To deserve all this shit in my last life I had to be the sort of person who stood on top of a transmission tower during thunderstorm in wet, copper Master Chief's cosplay, shouting "All the Gods are nitwits!"
All in Red

She never met another soul who liked pigeons. Seriously, who in their right mind would? They had buggy eyes and with them they relentlessly looked into her soul until she threw a rock at them or something. Last of all these birds were just too arrogant, honestly believing they could ran her hidden village like some missing-nins gang. And today they were everywhere! No matter where she turned, there already was a pigeon staring at her, the girl's own worst nightmare – so she did one possible thing.

She gritted her teeth, glared at these feathery monsters with her violet eyes and ran. The child's feet were made to travel at speed and as light as the paws of a cat. Heart strong, breathing steady - this child was born to run. She bolted down through the harbor's streets like a hunter-nin after his prey. She quickened her pace to an all-out sprint as bird shrieks rose into the air in a cloud of feathers. Nevertheless the uproar disappeared in the sounds of the bustling village and its loud citizens.

Uzushiogakure was not one of the big hidden villages, nevertheless it was full of life mainly because of its people. The majority of the residents came from the Uzumaki bloodline so it was normal to see streets bursting with redheads of all kinds. Anyone could say they were a loud and lively bunch. The girl proved it laughing. People think of laughing as a noise that comes from the mouth, but when she laughed it was nothing like that. The laugh was in her eyes, in the way her face changed into that image of happiness and unrestrained mirth. However to tell the truth, it wasn't in her face either. This laugh came from within, it was just the way she was.

She had not stopped laughing even when she went through two streets and ran across the bridge. It arched elegantly over the clear blue water. At first glance, it seemed calm and peaceful, but underneath the surface were violent currents that would whisk away anyone who dared to touch it. Stone bridges were the only way to cross it if you were not a shinobi, for the deadly waters split the entire land in parts. The swirling waters, shimmering in the sunlight, were the reason for naming her homeland – the Village Hidden by Whirling Tides in the Land of Whirlpools.

For her it was the best place in the entire world. Pale stone palaces and towering columns were squashed against modern buildings, some rising up to five stories tall. Two narrow arms of sparkling water carved the city into three parts and a placid sea stretched around, peppered with countless ships which like the buildings served as homes, shops, restaurants and everything else. Despite the huge amount of boats it was not a port city. Trade was conducted almost exclusively with allied Konoha. After all, Uzu was a hidden village and had many enemies.

Hostile tides were not the only defense of the city. Anyone who wanted to conquer their border had to go through the gate, otherwise would encounter the force thanks to which all reckoned with them. Fuinjutsu – skill of the sealing was a closely guarded treasure of the Uzumaki clan, whose secrets came to know very few outside of their village. It was a feared and highly apprised shinobi art. Many would kill for it. Many would kill to get rid of it and many would gawk at marvelous pillars with complicated swirls of seals that stood throughout the village maintaining a protective barrier around Uzu; but not the girl. She passed them without a glance and with impetus fell into the old building near the main market.

Inside it, dust collected everywhere as far as the girl could see, spider webs wove around scrolls, books and shelves. Few tables were littered with brushes, ink bottles and torn papers. Dust floated lazily in the air causing her a difficult time breathing, and every step put more of it in to the air. All she could hear were the scurrying feet of people accompanied by the faint chirps of seagulls outside and the rustling of papers from the nearby corner.
The last sound was created by a small child quickly leafing through old sketchbooks, taking notes. Purple eyes glittered with mischief and in the next moment the girl stood behind the smaller redhead, ruthlessly carrying out a tickle attack.

"Kushina-san, please stop," pleaded the squeaky voice between volleys of laughter.

"What have I told you about this whole san crap? For you it's Kushina-nechan, dettabane!?!"

The child was not able to answer through a particularly severe attack that ended so quickly and suddenly as it had begun, leaving Kushina empty-handed.

"Seriously, Kushina-chan, stop bothering my little sis. Even if she's nothing more than a pompous, grumpy squirrel."

The seven year old gawked at three years older girl that was her role model. For Kushina, Uzumaki Suzu was the epitome of coolness. With long, coral hair, fair skin and golden heart-stopping eyes she was something boys called eye candy, but only when Suzu could not hear them. Otherwise she would kick their asses. Kushina knew with the certainty of a seven year old that Suzu could kick every ass in all Elemental Nations if she only wanted and one thing stopping her was Yori obaasan – at least two hundred years old, cranky witch who was one of Uzu's elders and grandmother of these two sisters.

"But Shiori-chan always has a stick up in her ass. She never wants to play, so my super-cool-tickling-attack is the only way for her to loosen up, dettabane!"

"Come on, Kushina-chan, give up on this shrimp. Why you need her when you have us!"

"Yeah!"

The Uzumaki princess was locked between two young boys with smiles three times too big for their identical faces. The twins bounced on their feet like they were dancing to music only they could hear. Kushina thought it could be the case, her parents said that Isao and Hisao were a few feathers short of a whole duck – whatever it meant. They were also tall, scrawny and had matching scars on their elbows and knees that distinguished them as resident troublemakers. With her they formed the Uzu tripled terror squad to whom Suzu-sempai took unofficial tutoring in ways of awesome shinobi moves, even more awesome fuinjutsu and the most awesome pranks.

"Besides the last time Suzu-sempai promised to play ninja with us," reminded one of the boys, probably Isao.

The oldest girl assessed three pairs of hopeful eyes in front of her and sighed theatrically.

"Well," she started, glancing at her sibling - that all the time she had hanging upside down by the ankle – and encountering brows furrowed in heavy disapproval, what only increased her internal glee. "You know that I'm chunin now and I shouldn't waste my precious time with a bunch of kids… but I suppose that in all my awesomeness I shall play with you the most marvelous ninja game in history of Uzu!"

All kids cheered loudly – minus the one still dangling upside down – and began to shout ideas for their made-up most marvelous mission, not paying attention to the quiet but annoyed voice reminding them, they should finish the fuinjutsu lessons that Yori obaasan told them to do.

While having fun, time went by inhumanly fast. Kushina could swear that in one moment she was in the Uzumaki clan library and in the second she struggled through the crowded streets of the village along with her beloved Senpai and twins. It was the time of the equinox festival and unrestrained joy,
rebellion of colors that lit up the autumn's day so it could rival with any gardener's paradise. Music filled the air, festive beats lifted the spirits and made the people want to move, jump and sing. It was a time to celebrate being alive, celebrate the wonders of creation and be one with the community. The air tasted so heavenly, every delicious thing ready to be shared with friends.

Tonight she was a proud Uzu kunoichi, cloaked and masked like an ANBU she pretended to be. Around each of her wrist hung a delicate metal chain that clanked as she walked. Next to Kushina walked the most important Kage in the world, ten years old that wore the leader hat like a pro. But for Suzu it was not about sweets and performing ninja. Tonight, the world was her stage and she fed on the drama through her skin. She was not really walking. The young chunin marched, head high, chin out, arms moving like she was leading the clouds above. For Kushina she was.

Unfortunately, even her Sempai could not compete with the privileges of her parents, who pulled her away from her friends toward the elegant restaurant, where she was seated at a lavishly set table where apart from her family sat three ninja from Konoha. To tell the truth, they did not look so special. Only one with odd, spiky silver hair and kind eyes attracted her attention, maybe because he was making funny faces behind the menu when no one except of her could see him.

They were talking about Third Mizukage illness, some Hanzo guy, First Hokage grandchildren and upcoming Kushina's family moving to Konoha. With this last subject, the girl stopped listening. Long ago, she told her mom and dad that if they wanted to move out they could. She won't go anywhere from here. The small redhead sighed, looking out of the window. Everywhere she looked warm faces of children and adults grinned back at her. Almost no-one walked anywhere, they danced, skipped, jogged, jumped, hopped and wiggled. It was the day when extraordinary was the norm and just being alive was a riot. And she had to sit here and listen to boring adults talk while outside she could hear cheers getting louder and louder with every second. It was unfair, dettabane!

And then with one moment everything changed.

There were many enormous explosions. It was as though a fist of orange flame had decided to punch its way out of the ground. Windows shattered. Smoke and fire rushed out. Thousands of pieces of glass, steel and wood showered down. Piercing and deafening screams erupted from everywhere. A series of new flashes broke out and then a great gush of flame arose. A column of some gas must have rushed up into the empty air space created by the explosions because the next blast of flame came nearly three thousand feet above the ground, and great rags of fire, changing from red to violet and back through the spectrum to red again, raised and then turned back being restrained by a barrier that had to protect the village against outside threats. Rains of fire and molten rock fell on Uzushiogakure.

