of the Hokage’s Tower. “But I’m the one who is going to have to deal with Ebisu.” He tucked his book away before cocking his head to one side all of a sudden, as though struck by an idea. “Actually, he was Gai’s teammate back in the day, so if we make it a joint training session, I might not actually have to do that. Objection withdrawn.”

“Wait, since when did you have the right to object to this?” Naruto demanded, arms akimbo. “Tsukimi-hime already agreed.”

“…You do realize I’m still your superior, right?”

“Eh?” Naruto blinked, apparently baffled. “But, I thought Tsukimi-hime was in charge, ’ttebayo.”

“Same here,” Sakura chimed in, before turning to me. One hand rose to her mouth in… polite surprise. “Wait, Tsukimi-chan, does that mean you aren’t paying him to tutor us?”

“You think I’d pay him for this level of service?” I raised my brows incredulously as we entered the building, our teacher sulking along behind us. “Please, Sakura-san. Give me a little credit.”

“Ah, good point,” Naruto nodded sagely. Somehow, we were all managing to keep straight faces, even as the air surrounding Kakashi grew gloomier by the moment. “He wouldn’t sass us nearly as much if we were bankrolling him, would he?”

“I’m sassy?” Kakashi muttered, sounding completely affronted.

“At least he owns up to it,” I murmured under my breath. Naruto was the first to break character, sniggering against my shoulder as we finally swept into the Tower.

“We love you, Sensei,” Sakura assured him, all glittering, earnest green eyes and award-winning sweetness. Naruto and I widened our eyes in earnest accompaniment beside her.

Kakashi harrumphed and stuck his nose into his book, slouching ahead of us. As we turned a corner on the stairs, however, we were greeted by a familiar, booming voice.

“Team Kakashi!” Gai threw his arms out, beaming. “What a fortuitous encounter! I hope you’ve been faring well this fine morning.”

“We saw them two days ago,” Neji reminded his teacher flatly.
“Indeed!” Lee chipped in. “Uchiha-san, how is your wrist?”

“Good enough to be cleared for weed-pulling,” I assured him, rotating the joint he had dislocated when I almost combined an over-the-shoulder flip with a grapple-breaking maneuver. My tailbone still ached a little from being properly flipped and restrained, but nothing that needed a medical examination. I saw the inside of the hospital more than enough, between check-ups to make sure I hadn’t poisoned myself with the reluctant aide of my own summons, and check-ups to make sure I wasn’t working myself blind practicing with my dojutsu, and check-ups to make sure that nothing was broken after practicing with Team Gai.

I wasn’t sure if I should be thankful or worried that none of the health care professionals I was seeing on an increasingly frequent basis had sat me down to ask about my life and choices yet.

“Ah, another successful D-Rank, then?” Tenten stretched, and offered a grin. “Bet Uchiha-chan was happy about that.” She found it hilarious that I seemed to enjoy the calm, steady pace of mind-numbingly boring chores.

“Tsukimi-chan is always diligent,” Sakura piped up. I shot her a grateful look. “…Still, Kakashi-sensei, isn’t it about time we tried out another C-Rank?” I withdrew my grateful look, busying myself with smoothing out the loops of my scarf. Naruto, in turn, perked up.

“Yeah, we’re totally ready!” He clenched a fist. “And I’m ready to beat those odds, ’ttebayo!” Team Gai had been filled in on his theory, and as such did not bother to ask or argue about the sheer unlikelihood of hitting the magic animal lottery three times in a row.

“Well, Tsukimi-chan hasn’t started vomiting blood at any point during this past week, so we could ask,” Kakashi said, like a total traitor. “Know how many are left, Gai?”

“We just selected one of the ones with the lowest projected difficulty and shortest travel time,” Gai mentioned, a brief look of chagrin flashing over his face. “I apologize, my Eternal Rival. I know you’ve been combing through the options for more controlled—”

“It’s fine,” Kakashi interrupted him loudly, not quite fast enough to let on that he cared. It was a moot point, anyways; the monster of a camera he whipped out at the end of our first mission outside of the video had reappeared sporadically ever since, candidly capturing us at the oddest, or most embarrassing moments. He could use it as a taunt as much—and as effectively—as he liked, but the man liked us, and we all knew it. Pakkun and the other dogs’ occasional snide remarks only proved it further.

“Yeah,” said Tenten, drawing out the word with palpable uncertainty. “I don’t know that escorting some old drunk is his dream mission for them, Sensei. Somehow, I think they’ll survive the disappointment.”

My blood froze in my veins. I wanted to say something—don’t go, don’t do it, he’s a liar, don’t go, don’t don’t don’t—but my throat closed up. I made a faint noise of what could probably pass as interest.

“It’s just a quick jaunt over to the Land of Waves,” Tenten continued. “We’ll be back in a week, week and a half at most. There were still a couple courier and escort missions up for grabs, though.”

Like hell you will, I didn’t say.

Naruto threw up his fists. “Alright, we gotta get up to the Old Man quick then, before the other good C-Ranks are taken! Thanks, Senpai.”
“Go forth, my comrades!” Gai stepped to one side and threw out an arm dramatically. “When we next meet, I hope to find us all enriched by where our paths have taken us!”

“Gai-sensei, so cool..!”

“Thanks, Gai-sensei!” Naruto flashed him a thumbs up before bolting up the stairs at a dead sprint.

“Yeah, thanks a lot, Gai.” Kakashi sighed, tucked his book away, and started up after our excitable teammate at a lazy jog.

“Good luck,” Sakura wished them, following after.

“…yes, Uchiha-san?” Neji lifted his brows when I lingered.

My feet felt as though they were rooted to the ground, but somehow I found the strength to raise one and place it on the next step up. I swallowed, and managed to find my voice at long last. “…Please be careful on your mission and come back safely,” I requested, my body automatically sliding into a textbook-proper bow. When I straightened up, I found all four of them, and Sakura, half a flight up, staring at me with quiet solemnity.

Then Tenten reached over and flicked my forehead, hard.

“We’ll be fine,” she assured me, a grin blooming on her face. “We’re tough. You just work on finishing a mission out of the village without passing out, okay?”

My cheeks went hot and I tugged up my scarf, using all of the maturity I possessed not to stomp as I headed up the stairs.

“Thank you for your concern, Uchiha-san!” Lee called up after me. He sounded a bit choked up, but that wasn’t all that strange, for him. “I wish you the same!”

“Tenten isn’t wrong,” Neji mused. “Worry about yourself, first, not those with far more experience.”

“Neji!” Tenten hissed. Their voices grew fainter as they continued down and I kept climbing up. When I finally raised my head, I found Sakura looking at me with the now-familiar baby-duckling look.

“No a word,” I warned her sternly, as we finally reached the right floor.

Sakura mimed zipping and then locking her lips, eyes still sparkling. The grand doors for the Missions Department were open, so we went right in to see—as I was now expecting—Iruka and the Hokage, who were in the middle of processing our completed mission scroll, and the remaining half of our team.

Naruto took one look at us and groaned, loudly. “Damn, we missed something really cute, didn’t we?”

“I’ve promised not to say,” Sakura said, smugly demure.

“We’ll get it out of them later,” Kakashi assured him, a hand on his shoulder.

The Hokage coughed once, and we all fell into line, giving him our full attention.

“Well done, Team Seven,” he began. “Noya-san seems to be pleased with your work. The proper payment will be transferred to your accounts by the end of the day.” He puffed at his pipe. “Now, I believe Naruto mentioned you were interested in pursuing a C-Rank mission next?”
“Emphatically,” Iruka agreed, his tone drier than the desert.

“Excellent timing,” the Hokage commented, before glancing shrewdly at my teammate. “Though the delivery could use some… restraint, next time.” Naruto rubbed the back of his head, sheepish, which seemed to appease the old man. “As I was saying, however, we recently finished vetting another specific request for your team, Tsukimi-chan.”

“I… see,” I said, wracking my brain for any more filler characters that ‘I’ might have ties with. Naruto perked up beside me. “What are the parameters?”

“Well,” said the Hokage, pulling his pipe away from his mouth. “The client this time is a religious sect with historic ties to your family—an Uchiha woman founded it, several centuries ago. Every decade or so, they request an Uchiha woman come and perform a ceremony with their priestesses at the main shrine, over in the city of Susuki.”

“A religious sect,” I echoed, to surprised to be properly incredulous.

The Hokage coughed, this time the tiniest bit sheepish. “Yes. Their locations of worship are referred to… ah, Temples of Tsukimi.”

“Temples of what.”

“Tsukimi-hime,” Naruto said slowly. “Are you… named after a cult?”

“The characters are different,” the Hokage explained, before we could fall into that misunderstanding. My brain throbbed hard for a moment, but once the pain of having two lifetimes of literary experience in vastly different languages cleared, I could make sense of that comment. ‘My’ name, Tsukimi, used characters that carried the meaning of “moon” and “sea,” while a more common version of ‘Tsukimi’ carried the meaning of—

“…moon viewing?” I murmured, wrinkling my brows. I thought about what the Uchiha clan had kept under a shrine in their own village, and a knot of vague, slow-building worry formed in my gut.

“Exactly,” the Hokage agreed, sending me a pleased smile. “While historically this has been a D-Rank mission, given current circumstances, I think an upgrade isn’t out of the question.”

Well, that made sense, I thought crudely. It wasn’t as though there was a surplus of Uchiha women these days. I hadn’t gotten into the sequel all that much, but maybe it was a plot point for Sarada that I wasn’t remembering. Either way, it put me on edge—or rather, after that little, world-shaking conversation with Team Gai, I was already on edge. If I stayed in the village waiting for them to return, one way or another, I would go crazy with worry and guilt.

I might, anyways, but I should at least accomplish something while I was at it.

“What do you think?” I asked, looking over at my team. Susuki City was fairly prosperous, and not far from the capital of the Land of Fire, so it would be much less of a journey than the Wave Mission. “I don’t mind, but…” It felt wrong, having them trail along whenever I was specifically singled out.

“Let’s do it!” Naruto clenched his fist. “Even if it’s for you specifically, Kasha always says how you’re totally off the market, so—”

“We’ll accept, Hokage-sama,” Sakura said, cutting Naruto off before we had to explain his Summon Theory of C-Ranks to our military commander. “Is there a deadline?”
“They asked that you come as soon as possible, should you accept,” the Hokage said, looking at the scroll again. “The ceremony itself is scheduled for the fifteenth of this month, but they still need to instruct you on your role beforehand, and would like you to sit in on at least one normal religious service before and after the ceremony, as tradition dictates you need to be a nominal member of the congregation to participate. They are willing to pay for your time, of course.”

Today was April 4th, a Friday, and Susuki City was about a two-day travel on foot. If we left now, that would give us a bit over than a week in the city, maybe more depending on how frequently ‘normal religious services’ were carried out. At a C-Rank salary, that was... not a bad way to make some good money, fast. I felt some of my apprehension fade. If this was a crazy cult, I didn’t think it would have gone unmentioned in the original story, even if the only Uchiha left were all men. Furthermore, if it were a crazy cult, it wouldn’t have been left to prosper so close to the country’s central government, I was pretty sure.

“I guess we should all head home and pack, then,” Kakashi said, accepting the mission scroll after the Hokage stamped on his seal. “Meet back up at the gates in about an hour, alright kids?”

“Yes,” we all chorused, and then bowed to the Hokage and Iruka in turn.

“They’re so respectful to you two,” we heard Kakashi complain as we filed out.

And all the way to Susuki, things were peaceful. It was hard to feel completely at ease when I knew that soon Team Gai would be dealing with the Demon Brothers, with Gato, with Zabuza, but I reminded myself time and time again that they all really were more experienced than Naruto, Sakura, and me, and that Haku’s needles-and-mirror nightmare attack would probably be useless against a Gentle Fist user. They would be fine.

They would be fine.

We made good time, my internal struggle notwithstanding, and ended up arriving at Susuki late Sunday afternoon. The city itself was ringed by sloping hills and a few plains filled with the long, swaying grasses of its namesake, with the low outer walls and the storied buildings rising over it on the horizon. It was very obviously not a miliatary village; its main strength was in commerce and serving as a stopover for diplomats or young nobles out for a day-trip away from their capital estates.

When we entered the city properly, I was surprised to find a rustic trolley system running through the streets.

“What’s that?” Naruto gaped, readjusting his mission pack.

“It’s called a cablecar,” Sakura told him, her eyes glimmering with obvious fascination. “Basically, a half-way point between a train and a carriage. I heard they installed it here a while ago as a trial run, to see if it would be worth building it into the capital.”

“…Are we there yet?” I heard from my own mission pack mumble sleepily. I unslung it from my shoulder and unbuttoned the flap. Kasha hissed at the sudden burst of sunlight and curled up defensively, but I plucked him out before rescuing my pack. “Tsukki, you’re so mean,” he complained, nestled in the crook of my arm.

“Yes,” I said, with a patience I did not feel. “We are. Kakashi-sensei, where is the shrine?”
“Hm?” Kakashi glanced up from the map he had in his hands, head tilted in apparent confusion. “I’m sorry, which shrine?"

I narrowed my eyes. “Sensei…” I trailed off warningly.

“This is a pretty big city, my cute student,” Kakashi wagged a finger at me chidingly. “You’ll need to be more specific than that.”

“Where is the Temple?” I grit out.

“You mean the Fire Temple?” Naruto piped up, because apparently he had a death wish. “Tsukimihime, no, that’s like five days back the way we came.”

I set my jaw.

“Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, don’t be pests!” Sakura scolded. “She doesn’t have to say it if she doesn’t want to.” I glanced at her, and found her watching with barely-veiled anticipation. I sighed, my shoulders slumping, and took off my pack, handing it to Naruto, who took it uncertainly. I handed Kasha to Sakura, both of them blinking at me in confusion. I stood with my back to the street, looked Kakashi dead in the eye, and pulled a hair tie out of my pocket.

“…now, that’s just cheating,” he pouted.