Kushina could taste smoke and the stench of burned paint on her tongue, could feel the heat of rising fire on her skin, see people fleeing in panic; and then she could not. She was in her father's arms and they were running faster than she had ever thought possible. The girl was safe with her dad, he was one of the best shinobi in Uzu, and nothing could go wrong when she was with him. The only problem was a blast that sent them through the wall of a nearby building.

Her back hurt just like her arm. Kushina sat in agony and semi-blindness among the chaos. Her father was fighting with six bad shinobi at once. There were shining chakra chains and small explosions, kunais gleaming in the warm red light. Everywhere was so much red.

A hand grabbed her hair from behind and pulled, exposing her neck in front of which shone katana's blade already covered in red, the same color as her hair. Then the sword was gone along with the arm that held it. The enemy shinobi roared but the next seal silenced him. His head exploded covering her Sempai in reddish paint.
"Kushina-chan, we must go." She had never heard the older girl so calm and cold. She always was like the sun, warm and caring. It was wrong!

"But what with otochan?" She asked with trembling voice. She could not leave him. He was still fighting with bad ninjas.

Suzu did not listen to her. She grabbed the little girl in her arms and ran in the opposite direction than everyone else. People fled to the water, trying to get off of the island, but the young kunoichi knew that the barrier would not allow it. The next opponent shunshined before them in a cloud of water and charged. The girl dodged to the side in one fluid move. Her enemy twisted in their direction. His menacing eyes were blazing and his black hood made the rest of his features blurry. The opponent thrust his sword forward, only to be met by Suzu's sandal. Her second foot met with his scull leaving there explosive seal. Kushina had not seen what happened to him after that. Sempai ran.

There were more explosions and bad ninjas. Kushina was left for a moment in the protective barrier so the older girl could fight freely. Then they ran again but Uzu kunoichi's breathing was heavier, more labored and deeper. They moved slower, Suzu was tired but also she carried a bigger weight because at some point Shiori-chan had appeared in the other arm of the preteen.

The youngest of the girls was quiet. The only sign of her anxiety were squeezed, trembling knuckles, holding her sister's bloody yukata. Kushina wanted to reassure her, say that everything would be fine; but she could not utter a word. It was not that she was afraid. Actually she did not feel anything at all.

Sempai abruptly stopped in the middle of a burning street. They were before Uzu's administrative building. Kushina often came nearby with her mother for a ramen. Here it was the best in the whole village. They both loved it. She was curious what had happened to her mom. When she saw an approaching shadow in the smoke, she thought it was her, but it was only the odd konoha shinobi.

"I'm sorry, but I can take only one. I don't have enough chakra," he said. His eyes were not kind anymore, they were empty.

Before anyone could think what to do, Shiori-chan pushed her out of Suzu's embrace into the arms of the silver-haired man.

"Go, now," she whispered solemnly through chapped lips.

There was no room to argue because the two sisters were gone and the odd man started to sink into the ground along with her.

Black replaced everything red.

"Kushina!"

The redhead woman woke up faster than a cat in ice-water. Every sense urged her to claw her way to stand up but something on her chest was stopping her. After a while, violet eyes adjusted to a faint glow from a street providing enough light to illuminate gentle and worried face above her.

"Minato?" She needed to make sure it was him. She needed him.

"It's ok. Everything'll be ok," he repeated it like a mantra, until she believed him. As Minato stroked her ruby hair the woman's breathing calmed. Then he began to sing the lullaby he had always sung to Kakashi when he was a little boy who had just lost his father and did not know what to do or think.
Kushina's tears had stopped, leaving only their tell-tale wet tracks down her face.

"I must do something, Minato. I don't want to see it every night. I just cannot."

"Whatever you need, love, whatever you need."

Heartfelt thanks to mrsmiawallace88 - the best beta ever ^^
Obito did not consider himself too arrogant - no one in the Elemental Nations was as arrogant as Kakashi (that stupid bastard). The young Uchiha’s dream to become Hokage was a completely natural thing; he was after all a damn good ninja. However, despite his innate modesty, Obito sometimes could not get rid of the impression that the whole world revolved around him. Otherwise, how was it possible that every time, he went to meet team seven, no matter how early he would have left, he was always (seriously always) late? And what was the worst, it was never truly his fault!

If not some old lady needed help carrying her shopping or painting the fence, then some idiotic cat could not get down from a tree, what resulted in a bunch of crying children. Seriously, what was the possibility that almost every cat Obito met had the same climbing indisposition in feline nature?! In all this little coincidences was something abnormal, as if some higher force had planned everything just to give the stupid bastard more reasons to glare at him.

Ok, maybe being late was not a good thing, but at least he was trying. Exactly like now.

The boy ran as quickly as his twelve year old legs could carry him, bolting through the roofs like any of these freakish cats should; quickening his pace to an all-out sprint. The pounding noise of his ninja sandals hitting the tiles with a clanging echo that matched the heart throbbing inside his chest with the thick frustration he felt.

Completely ignoring two junins standing before Hokage’s office window, the dark-haired teen jumped into it and with a grace of a drunk cow landed in the middle of the room, focusing all present eyes on him. Sensei’s blues were more resigned than disappointed, recognizing that this one of his cute students, would always be late, Hokage present or not. The mentioned old man’s eyes were blank, at least as far as Obito could tell, because right now clouds of smoke from Third’s pipe hid them rather well. Rin’s doe-like pools of brown were sympathetic and comforting – his sweet Rin, Obito could turn into a puddle of warm goo right now and there. Her eyes were so comforting, totally different than the grey ones, so dark that they were nearly black, yet they were not cold, just mocking. The bastard’s glare was so smug, so knowing that he screwed up again.

Unfortunately, all of this was a norm, at least for him. He had known how they would react even before entering the office. Nevertheless, there was the last gaze which he did not expect. As if the bastard was not enough, next to Minato-sensei stood another bane of young Uchiha existence. The Uzumaki woman was rude, loud, bold and energetic like a stoned bunny; Obito could not fathom how their cool teacher could be with someone like that. Well… it was not true. Even he had to admit that Kushina was attractive. Men had to rip their eyes away from her every time she walked into a room. There was sunshine in her smile and her voice went right to a brain like a shot of baijiu. But now one of her brows slanted in strong disapproval while she cracked her knuckles. The redhead tried to catch him, but thank goodness sensei was faster.

Hokage was a rather patient man but he had seen enough of his shinobi antics to know that sometimes it was the best to stop their squabbles before they began, at least if he thought about making it for a dinner with his wife and sons; unfortunately, in times of war it was almost an impossible feat.

“Uzumaki Kushina, Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Obito and Nohara Rin,” he began causing an immediate silence. “The four of you were requested for a B rank. It’s an escort mission to the old ruins. There, you will help the client find and examine fuinjutsu formulas. On the way back, team seven will perform one more mission, this time D rank. Do you accept?”
He was answered by harmonious “Hai, Hokage-sama!”

Hokage gave to the adults their scrolls with the mission details and took a solid breath of smoke from his wooden pipe.

“So, Sensei is going with us?” asked Rin blinking questioningly at Kushina.

The woman reading their scroll opened her mouth to answer but the next moment her lips formed perfect “o” only to slam with a loud smack. The air in the room froze. Nothing moved except of the beautiful, ruby locks that had already begun to float and divide into nine parts.

“Minato…” it was a whisper resembling arctic tundra that at any moment could turn into a raving volcano and explode in the face of sheepish golden-haired junin.

Said junin was smart. He ran.

Ω

“What, in the name of Rikudō Sennin, where you thinking? No, wait, have you even thought at all?”

“Listen, Kushina…”

“Don’t listen to me now, mister, dattebane!”

Minato dodged behind their kitchen table. The cookbook flew through the spot where his head was second before, and broke an elegant vase they got from Hizashi’s wife. Well, it’s good he never liked it. Hyuga’s sophisticated taste was a little too much for him. But when the raging woman grabbed his current reading material he reacted.

In the blink of an eye, Minato was behind her, closing trembling with anger redhead in firm but gentle embrace.

“I was worried, ok?” he tried to reason with her. “You had this nightmares like forever but the last two months was a living hell. Every day you were waking up screaming and crying. The previous few nights you were too scared to even try to sleep.”

“It would be better in time! It always is,” she protested.