I ignored him, still not breaking my stare as I gathered up my hair with both hands, making a grand production of arranging a proper ponytail. The point of this entire endeavor, of course, was that it got all of my hair off of my back—and, more importantly, displayed the blatantly white and red uchiwa I had reluctantly but eventually paid to have embroidered on my camisoles. It had been an unseasonably warm day, so my cardigan had been serving as Kasha’s bedding for the last half hour.

One, I started counting in my head. Two, three, four, five, si—

“Excuse me!” A woman called out from behind me. “Excuse me, miss?” I turned, letting my hair fall down with a small flounce, to look at a portly looking woman in a rough brown apron. Probably an employee from the flower shop on the corner, I surmised, before she started talking again. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help but notice just now, but are you perhaps the young lady from the Uchiha clan.

“I am, yes,” I nodded and casually let my hand rest on the forehead protector I was using as a belt. “I take it I’m expected?”

“Oh, yes, the Mother Superior is going to be over the moon—oh!” She chuckled faintly to herself. “Over the moon,’ I’ll have to tell her that one.” She coughed, composing herself with a small blush when she remembered herself. “Ah, yes. She spoke about you to the congregation a little while back, about what might or might not happen, depending on whether you could make it for the Renewal Ceremony.”

“I take it that means I could trouble you for directions, then?” I asked, smiling faintly at her enthusiasm.

“Oh, absolutely, I never miss a service,” the woman assured me. “Just follow this street until the first main intersection, go up six streets, take a left, keep going until you can’t, take the right when you hit the plaza with the fountain, and then just go straight until you see the stone steps. You can’t miss it. The current Mother Superior’s name is Suwabe Mameko. Oh, she’ll be so happy to see you, dear.”

“It’s always nice to be wanted,” I said mildly. “And you are?”
“Oh!” Her hand went to her cheek and she laughed again, flustered. “Silly me. I’m Kuroda Kokuri, Uchiha-san. I’m so pleased to meet another one of you.”

“Well, thank you very much for your help, Kuroda-san,” I said, refusing to fall into the awkward pit trap of trying to find out which of my dead relatives she once knew. “If all goes well, hopefully I’ll see you again later.”

“Of course. Welcome to Susuki, Uchiha-san!”

As the woman puttered back to her flowers, more and more heads seemed to turn to look at us. I wondered, all of a sudden, just how big ‘the congregation’ happened to be. Paying for a C-Rank wasn’t cheap, but I had thought that fundraising might have been the reason for the decade gaps between the requests. Maybe it was. Maybe the reason that woman knew the Uchiha crest on sight was because she just happened to work nearly the main entrance to the city. Maybe the Mother Superior had asked her followers to watch out for me. Maybe, maybe, maybe. If that wasn’t true, though…

No. I shelved that thought before it could form, and took back my backpack and my cat. “Well,” I said briskly. “You heard the woman.” And she sounded like every city-native I had ever met in my life, right up to the ‘you can’t miss it’ tacked on at the end. “Let’s get going.”

“Fine, fine,” Kakashi sighed, stowing his map away. “Cheater.”

“It’s not cheating to use a natural trait to your advantage,” I dismissed his claim entirely, rubbing under a now much more alert Kasha’s chin idly, starting to head off towards that intersection.

“I don’t know, that does kind of sound like something a cheater would say.” Naruto mumbled.

“Mm.” I tuned out his grumblings as we walked, instead enjoying the sight of a pretty, prosperous city. The architecture was entirely different, but every time a cablecar rattled by I couldn’t help but think of San Francisco, and the summer trip I took there with my family. When the homesickness tried to rear its ugly, futile head, I focused on the differences and stared at the buildings and parks instead.

As we drew closer to our destination, I noticed a symbol appearing every so often, carved into stone or painted into larger designs. It was some sort of six-pointed sun or maybe a flower, with a circle in the center and three teardrop shapes just below. And I was still garnering excited stares in return, and whispers, every time somebody noticed the Leaf symbol our group was sporting. Maybe it was the city’s symbol, but my faith in maybes was dwindling further with every step.

When we found the stone steps, just as directed, and climbed them to find a grand temple, dead in the center of the city, that faith entirely disappeared. There was a young woman sweeping between the open gates there, clad in a black dress with a richly embroidered purple sash looped over one shoulder, and a large, heavy medallion hanging from her neck. I couldn’t be sure just whether or not it was gold or some other metal now, because it was fashioned into the same symbol. A greenish gem was inset in the golden, six-pointed star, with three red gems dangling from it.

Like blood dripping from some strange, triangle-encircled pupil.

Fuck.

“You all must be the Konoha team,” the woman greeted us, bowing gracefully. “My name is Chisato, one of the priestesses here. And you must be…” Her eyes landed on me, and a smile bloomed across her face. “Our Uchiha maiden.”
“I am,” I agreed, outwardly numb as I tried to calm down. This sect was hundreds of years old. The Hokage had said so himself. And it had been founded by an Uchiha woman. Statistically, it wasn’t that strange for an Uchiha with a Mangekyo Sharingan to be able drum up a fanatical following.

“Well then,” Chisato said, a mischievous glint coming to her eye. I bit back a sigh when I realized what was coming, but it calmed me down, finally. “Let me be the first to formally welcome you to the first and largest Temple of Tsukimi,” she paused for effect. “Tsukimi-sama.”

“There it is!” Naruto whooped, and high-fived Kakashi over my head.

I gave in, and sighed. “Something tells me I haven’t heard the last of that by a long shot.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks! This is my first update to this story in 2017, so belated Happy New Years (both calendar and Lunar) to all of you. Thanks for sticking with me this long, and extra thanks for 1600 kudos!
In which Tsukimi is a cause for concern

Chapter Summary

In this one, you get what I know you've all been secretly longing for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

‘Keeps others at a physical and emotional distance,’ the psychological evaluation had read. ‘Relies heavily on rules and regulations in her everyday life. Respectful to direct superiors, rigidly polite to all others.’

“It’s an honor to have you here,” Suwabe Mameko said, bowing with a faint, warm smile.

She was a woman closer to fifty than forty, with the complexion of a Lightning native and dressed in a loose, wide-sleeved black dress similar to the shrine maiden that had initially welcomed his team. Her purple sash was laden down with even more elaborate embroidery and there were several more pieces of what he supposed was religious paraphernalia in her braided hair and draped around her neck. It was bronze jewelry in a flower or six-pointed star shape often set with what, to Kakashi’s limited geological expertise, seemed to be some sort of fluorite.

“It’s an honor to be here,” Tsukimi said, bowing back. Her legs were folded primly beneath her, and her expression was every bit as faint and warm.

The psychological evaluation, Kakashi had found, was either completely out of date or had been filed by somebody completely inept. Given that the instructor who had filed the most recent one happened to be Mizuki, a recent, flagrant traitor to the village, he was willing to bet it was both.

If he were feeling generous, he might go so far as to accede that Tsukimi had and did keep most people at a distance; as of late she had simply made some notable exceptions to her normal standards. Every ninja had some sort of squad, no matter the rank. It made sense that a smart girl like Tsukimi would save her energy and emotional investment for a long-term assignment, as she said.

It made sense, but Kakashi highly doubted she was actually that analytical about the decision.

Uchiha Tsukimi, he had found in very short order, was a creature of passion. Either she did not place nearly as much stock in regulation as reported or—again, if he was inclined to be fair—she had never had something worth breaking the rules for before. Truth be told, for years he hadn’t given much thought at all to the girl, beyond the fact that as the only other Sharingan user left in the village he would be forced to have her underfoot at some point. If he thought of her in any fashion, it was generally in the context of Itachi, his most infamous, wayward kouhai.

“It’s been quite some time since we played host to an Uchiha maiden,” Suwabe continued, her eyes crinkling. “We have a customary room prepared for you, and several guest rooms for your team. If there’s anything we can offer you while you’re here, please let us know.”

“I’m sure we won’t need to,” Tsukimi dipped her head again. “I… hadn’t heard much about you, before recently, but according to the Hokage, your sect has decades of experience working out
logistics like this.”

A somber silence briefly settled, the way it always did when Tsukimi referenced her greatest trauma in casual conversation. Kakashi initially hadn’t expected that sort of cavalier attitude, but he of all people knew how people could use a blasé front to shield deep wounds.

The illuminating home-visit with the Hokage had jolted him slightly, but she was far from the only orphan Rookie of the Year he had come across who was desperate to stay ahead of the curve. The test, however, had tossed his vague preconceptions straight out of the window.

The Uchiha clan, as a whole, had been insular; he remembered that much clear enough. And Tsukimi had showcased just how desperately an Uchiha would fight for the sake of those within their cloistered little social circles from the very start. It reminded him jarringly of Obito. He was self-aware enough to know his heart must have skipped a beat when she traded places with Naruto so thoughtlessly, that first spar.

The C-Rank later on had only cemented his suspicions.

Tsukimi was a capable, cool, collected young kunoichi—on the surface. Once you got to know her, it quickly became apparent that she was also cripplinglonely, and likely had some degree of generalized anxiety. On top of that, she lived in the deserted ruins of her own ancestral home.

Honestly, Kakashi still counted it as a blessing that she wasn’t still living in the Main House.

He was also hopelessly ill-suited to coaxing a socially awkward, introverted orphan out of their shell. Luckily, he had some first-hand experience of being a socially awkward, introverted orphan getting coaxed out of his shell. He was no Minato-sensei, not by a long shot, but Kakashi had pulled together some rough methods based on his teacher’s efforts. And help from Gai, who already had at least a year of preteen-girl supervision under his metaphorical belt.

The Hokage had made it clear that he couldn’t just move in and take custody of her, the way Minato-sensei had for him, so he had compromised and started breaking in for breakfast after she had tentatively accepted Gai and his team into her tiny little sphere of sociability. He knew firsthand how thoughtlessly depressing eating alone day in and day out could be and had even tugged down his mask for the visits, as an added gesture of goodwill.

She might not have consciously recognized the move for what it was, but she had responded well to his presence all the same. Gai had further encouraged him to be more expressive in his ‘affections’ towards his students, so he had taken to snapping photos of important moments.

He remembered his father doing that, before…

Well. Before.

He now had a photo album back home with a few dozen pages of memories that Gai had taken to thumbing through in the evenings after dinner. Kakashi might not have the propensity for random, enthusiastic embraces the other man did, but he felt a flicker of pride—deep, deep down—that none of his students seemed to doubt that he cared about them and their well-being. He was habitually aloof, yes, and they were all deceptively needy, abrasive, clingy brats.

But against all odds, they were growing into a tightly knit unit. Furthermore, the Pack had taken to the kids just fine, and were honestly better at looking after them and their many, many needs than Kakashi would have been by himself.

“Tsukki was pretty excited to come!” Kasha piped up, purring protectively against his summoner’s
“Kasha,” Tsukimi’s tone was chastising, but there was no mistaking the grateful ear-rub the kitten had earned himself. With that ice-breaker so cutely delivered, she and Suwabe were able to slip back into pleasantries and then began hashing out her preparation schedule for the ceremony.

The first summoning contract, Kakashi reflected as he watched the kitten nestle down, hadn’t been terribly surprising. The Uchiha clan had boasted several summoners before the Massacre, though he couldn’t remember any cat contractors specifically in recent years. The Sharingan had been less welcome, but also not unexpected—nor was the passionate outburst that revelation that Tsukimi seemed to take more after the Obito-type of Uchiha than the Itachi-type, despite being hailed as a prodigy. As he walked her home after she returned, he had gotten a sudden, savage glimpse of just how much she cared about himself and her teammates.

“Wait, you want Tsukimi-chan to do a service tonight?” Sakura interrupted, cocking her head to the side in confusion.

“Just to introduce her to the congregation,” Suwabe clarified. “More like filling in for an altar girl as we ease her into the rites and prepare for the oncoming festival. We’ll have a mass tonight to celebrate your arrival as well, as doubtlessly word has spread.”

Sakura made a faint noise of comprehension, and fell silent once more.

The second contract had been a gut-punch. It wasn’t every day those fell into the lap of the average fresh-from-the-Academy genin in peacetime, after all, a fact Naruto still seemed to be struggling with. That was fine; the boy’s steadfast belief that he too would come away from one of these missions with his own helped soothe Kakashi’s knee-jerk guilt for not deliberately helping him hunt one down. Jiraiya-sama, for all his faults, would probably beat Kakashi across the village and back if Minato-sensei’s son didn’t end up with the Toads in the long run.

“That sounds fine,” Tsukimi nodded. “Though, I should probably take a bath sometime before then. We’ve been traveling all day.”

“One of our initiates here at the temple will show you around and get you outfitted in the proper raiments,” Suwabe assured her, gracefully raising one slender, dark-skinned wrist. A girl, no older than his students, was kneeling by the doorway. She was dressed in a dark shift as well, but without any jewelry, sashes, or embroidery—no embellishments at all, except for a purple ribbon tied off at the top of her short, dark bob. “This is Kikyo.”

“Kikyo,” Tsukimi said slowly, drawing the syllables out strangely. If she were anyone else, she might look like she was staring, with such a prolonged, unfathomable look. She seemed to shake it off easy enough, and bowed again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Uchiha Tsukimi.”

“Oh wow,” Kikyo beamed, bowing back. “What an honor! Please, follow me. I’ll make sure you and your teammates are taken care of, Tsukimi-sama!”

“Oh of course,” Tsukimi said again, bowing deeply to Suwabe. “Then, I’ll see you this evening?”

“Of course,” Suwabe assured her. “And, please; just once more, let me say how grateful we are that you were able to meet with us. I’m afraid the sect might not have survived without your generosity.”

“…mm,” Tsukimi replied ambiguously, standing up. No pressure, he imagined she might say, if they weren’t in mixed company. “I’ll do my best.”

“This way,” Kikyo ushered them, out of the private chamber and back into the open halls. “Sorry if
the Mother Superior got a little heavy—it’s just, our sect probably would crumble if we couldn’t hold on to our central tradition.”

“It’s fine,” Tsukimi assured her.

“It’s kind of weird,” Naruto said, brash as ever.

“Naruto!” Sakura hissed, elbowing him sharply in the side.

“It’s religion,” was Tsukimi’s firm rejoinder. She seemed a bit on edge, if the way she was restlessly stroking her cat was any indication. “Being the central leader of a faith isn’t exactly a career for flighty people.”

“What exactly is your religion about?” Sakura asked, forcing the conversation toward what she probably thought was a safer direction. “I didn’t have time to look for any books about it before we left.”

“Well,” Kikyo hummed, tapping her lip as they walked. “I guess, first and foremost, we pride ourselves on learning from the parable of the Rabbit Goddess.”

From the corner of his eye, Kakashi saw Tsukimi inhale deeply, several times in a row. At length, she spoke up. “How so?”

“We take heed from her shortcomings and downfall,” Kikyo was happy to explain, her words sliding towards the rote elegance of somebody reciting from memory. “Instead of fearing our death and scrambling away from it, we remember our mortality, treasure our current lives, and strengthen our love for those who go on ahead of us, so that their memories can enrich our lives, instead of poisoning us with the very fear we normally seek to reject.”

“…Oh.” Tsukimi blinked. “That… actually sounds like a very nice philosophy.” She seemed to mull that thought over for a moment. “…And you’re sure one of my ancestors founded it?”

“Yes,” Tsukimi agreed, her expression inscrutably thoughtful. “I’m sure she had all sorts of power, to pull all that off.”

“So, is that why you’re called the Temple of Tsukimi?” Naruto wanted to know, arms hooked behind his head. “Cause of that Rabbit lady being taken off to the moon or whatever after the Sage kicked her butt?”

“Pretty much,” Kikyo agreed. “Well… other reasons too, but that’s mostly congregation stuff. The Mother Superior could explain it better, if you wanna ask her later. Ah, here we are.” The girl gestured to the sliding doors behind her with a flourish. “This is where your teammates will be staying. Your chambers are a little bit further down, Tsukimi-sama.”

“Thank you,” Tsukimi dipped her head. “Sensei, if it’s all right with you, I’ll go and unpack. And…” She paused, her expression still blank. “And get ready for mass, if Kikyo-san doesn’t mind helping me.”
“Not at all!” Kikyo nodded brightly. “It would be an honor, truly!”

Tsukimi made a noise of faint acknowledgement, and followed the chipper shrine maiden down the hall. Kakashi watched them go, seeing Kasha butt his face against his summoner’s as he murmured some comment or another into her ear. Whatever it was, it made her shoulders twitch in a stifled laugh, so he supposed she was in good hands—and paws—for the time being. He turned back to the doors, which his other, more rambunctious pupils had already shoved open, and saw them flopped down across the thick, richly embroidered futons that the shrine had prepared for them.

“So much better than pulling weeds,” Naruto groaned happily, rubbing his cheek against a thick pillow. “Feasts, cable-cars, festivals… man, Tsukimi-hime nabs us the best C-Ranks, ’ttebayo.”

“Yeah,” Sakura sighed, luxuriating in the bedding just as much before her brow suddenly creased. “…She’s always so skittish, though. After you guys went ahead to the Hokage, she deliberately hung back to ask the senpai to be careful on their mission. Tsukimi-chan is always so worried. I hope she gets the chance to properly relax, this time.”

Naruto hooked his hands behind his neck and rolled onto his back, frowning. “…Yeah. But, it kind of makes sense, too. I mean… there was that whole thing with Nekomata. I think that’s still bugging her.”

Kakashi slid the door shut behind him with a deliberately audible click, and they fell silent. Normally his other two miscreants waited until the third was multiple blocks away before attempting to dissect her physical and emotional states of wellness, not down the hall. They eyed him speculatively, perhaps weighing the pros and cons for asking him his own opinion on the matter. The cons, it seemed, won out today; they instead reluctantly sat up and started to unpack their luggage. He flipped open his book and settled down on his own futon, absolutely not sulking over the clumsy brush-off of his own students.

“Wait, does she have to wear one of those dresses?” Naruto suddenly asked.

“Duh.” Sakura shot him a withering look. “She’s here for ceremonial reasons. There’s probably some old costume she has to wear for the festival too.” After a moment of thought, both their heads snapped towards him.

“…Yes?” He kept his nose tucked sully between the pages, as if he couldn’t even tell they were trying to bore holes through the side of his head.

“You brought the camera, right?”

His right palm itched against the storage seal embroidered on his right glove.

“No,” he lied blithely. “Why on earth would I pack a camera for a mission?”

“Liar!” They snapped at him.

“Words hurt, children,” he chided them, affecting a wounded look and pressing his book over his heart. Warmth suffused through his chest at the heat and venom in the resultant glares.

“You’re lucky we’re on hallowed grounds, old man,” Naruto grumbled, immediately banishing that warmth entirely.

“Rude,” he informed the boy, scowling beneath his mask.

He scowled at her too. When he had first been given Team 7’s dossier, he had gotten so drunk that the singular moment he still recalled from that night had been slurring into Gai’s shoulder that the squad had been assembled from a host of malicious ghouls summoned up to solely make him pay for his many, various, and in some cases legendary sins. His initial reasoning was wrong, but he firmly believed those to be among the most true words to ever pass his lips, no matter how soaked in alcohol they might have been at the time.

Wicked little monsters, the lot of them.

His reading time was most inconsiderately postponed as they dragged him into unpacking his own supplies and chattering about sight-seeing pamphlets Sakura had somehow pocketed on the way to the temple. He made an idle mental note of a souvenir shop Naruto mentioned seeing, since Gai probably wanted another tiny novelty snow globe to add to the collection steadily taking over their cabinet space. In a way, Kakashi was lucky that Jiraiya published new books at the speed of a lobotomized slug in a salt mine, because their bookshelves were similarly decorated.

“We’re coming in,” Tsukimi announced softly with brief knock a short while later, when daylight was beginning to fade.

“And here I was worried you’d gone and deserted us,” Kakashi jibed.

Naruto and Sakura did not follow up or refute the banter, too busy staring over his shoulder. Kakashi braced himself, and turned.

Through sheer force of will alone, the camera stayed unsummoned.

Tsukimi was, as they had supposed, dressed in one of the black dresses the other shrine maidens sported. Hers had neat white embroidery around the edges, while golden thread was woven into the deep purple sash knotted over her shoulder, most notably featuring a large crescent moon and more stars. There were strings of six-pointed fluorite star charms looped from her belt and around her neck and ankles. An embroidered, bronze-set headdress dangled jeweled charms similar to Suwabe’s around her cheeks and temples. And her hair itself…

He narrowed his eye contemplative. There was the faintest, sheepish, defiant cast to her features but no discernible cause, aside from the unprecedented change in style. It was an arrangement a little similar to what Gai’s girl usually trussed hers up in, with her hair divided, bound up into buns, and then—strangely—the rest was left to pool downing two tails that swayed behind her with each movement.

“Tsukimi-chan!” Sakura’s voice finally erupted from her in a soft wail behind him. “You look so cute!”

“She’s jangly too,” Kasha reported, circling around her ankles like a shark.

A faint blush rose in Tsukimi’s cheeks, and she busied herself with nudging Kasha away from batting at her new anklets, which he was evidently enraptured with. “Thank you. Kiki-chan was a great help.”

“Kiki-chan?” Naruto gaped.

“Tsukimi-sama guessed my nickname!” Kikyo informed them, smiling brightly. “Actually, everybody around here calls me that, besides the Mother Superior.”

“Is that so,” Kakashi hummed, staring down his shifty-little Uchiha. She stubbornly kept on shifting her gaze away, despite her steadily deepening flush. “Well, our Tsukimi-chan is incredibly insightful,
“It’s true.”

“Kiki- chan?” Naruto said to himself again, *sotto voce* with a budding undercurrent of affront.

“Sorry we took so long,” Kikyo apologized after a concerned look at the pouting blond. “We had a few options for ceremonial jewelry, and we had to see which of Masuyo-hime’s robes Tsukimi-sama would be wearing for the festival. She’s, um... she’s the youngest Uchiha maiden we’ve ever hosted.” Kikyo coughed lightly, as Tsukimi’s expression soured, ever so marginally. “…Luckily, Masuyo-hime bequeathed her entire wardrobe to us upon her death, as well as the clothes of her daughters during their childhood at court, before they chose to join the main forces of the clan.”

“Yes,” Tsukimi said, plucking her cat up by the scruff of his neck as he made another playful swipe at the charms dangling from her ankle. “Lucky. Kiki-chan, aren’t you forgetting something…?”

“Oh!” The shrine maiden knocked a fist on her head, laughing. “Silly me. We also came to let you know that dinner is ready. Please, follow me.”

Dinner was, perhaps, far more sumptuous than any religious group had a right to host. But it seemed that the illustrious Masuyo-hime was a woman who had enjoyed a certain amount of luxury in her life; as to be expected of a woman who enjoyed a long life at court as one of the precursor protector-vassals that would eventually inspire the Twelve Guardian Ninja. With that in mind, Kakashi snuck a picture of the spread as deftly as he snuck his bites, in order to better taunt Asuma upon his return. The former Guardian had once mentioned how the Fire Temple had made him go vegetarian for two whole years, a trial so daunting he still insisted on going out for barbecue on a weekly basis to make up for the ascetic menu.

He smiled as he gently set down his chopsticks. The thought of his fellow joining instructor’s face upon the eventual presentation of the gorgeous photograph warmed the cockles of his heart.

“...Darn it!” Sakura clicked her tongue under her breath, and Naruto glowered across the table at him, united in their ongoing frustration. His heart warmed even further.

“Are you not a fan of sweets, Tsukimi-sama?” Suwabe asked from the head of the table.

Tsukimi looked up from the dango platter she had been studying, and some of the warmth in his chest quickly leached away.

Kakashi associated two people with that particular treat above all others, and he prayed that his student’s anxiety wasn’t about to flare up. He still wasn’t sure how he might tackle a panic attack in an individual who wasn’t a strictly trained ANBU operative.

“Nothing like that. I was just thinking that I should stick to something lighter, before mass. That’s all,” Tsukimi said instead, to his relief.

“Tsukimi-hime has a *huge* sweet-tooth,” Naruto divulged. Kakashi thought he might still be a little sore over how quickly Tsukimi had leapt to endearments and nicknames with their assigned guide. “She’s always got some sort of snack around.”

“You make me sound like a glutton,” Tsukimi protested faintly.

Kakashi had caught her with three servings of sakuramochi stuffed in her cheeks at once just last week at breakfast time, the day after a particularly rough training session with Gai’s team. She had stared him down like a particularly affronted chipmunk, then knocked back a mug of cocoa to wash it down without batting an eyelash.
“Tsukki, last week you—*mrphrm!*” Kasha, another witness, began to report the incident himself before his summoner clapped a hand over his mouth.

“We have some zarame senbei,” Suwabe offered, and a shrine maiden ferried over the appropriate plate. “They’re a specialty of a small shop run by Kikyo’s guardians, as it happens, and very popular.”

“Thank you,” Tsukimi dipped her head, and accepted one of the crackers. Kakashi swiped one as well, and found to his surprise that they had a taste similar to one of the types of senbei sold at the ancestral Uchiha senbei shop that Obito had always brought for Rin.

Tsukimi took a bite, and her expression turned faintly puzzled. It stayed there in various degrees even after the senbei was finished, even as the grand table was cleared and they were guided towards the wing of the temple dedicated to the gatherings.

“Something wrong?” Kakashi murmured, sidling up to her.

“It…” she paused, glancing at Kikyo, who was happily explaining some moment or another in the long and storied history of the Temples of Tsukimi. She lowered her voice even more. “It tasted wrong. I could make a better one.” She sounded surprised by the revelation.

Kakashi’s eyebrows lifted, before some dots connected. “….ah. That’s right, your father’s elder sister and her husband ran the shop in your district, didn’t they?” He wasn’t sure why, exactly, they had taught recipes to a five-year-old, but it wasn’t the strangest skill Tsukimi had displayed to date. “You’ll have to make some for us to back up that claim now, I hope you realize.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, effectively knocked back into her usual even keel. “Fine, fine. When we get back, then. If I feel like it. And you—”

“Pay for the ingredients,” Kakashi finished for her. “Yes, yes, we know.”

“What about ingredients?” Naruto broke in, eyes bright. “Are you making something for us, Tsukimi-hime?”

“No,” she shut him down blandly, and sped up to walk by the Mother Superior when he started to whine at her.

In the days and nights that followed, Kakashi and his team settled into a new routine. In the mornings and afternoons, they explored Susuki City and all its various attractions, from the cable cars to Kikyo’s aunt and uncle’s bakery, spanning museums and art galleries and exhibitions of antique tea vessels. And, by virtue of having the star of the upcoming festival in their retinue, they weren’t charged so much as a single ryo the entire time.

Tsukimi was a bit uncomfortable, but Kakashi walked away with a limited edition Lunar Eclipse-Style Renewal Festival miniature snow globe, with tiny six-pointed glitter fragments and a red glass bead dangling from the top, and absolutely zero guilt. Sakura chided him, but he knew for a fact she had a new glass hairpin. Naruto, in contrast, was hell-bent on trying out every food stall in the city during the duration of their stay. Kakashi was a bit surprised about that, if only because his most boisterous student wasn’t just focused on ramen. It was a bit endearing, seeing him check off listing by listing on his own collection of pamphlets. Kakashi wasn’t sure where he got them either.
Tsukimi split off from them around lunch time each day, in order to study for her part in the ceremony while they continued to play around to earn their part of the paycheck.

When the day waned and they returned to the temple, they enjoyed consistently lavish dinners with the priestesses, and then Tsukimi was shuffled off for mass.