“When? You are a kunoichi, Kushina, and sleep deprivation is a serious thing. Few more nights like this and you would be too exhausted to focus properly. You could die.” He spoke clearly, in a snappy tone, his sharp eyes never leaving the lovely red before him. He buried his nose in thick curls and inhaled her scent. Sandal wood and oranges, it was intoxicating.

“They practically never sent me out of the Village, especially now and you know it,” her protests were weaker, calmer.

“With every passing day you’re going mad and I with you. I didn’t know what to do, so I asked Inoichi. He said that confronting your fears should make it better.”

“So you dragged it to the Hokage,” her voice had a mocking and bitter edge to it.

“Actually, no,” he denied. “And I asked Inoichi also not to do it. Sarutobi-sama thinks it’s just my curiosity about Uzu shielding system. It could be useful to Konoha. He thinks you’re a little apprehensive about it, that’s all.”
She snorted at that.

“...A little apprehensive my ass. I totally freaked out in his office.”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t the best way to inform you…”

“You think?” She huffed, at least not wanting to throttle him anymore. “And now I will have to bear your team for at least a week”.

“Come on, it won’t be so bad. You know you like them, especially Obito”.

“The brat”, she huffed with a hint of sympathy, putting her hands on Minato’s arms that were still around her. “But you know, I have an idea how you can make it up for me”.

The blond man feeling her hands, slowly going to his shoulders, had an inkling of what she had in mind.

“Oh, pray tell…” his lips smirked before sliding to her neck for a kiss.

“My eyes!” an unexpected shriek of the young Uchiha snatched the lovers from their blissful unawareness. “What the heck, Sensei, it’s the middle of a day?! At least get a room!”

“We’re in our own home, brat!”

Minato sweet dropped. He would never be able to keep up with the temper of his princess or his team craziness. Sometimes it was easier just to let it go.

Ω

They were traveling for two days now and steadily approaching the ruins. It turned out that their client was no one else but Minato-sensei and objective - the Village Hidden in the Whirlpools, the old home of the Uzumaki clan. Konoha’s resident Uzumaki was getting quieter with every step they took. Even Obito jumping from tree to tree in complete silence could feel the somber mood. Gone was their usual bickering and Kakashi’s taunts.

The mountains were getting lower and the forest thinner. At dawn of the second day, they jumped from branches and ran on grass. When they stopped on a seaside cliff, the redhead uttered a low, painful whimper. Kushina wanted to cry, shinobi training be damned, but she knew that if she started, she would not be able to stop upcoming tears. The warm fingers wrapped around her hand reassuringly, making it clear that she was not alone in this.

Thanks to chakra control they easily crossed the treacherous waters surrounding the islands and stood in the middle of something that once was a Hidden Village. The three young chunins were growing up during the war, but until now they had not seen it long-term consequences. The streets that once thronged with life stood empty. There were no food vendors and the women with bright hair selling hand made goods from carts and baskets; no children who played amongst the crowds with their games and laughter; no shops with windows of fine clothing or fuinjutsu scrolls. Now even in morning sun all they could find was the dusty street with only the wind for company.

Uzu was a skeleton, stripped of its flesh long ago. All that remained was the concrete structures themselves, no glass, and no wood, nothing that could be used. Though the air was blowing as fresh as any sea breeze, this was a graveyard with unburied dead and the last standing Uzumaki was emotional bankrupt. There was nothing left to feel, nothing left to say, nothing left but the void that enveloped her mind in swirling blackness but before she could take a step back to run, there was a sound of vomit.
Green faced Obito was leaning on a nearby boulder that had once been a part of one of the famous barrier pillars. She knew there was the reason the boy was her favorite. He was not a very good shinobi, heck, he was pretty awful at it but contrary to his vocation, he was a good human being. Kushina was not alone here, there were others and she was responsible for them. She looked at Minato and for the first time in long time she had no remorse, no regrets that she was alive when they were not.

“We should go to the main barrier center, it’s somewhere in the middle of the Village but I don’t know where exactly. I’ve never actually been inside.”

The blond man nodded and they went forward. As they walked on, the ruins seemed to be larger and more ragged, as if they were explored multiple times. Minato thought that with Uzumaki’s fuinjutsu reputation it had to be true. Finding old seals in here was only an excuse, but since they were already in Uzu, they might as well look around. There could be something previous expeditions overlooked. Fuinjutsu was a tricky art and Kushina and he were one of the best of its masters.

“Rin, go with Kushina, Kakashi with Obito. If you find something interesting use flares. Kids, don’t touch anything. This place, even after so many years, could be full of traps.”

The Uchiha protested but no one was listening. Why he always had to be paired with oh so perfect Kakashi? Why he could not go with Rin-chan? Hell, even Kushina would be better.

“Come on, dead last, you heard Sensei.” Kakashi not waiting for him had disappeared around the corner.

The Village was a dreadful sight, everything here was so silent and still, but of course the bastard was able to completely ignore it. The silver-haired boy thoroughly scoured every nook and cranny, not giving a thought about people who lived and died here. The remains of the buildings were covered with growing greenery that in the end would probably consume all Uzu ruins.

Obito sighed and followed Kakashi, pulling with chakra on nearby bushes and pinning their leaves to his body. Maybe he could scare the bastard pretending to be a forest monster?

“What are you doing, idiot?” as if reading his mind Hatake appeared behind the boy, giving him a nice heart attack. As clearly as sun at sky, it was followed by an exchange of insults typical for these teenagers and even few kicks and hits; what left sulking and battered Obito walking away from his adversary.

“Stupid, heartless, arrogant, selfish, pushy, bossy, holier than thou bastard. If I wanted to kill myself I'd climb his ego and jump to his IQ.” It was not true that Obito hated him, well not exactly. It was just that if Kakashi was on fire and the Uchiha had water, he would drink it.

“Rules this, rules that blah, blah, blah. He’s so high and mighty but I’m sure the bastard doesn’t even know what he’s looking for.” Obito obviously would never admit that he also did not know what he was supposed to find. Frustrated, he intended to pick off a stick and break it into hundreds of small pieces imaging it to be Kakashi’s stupid face. Unfortunately, there were no bushes within reach. Actually nowhere nearby grew any plants.

The boy climbed on the highest, protruding from nearest rubble pillar and looked around. Empty, bare terrain had the shape of a perfect circle. He, Uchiha Obito and not Kaka-baka, had found something. The young chunin could not stop overwhelming him with glee.

With a big smile he ran toward Kakashi to show him who was the true boss here, only to feel the ground underneath his boots give-way. A small gasp left his lips as his arms flailed in the fading
light, gravity taking him down and he let out a scream. After a few moments Obito splashed into frigid water right up to his chest, the air knocked from his lungs. Once blinking the splashes of dirty water away he squinted upwards, the remaining sunlight barely was a small circle in the distance.

“Obito?!?” Kakashi’s flabbergasted voice echoed in the stone tunnel.

“Fetch Sensei and Kushina! I’ve found something.”

Kakashi muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *fortune favors the fool* and disappeared from sight.

It turned out that the tunnel that Obito discovered, was exactly what they were looking for. It was one of the entrances to the barrier facility, which emergency protocol included not only total shut down and an entire mountain of most deadly seals but also something that left Minato speechless for a few minutes after which his silence changed into full sized gawking and delighted squeaks. Kushina called it an eight-pointed bloodline star seal, preventing anyone but full-fledged Uzumaki from the main family to break it and enter.

It took them three hours but they were able to pass in. The cave changed into corridors leading down and then into gigantic caverns. It was a dimly lit fuinjutsu laboratory; nothing but lines of standing huge, arrayed stone blocks met their eyes. There was no movement of any kind. The lights like the stars in a night sky did little to lift the blackness, showing only the most deeply grooved swirls of texts that children could not make sense of. It was like sorcerer’s den just in the size of a stadium, with black endless roof above and white shiny floor below. Every step echoed around, not loudly, but enough to give away their position.

For a moment Obito considered going back on the surface but then he stopped, they all did. Stopped moving and breathing, while their hearts sped up to running ANBU’s rate. What they had thought to be abandoned shambles was nothing of the sort.

Kushina’s skin was greyed in a way that made it look thicker, gristlier, as if all the blood had reached into her core or drained into the shining floor. It hung on her skull like pastry draped over a cut apple. The awful hollowness, the waves of misery threatened to engulf her mind, body and soul. In that moment even Kakashi could sympathize with her. In that suspended moment, a fraction of a second drawn out to eternity, his brain offered an explanation and yet rejected it at the same time.

What they had perceived to be a next odd block laying on the ground was a barrier seal. The lights glowed in its lines. They moved in great swaying bands of color like a living organism, giving birth to soaring sparks dancing into air, creating a dome.

“Sensei, Kushina-san, something is there.”

Rin was right. Something lay not only inside of the barrier, but partly also on the outside. It was the lower part of the body, or rather what was left of it. The bones were covered by small, weathered cloak. Normally they would treat it like a next corpse, they were ninja, and they had seen dozens if not hundreds of bodies but it was not normal. Someone who loved this corpse was in their group. That was when the atmosphere changed, when the present shinobi started to feel the strain.

Children and Minato tensed but for Kushina it was only another proof of the past horrors that plagued her since they set out on this damned mission. Seeing Senpai like that was painful like shit nevertheless other things were far more important.

“We must unseal it.” Her tone was urgent and nervous.
“Kushina…”

“You don’t understand, Minato. It’s special kind of Uzumaki Sealing Technique. It creates not only a protective barrier but also something like a stasis seal.”

“Wait, you mean that whoever is inside could be alive? But how? I’ve never even heard of anything like that.” He remarked doubtfully.

“It was more of a theory that practical seal because it requires huge energy inputs. Suzu-senpai probably connected the key seal with energy loop of Uzu barrier making closed correlation of six degree, fine-tuning their amplitudes.”

Obito understood exactly the whole nothing of what the two fuinjutsu masters said and were doing but looking at the half of corpse made him want to vomit. Minutes and hours passed but for the young Uchiha as well it could be days in this hellhole. His thoughts became nonsense about Kakashi’s superiority and he knew he was falling asleep.

He woke to the noise of arguing adults and light poking. It had to be Rin, his other teammate would treat him with a kick in the head. Next nudge to his ribs made him jerk awake to see the young kunoichi’s smiling face.

"Sorry, Obito. I had to wake you up because you weren't listening.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” protested the boy wiping the last signs of sleep out of his eyes.

“Of course you weren’t.” Kakashi kept his tone cold and monotone, the blackness of the room reflecting in his unmoving eyes like shards of void. “You’re drooling even when awake.”

“You…”

“Could you two stop?” the girl’s tone was sharp and begging for mercy at the same time. It was not only known whether she begged for herself, or for them when she finally lost her patience. The Nohara girl was kunoichi and every kunoichi was a feral beast when irritated.

“We should be ready to retreat if necessary” declared Kakashi, deciding to ignore Rin’s whole existence, yet stopping his jabs. “Sensei and Kushina-san may end taking out the barrier even if they don’t know how everything’ll react.”

Kakashi’s posture clearly gave away what the boy thought about this unnecessary risk but his devotion for Minato’s judgment outclassed attachment to rules.

It was one of the rare times when Obito was glad he did not had a sharingan. Having in his head the picture of red faced, fuming Kushina and disgruntled Sensei was not a happy perspective. The memory of their kissing was more than enough for him. The mentioned woman shrieked and slammed a hand into the shimmering wall of chakra, apparently against her boyfriend’s protests.

There was not a flash of light, loud noise nor quite a pop. In one moment the barrier was in place and in the next it was not. Nevertheless, for sure in place was the second part of the corpse that was breathing. Obito stood there gaping when Kakashi shunshined next to Sensei ready to strike and Rin was already forming Mystical Palm Jutsu, but the eyes of the half decomposed girl stopped her. They were frightened yet after focusing on Kushina the gold irises held a sudden content.

“Good” was the only word that left her lips before they froze in an eternal smile.

Surprisingly it was Obito who broke the silence.
“We should move her, otherwise the blood will reach the kid.”

Kushina whined again, it was disturbing how much of pathetic noises gave off the woman in the last few hours. More disturbing was the fact that they had not noticed a pool of blood leaking from fresh part of the body or the next, smaller one lying in center of the barely glowing seal.

The kid was young, dirty yet unmistakable cute. If they did not know better, they would say the little girl was sleeping while having a bad dream.

“Shiori-chan…” Kushina could not believe in it.

“Kushina, stop.” As if confirming a warning of the blue-eyed man, the cave rocked on its foundations. “She should wake up. Something went wrong.”

“We can’t leave her.” it came out as a low, harsh, angered wheeze.

“We won’t.” He said in all calm seriousness and Kushina couldn't quite understand how he could do that in this moment of pure panic. She could almost cry or maybe bite him. “The seal is still working, keeping her in stasis. Responsible formula must be somewhere else. The two of us must find it while the kids will watch her. Kakashi, if she wakes up or something goes wrong send your dogs.”

The masked boy nodded and the adults were gone in a flash.

Team seven sat quietly around the seal, glancing cautiously at the child and the ceiling. It would have been wiser to go back outside, but they just could not leave their sensei and Kushina in here.

It was dark, darker the further down they went, their ears nearly popping from the rapid descend into the vast depths of the underground base. It was far larger than any of them thought so they decided to split. Checking all passed seals Minato pushed forward, his focused eyes scouring the vast expanse of black void that laid out before him. He felt a stab of lingering chakra if only just barely. In fact ever since they came in here, he could barely feel anything even if it was right in front of him, and not knowing why really unnerved him. It was like everything in this damn place was a ghost, only an image that wasn't really there.

Almost ready to believe it was all a mistake, an imagining of a nervous mind, his eyes caught a glimpse of a much darker swirl of a seal on the ground nearby and he instantly changed his direction.

Ω

The child stirred. It was not sluggish as it should be after nearly twenty years of sleep. The girl abruptly sat and looked at them with large plates of molten gold, blinked and muttered something that for Obito sounded like a total gibberish.

Rin being the sweet and caring soul she was, hurried up to the disturbed child.

“Hello, sweetie, how are you?” she asked with the gentleness of summer breeze.

The small girl blinked once more and Obito thought that no one should be allowed to have eyes like that. They were too adorable.

“My name is Rin and that’s Kakashi-kun and…”

“I'm Obito-kun.” he cooed butting in, giving Rin time to look her up and down for any visible
“What’s your name?”

“It’s nice to meet you all, Obito-san. I’m Uzumaki Shiori, age five. I like reading, sweets and sunny days; please take care of me.” With a wide grin plastered on her face, she bowed so low that she hit the ground with her forehead. “Ouch…”

Two thirds of team seven was officially sold. Well, more like three fourth because Sensei also was there. Obito could hear his joyful laughter. It echoed through the halls and into each and every corner of the cave, announcing the arrival of the blond junin.

The girl found herself in the arms of the kneeling man in one fluid move.

“And my name’s Minato. It’s lovely to meet you, Shiori-chan.”

Obito could not stop a snicker seeing these big, innocent eyes unable to unglue themselves from Minato. He had the kind of face that stopped people in their paths. The Uchiha guessed Sensei had to get used to it, that swift pause in a person’s normal expression when they looked his way, followed by overcorrecting with a weak smile. Of course, the blush that went along with it was a dead giveaway. It did not help that he was so modest with it, it made the ladies fall for him even more. Regardless of all the opportunity that came his way he was a one-woman-man.

“Hello” the little redhead stammered out at last, earning another heart stopping smile.

“Shiori-chan, Rin-chan here is a medic-nin. You know what they do, right?” a nod and quiet hum answered him. “Great, then she’ll examine you, ok?”

After one more nod the teenage kunoichi got to work. The small Uzumaki with awe admired green light dancing from older girl’s hands.

“You’re so cool, Rin-san, and pretty.”

The girl blushed from the praise.

“Thank you. You’re also a pretty and healthy little girl.”

“If everything is all right, we should find Kushina and get going.” Announced the man, hoisting up the child. “What you say, Shiori-chan?”

“I’d be glad to go. I don’t like it here very much, Minato-san.”

“You don’t have to be so formal, little one.” He assured ruffling her hair. “You can call me aniki or however you want.”

“I’ll also be your Obito-nii, what do you say?”

Two blinks of molten gold later the girl chewed her lips.

“Obito-nii and Mini-nii?”

Sensei was beaming, Obito could feel it but none of them could say anything, because an accusing shout tore the air.

“What the hell are you doing?”

No one on team seven could understand what got into the spitfire of a woman standing in the doorway. They thought she would be beaming even more than Sensei, who was beaming mainly for
sake of his girlfriend and her newfound family.

“Kushina?” Minato was bewildered like hardly ever before.