Kikyo reported that Tsukimi’s presence drew larger than usual crowds, as usually most people simply attended the ceremony on the weekends. The mass itself seemed simple enough; Suwabe recited some scripture more or less in line with the philosophy Kikyo had described their first day in town, with a smattering of local community news and ongoing festival preparations. And then, apparently, the entire congregation took a communal nap. They called it ‘meditation,’ certainly, but Kakashi knew unconsciousness when he saw it.

Kakashi truly appreciated the honorable Uchiha Masuyo-hime more and more by the day.

Like all vacations, however, time slipped by with increasing speed, until the first and most holy day of the festival was upon them.

He lost sight of Tsukimi shortly after breakfast, and was entrusted with looking after Kasha as the entire temple—the entire city—boiled over with activity and preparation. Naruto and Sakura poked around in fascination, but by and large they were good kids and stayed out of the way. As evening approached, they finally regained partial custody of their diligent little Uchiha maiden.

“…holy shit, Tsukimi-hime.” Naruto breathed, his jaw dropping.

Kakashi concurred.

“Is that a good ‘holy shit’ or a bad one?” Tsukimi frowned faintly as two of the priestesses—the golden embroidery on their sashes denoting their high rank—applied careful, methodical strokes of various cosmetics. Her eyes were closed, obviously, because if they were open there would be no missing the fact that Sakura seemed on the brink of heart failure.

Kakashi kind of concurred with that sentiment too.

The Uchiha clan, as a rule, was a conglomerate of beauty. Whether it was deliberate breeding or good fortune, they often came with either chiseled, striking features or delicate loveliness. Neither of these traits was constrained to a specific gender, historically, but both surviving remnants of the clan were known for taking after the second archetype. Itachi, Kakashi remembered, had been an elfishly beautiful youth, and only his status as the heir of a bloodlimit clan kept him from being deployed for seduction missions in ANBU.

Tsukimi, resplendent in a richly embroidered crimson kimono, put him to shame.

Her hair was piled up and styled as if she was scheduled for an audience with the daimyo himself, decorated with a treasure-trove of golden combs and hairpins. Her pale skin practically glowed against the richness of the red fabric and the rouge meticulously applied to her lips. Heavy jeweled earrings dangled from her ears, trembling each time her head made the slightest of movements. Kakashi, all at once, now saw the dazzling specter of puberty’s grande finale—of a fully matured, fully blossomed Uchiha Tsukimi—loom ahead of him, and felt an unnameable fear sprout deep in the pit of his stomach.

“N-Nekobaa-san wasn’t… wasn’t kidding,” Sakura stammered, starry-eyed. “Tsukimi-chan… Tsukimi-chan, you’re going to be the kind of beauty that topples empires.”

“Stop it,” Tsukimi huffed. “Save the teasing for when I can actually see.”
“One more moment, Uchiha-sama,” the priestess on her left promised. “We’re almost done.” And after a few more pats, strokes, and minute shifting of hair ornaments, they withdrew, with gentle reminders of just how much time they had before Tsukimi needed to report to the ceremonial stage.

Tsukimi opened her eyes and looked in the round mirror the priestesses left for her.

“What the _fuck,_” she breathed, eyes wide enough to show the whites all around.

“Right?!” Naruto nodded repeatedly.

“What the _actual_ fuck,” Tsukimi said again, this time with a note of distress.

“Now, now,” Kakashi soothed her, holding back the urge to tousle her hair comfortingly. “There’s no time to get stage fright _now_ of all times.”

Gratifyingly, the shock seemed to be knocked loose thanks to his quick thinking, and she rolled her eyes.

“Please.” She scoffed. “I’ve gone through the steps so often I could do this dance in my _sleep._”

“You might have to,” Kakashi mused. “I don’t think nap time is on the schedule tonight.”

“Too bad,” Kasha murmured, caged snugly in Sakura’s arms to keep him and his eye-catching fur away from the pristine ceremonial kimono. “I like that part.”

“That’s because it’s past your bedtime,” Tsukimi shot back.

“No it’s not! I don’t even _have_ a bedtime anymore!”

“Uh, speaking about time, we’re almost out of it, ’ttebayo,” Naruto reminded them, glancing at the clock. “You better shake a leg, Tsukimi-hime.”

“Ah, you’re right.” Tsukimi glanced back in the mirror one last time and took a deep, steadying breath. Then she squared her shoulders and smoothly stepped forward, the very picture of poise and grace. Apparently part of her training had been devoted to learning how to navigate while wrapped in ridiculous amounts of fabric. Kakashi approved, as he watched her go, then shepherded his remaining brats out towards the proper festival area.

They had to make their way down the side of the hill the temple was situated on and circle around the back, where a few dozen vendors had already set up shop. Families and lovers, people young and old alike were packed into what appeared to be a massive central park designed for this very event, bordered with cherry blossom trees just a few weeks out of season. Blankets and benches were arranged in a specific area, and Kikyo came and found them in order to make sure they found their way to an area up front, reserved specifically for them.

They now had their first chance to see where the main even would soon take place: a low, flat area carved straight from the side of the hill, halfway up with ten large column-shaped objects—hanging bells, according to Kikyo—arranged in two semi-circles at either side of platform. There seemed to be carvings in the stone, but the limited light provided by the fluorite circles ringing the platform’s edge, patterned after the phases of the moon, was too dim to provide much detail.

After a short time, ten female figures, all dressed as Mother Superiors, filed out.

“These are the leaders of all the major Temples,” Kikyo whispered to them, as a hush quickly fell over the crowd. “They only gather like this for the Renewal Ceremony, every 108 lunar months.”
So that worked out to about once every eight years, according to the requests for Uchiha maidens that Konoha fulfilled in the past. Kakashi folded his arms and got comfortable; a glance at the sky showed a deep pinkness beginning to suffuse through the full moon hanging heavy above their heads.

It would start soon.

Indeed, not long after the thought crossed his mind, a steady, rapping drumbeat sounded out from somewhere nearby, and the Mother Superiors each struck a pose by a different bell, holding still as a small, resplendently refigure carefully made her way to center stage. The drum stilled, and went silent for a moment.

And another.

And another, the entire tableau frozen in place until the moon was half-stained by the eclipse. Then, all at once, a flurry of music—drums, flutes, at least one zither—flooded the park, and all eleven women burst into motion. Tsukimi stayed put in the center, a fan in hand as she gracefully turned and danced, but the priestesses themselves were a flurry of activity, making sweeping lunges, twirling across the stage in linking, crossing paths, and striking the large, heavy bells in perfect harmony. Something about the song and dance made his blood sing and his heart race, but he didn’t pay it too much mind until his eye—Obito’s eye—began to ache, ever so slightly.

Ice formed in the pit of his stomach, and he stared at the dance, mind racing.

Ten Mother Superiors.

Ten.

It took a moment after the other shoe finally dropped, to properly sketch out the dance in his head from a bird’s eye view. Once he did, however, that icy feeling spread to his heart and lungs. If he twisted the perspective a certain way, if he assigned each woman to a finger, then this wasn’t a dance. That last maneuver had been a translation of the Rat sign, followed by the Ox, followed by more and more that he didn’t pay attention to because he was already on his feet.

“Sensei!” Sakura hissed, mortified. “Sit down!”

Kakashi didn’t reply to her, grabbing his forehead protector and dragging it up as he stepped forward —

Too late, he realized, as the last bell toll faded, and all eleven figures went still once more. The moon was a deep, bloody crimson above them, shining down like some great and terrible goddess really was sleeping inside of it. With his Sharingan uncovered, he could see the exact moment when Tsukimi’s activated, churning more chakra through them than ever before. And then, without the chakra flow pausing at all, the small, delicate form of Uchiha Tsukimi tumbled down. From this distance, it looked like an artful kneel, at the apex of the ceremony.

It wasn’t.

Kakashi knew unconsciousness when he saw it.
Thanks for your patience, everybody! It's been about nine months, but here's the latest chapter. And some visuals to help you enjoy this story arc just that little extra bit more.
In which I have a close encounter of the fifth kind, kind of

Chapter Summary

In this one, Tsukimi gets approximately one answer and about a million new questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Looking back, there had been little signs. Little cautionary blips that I had been too busy to follow up on—or perhaps, too stubborn. ‘Don’t borrow trouble’ had been my motto in life for months now, and while it hadn’t kept me entirely free of trouble or put a dent in my worries, it had perhaps made me a tad too optimistic. Even in the wake of the brief, striking terror of being so close to the Land of Rice, even after Team Gai had found their way to the god damned Wave Mission, I had allowed myself to relax. Even after the lesson Kasha and Nekomata had literally beaten into me, I had let myself get so swept up in the ceremony preparations.

I put hours into perfecting the angle of my wrist, the arc of the folding fan, the ever-so-graceful shift and bend and incremental lunges of the dance. I wrapped myself in a veil of nostalgia, and allowed myself to put time and effort into what I believed to be a harmless duty. Maybe in a way I was even doing it as a way to atone for the life I had somehow usurped, for the same reason I stayed in the Uchiha District. Whatever the reason, the end result was the same: me, pretty as a picture, literally dancing my way into my current predicament.

Until the red, moonlight-painted artfully carved stone melted into dusk-stained, glassy water beneath my bare feet, I hadn’t even realized anything was amiss.

My chest ached, and my eyes burned and blurred with more than just the chakra throbbing through my temples.

I couldn’t breathe, beneath the shame and self-directed fury. I couldn’t breathe, and it didn’t matter.

This wasn’t even real, anyways.

“I would argue that is a matter of perspective, rather than fact,” a low, thoughtful voice interjected from behind me. I closed my eyes tightly—didn’t matter, it didn’t matter—and forced in a slow, painful breath to brace myself for whatever—whoever—whatever I might find next.

I opened my eyes, and turned.

The water beneath me didn’t so much as ripple, even as shock exploded through me.

“I am pleased we finally have the opportunity to speak,” said a man who was unmistakably Ōtsutsuki Indra, his arms crossed over his chest.

I stared.

“We shall have more opportunities, now that a proper contact has been established,” continued the man who was unmistakably Ōtsutsuki fucking Indra, nodding to himself. “But I felt it was best to waylay you now, before you were overwhelmed by what comes next.”
I stared.

“It is a luxury I have rarely had, given the blinded fools I generally end up shackled in,” he mused.

I finally managed to wheeze inquisitively.

“Come now,” he chided, a faint look of dissatisfaction spreading over his harsh, hauntingly gorgeous features. “You are entirely aware of the phenomenon in which chakra exists as a sentient, sapient being.”

I stared harder, eyes wide and heart thundering. Uchiha Tsukimi had no context for that comment. If he was… my chakra, if he was aware and alert in my body, then he knew I knew about the Kyuubi, but for the particulars—

“You know who I am,” I breathed out.

“Of course I do,” he said, trace amounts of dissatisfaction fading away. “Don’t be ridiculous, child. I know everything you know, and countless things you do not.”

“You know who I am,” I repeated, an unstable, bright feeling starting to bubble in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t need to blink here, really, so I didn’t. I stared directly at him, him and his six-pointed Mangekyo eyes. “…Oh my God, was Masuyo-hime one of your—” I faltered, briefly, because… because reincarnation didn’t quite fit. I sure as hell wasn’t the literal second coming of Uchiha Madara, after all.

“Yes,” he agreed, a slight uptick at the corner of his mouth. “She was. I existed within her from the cradle to the grave five hundred years ago.” He smirked, the blue warpaint around his eyes giving the expression an unnecessarily sinister cast. “Give or take a decade, of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed weakly. I heaved a heavy sigh and shook my head, the dangling ornaments in my hair swaying and jingling with the motion. “I… I have so many questions. I don’t even know where to…” I stopped.

I knew exactly where to begin. I didn’t want to, but it was something not even I could run away from, with the best shot at answers I could get staring me in the face ever so patiently.

“What happened,” I asked in slow, fumbling tones, “to Uchiha Tsukimi?”

Indra looked at me for a long moment. “Nothing that can be undone now,” he said at length.

It hit me like a punch to the gut. “What,” I gasped out, my blood icing over in my veins, “what, what does that mean, ‘can’t be undone,’ why not, why—” I shook my head again, this time wild, the charms and jeweled beads a jumbled cacophony in its wake. “Why me?”

“You don’t want to know,” he said.

“I—”

“You didn’t want to know,” he amended before I could properly protest. I wanted to scream, either at him or in general. I was too numb to decide which, just then. “We made a deal, you and I, and I will not be the one to break it. The price of forfeiture is not something I would risk.”

I slowly sank to my knees, reeling. I was furious. I was terrified. I was indignant.

I was relieved, God damn me for it.
I had lived in terror of the unknown truth of my situation. Of the reasoning, of the twist of fate that landed me stranded in somebody else’s skin and home and life, terrified of finding out the reason why. I now knew this situation was one I had somehow agreed to, even if I didn’t recall it, and my prior consent to this state of affairs flipped the last half a year on its ear. The reflection of the dusk-swathed sky in the water swam before my eyes as I felt myself hyperventilating once again, in this illusory world.

The warm, calloused hand of a ghost settled on the nape of my neck, and grounded me.

“Breathe,” Indra ordered me, with kindness that seemed almost criminal, in this moment.

I breathed.

“Even though it isn’t real,” I apparently mumbled out loud, because he then flicked me on the shell of my ear, hard. “Ow!”

“That pain ‘isn’t real’ if I recall correctly,” he told me dryly, but he didn’t remove his hand or rise from where he had knelt beside me.

“One could argue that’s a matter of perspective, rather than fact,” I muttered, almost managing snideness.

“One certainly could,” he agreed, and smiled. It was a faint, gentle thing. “Let us… table the matter of how you came to be here, for the time being. We’ll have time yet to discuss the matter, but you are currently expected elsewhere.”

“I’m what?” I stared at him, incredulous. “I’m sorry, how many people are stuck in my brain or soul or whatever right now?”

“Is that where you think we are?”