“Not you, Minato, her!” the redhead pointed an accusing finger at the sweet child while she approached them. The three teenagers reasonably took a few steps back. “Why you’re so childish, dattebane?!!

Shiori’s shy smile lingered for a moment before it vanished completely.

“I’m five. No one can accuse me of being too premature and cute.”

“You never were premature, even in your diapers; and who told anything about being cute?”

One Uzumaki was forced everyone must reckon with, but two was able to turn the world upside-down and inside-out. In some odd twist of time and space the little redhead was in the arms of her cousin who tried to hug, nuggy or break her neck – Obito was not sure which one. Shiori has shown admirable defense putting her elbow in use, pushing it in Kushina’s face. Suddenly the little one cased her brave resistance and went limp.

“Shiori-chan?” Kushina’s sharp glare cased and became concerned seeing the child’s uneasiness.

“Kushina-san, that’s Suzu-onesan, right?

Everyone froze. They were certain that someone so short could not see the corpse that Kakashi moved away but failed to take into account the girl gained height when lifted up.

“Yes.”

Kushina’s straightforward answer seemed a little too harsh to Obito, but on the other hand how could anyone say something like that any gentler? The girl’s brows furrowed as her mouth turned grim. Her unique eyes seemed to reflect the black of the cavern. Her size said she was five or six years old, but her gaze showed that she was far older than that. Obito guessed a war and death could make everyone like this; felt like they had grown a thousand years older though it had been just a few heartbeats.

“I know it’s hard and you don’t understand many things right now but we should bury her or something.” Continued the uncertain woman. “Do you know how she wanted to be…?”

“Burn her.”

The dark-haired boy expected shouts and tears – not an answer.

“Suzu-senpai wanted to…?”

“I don’t know and it doesn’t matter. Funerals are for the living not for the dead”.

In that one moment Obito knew that the little, sweet looking girl was nothing like Kushina and the thought frightened him.

All my thanks to all you guys who have reviewed/faved/alerted/lurked/read. I adore all of you, and of course mrsmiawallace88 as well, who is as invaluable and awesome as ever. Until next time ^^
Broken things

As a certain cliché says: death is a part of life; and no matter how well-worn it is, that does not make it any less true. You never know how it feels, or what happens or where you go after you die. Most of the time you are too busy to think about it. The rest - you are either too scared to think or you believe that you still have a lot of time to think about that. The majority of the elder people goes to some kind of worship place and prays in hopes of good afterlife, but they also do not want to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it even if they tried – she knew, because she also died and failed in this regard (unfortunately quite literally).

Death came to her like a shot from behind. One moment she was writing her reports for CERN and IAEA, drinking her fifth coffee that day and listening to the new Tony Bennett album, the next she was gone. The stroke gave her perhaps a half second of confusion and then it was “lights out”. Given that we all have to die somehow; it was a surprisingly polite end for a rather impolite woman.

To tell the truth, all this time she had not known whether she died or was still lying in coma in some pitiful, grayish hospital room, while her brain once again proved that it was far from normal.

She had never before thought much about death because she was a rather ambitious however lazy overachiever, when suddenly she just stopped to be; only to open her eyes to overwhelming light and enormous hands gripping her poor bum. She would say this to whoever wanted to listen: thank goodness that people don’t remember their birth and early childhood, it would scar them for life. There are some offenses that are unpardonable. Can you have any idea what it was like? Confined in a non-cooperating body, treated like a mindless puppy? Right now, her memories were a selective thing but then time wasn’t moving any faster than normally. It was worse; in that hell it crawled at a snail pace. She got more bitter and angry with every passing day, to the one when her supposedly new, six-year-old sister had a splendid idea and took her for a walk. Just imagine the level of crushing her idiocy when the older girl started to walk up on the wall with the woman’s new toddler form in her arms. Naturally she started to shriek like a skinned baboon. Her wannabe sister tried to calm down the infant, bribing her with sweets and explaining the mechanism of chakra – she had a faint grasp of the new language but hearing the magic word, she began to scream like a whole herd.

So here she was in the world of some stupid manga she read one night when she was looking after her nephew and had nothing else to do. The little monster was sucked to her like a leech and fell asleep when within the woman’s easy reach was only a collection of “Naruto” volumes. But back to the topic… she made a plan, a really good one. She was going to become a seal-master, abandon Uzu and the Land of Fire, then offer her services for the Hidden Cloud. From what she remembered it was one of the most powerful Hidden Villages, with no records of any invasions or other disasters. It would be a good, luxury and boring life, away from the main plot and its tragedies.

And then was the day when fate, gods or her brain (however she was no longer inclined to the last option, because her mind had never before showed masochistic tendencies; sociopathic – yes, even very often, but never masochistic) told her to officially screw up – the day of the attack.

The woman in a baby body didn’t let herself to care about her new family or anyone else for the matter. Truth be told the only Uzumaki she was able to remotely tolerate was her cranky grandmother, but caring for someone? It was ridiculous. There was simply no point in it. For her it would be like caring about chickens bred for slaughter. She knew it sounded terrible, but it was true and denying it would be pure hypocrisy. People died all the time, in this world and all the others. In Africa thousands of kids were recruited to terrorist armies and no one waiting for a green light on
way to work, eating French fries in a McDonalds or doing shopping tried to prevent it, so why should she do it here? Dying people weren’t the issue. The only problem for her was the timing. It was way too soon! She wasn’t able to run away before shinobi hit the Village. There was no house they wouldn’t enter, no shop or alley. She stood there as the life was choked out of almost every man, woman and child, but she felt no sadness or emotion of any kind; there were no rushed heartbeats or tears to dwell in her resigned apathetic eyes. There was only the girl she refused to call sister.

The reborn woman was still breathing only thanks to Suzu’s one tracked mind and its inability to admit a failure. Her… their grandmother left Shiori in her older sister’s care as her main responsibility. You can believe it or not but honor, duty and all the rest of this shit were taken here very seriously. Uzumaki Suzu was a loud and irritating person, but one of the best the reborn woman had ever met, counting both worlds.

Unfortunately, the lone memento that was left after the older Uzumaki sister was a smell of burned flesh none of them would be able to forget to the end of their lives.

The funeral pyre wasn’t big. Minato wrapped the corpse in his spare shirt and put it on the wood gathered by team seven. Kushina set the pyre on fire and then they all watched the deep flames of the enraged element through blurry eyes. The blurriness wasn’t caused by sadness or any other emotion. It was because of the stench.

Some people thought that the smell of burning human flesh resembles the one of a burning sausage or other meat, unfortunately they couldn’t be further from truth. It’s an awful, acrid odor; nauseating and sweet, putrid and heavy, something like leather being tanned over a flame. The smell was so thick and rich that Shiori could almost taste it. She didn’t know what it was about the smell of the smoke, but it filled every little thing, like it was terrified to be blown away in the wind. Every hair, every cotton fiber, even their skin, carried its stench long after the flames were extinguished. Why couldn’t it smell like a steak? Especially medium, or even rare; with a barbecue sauce and coleslaw?

The little redhead really shouldn’t think about food right then, because her stomach felt like the bag in a set of bag-pipes that was vigorously squeezed. With a heaving lurch of her guts another small mouthful of bile jumped into her mouth and hairs tickling her nose weren’t helping.

“Are we there yet?” She mumbled trying to stop the rising wave of vomit. No matter what world she was in, motion sickness was the bane of her existence.

Minato turned his head putting even more of his sunny locks in his passenger face but it wasn’t his voice that answered her. The tone of the response carried in itself the distinct impression of a reinforced concrete rod lodged in its owner’s ass.

“We are not. Just like three and five minutes ago.” It was enough to say that Kakashi was not very impressed with her and her constant whining.

“You don’t need to be rude” her muttering and sense of smell was drowned out by Minato’s jonin vest. The blond-haired man was sweating like an Eskimo in the desert. He needed a bath even more than she did!

With a next rather jerky jump her stomach started lurching so much she felt bruised inside.

“Mini-nii, you better put me down, now!”

There was no need to repeat it when the stomach-acid stench of vomit filled jonin’s nostrils. Minato barely had time to remove the girl from his back and put her as far away as the length of his arm.
allowed. Shiori was held like some radioactive material but while the concealed contents of her stomach emerged into sunlight she just couldn’t care less.

After a little fusing over her by everyone except of the Hatake boy and hours of hellish tree bouncing they arrived to Kakogawa village, one of the main producers of flour in the region. To the locals charging, the village mill broke down and to produce a regular amount of flour they needed extra hands to work. Kakogawa’s elder looked at the kids doubtfully, but hearing two jonin’s assurance, against his better judgment he left them alone.

Blue eyes sparkled seeing team seven eager to work, no matter how different their reasons were, Namikaze was proud of them (even if Kakashi just wanted to run from other teenagers and their stupidity, Obito waited for a right moment to bit Kakashi into a pulp, and Rin just needed to get back to Konoha and check upon strawberries growing in her garden).

“Ok, now…” it was not given for Minato to split their tasks, because something began to pull at his pants, demanding his undivided attention. “Yes?”

“I need new shoes” claimed the little Uzumaki squeezing his leg like a vise.

“New shoes?” In the first moment the man thought it was some sort of shinobi code but the child tugged once more and showed him a bare left foot.

“I lost my sandal when Uzu was under attack.”

“Your shoes aren’t our priority, the mission is.” Kakashi really wanted to be as far away from this lack of professionalism as possible. Shinobi missions weren’t a place for little children, especially the spoiled, whining ones.

“I would like to see you going around without a shoe” bullying him was one thing, but Obito couldn’t allow the bastard to mistreat children, even the odd ones.

“If I had your attention span, I would long ago have lost not only boots but also my feet.”

“Aha, so you would be worse me than I am!”

Kushina barely stopped a snort, hearing Uchiha’s comeback while Minato openly face-palmed. The only person not giving into the boy’s drama was a five-year old with her own problems.

“Over the last fifteen years, I was exposed to drafts between my toes. I can catch a cold, let alone have corns. I already have one blain, see?” Minato indeed saw. “Without new shoes I’ll be standing on one foot. I’m warning you, Mini-nii, Kushina-san, you’re looking at future, very desperate flamingo.”

If cuteness was a weapon Shiori would be its champion. No one could resist her big eyes of molten gold, quivering lip and reddened cheeks.

“Sensei, looking for her new shoes is a waste of time.” Nevertheless, Kakashi’s jackass-ness was a rather efficient counter weapon which, however, often brought with itself certain consequences in person of angry Uchiha.

“Shut up, bastard, no one asked you!”

And so in the atmosphere of quarrels, rolling eyes and growing headaches was decided that Kushina would go with her small ward for shopping, her fiancé would take care of collecting crops, while the rest of team seven would handle minor tasks.
After supplying in new sandals, the older Uzumaki left the child under care of teenagers, harnessing Shiori to help them. For some odd reasons Kushina wholeheartedly opposed the presence of the girl close to the harvest.

Highly unsatisfied with the turn of events, the little redhead was faced against few horrendous tasks like cutting small pieces of wood (the ax was taken from her after forty seconds when she toppled backward due to its weight), carrying firewood (splinter in a finger and a cascade of tears after a minute), carrying buckets of water (wet clothes, hers and Kakashi’s, after whole six minutes). At the end, the young Uzumaki, officially called now walking disaster, was left with Obito in the broken water mill.

“These are quern-stones, Shiori-chan. You are spinning this lever and its grinding cereals into flour.”

The brunet demonstrated earning a flattened look.

“This stones are big, Obi-nii. They’re bigger than me. How can I move them?”

“Come on, Shiori-chan, you’re smart, tiny kunoichi. Just a little chakra in your hands and you’ll be as strong as your nii-chan.” Obito proudly puffed out his chest and adjusted googles.

“Maybe I’m brainy but in no way I’m brawny. Besides I don't want to be ninja. It's far too exhausting and I can easily get dirty. Nevertheless, even if I wanted, don’t forget I’m five. Could you mold chakra when you were my age?”

Obito’s chest deflated. At her age he still was stuttering, not talking about chakra manipulation, nevertheless he couldn’t admit to it, not looking pathetic.

“Could you try, for me?”

“Nope,” the girl was unrelenting in her indolence.

“But why?”

“Because I’m lazy.” Unfortunately, Shiori was also a woman, and no representative of the fair sex could resist puppy eyes performed by Uchiha male specimen. “Ugh… you are pure evil you know that?”

Evil or not, the reborn female spent the next ten minutes puffing and wheezing, trying to grind cereals. She was a stubborn creature, but she wasn’t suicidal even for two black, breathtaking diamonds.

“Enough or I’ll die.” the child whined and slumped on her ass with a loud plop.

Obito stopped rotating his stones and looked at their piles of flour. Shiori’s was nonexistent. He could tell she wasn’t trying too much but her constant complaining also wasn’t very helpful. It would be easier if she was occupied with something else.

“Ok, you can stop and do whatever but be careful. Kushina will kill me if you get hurt.”

“Come on, Kushina-san isn’t so scary.”

“Yeah, right.” Obito trembled remembering several times when he had the opportunity to watch the wrath of Red Hot-Blooded Habanero. “Just wait, then you’ll see.”

Shiori sighed, further debating with the young Uchiha made no sense. While he saw Kushina as a
one-woman army with a pintsize temper, for her she was only an imbecilic troublemaker with severe case of ADHD. Well, thinking about it, now she was an imbecilic troublemaker with severe case of ADHD and furry, over four hundred feet tall monster, spitting atomic bombs. Ok, maybe she was scary, contrary to the Uchiha in front of her.

She truly couldn’t understand how this pathetic boy became the Darth Vader of Naruto universe. Obito was like her neighbor’s dog. Not only was the mutt stupid and hellishly friendly - from joy always pissing on visitors’ shoes - but what was the worst it was impossible to dislike him.

When she first saw team seven leaning over her, resembling some damn gorgons, something like fucktarded cocksuckers could slip from her mouth. Of course, she just had to bite her teeth into the ass of plot and now mentioned plot was plotting against her! Obito was a sweetheart, Kakashi - a bastard, Rin was dull and Minato, well… she could do extramarital calisthenics with him anytime. Ok, she had to stop this train of thoughts. She was five here so no funny business, especially with future the father of the chosen one.

Shiori was in need of something to busy her brain and the only thing in the mill was a broken machinery.

“It’s stupid to do it by hand, anyhow,” she mumbled and with reluctance looked at the seditious device. “If something’s broken they should fix it. It can’t be that complicated. Ok, that thing delivers the force and this goes there…”

Ω

Obito wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, proudly looking at the created flour. The work was incredibly boring, especially after more than an hour of constant spinning, but imagining that instead of cereals he milled flock of small Kakashi’s great help. Only three more sacks and…

Something dropped, jerked and crashed as if the roof was going to collapse on his head. Chunin looked in panic for the owner of eyes of molten golden, who was currently trying to clumsily clamber out from under the big gear wheel that was slowly but surely spinning.

“See, all done. No need to sweat anymore” the girl smiled and tried to brush dirt and flour from her hair and clothes.

“You fixed it.” Unbelieving Obito poked the falling piston.

“I’m five, how could I fix it? You did it.” She smiled with feigned innocence.

The Uchiha blinked, he saw that wicked grin before on Kushina. It didn’t bode well for anybody.

“You don’t want me to tell you did it? Why?”

“If they know I repaired it, they’ll make me do something else. Why would I want to do more work?” she deadpanned. “Chill out, Obi-nii. Now, we can relax. Besides, Kakashi-san will be really pissed that you fixed it.”

Slowly, the corners of his mouth rose up, giving birth to a beaming smile going straight to the girl’s heart and wrenching it.
She was pissed. No one asked too much about the fixed mill. Kushina drilled her with a suspicious glare, then just shrugged, called her creepy and choked her in a bone-crushed hug; but violation of her personal space was not the cause of her tantrum.

First one was the freaking tub. It was a big, old barrel with cold water. There was no plumbing in this shithole! In Uzu she was mentally ready for the lack of internet and very limited electricity but at least they had a functioning water system. Here she was freezing her butt off, trying to scrub off layers of dirt with an old rag and a grey soap bar when once she indulged herself in sandalwood, cinnamon, musk, Arabian fragrances, pastel and lavish at the same time.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t the worst thing.

The cherry on the cake of her frustration was Nohara Rin. The girl helping her bath hadn’t done a thing and that was the problem. She was an indulgent, affectionate, semi intelligent person that wasn’t at all special. Yet, her kindness was the source of future tragedies.

“You have beautiful hair, Shiori-chan. Its hue is a bit warmer than Kushina-san’s, like rose petals. You should grow them.”

All day of smiling and Shiori wanted to kill something cute.

“Could you shut up at least for a moment?”

The silence that fell was overwhelming.

“Excuse me?” Rin stammered nearly choking up - contrary to torrents of words flying out from Shiori’s mouth.