“…Well, I did until you said it like that.”

Indra stood in one fluid motion and helped me to my feet. I had no reflection or apparent weight according to the water, but my kimono was still pristine, probably because the real-world equivalent had been that way when I was first drawn in to… wherever we were, at the end of—

“The Renewal Ceremony,” I said slowly. A penny finally, finally dropped. “…What exactly was I renewing?”

“Masuyo’s magnum opus,” Indra told me.

“You know Latin?” I gaped, momentarily side-tracked.

He frowned at me. “I know exactly as much Latin as you do,” he told me. “But as I was saying, this is Masuyo’s masterpiece, and the true face of the faith kept by the Temples of Tsukimi. This—possibly—illusory world is known to its denizens as the Land of Dusk, Ōmagatoki.”

A million different thoughts rushed through my head, many circling around his now hauntingly cryptic words earlier—I know everything you know, and countless things you do not—before I desperately latched on to the barebones facts of the matter and struggled to make sense of it on my own. It was my only defense against eventually being thrown for yet another loop.

Fact: this was a gigantic, moon-centered genjutsu, or was at least supported by one.
Fact: it focused some of its core tenants on the life and fall of Ōtsutsuki Kaguya.

Fact: it had been founded by Uchiha Masuyo, a… carrier of Indra, five hundred years ago. Four hundred years before Madara even existed, and five hundred after Kaguya was locked away. Something about that timeline was the crucial puzzle piece I was missing. There had to be a line between point A and Point C that also intersected Point B, logically speaking, but what—

Ōmagatoki.

Comprehension slammed into me, with almost painful clarity.

The Land of Dusk, Ōmagatoki.

“It’s a fucking Zetsu plot,” I said, almost affronted by my conclusion.

Indra nodded, approvingly. “Clever girl.”

“An old one!” I continued, raising my hands in an angry swiping gesture I couldn’t put a purpose to. “A… a failed one!” Perhaps the precursor to the Moon’s Eye Plan, even. Very probably the precursor to it, actually. …It made the worst kind of sense. Madara wasn’t the only—the only carrier of Indra’s chakra to date. It had been hundreds of years since the sons of the Sage of Six Paths died, and Zetsu had been alive for all of them, always ready to connive its way back to its monster of a mother. It was almost comforting, knowing that the would-be Ninja Armageddon had been the culmination of a millennium of trial-and-error.

“I believe you shall find that Masuyo is only malleable when it suits her,” was Indra’s dry input on the matter, stripping me of any modicum of comfort yet again.

“…Don’t you mean was?”

“I told you,” he said slowly, a glint of what I thought might be amusement flitting through his eyes. “You are currently expected elsewhere.”

I inhaled sharply through my nose.

“Why?” I asked yet again, with great and terrible feeling.

Perhaps he took pity on me, because his tone was almost gentle. “Because you haven’t finished the Renewal Ceremony, yet.” There was an unspoken of course drifting in the air at the end of that sentence. He took me by the shoulder and turned me away from the endless vista of water and twilight. Pointing to a shoreline lined with thick, dark trees, he said, “I recall that the first settlement is Masuyo’s, but the Uchiha maidens in the years that followed shaped the resultant topography.”

I stared at him flatly.

“Go ask them your cult questions, child.” He actually shooed me off, frowning. “We shall speak again at another time.”

I wanted to protest, but he appeared to have had enough and was rapidly losing solidity, shifting from an imposing, long-dead warrior in the flesh to a transparent specter of blue-purple chakra that eventually lost shape entirely and wafted into my chest.

And then I burst into flame.

Pure shock kept me from screaming at first, and by the time I unfroze I realized there was no pain,
except for a slight, residual sting in the shell of my ear where I had been flicked. I looked at my bright, purple, glowing hands, and down at my body, upon which I noticed three important facts: one, I had lost my ceremonial garb and explicit genitalia besides some gentle curves, like some magical girl mid-transformation sequence; two, the water now showed my reflection; and three, I was now gently floating in the air about an inch over the water. I squeezed my eyes shut, counted to ten, and summarily shelved all of my new questions for whenever the ancient, legendary ghost possessing my chakra coils decided to talk to me again.

Jesus Christ.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that they were burning red in my reflection, and I found that I now sported the full three tomoe in each eye. My hair was lazily drifting upwards, akin to a flame as it swayed, loose and luminous above me. When I experimentally drifted forward it flowed with me, as if I were swimming. Okay. Okay, I could make this work. I had directions, I had mobility, and apparently I had ancient Uchiha ghost ladies waiting on me.

I took another, possibly useless breath and set a course for the shoreline.

It was a quicker trip than it had any right to be, given my initial estimation of distance, but then again I knew for a fact that the Mangekyō Sharingan could put the human brain’s perception of Time and Relativity on their proverbial knees. I hesitated briefly at the border of ‘land’ and ‘water’ but did eventually cross that threshold at a glacial float.

And then, suddenly, I wasn’t alone any more.

A glorious, imposing woman in a kimono with more layers than I wanted to even think about stood in front of me, lunar themes embroidered on the outermost layer of the delicately dyed robes. Gorgeous, large, cleanly cut gems—some type of fluorite, I was willing to bet—dangled from the ornaments in her meticulously styled hair, casting a faint pinkish glow onto the silky black locks that fell all the way to the ground. Her face was beautifully made up, with painted lips, eye-brows shaved to circles and a rosy eyeshadow sweeping over her closed lids. Slowly, long, inky lashes opened, revealing red irises set with Mangekyō patterns identical to the ornaments so common in her temples, hundreds of years later.

“Welcome, young maiden of the Uchiha clan,” she began in slow, cultured tones as her gaze settled on me. “You have the honor of addressing Uchiha Masuyo, the sworn Protector of the Court and the venerable—”

Something in me, taut and fraying, finally snapped.

“I’m sorry,” I sniffled some time later, as she gently rocked me and stroked through my strange, floating hair. “I just, I didn’t… I wasn’t prepared…”

“Hush,” she bade me, and pressed a kiss to my hairline. “Say no more, dearest. We of the Ōmagatoki are not unaware of the vicissitudes of the mortal world.” Her arms tightened around me, her robes
sweetly perfumed beneath my nose. “How long has it been, since you felt the warm embrace of your own kin?”

The question brought tears to my eyes once more.

“Too long,” I said, my voice quiet and thick.

“Be at ease,” she told me, pulling back to cup my face in her hands. Her expression was fierce and soft, beautiful and intent. “From now on, you shall never be far from us.” Gently, so gently it somehow hurt even worse than Indra’s flick had, she rubbed the tears from my cheeks.

The sweetest, worst kind of pain lanced through my chest.

“Thank you,” I choked out, and took a few more deep breaths to push everything I was feeling right now down and lock it away. “I… I really am sorry. I ruined your ceremony.”

“Nonsense,” she dismissed, squeezing my shoulders. “True, I would have liked to see you as you are in the flesh, but you are young. It’s to be expected that control over your own self-image is nebulous, at best.”

I wanted to laugh, strangely enough. Self-image issues didn’t even begin to scratch the surface.

“How much time do we have?” I asked instead.

“As much as we need.” Masuyo said, waving airily. A faint smile curved her lips. “Days in a world such as this equate to mere seconds in the mortal realm, I assure you.”

An involuntary shudder ran through me. “I know,” I said quietly.

Her expression fell immediately, and she drew me close once more. “So young. And oh, but how you have suffered, dearest,” she murmured, a note of anguish shooting through the soothing croon. She pulled back reluctantly, but kept an arm looped around my waist as she guided me down a path through the forest. The long, layered sleeve felt almost like thick blanket, and despite everything I felt myself start to calm down, bit by bit.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked, in lieu of getting into the particulars of the suffering that haunted my nightmares. “The Mother Superior never mentioned anything like this.”

“From what I have been led to believe,” Masuyo said delicately. “You are an active shinobi of… Konohagakure, I believe you decided to call it. And you have other active shinobi that accompanied you as well.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “My teacher and teammates.”

“Can you imagine,” Masuyo said slowly, “why the daimyo of each successive generation might order the truth of this place to be harshly guarded against outsiders?”

I thought immediately of snakes and scheming old shinobi. “…yes.” I frowned. “Does… the Hokage know?”

“It wasn’t pertinent before,” she sighed. “All of the previous maidens had left the service of your village or never entered it to begin with, and all of us swear direct fealty to the lords of the Land of Fire during this ceremony, as any shinobi of worth in the Land of Fire should.”

“But it’s pertinent now,” I pressed.
“Your lord Daimyo will notify him of the relevant information upon completion of the ceremony.”

I eyed her, in suspicion. “…Did I dance in front of the Daimyo tonight?”

“I could not say,” Masuyo said evasively. Before I could deal with that detail, the trees thinned out, and I found myself looking at what seemed to be an ancient, flourishing city out of some feudal fairytale. As I was led down the streets, I saw all sorts of people peering at me, from noblemen to nuns. Some were obviously Uchiha from the cut of their clothing, and some seemed to be the first iteration of the priestesses, with slightly more ornate and lavish clothes more in line with Mother Mameko’s wardrobe than Kiki’s clothes.

…Ikkyo. Dammit.

“So, I just have to swear fealty to the Daimyo?” I asked, trying to get my thoughts back in order.

“After you make your mark and expand Ōmagatoki, yes,” Masuyo nodded. “Our number shall never dwindle,” she informed me with a proud smile. “We are, all of our congregation, a fixture in this place. As such, each Uchiha maiden chosen creates their own territory, for those who shall join us.”

“Instead of fearing our death and scrambling away from it, we remember our mortality, treasure our current lives, and strengthen our love for those who go on ahead of us, so that their memories can enrich our lives, instead of poisoning us with the very fear we normally seek to reject.” Kiki had said, what felt like ages ago. I imagined it was plenty easy to strengthen your love with the dearly departed when they were a ‘mass nap’ away.

“…I don’t even know how to begin doing that,” I said, my voice faint.

Masuyo drew to a stop in front of a large gate similar to the one we came in from. Again, it didn’t seem possible that we had covered such a grand city in such a short time, but then again I was in the protective embrace of a woman who had lived, died, and spit in the face of the God of Death five hundred years ago. ‘Possible’ was very much a matter of perspective, now. Reluctantly, Masuyo pulled back and pushed me towards the grand doorway.

“Just picture a place dear to you, or even multiple places, if you like,” she encouraged me. “Ōmagatoki shall do the rest.” A note of undeniable pride crept into her voice. “Its geography rearranges with every Renewal Ceremony, to account for any necessary expansion. As it stands, to reach the unshaped region on the other coast, you shall have to cut through several other territories, with the aid of some of your other predecessors.” She swept her sleeve towards the door. “As luck would have it, the closest to me currently is a woman who lived outside of the clan in solitude for many years, and then my dear daughter, Saki. After her is…” Masuyo paused, and smoothed her hand over my cheek, her expression turning tender once more. “A woman who once knew you briefly in life, Uchiha Wakana. She was the Uchiha maiden who directly preceded you, though she… passed on shortly after, of natural causes. You wouldn’t have been much more than a babe, then.”

Well. Thank goodness for small mercies, I supposed.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“One more,” Masuyo told me. There was a look I couldn’t put a name to on her face now. “The territory of Uchiha Ran. Your paternal great-great-grandmother, as Wakana tells us.”

I was nowhere near prepared to respond to that in any fashion, so I just squeezed her hand and floated out the door. The sooner I was back in the ‘mortal’ world, the happier I would be.
After I cleared the gate, I found myself feeling that *keenly*.

Unlike Masuyo’s city, I recognized where I was immediately, though its entrance was bustling with people all peeking at me in fascination and filled with smiles. The construction was clean and the stone was polished, but the looming, tiered Uchiha stronghold where Uchiha Itachi might have one day met his death loomed out of thick sea of trees.

“Welcome, young maiden of the Uchiha clan,” greeted a sloe-eyed beauty with thick, messy black hair and neat, scholarly old-fashioned clothing. She adjusted shawl around herself as she offered me a gentle, welcoming smile, and the crow on her shoulder cawed and hopped to reorient itself. “My name is Uchiha Tomomi. I am pleased to be your guide through my territory. For a while, we thought we were all finally going to properly die, you see.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “…Uchiha Tsukimi,” I introduced myself. “I… I’m really very overwhelmed right now, I’m sorry.”

“Think nothing of it,” Tomomi told me, mellow and mellifluous. “Shall we?”

I nodded, and drifted along with her as she began to hike around the circumference of the fortress. There was so much I was deliberately not thinking about in this moment it made my brain itch. Tomomi hummed as we moved along, apparently not as verbose as the illustrious Masuyo-hime. That suited me just fine. Soon enough, we came to the rounded cliff at the back of the stronghold, and what appeared to be a tunnel through it.

“Here you are,” Tomomi said, and gently pat my head. “Come visit later, when you’re more reasonably whelmed. I think you’ll enjoy Saki’s garden, but it’s a bit much at first. Take care.” She waved, and then turned and wandered away.

“Bye,” was my belated, soft farewell, before I apprehensively edged into the tunnel.

Immediately, my world erupted into flowers. Flowering trees, flowering trellises, flowering bushes, ponds and streams swirling with petals, painted screened houses, all weaving together to form a sprawling settlement apparently constructed on aesthetic alone unfolding before. While I supposed the dead didn’t have to worry about.

“Welcome, young maiden of the Uchiha clan,” said a woman with lavish robes, wild, dark brown hair, scarlet nails, and a voice almost identical to Masuyo. She truck a similar pose, too. “You have the honor of addressing Uchiha Saki, second-born of Uchiha Masuyo, the Sworn Protector of the Daimyo of the Land of Fire and the grand architect of this Ōmagatoki.” She set into a grand bow. “Pray allow me to accompany you on this leg of your most holy journey.”

“…okay,” was all I could think to say before bowing back much more simply. “Uchiha Tsukimi. Thank you,” I tacked on, trying to do better than I had with Tomomi.

“You are most certainly welcome,” Saki told me, before hooking her arm through mine and steering me across a bridge so beautiful it looked as though it would shatter with too much weight. “Now that we’ve gotten Mother’s formalities out of the way, you must tell me—are you truly so small in the flesh?”

She had at least a foot and a half on me, so I tried not to get too miffed. “I think so,” I told her. “I’m not even a teenager yet, technically, so I might still grow, though.”

Saki heaved a deep sigh. “To think things are truly so dire that me must ask a *child* to help us survive… Mother never would have wanted this, I hope you know.” She patted my hand. “I was in
my fifties when Mother lost her body and I took up her mantle, for the record.”

I stared at her, supple-cheeked and not a day over twenty-five, if I was any judge, and let politely disbelieving silence stretch in reply.

“As you gain more experience, you’ll be able to change how you appear in this world,” Saki informed me, correctly sussing out my problem.

…Well, my most recent problem, at least.

“I think your mother mentioned something like that too.”

“A strong foundation in genjutsu helps,” Saki admitted. “I can’t say I’m entirely supportive of how late you start now, according to Wakana, but it certainly isn’t your fault your tutelage is lacking.”

I was suddenly very, very glad that we were halfway through Saki’s territory. All the people in it were beautiful, as though they stepped from paintings, but it suddenly felt like a bit…much as Tomomi had so succinctly put it. Most of them had some sort of weapon, like the wicked looking blade at Saki’s waist. I thought it might be a strangely shaped Fuuma Shuriken, due to the thickness, but I decided that wasn’t a question I wanted answered at the moment.

Saki continued to chatter along as we wove our way across the beautiful little village, ranging from subjects such as the particular breed of wisteria lining the boundaries of the settlement to more disgruntled, vague condemnations of what a shame it was that I was forced to worry about preserving life long gone by rather than singing out my youth on the battlefield, as was proper for a girl my age.

I kept very quiet, aside from some noncommittal noises to keep her going.

Eventually, thankfully, we came to two cherry blossom trees with their branches woven together like a lovely, makeshift torii gate.

“Come back any time,” Saki told me, earnest and sincere.

I smiled, nodded, and slipped through the gate with much more haste than my previous transitions.

When what seemed to be the Uchiha District sprang up around me, I almost regretted it. I said ‘seemed to be’ only because of two factors: one, it was bustling with people instead of deserted, and only a fraction of them seemed to be actual Uchiha clan members, and two, the buildings were wrong. The architecture seemed to be more or less the right kind, but the houses and store fronts were…older. The layout was different, and there was no great and towering wall at the far end, marking the outer limit of Konoha.

“This is the old District,” A woman leaning back on a stone bench told me. There was a stringed instrument—a biwa, I was pretty sure—slung over her lap, and she was half shrugged out of her kimono top, revealing a snugly wrapped sarashi with a slanted, wicked looking scar training onto her bare collarbone. Her hair was a dark, ruddy color, but her eyes, like every Uchiha maiden except for Masuyo, were red as blood and had all three tomoe. She looked out onto the streets, and sadness flashed across her face before she set her instrument aside and stood up, only to bow deeply to me.

“It was before your time—we got shuffled over to the new one after the Fox attacked—so if nothing else I’m pleased you were able to see it.” She straightened up, and her eyes crinkled kindly. “It’s good to see you, little miss. More than I can possibly say.”

“I…” Restless, I looked around. “I’m, I’m sorry, I don’t…
“Remember me?” Uchiha Wakana asked knowingly. “No, I don’t suppose you would. You were… two, maybe three when I lost my body. My son used to help babysit you, though. You couldn’t have been higher than my knee, and you always had the cutest pigtails.”

I swallowed around the sudden lump in my throat. “Do you…” I bit my lip. “Masuyo knew, but—”

“I know what your… what the former heir did,” Wakana said, catching on to what I was dancing around. Her expression twisted with a sudden flash of grief. “I’m sorry, Tsukimi-chan. If I had ever suspected what was coming, I swear to you I would have dragged the entire clan into this place, kicking and screaming, loyalty and oaths be damned. I swear.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

“Died?” Wakana smiled ruefully, the haunted shadows melting from her face as she shook her head. “We don’t really use that word here, but no. Hell, it’s probably something somebody should talk to you anyways. Walk with me?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“I don’t think it’s something you need to worry about,” Wakana prefaced her explanation. “It’s carried through the father’s line if it shows up at all, and… you two always seemed in the pink of health.”

I had a sudden, terrible inkling I knew what she was about to say next.

“Every so often, a congenital illness pops up in the Uchiha clan.” Wakana told me. “I won’t get too gruesome, but it’s a nasty business; it hits your lungs and tears into them like a starving Inuzuka. If you catch it quick enough, sometimes you can treat it and keep the symptoms in line long enough to die a shinobi’s death, as my dad put it, but I was a life-long smoker.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth twisting in self-mockery. “I told my medics not to bother with my lungs. Last person in my branch of the family to come down with it was my great-great-great-granddad.” We turned a corner, and I saw a lavish, traditional house exactly identical to the Main House I had still only seen from a distance, back in my own District. “My paternal great-great-great-granddad, of course, so joke’s on me. Mikoto nearly screamed herself hoarse at me, when she found out.”

“You knew…?” I stared at her, as we drifted to a stop in front of the other end of the district, just past a shrine a little similar in age and style to the Naka Shrine I had visited out of morbid curiosity, my first month in Konoha.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and… you two always seemed in the pink of health.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“Every so often, a congenital illness pops up in the Uchiha clan.” Wakana told me. “I won’t get too gruesome, but it’s a nasty business; it hits your lungs and tears into them like a starving Inuzuka. If you catch it quick enough, sometimes you can treat it and keep the symptoms in line long enough to die a shinobi’s death, as my dad put it, but I was a life-long smoker.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth twisting in self-mockery. “I told my medics not to bother with my lungs. Last person in my branch of the family to come down with it was my great-great-great-granddad.” We turned a corner, and I saw a lavish, traditional house exactly identical to the Main House I had still only seen from a distance, back in my own District. “My paternal great-great-great-granddad, of course, so joke’s on me. Mikoto nearly screamed herself hoarse at me, when she found out.”

“You knew…?” I stared at her, as we drifted to a stop in front of the other end of the district, just past a shrine a little similar in age and style to the Naka Shrine I had visited out of morbid curiosity, my first month in Konoha.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and plenty she probably didn’t.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and plenty she probably didn’t.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“Every so often, a congenital illness pops up in the Uchiha clan.” Wakana told me. “I won’t get too gruesome, but it’s a nasty business; it hits your lungs and tears into them like a starving Inuzuka. If you catch it quick enough, sometimes you can treat it and keep the symptoms in line long enough to die a shinobi’s death, as my dad put it, but I was a life-long smoker.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth twisting in self-mockery. “I told my medics not to bother with my lungs. Last person in my branch of the family to come down with it was my great-great-great-granddad.” We turned a corner, and I saw a lavish, traditional house exactly identical to the Main House I had still only seen from a distance, back in my own District. “My paternal great-great-great-granddad, of course, so joke’s on me. Mikoto nearly screamed herself hoarse at me, when she found out.”

“You knew…?” I stared at her, as we drifted to a stop in front of the other end of the district, just past a shrine a little similar in age and style to the Naka Shrine I had visited out of morbid curiosity, my first month in Konoha.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and plenty she probably didn’t.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“Every so often, a congenital illness pops up in the Uchiha clan.” Wakana told me. “I won’t get too gruesome, but it’s a nasty business; it hits your lungs and tears into them like a starving Inuzuka. If you catch it quick enough, sometimes you can treat it and keep the symptoms in line long enough to die a shinobi’s death, as my dad put it, but I was a life-long smoker.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth twisting in self-mockery. “I told my medics not to bother with my lungs. Last person in my branch of the family to come down with it was my great-great-great-granddad.” We turned a corner, and I saw a lavish, traditional house exactly identical to the Main House I had still only seen from a distance, back in my own District. “My paternal great-great-great-granddad, of course, so joke’s on me. Mikoto nearly screamed herself hoarse at me, when she found out.”

“You knew…?” I stared at her, as we drifted to a stop in front of the other end of the district, just past a shrine a little similar in age and style to the Naka Shrine I had visited out of morbid curiosity, my first month in Konoha.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and plenty she probably didn’t.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.

“Every so often, a congenital illness pops up in the Uchiha clan.” Wakana told me. “I won’t get too gruesome, but it’s a nasty business; it hits your lungs and tears into them like a starving Inuzuka. If you catch it quick enough, sometimes you can treat it and keep the symptoms in line long enough to die a shinobi’s death, as my dad put it, but I was a life-long smoker.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth twisting in self-mockery. “I told my medics not to bother with my lungs. Last person in my branch of the family to come down with it was my great-great-great-granddad.” We turned a corner, and I saw a lavish, traditional house exactly identical to the Main House I had still only seen from a distance, back in my own District. “My paternal great-great-great-granddad, of course, so joke’s on me. Mikoto nearly screamed herself hoarse at me, when she found out.”

“You knew…?” I stared at her, as we drifted to a stop in front of the other end of the district, just past a shrine a little similar in age and style to the Naka Shrine I had visited out of morbid curiosity, my first month in Konoha.

“We were neighbors, before we got married,” Wakana told me. Gently, she patted my head. “When you have the time, come visit. I have plenty of stories I’m sure she wanted you to hear someday, and plenty she probably didn’t.”

“I believe you,” I whispered, the lump in my throat swelling. I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Is… is it rude to ask how you…?”

I nodded, and followed after her as she started to amble down the streets, nodding to different people along the way in greeting.
the last territory.

I found myself in a forest again. The trees looked a bit like the ones near Tomomi’s fortress, but much, much larger. Some seemed as thick as I was tall, but one of them had a woman in a lovely black, crimson, and gold kimono waiting beneath one, with white ribbon in her hair and a gilded red umbrella over one shoulder.

“Uchiha Ran?” I asked, growing a bit nervous now that I was so close to the end, and… finally in front of an actual, direct relative. Even one who lived and died long before I ever entered the picture. The woman turned, and the resemblance between her and the face I saw in the morning was so striking I nearly drew back. There was something different in the cheeks, and her lips were a bit more pronounced and shapely as they split into a dignified smile.

“That sounds so impersonal,” Ran told me, her eyes spinning softly as she drank me in, head to glowing purple toe. If she was disappointed not to see me as I had been when the priestesses finished dressing me up, she didn’t mention it. Instead she said, “I think you should call me Kousobo-chan, young lady.”

“Kousobo-chan,” I parroted, somehow not stumbling over the word. ‘Great-great-grandmother’ didn’t come up often in conversation, after all.

“Much better,” Ran praised me. She still hadn’t moved, and I uncertainly drifted a little closer, and a little more, until I was right beside her. A lazy river wound through on the other side of her tree, burbling peacefully. “I’m pleased one of my descendants found her way to the faith, though the circumstances are beyond the pale. I married and survive the Clan Head, so I thought it was perhaps impossible to fulfill my final wish.”

“My… final wish?” My brow furrowed. “Um, I don’t mean to rush you… Kousobo-chan… but aren’t we supposed to be… ah…”

“My final wish,” Ran said placidly, “was to let my youngest son see his child. I bent a rule and forcefully anointed him as a denizen of Ōmagatoki when he was on his death-bed,” she said, entirely without shame. “Unfortunately, I too lost my body before his lover gave birth. His daughter Shinano eventually married a cousin to give him legitimacy as the Clan Head after her uncle left us without an heir, and bore your aunt and father in turn.”

“I see,” I said, though it sounded a bit more questioning than I might have hoped. After a long moment of silence, only broken by the sounds of birdsong and other natural background noise, I opened my mouth to ask more, since it didn’t seem like she was an independently chatty woman. A much more modern Uchiha than Saki, this great-great-grandmother of… mine, from a technical, genetic standpoint.

Before I could utter a sound, however, a form darted through the trees, landing in a crouch. It straightened up to reveal a man, not panting, but betrayed by his own excitement by the rapid spin of his Sharingan. He had his mother’s pretty, elegant mouth, and a long, low ponytail pooled over his shoulder that slipped back behind him as he stepped forward, fell to one knee, and pulled my hands into his own.

“Uchiha Tsukimi,” he said, and it sounded like a prayer. His expression was like a man seeing the sun after years away from it, like a starving man with a feast laid out before him out of nowhere. His hands were so very gentle, I noted as if from far away.

I looked at him, and could only be so very thankful that I didn’t need basic bodily functions here; if Ōmagatoki followed the laws of nature, I was pretty sure my heart would have stopped dead at this
“My name is Izuna,” he said softly, looking up with scarlet eyes that glittered brightly, a perfect, normal copy of the damned, damned eyes that had since been passed on, warped, and passed on again. “And I am so very, very pleased to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this entire chapter today, all at once. You're welcome. I also introduced a lot of ladies in this chapter, so have some character designs to help them gel in your memory.
In which I am clapped in the shackles of honor and duty yet again

Chapter Summary

What is Tsukimi doing in this chapter?

Her best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Likewise,” I blurted out, before the silence could stretch on too long. I was aware that something within me had been drawing ever taut, this entire time, choking me with all the finesse of a piano wire around the throat while I was in the embrace of Masuyo. It had finally snapped with a silent, stinging twang upon the entrance of **Uchiha Izuna**, and numbly, desperately, I fell back into the safe and steady routine of formalities. Even if they couldn’t shield me from the way his eyes were still trained on me, cataloguing every detail my strange, amorphous form might yield to him.

“Wakana-chan says you seem to be the very picture of our Shinano,” Ran interjected.

I blinked. “Shinano… She’d be my father’s mother, right?” For some reason, that rang a bell. But why on Earth would I…? “Oh.” It was a jangly, cat-shaped bell. “Oh. Nekobaa once said that I’m the spitting image of her, yes.”