“I don’t know if you’re so cruel or simply stupid. You’re openly ogling Kakashi at the same time leading Obito by the nose. He has a crush on you and you don’t even deign to think about his feelings. You’ll destroy him, hell, you’ll destroy both of them.”

The crimson haired child nearly tore off skin from her arm brushing them during her tirade. She stopped only when the banging of closing doors rang through the room. The girl slid down into the water, letting it block out the sounds around her. The sensation of the water calmed her; it took her mind off things. All the things she didn’t care about. The life she left behind. All the faceless people in Uzu that died and were forgotten. Plot that couldn’t be built out of jokes because it needed tragedies, broken souls that could rise again, hero that save all; and of course a villain. Every good story needed a villain, thus it thoroughly fucked life of some poor wretch, breaking him so he could go bad and fuck even more lives! But she didn’t care, she didn’t care at all!

The air plunge into her lungs when arms pulled her from under the water.

“What you said to Rin-chan?” Kushina’s angry gaze sliced her, demanding answers. She wanted them? Good, she would get them.

That was the breaking point of Shiori’s patience. At that moment, she was blinded by a serving of rage that tasted bitter, yet surprisingly satisfying.
“The truth. That trying to protect Obito, she is hurting him and I don’t know like you, but I don’t think that fucking with feelings of Uchiha is the best idea. All this horseshit about love transforming into hate and red eyes of doom and mass destruction is slightly disturbing.”

The unexpected hug was a simple enough gesture - affection, little love, perhaps the fragile beginnings of healing a chronic trauma. The arms that held Shiori were soft, yet strong. The feel of the other so close to her soothed the reborn woman more than she had expected. Pure. Unselfish. Undemanding. Free. She felt her body press in, soft and warm.

“You were always messed up.” Kushina mumbled, stroking her wet, red hair. “Even in Uzu on a daily basis you were gloomy. When you were really miserable you exploded with anger. It’s ok to be sad. You can cry. You know that, right?”

Shiori nodded, burying her head into the neck veiled by enflamed hair but she didn’t cry. She couldn’t because she didn’t care. Maybe it was nothing more than a childish lie, but she had to believe that lie repeated often enough became the truth. She didn’t care. Otherwise she would crumble.

So much thanks to everyone, as always especially my beta - mrsmiawallace88, you are the best.
War mongrels and hamsters

No one in the history of the universe (no matter which one) cursed greenery as much as she did, Shiori was sure of it. These monstrosities were growing here just to make her existence a living hell, because when konoha nins were seeing a tree, it's obvious they had to jump on it, otherwise it would end with their sudden and painful demise. They were from Village Hidden in Leafs so they couldn't just walk like normal human beings, they had to imitate these fucking squirrels!

Another jerk interrupted her train of thoughts. The girl shifted in her cousin's arms to have a better look at the night sky and their companions. The Road to Konoha was unusually quiet. Rin held on the sidelines, avoiding all, but especially Obito, who wasn't too happy with the development. The boy had no idea what he did to hurt her so, because she was hurt. It was particularly clear when she shrank from his touch. It was wrong on so many levels he couldn't even start to count them, and what was worse, he didn't know how to fix it.

While Obito and Rin were sulking and experiencing their own moral revolts, their last teammate savored the rare silence. Kakashi practically oozed the essence of contentment even with their sensei gone. Minato went ahead to notify the authorities of their small discovery in the form of a girl with particularly red hair and unhealthy green face. He and Kushina seemed to not worry about dense atmosphere between children, most likely being all too familiar with teenage drama.

On the other hand, all Shiori could think of was her sore head and tender stomach. She wanted nothing more than to stand in one position long enough to put to rest legions of elephants waltzing in her guts. She was sleepy and emotionally drained, it wasn't so surprising, as for the five-year the last few days, or years, depending on how you looked at it, were very exhausting.

As if sensing her little cousin growing distress Kushina put a hand on her back and started drawing circles, needing to calm down the child. Shiori sighed once more, nuzzling herself into the warm body under the stars, which were like a beautiful, surreal blanket above their heads. She could feel older Uzumaki's heartbeat and hear the soft, relaxed and utterly content breaths. That's when, half-asleep, realization hit her: occasionally people were like stars – they had to fall to make somebody's wish come true.

Ω

As she was roused from a heavy slumber, she was first aware of a pair of warm lips on her forehead and a male voice.

"Shiori-chan, you must wake up. There is someone you need to talk to."

"Is it truly necessary, Minato?" Asked the lips. "I'm sure it could wait until morning."

A pair of big, calloused hands took her from the secure embrace and put her wobbly legs on the floor. The girl dragged her sleepy gaze to the stone-faced, blond jonin and his fiancé. Kushina seemed nervous, but Shiori couldn't understand why; the woman was perfectly happy before and yet her hand trembled when she laid it on the child's head.

"Shiori-chan, this is Hokage-sama."

This few words were more than enough to wake her up. Those golden eyes inventoried their surroundings; the vast, neat and totally impersonal office with three elderly people standing over a hunched figure, sitting by the desk. Hokage's face was obscured by a big hat, but the sensation of his
gaze on her was more than a simple impression. For the first time after her death, the woman in the child's body was feeling like a truly inexperienced and completely helpless baby. She would give everything for some explosive seals, hell, even a Molotov cocktail in her grasp would be a considerable bust for her self-confidence right now.

"So, this is Yori-sama's grandchild" whispered one of the men, loudly enough so everyone in the room could hear him perfectly.

The man wasn't yet the shriveled creature, impersonating a mummy and walking with a cane, nevertheless Shiori had no doubt that in front of her stood no one other than Danzo - one of the biggest douchebags she had ever heard of.

The woman remembered his character far better than the present Hokage. About the Third, besides the general impression of dislike resembling the one she held against Dumbledore, she knew only that he was killed by Orochimaru. In her current lifespan she gathered nothing about Danzo, but many things clearly implying that the Third was called a god of shinobi for a reason. Well, if people that were able to move at the speed of flying bullet; casted spells, compared to which Harry Potter should hide and be forgotten; and generally were tools of total destruction, named someone a "god", then that someone had to know few things about badass-ness.

Shiori hadn't even noticed when she hid behind Kushina and attached herself to her legs like a burdock to dog's tail.

"Come closer, Uzumaki-san." Ordered the voice under the red cap. Shiori had been expecting the rasp of old age but his voice was more like a sergeant; tough and noticeably accustomed to giving orders.

Then the brim of the hat lifted, revealing tired eyes observing her with the gaze of a stranger that detached judgement deprived of sentiments. Since she was carried into his office the Hokage made some opinion of the child. The girl didn't like it but she understood his reasons. Though she was brought in by one of the best Konoha's shinobi and the last Uzumaki, there always was a possibility the child could be dangerous to the Village; his Village. The Hokage had to make an observation, a casual assessment. Was she friend or foe? His stare was as uncomfortable as a chorus-girl corset and had the same effect on Shiori's breathing, restrained and shallow. There was no sympathy behind those eyes.

Kushina's hand was on her head again, however she didn't push the girl forward, she hid her even more, not liking where it was going.

"Hokage-sama, I still don't think this is necessary. She's just a kid and…"

"We both know this isn't true, Kushina."

The older Uzumaki plastered a false smile to her face, trying to hide her discomfort and at the same time transfer a message to Minato that he was a miserable snitch, who in the best case would be sleeping on the couch for the next month.

"Well, she's a little odd, grumpy and far too serious but…"

"I met her before in Uzu," again the Hokage didn't let her finish. "But I guess she doesn't recognise me."

It changed when he took off his hat.

The girl, disregarding his demand behind Kushina's legs, gawked at him wild-eyed, as a damned
soul might look at Satan passing in his majestic grandeur through the circles of hell.

"You had to be fucking kidding me." She murmured.

The Third fully shared her sentiment, because he thought exactly the same thing an hour ago hearing Minato's report. The old Uzumaki hag was unforgettable, and so were her granddaughters.

Ω

Yori-sama's stare wasn't intentionally emotionless, her face just lacked the flexibility. Her sickly-yellow eyes rested on one point, remaining like that far longer than they should. Others adjusted their paths to not cross hers and stand further back than was necessary. It was like the extended eye contact commanded a larger degree of physical separation. If it didn't work, unfortunate souls faced stubbornness worth a wild hog and a tongue so sharp, they could nearly be sliced in two if the woman believed them to be worth of her time, let alone bothered to utter a word to them at all.