Izuna smiled, and it was such a lovely, lovely thing. But there was an echo of Itachi in his features—something in the cheeks, maybe, or the slope of that aristocratic nose—and it made my possibly-nonexistent-stomach lurch dangerously. “Wakana-san also says you were a prodigy, even back when she was still alive,” he said. “They run strong in our line of the clan.” There was an undercurrent of pride to his voice.

“Unfortunately true, yes,” I said, trampling over it without thinking twice. Without even thinking once, honestly, because at this point using vague Itachi references to cut down any attempts at discussing ‘my’ childhood was more or less a knee-jerk reaction. Izuna stiffened, his hand going lax on mine, and I bit my lip in sudden, agonizing regret. It was one thing to say it to Naruto or Sakura, or even Mitsuba-baachan when I was really desperate, but Izuna… Izuna might actually be familiar with the pain of having a brother who betrayed every speck of trust you once put in them, if the subsequent Uchiha maidens had kept him up to date on the state of the clan after his passing.

The founding of Konoha alone had to have been a harsh blow, at the absolute minimum.

It took every speck of courage I had to be anything approaching proactive in this moment, but I found the courage to gently squeeze his hand and drop my head. “…sorry, Izuna-san. That was rude of me.”

“Hijiji,” Ran said from the sidelines, idly spinning her umbrella over her shoulder.

I blinked. “What?”

Izuna gripped my hand once more and stood, laying his other palm on top of my head with a smaller, but similarly warm smile. “My mother is referring to me. Or rather, how you should be referring to
me. I find that I must agree; being called ‘Izuna-san’ by my own great-grandchild just sounds so… impersonal.” There was a spark of mischief in his scarlet eyes, glinting beneath the warmth. “Don’t you agree?”

“Um.” I blinked, now seeing the resemblance between the pair of them even more strongly. “I… suppose so.” He was still looking down at me expectantly, so I tacked on a tentative, “Izuna-hijiji.”

There was an expression of quiet, bone-deep joy that spilled over his face at that uncertain little concession. It was uncomfortable to look at—I had never felt like more of an impostor—so I politely averted my gaze for a moment until I was confident enough that I could remain composed. When I looked up again, he too had wrangled his face back under control, but his lips were curved at the corners.

“Masuyo-sama said I, ah… that I needed to ‘make my mark and expand Ōmagatoki’ once I reached your territory,” I told Ran, before I could become entrenched any deeper in this sprawling minefield of emotions and trauma. “She gave me a… vague explanation on how to do it, but do I do it here, or is there another border somewhere?”

“There is another border, yes,” Ran nodded, her umbrella’s rotations slowing to a halt. “We’ll have to cross through the heart of my domain before we can settle yours, naturally.”

“Naturally,” I echoed.

“It is fortunate Hibana-chan was so understanding,” Ran continued, beginning to drift down a path through the trees. “There were other routes you might have travelled in order to reach the frontier, but the others ceded to my direct claim upon you.”

“Because you’re my… Kousobo-chan,” I said slowly, just barely remembering to use the specific term. It earned me a pleased smile.

“Just so,” Izuna agreed, moving with me as we followed his mother through the winding forest trail.

“So, Hibana-san is going to be my, um… my other closest neighbor, I suppose?”

“Indeed,” Ran nodded as we entered into a clearing. The small village within was simple but had a sort of clean-cut elegance in its architecture; a rustic air of regality hung over the whole landscape. The people who milled about, eyes bright with interest, had the same demographic as the rest of the little worlds I had glimpsed so far—that was to say, a minority of actual Uchiha clan members, and a surplus of every other possibility.

It was a little confusing, at first, but in context it made sense. Ōmagatoki may have been built by an Uchiha, but it’s express purpose hadn’t been for the Uchiha clan.

“Where do the daimyo go?” I asked, exchanging nods with the various onlookers that hopefully weren’t actually as awkward as they felt from my end.

“There’s a palace back in Masuyo-hime’s dominion,” Izuna told me. “They and their courtiers generally stay there—it serves as a ‘capital’ of sorts here, I suppose. The area of greatest historical note.”

“She adds a wing to it after every coronation,” Ran tossed back over her shoulder, as we turned a few corners and eventually approached another tree-line. “A grand affair. Your presence will doubtlessly be requested when the next one occurs, so look forward to it.”

“Just as long as there isn’t a second, even deeper cult I get initiated into,” was my thoughtless reply.
Two sets of Sharingan settled on me, alight with amusement.

Had I not already been glowing purple at that point, I would have burned red.

“Look,” I said defensively. “This night has gone all sorts of places I never expected. You can’t blame me for that one.”

“I suppose not,” Ran ceded with warm grace. After a few more moments of comfortable silence as we walked, the trees abruptly ended and we drew to a halt. The ground fell away as well just ahead of us, in a steep cliff, cut cleanly straight down to glassy, twilight-painted waters identical to the ones I was first greeted by.

I surveyed it for a long moment.

“Well,” I said. “This is, uh… I’ve got a job to do, I suppose.”

“Just so,” Izuna agreed, releasing my hand and offering an encouraging shoulder pat as I floated forward to the precipice.

I shifted in place, inches above the soil, and tried to wrangle my thoughts in order. I was faced with a totally blank canvas; a reactive, malleable piece of semi-reality ready and waiting to be shaped as my personal desires or creativity dictated. An open page. An empty vessel, pristine and just waiting for me to fill it as I saw fit.

…

Literally nothing came to mind.

Nothing I could use, anyways. I was a fairly imaginative and well-travelled girl, but American architecture, European landmarks, fantasy castles, sci-fi movie scenery… none of them fit the narrative of ‘Uchiha Tsukimi’ that I had been working so hard to uphold. More to the point, they would only raise more questions than I was comfortable answering.

The television in my room back in the District was still more than a foot thick, for God’s sake. Modernity was the enemy, as of this moment.

“I look forward to seeing what you craft,” Izuna spoke up, apparently attempting to bolster my noticeably flagging confidence.

“Right,” I said. The water below only made me think of Venice, which I had fallen in love with back when I visited in middle school and was reasonably close to the exact opposite of the pseudo-Japanese aesthetic I actually needed to picture right now. The only suitable place I could imagine easily enough off the top of my head was my District, and I didn’t even want to be there in the flesh most of the time, let alone metaphysically.

“Pay us no heed,” Ran said. The weight of her and Izuna’s gazes was almost palpable.

I stared down at the still waters, thinking of Konoha, of Sora-ku, of Susuki, furiously chasing after a suitable train of thought—

Train.

Susuki. Kiki.

“Got it,” I breathed, inspiration slamming in at the eleventh hour with nigh cinematic definition.
Triumph and relief crashed and churned in the pit of my stomach as land burst out of the surf to billow out in front of me in a rolling slope, flush with trees and greenery.

A path emerged, overgrown and barely beaten and then giving way to a rough stone road, and I began to move forward with more enthusiasm than I had shown all evening. I heard Izuna and his mother following, but didn’t stop to wait until I had found the abandoned red building and the squat, two-faced stone guardian in front of it. Their footsteps echoed upon empty halls as we passed through, and when we paused on the hill Izuna made a soft, interested noise at the various colorful facades and general festive air of the buildings down the hill.

Ran’s attention seemed to be firmly on the massive, resplendent bath house I had shamelessly stolen.

“Beautiful,” she said simply. “Is it a fond memory, or a dream?”

I wasn’t about to tell her that the gorgeous, vivid imagery of Studio Ghibli was just unforgettable enough to have saved my desperate mess of a self from the quagmire of artist’s block. True, the Uchiha clan found its bread and butter in intellectual property theft, but it would only call down more scrutiny and questions if I ended up rambling on too much. And I felt very much inclined to a nervous ramble, after everything I had dealt with by this point.

“Something out of a story,” I said eventually. “That’s all.”

A haunting whistle floated through the air. In the distance, a train rattled and rippled its way through the water and off towards the horizon.

I opened my eyes what felt like days later, the residual tension of kneeling in front of literal ghost monarchs still knotting my stomach. Those knots gave a hard lurch as my mind briefly grappled with two sudden, conflicting truths.

One: I had been out of it for quite some time.

Two: I had only just finished my dance.

The moon was still red and swollen, directly above me. At some point after striking my final pose a heartbeat ago, I had fallen to my knees.

“Well done, Tsukimi-sama,” one of the priestesses murmured; the one from up north, I thought. Two more of them swooped down to help me up and made it look graceful enough that I didn’t even stumble. I became aware of a dull roaring in my ears, and realized belatedly that it was the cheers from the people below—from all of Susuki, and the various Temple-goers who had converged on the city for the Renewal Ceremony and its assorted festivities.

The next daimyo I had to swear my loyalty to was down there, I thought to myself. Him and his wife, and their cats too, maybe.

My cat was down there, I recalled sluggishly. So was…

Shit.

So was my team.
While not technically an issue, I wasn’t sure where on the spectrum of ‘Classified Information’ secret political genjutsu ghost mind-meld cult secrets actually fell. The Hokage was going to be informed after tonight, yes, but… well, even he hadn’t been in the know to begin with. Was I supposed to keep this close to the chest, for now? More to the point, did I want to? Much like the little team discussion we had about Naruto’s not-so-little secret, if I did want to share information then my best shot would be to do it before we returned to Konoha proper and I received orders about it one way or another.

“This way,” the priestess from one of the southern islands bade me, and I moved with thoughtless grace to where she directed.

I had to start actually using my brain on more immediate, practical issues then, because navigating stone steps in a million layers of silk was not something you wanted to half-ass. It wasn’t hard to snap out of my daze then, because unlike the stone of the platform, which the rest of the priestesses were covering with long, insulated planks, the stairs were cold. And my feet were still bare.

Luckily, this wasn’t the Temple of Tsukimi’s first rodeo; Kiki—no, I meant Kikyo—

...Oh, forget it.

Kiki was waiting at the base of the stairs with a pair of black-lacquered, gold-etched geta that probably cost as much as my monthly utility bill did, at a bare minimum. She had claimed, during our rehearsals, to be thrilled beyond measure to be trusted with such an honor. She was certainly beaming as she knelt to slip them onto my feet for me now, so as it turned out she really had been sincere on that front.

 Weird, but far, far from the weirdest thing to come out of this night.

The crowds parted for our procession, even noisier and more jubilant up close. The faces and clothes blurred together in a very familiar way as we made our way through the festival grounds and rounded back towards the main temple. Silently, I reset the tally of ‘Days Since I Last Hit the Point of Chakra Exhaustion’ and sadly realized that there was no way I wasn’t spilling the beans to my team tonight. They had seen me in this state too often not to recognize it, at this point.

Also, the Daimyo was kind of going to be joining us for dinner. According to Ran he was… uh… nice.

‘A doddering, easily swayed princeling content to let his bygone forefathers take the reigns,’ as she put it, but either way, he’d probably be fine with me telling Kakashi about Ōmagatoki, given I had some nebulous recollections of him supporting my teacher as a Hokage-candidate in the manga. And what was good for the goose was good for the gander—or rather, ‘the Daimyo said I could’ was a trump card I had exactly zero compunctions against throwing down, should push come to shove.

“…HIME!” I heard, a higher yell cutting faintly through the dull roar of the celebrating masses. I glanced blindly around, but for once my team’s unique coloring was next to useless; the festive kimono patterns of the citizens were just as eye-catching as yellow or pink hair. I summoned up a smile anyways, bright and reassuring, before turning back and focusing the entirety of my attention on the next trial looming ahead of me.

Climbing back up the front steps.

It was much more of a struggle than it had been the first day—when I was still only worried about religious symbols and brimming with a normal, healthy level of chakra—but we had trained with Team Gai and drilled long enough that I was able to muscle my way past the bone-deep physical and
mental fatigue just fine. One of the other priestesses, maybe even Kiki herself, must have escorted
my team in through a quicker, less public route, because they were already waiting in the courtyard
by the time our procession ended.

I drank in the sight of them, bizarrely, thankfully unchanged after my little trip to Cult Wonderland.

They all had been loaned and dressed in finery provided by the temple, though nothing as grand as
what I had been trussed up in. There was something about the outfits that tickled at the back of my
brain, but I wasn’t sure what, exactly. Sakura’s looked as though it had been made just for her, albeit
with cut-out segments connected by finely beaded strings throughout the dress that would have been
more suited to somebody over the age of thirteen, at the least, but the silken white yukata underneath
complimented the ensemble beautifully. Naruto’s gi was a slightly more subdued shade of orange,
though; perhaps that was it. It was just close enough to ‘normal’ that the parts where it wasn’t threw
me off even more.

Nothing about Kakashi’s dark green ensemble really caught my eye, aside from a white clan crest
not unlike a Sudoku square turned on its side. No, the most eye-catching thing about him was the
direct, urgent way he stared back at me, both eyes bared and moving with long strides to reach me.

“What happened,” he said, gripping my shoulders and giving me a searching once-over. It would
have been a question, from a normal person, but suddenly the air was thick with an ominous miasma
and his attention was starting to shift towards the priestesses.

“I-It’s okay,” I rushed to tell him, reaching up to squeeze his wrists. Behind him, I could see Naruto
and Sakura’s excited faces start to wilt into guarded concern. “I’m okay,” I tacked on, “Really. It’s…it’s
a bit hard to explain, but this was supposed to happen.”

“You would have let us take on Tazuna’s extra conditions,” Kakashi said lowly.

“You would have let us take on Tazuna’s extra conditions, I thought in a moment of knee-jerk
pettiness, except… no, I couldn’t really see that happening, for some reason. Every man had his
limits, after all, and I guess three was the magic number and also the absolute limit of ridiculous
escalations that Kakashi was willing to accept out of us.

…Out of me, I admitted, in the arguable privacy of my own head.

“In It’s okay,” I said again.

“It really isn’t,” Kakashi said flatly. “The Hokage doesn’t usually lend out the last member of a
historic clan to people who put her to work with mysterious jutsu, Tsukimi-chan.”

“Well…” I mustered up an awkward smile. “That may be true, but this kind of… goes over his
head.”

“Over the Hokage’s head,” my teacher repeated, his tone still flat as a pancake.

“Yes.”

 “…You’re not joking.”

“I’m really not.” I sort of wished I was, but… “Speaking of, we… we probably shouldn’t keep him
waiting. Mameko-sama?”

“Right this way, Tsukimi-sama,” the Mother Superior bade me, sweeping by with a deep bow of the
head. “Forgive us for the circumspection, Hatake-san. I assure you, we shall explain the night’s
“events after the evening meal.”

“Keep who waiting, Tsukimi-hime?” Naruto demanded, looking between the lot of us. “And… and what’s this about the old man not knowing something? What did you make her do?!” He rounded on one of the priestesses, his eyes narrowing to glittering blue slits of suspicion.

“The Daimyo of the Land of Fire?” Sakura sounded a bit uncertain, and convulsively smoothed down the front of her borrowed dress. “…Are, are you really sure you’re not joking, Tsukimi-chan? I-I mean, I know we’re not far from the capital, but…”

“I’m really, really not,” I insisted again. When I moved to follow Mameko, Kakashi didn’t stop me but he didn’t let me put much distance between us, either. Naruto and Sakura followed his lead immediately, crowding in for their own inspections as we moved through the halls.

“We lost Kasha,” Sakura admitted, shame-faced.

“It’s fine,” I said, my mouth settling into a resigned grimace. “I’m pretty sure I know what he’s up to.”

“What—” Naruto started to say, before the banquet hall door slid open.

“Ah, here she is now!” Kasha’s sweet little voice declared cheerfully. He was seated in the lap of a stone-faced man with gray hair who was probably only a few years older than Kakashi-sensei, mid-thirties at the oldest. He was also purring up a storm, courtesy of thick, manicured fingers idly strokes at his nape. “Tsukki! You did so great,” Kasha told me. “Even Auntie Tora and Uncle Shishi talked about how pretty you are.”

“Mind your tongue, Kasha-sama,” came the cultured tones of Tora. She and her brother were draped over the lap and shoulders of the stately, jowly old man next to Kasha’s human perch.

“Oh my God,” Sakura whispered behind me.

“Are they supposed to talk to humans other than Tsukimi-hime?” Naruto hissed to her.

“Quiet,” Kakashi ordered, his voice barely a murmur.

They went silent. Not an easy feat, normally, but the presence of at least two dozen ninja and other guards in the room lent a certain gravitas to the situation that discouraged any backchat tonight.

“You stand before His Excellency, Madoka Chouten, the Daimyo of the Land of Fire, and his most noble son and heir, Lord Madoka Ikkyū,” said a pompous-looking old man dressed almost as grandly as the old man playing with two highly intelligent cats that our team had once menaced all through the village with a pack of dogs.

I had gotten a crash course on what to do from Masuyo, and took one measured step forward in order to sink to my knees, bowing low enough that a loose lock of my hair brushed the floor. “Your presence honors me, my lords.” I said quietly. There was a speech—Masuyo seemed fond of them—that flowed out easily in this moment. Fleetingly, I wondered if having somebody else’s Sharingan implant an order into you always felt this natural. “This servant of yours humbly submits herself to your service. This Uchiha Tsukimi, Ceremonial Maiden of the Temple of Tsukimi,” which I would not have been able to say without a literal geas, “solemnly pledges to do her utmost to safeguard her gracious masters, in this life in the next.”

There was a soft, sharp inhalation behind me. I couldn’t be sure who it belonged to, but I couldn’t focus on that. The entirety of my focus was on not combusting in mortification at the hoity-toity,
ostentatious promise I had just delivered to what basically amounted to the king of my entire country and his son.

The response I received was nothing so formal.

“Ah, that’s much better,” Lord Chouten said. “Obviously, we happily accept our Uchiha Maiden’s oath. Lift your head, won’t you? It’s so nice, to have such a pretty child taking on the duties for once.”

I straightened up, still kneeling, and tried not to let my expression turn nonplussed. “…Thank you, my lord,” I said. A look of vague, long-suffering embarrassment briefly flitted over there face of the pompous-looking courtier. Lord Ikkyū idly rubbed at one of Kasha’s ears, apparently used to his father’s particular personality.

“Yes, we now see the very picture of a fine flower blooming from adversity,” the Daimyo continued. “For years, your clan has loyally served our line. We look forward to accepting your most earnest loyalty from here on in. Ah.” He snapped his fingers, and tickled Shishi’s chin. “As a token of our esteem and good intentions, we shall bestow the endearment of ‘Tsukimi-chan’ upon you. Truly, the fates must have ordained that you enter our service so directly.”

“…Thank you, my lord,” I repeated, blinking. Was… was he aware he had just implied that the Uchiha clan had been fated to die? Or was he honestly just not thinking about what he was saying, and to whom he was saying it? It was one thing when I was flippant to avoid an uncomfortable subject, but… ah, well, I’d just… ignore that and move on. King of the land. My boss’s boss. Focus.

“We also see that you have brought your esteemed comrades, Tsukimi-chan,” the old man pressed on. I was struck by a sudden, inexplicable certainty that he had just wanted to call me ‘Tsukimi-chan’ on a whim and rolled with it. “Introduce us. We shall permit them the honor.”

“Lord—” the courtier began to say.

“He’s right,” Lord Ikkyū spoke up for the first time, still languidly spoiling my kitten. Kasha was practically a puddle on his knee. “Tsukimi-chan over there will be seeing us every couple of years for the rest of her life. We might as well get acquainted properly, if her entourage tags along every time.”

“…Thank you, my lord,” I said again, the words a budding reflex. “I have the pleasure of working alongside Haruno Sakura and Uzumaki Naruto, under the tutelage of Hatake Kakashi.”

“These names are not unfamiliar to us,” Lord Chouten proclaimed.

Then why did you ask, I most definitely did not say to my now literal lord and master.

“We bid you to join us for an evening repast,” he continued, making a sweeping gesture at the table, which was even more splendidly laden with food than ever before.

“We’d be honored,” Kakashi spoke up for the first time since we entered, laying a hand on my back. Sakura moved to help me to my feet, possibly at his direction. “Will Madam Shijimi be joining us this evening?”

Tora and Shishi’s ears went flat against their skull and one of them hissed darkly.

“Our noble consort has no place in this celebration,” Lord Chouten said, idle and lax and ice cold. God damn. “She does not belong to the congregation. She married in from another country’s ruling family, you see.”
“I see,” I agreed, drawing myself up to my full height again and attempting to look as dignified as possible.

Within the grand room, somebody sighed. I refused to be self-conscious about that.

“That was a literal daimyo.” Sakura said, flopping back against her futon. I had my own rooms, as per tradition, but Kakashi had made this sleep-over an executive order, so I smoothed out my own futon next to her.

“I’d say a daimyo and a half, actually,” I said thoughtfully. “Since he brought Lord Ikkyū along, and he’s the next daimyo-to-be. Speaking of, you certainly looked comfy enough with him,” I noted, prodding Kasha where he had curled up on my pillow.

“Ikkyun and I are pen-pals,” Kasha sniffed, batting my finger away. “Uncle Shishi and Aunt Tora love him; he’s nothing like that crazy mother of his.”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to let you talk about my lord’s wife like that.”

“It’s fine,” said Kasha, tail flicking dismissively. “You heard him, right? She was just a political bride. Nobody at court really likes her, not even Ikkyun. His dad has a bunch of concubines he likes more. The only thing she was good for was making Ikkyun.”

“…Harsh, ’ttebayo,” Naruto breathed, taken aback.

It certainly was, but on the other hand, we had all seen how she treated her cats in the past. Some spite was to be expected, at the very least.

“…Getting back on track,” Kakashi interrupted, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I believe you have something to tell us, Tsukimi-chan?” He swept a weathered eye over me, and kindly added, “I can go hunt down Suwabe and run a fact-check with you tomorrow, if you’re that tired. We don’t need you to strain yourself so soon after recovering from the cat pill.”

Kasha’s ears drooped. I rubbed my eyes and shook my head, even though I was probably about ten minutes away from the world’s deepest food coma.

“No, I can tell you. You might actually be able to confirm some things for me.” I assured him.

To their credit, my team didn’t interrupt me even once, though I saw several points where they sorely, sorely wanted to. Kakashi’s face was a study in inscrutability the whole way through, but Naruto and Sakura ran the entire gamut of emotions, from shock, to awe, to confusion, and ending on a strange, misty-eyed expression I couldn’t quite put a name to. Obviously, I hadn’t breathed a word about what Indra had said to me—or about Indra at all—because claiming that I was karmically possessed by my most famous founding forefather was all sorts of alarming.

“…What?” I asked them, inching back. “What are those faces for?”

“Oh, Tsukimi-chan,” Sakura burst out, lunging forward to wrap me up in a hug. Naruto was barely a beat behind her, the combined force of them knocking me back against the plushness of my futon.

“Oh, Tsukimi-chan,’ what?” I demanded, my voice muffled against somebody’s shoulder.
“Your family,” Naruto breathed, and when he pulled back his eyes were bright, and soft, and so, so happy for me. “The asshole didn’t take them all away from you.”

I was knocked breathless from the impact of those words, from him of all people.

“We…” my voice was weak, and I had to swallow before I could get my suddenly dry throat to work properly. “We… still need to verify that. It was a genjutsu, sort of.”

Sakura leaned back and wiped at her eyes. If the look in her eyes was any indication, she thought I was putting up a tough front, so as not to get my hopes dashed.

“…I did know of an Uchiha Wakana,” Kakashi admitted. It was the first thing he had said since I began talking, and his expression was still unreadable. “And she did die early of some sort of illness. And her son…” He glanced at me briefly, his tone morphing from hard to hesitant. “Her son was a man named Shisui. He was famous among the Uchiha, though, and most people know he and your brother were close. It’s hard to say whether or not a dedicated researcher would have been able to make a fake of her, especially if she came here under the same orders as Tsukimi-chan.”

“But it’s your family,” Naruto burst out again. He gripped my shoulders, looking down at me earnestly. “Tsukimi-hime, it’s… even if it’s fake, it’s still a piece of them.”

“…Yeah,” I said. I didn’t tell them that my reservations didn’t have anything to do with the veracity of the Uchiha maids in Ōmagatoki, and everything to do with the fact that I didn’t doubt it, and soon other people might not either. People with vested interests in capitalizing on a massive, soul-perpetuating jutsu. I was, at any given time, about five degrees of separation away from drawing the absolute worst kind of attention, and this just painted even more of a target on my back than usual.

“Well,” said Sakura, rubbing her neck. “Tomorrow, you have to lead a ceremonial mass, right? Maybe you can talk to them more, see if there’s some sort of proof we can find that shows that they really are who they say they are. Uh. Were?”

“I can certainly try,” I said.

“Ask them about summoning contracts, ’ttebayo!”

“Naruto!” Sakura snapped, aghast.

“What?” Naruto puffed out his cheeks. “What, ’ttebayo?! It’s a good tactic! Kasha’s old man is like, ancient!”

“He is,” Kasha murmured proudly, half-asleep on my pillow already.

“If we found one of these ladies’ Summons, then they could probably help us prove if it’s them or not!”

“You just want a contract!”

“It’s my turn next, dammit.”

“Well,” Kakashi said, heaving a deep sigh as the squabble escalated in volume and then projectile pillows. “Either way, the Hokage is going to have an… interesting debrief waiting for us when we get home.”

“Oh, believe me,” I muttered. “I know.”
After a considering look, and after Naruto and Sakura began to roll across the floor tussling, he reached over and ruffled my hair. He was very gentle this time out of consideration for my scalp, which was tender after being styled for so long and so intricately. “You need to stop giving us these sorts of scares, Tsukimi-chan.”


“Yeah.” He sighed again. “I’m sure it does. …You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m really sure,” I told him, placing a hand over the one on my head. “…Sorry for scaring you, Sensei.”

“On the bright side,” Kakashi mused, his thumb rubbing idle circles against my throbbing temple. “You aren’t bleeding or vomiting, so that’s a definite step up. Let’s keep up the good work, okay? I don’t want Gai’s kids to hunt me down and string me up when we get home. They may never let you leave the village again, if we have any more incidents on our C-Ranks.”

“Sensei.” I pinched his wrist.

He flicked my nose.

“Go to bed, Tsukimi of the Temple of Tsukimi,” he told me, and nobly dodged the pillow I tossed at him. It sailed past, catching Naruto square in the face.

“Eh? You too, Tsukimi-hime?!”

“No, I—”

“Fine!” Naruto puffed up his cheeks. “Fine! I’ll take you both on!”

“Don’t you dare, Naruto!” Sakura snapped.

Naruto snatched up the pillow I had accidentally pegged at him.

“Na-ru-to…” Sakura growled in warning.

I stared at them, tired beyond all measure. When the pillow inevitably came, I let it hit front and center and fell back, plopping down next to Kasha. It was blissfully, blessedly dark, and the beginnings of my stress headache began to abate.

“…You okay, Tsukimi-hime?” Naruto asked, obviously concerned at my wordless surrender.

“Goodnight.” I said, not bothering to move the pillow as I squirmed under my comforter.

“Tsukimi-chan, we—”

“Goodnight,” I said more firmly, and blindly groped for my cat. Kasha grumbled a little, but obligingly curled into my embrace as we curled up for the night.

When sleep finally took me, I didn’t dream at all that night.
It's been a while, huh? And... against all odds, Addendum has officially broken 100,000 words! As a reminder, you can hit up my Tumblr and look at some Tsukimi Gaiden bonus content and fan-content, which is gorgeous and unspeakably precious to me.

For those wondering, Tsukimi was getting déjà vu over the fact that Sakura and Naruto were basically wearing these iconic outfits from an illustration way back in the day, with the only difference being Sakura's hair is still short and she's actually wearing an underlayer.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!