The men lifted a cup of tea trying to stay as motionless as possible. One move and heaps of paper would bury him alive, since papers of all kinds, from thick books and old scrolls to loosely flying notes on subjects varying from fuinjutsu to astronomy were everywhere in the house; on the floor, tables, chairs and cupboards. Hell, he would give his left nut that there were some sealing scrolls even under the bathtub.

The old woman seemed to not pay attention to any of it, putting last touches to prepared toasts. In addition to the sound of a knife slicing tomatoes, he heard the cracks and groans of the decrepit staircase complaining as a pair of feet came thumping down the ageing stairs, skipping three steps at a time.

"Why you didn't wake us, granny?!" lamented a rosy-haired girl, entering the kitchen like a typhoon at its peak. "We will be la… Sarutobi-sama! I'm so sorry I haven't seen you before."

Hiruzen laughed diminishing her fears, yet he quickly regretted as a nearby stack of documents began to sway.

"No harm done, Suzu-chan," the Third assured holding his breath, not daring to even exhale on the rickety paper tower. "It's good to see you. I must say that your performance in the last chunin exam was marvelous."

"I know, I totally kicked their…" Suzu couldn't say what she kicked because a full plate was placed right in front of her nose and one piece of the toast landed in her mouth.

"Fetch your sister." It was a voice that knew no objections.

Before Sarutobi could blink, the girl disappeared only to stroll to the room a second later with a smaller redhead slung over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes that was unceremoniously thrown into the seat next to him.

As the child's head slumped into the folds of her brightly pink nightshirt in white rabbits, Sarutobi wondered if she wasn't some misplaced Nara. Her facial expression was corpse-like, not just sagged but completely lacking Uzumaki's usual vigor, as if she had left her spirit cuddling under the blanket. The girl's eyelids drooped and there was a slight lolling to her head. Even the little hands barely touched the breakfast and altogether her limbs bore the appearance of being too heavy for her, as if she was struggling against gravity fare more than everyone else.

As Suzu was madly running around, still munching her toast and trying to pack various scrolls into a small backpack, her little sister finally noticed the man sitting next to her, turned towards him her
large, mesmerizing eyes and blinked.

"Hello, little bunny, how are you this beautiful morning?" He tutted just like he was doing every day, greeting his own son. They had to be in similar age because even a slightly older children didn't have such innocence in their eyes.

Those eyes blinked slowly one more time and turned to the old hag.

"Is he intellectually underdeveloped?" She deadpanned, Suzu almost tripped choking on her toast and their grandmother looked at him as if considering the answer.

"Nah," the old woman replied after a moment. "Hiruzen-chan is simply stupid."

The golden-eyed girl regarded him dubiously but said nothing and with a jaded expression began to eat away her breakfast, but the other girl wouldn't have it.

"Granny, you shouldn't teach her to be bad-mannered like that. And you, Shiori-chan, apologize now."

"Why?" mumbled the child, loudly swallowing a bite.

"Because you were rude."

"I, rude? Never," she stated, carefully wiping her mouth with a handkerchief, not wanting to leave even a crumb. "I was only making sure that my assessment of our guest was correct. It turned out that my hypothesis was false to a certain extent."

The older sister wanted to say something but the little one effectively interrupted her.

"And now we'll be late, again."

Suzu as if struck by thunder looked at the old clock on the wall and bolted, throwing the girl onto her shoulder then running upstairs, only to return a moment later with an already dressed child, whom once again was treated like a sack of potatoes, not judging by her apathy - was apparently a normal circumstance. The young kunoichi also had to be used to it because without a second thought she rushed outside, putting the shoes on the way and closing the door with a bang.

The kage's brows knitted in a frown trying to understand what exactly happened and why mountains of papers hadn't yet collapsed in all this madness.

"Without a doubt that one is something else."

Hearing him the Uzumaki matron scoffed.

"Don't waste my time on meaningless chit-chat, kiddo. Have you decided which one do you want?"

Dissatisfaction plowed his face when he pulled from his breast pocket a scroll and unsealed it, summoning a stack of folders.

"We still think that someone directly from Mito-sama line would be the best."

"Then use her grandchildren," she sneered, making Hiruzen glance at the knife lying dangerously close to her wrinkled hand. "If I remember correctly my dear little sister has two, right?"

"Tsunade and Nawaki are also of Senju blood…"
"In your place, Hokage-sama, I would remember who is giving you a leash keeping that monster of yours in check." Threat as well as disdain in her voice wasn't even veiled. "The treaty my father singed with Hashirama is old and times changed."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," She cackled humorlessly. "But better forget about my granddaughters. Suzu is brilliant and loyal to a fault and what's more, in a few years she will be the one leading Uzushio. Have in mind she is still in favor of supporting Konoha, what's extremely rare these days, so you should kiss her ass while you still can. As for Shiori, well, let's just say she would start poking the seal before its even completed. Besides, she is ill-suited to be a kunoichi, far too arrogant. Yet someday she will be a great seal master. She has all the technical stuff in her pinky and she knows it. Hell, she is even worse than the one of your brats, that pretty one."

Sarutobi cringed at the thought of his favorite pupil and the youngest Uzumaki princess. These two put together would be awful, but looking at the current mood in the Uzushiogakure it apparently was one of the last of his problems. After Tobirama's death relationship between both Villages had significantly deteriorated. Without Senju Uzumaki the clan stopped believing in the superiority of Konoha over other nations, thus doubting in the protection promised to them. Uzushio was a small Hidden Village, nevertheless what they lacked in manpower they certainly made up for with their fuinjutsu users. Unfortunately, in recent times the village was becoming more and more alienated, sending to Konocha fewer sealing experts and formulas. Even simple exploding tags weren't as common as twenty years ago. If someone knew what to listen for, they could hear whispers of rebellion and change of allegiance, and something like that couldn't occur without resistance. The Land of Fire would drown in blood of civil war that had not been seen in decades.

"Orochimaru," he muttered mindlessly.

"That's him. The boy reminds me of Tobirama-kun when we were younger. They have the same arrogance and air of superiority. I only hope your genin won't end like him."

"He's a jonin now," the man corrected.

"And you think that matters?" The woman regarded him with pity, coming closer. "Jonin, genin, even kage, one way or the other everyone dies."

Sarutobi did not know whether he should treat her words as a threat or good natured warning. He supposed it was both.

"But enough of this nonsense." One wrinkled, old finger resembling withered branch tapped the stack of folders containing data about the majority of Uzumaki children. "Which one do you want?"

"I suppose Kushimoto's daughter will be sufficient."

Ω

Shiori was thinking about the same moment in her life, wanting nothing more than kick herself, hard. That morning she hadn't the foggiest idea what was the third hokage name, and even if she had, her brain would refuse to associate the name with the rather stupidly looking man. Hokage wasn't a person but a label, idea of higher power somewhere far, far away. He was like a pope or president of a foreign empire.

Not to mention she behaved like a total ass.

"I called you intellectually underdeveloped." She whispered with a fright, causing a wheezing sound
out from Minato’s throat.

Sarutobi barely stopped rising the corners of his mouth. At least she wasn’t an imposter.

"Sorry, Hokage-sama, she doesn’t know what she’s saying." Kushina apologized clamping her hand over the girl's mouth. "Please, don't pay attention to her. She is always rambling, juggling so many difficult words in that big brain of hers that most times whatever comes out is complete gibberish. She really didn't want to offend you, sir."

"Oh, I think she wanted. And only thing she regrets is the fact of being at my mercy."

Shiori mentally face palmed. Her poker face had to be lacking or the hokage was a fucking mind-reader. In Uzu she shamelessly prided herself on extraordinary intelligence and now it backfired with a force of an atomic bomb. She wanted to be allowed to learn the more advanced secrets of sealing arts; the more she knew, the easier it would be to obtain the refuge in another Village. Now the woman was like a true toddler, subjected to the whims of politicians and killers. It couldn't be worse.

"If the child is as intelligent as you think it is, we should provide proper up bring."

It wasn't Shiori's hand that face palmed her in the forehead. Danzo's words triggered a panic attack not only on a small Uzumaki redhead. Kushina in the throes of protest hid the girl rather forcibly behind Minato's legs, at the same time hissing in the face of the village shadowking. Any normal woman would be ignored, but Kushina… well, with rising crimson locks and wild snarl on her face there was no forgetting what was made of her at their own request.

"Shiori-chan is family," her growl held unwavering attention of all present. "My last family and she will be under my care."

"Don't forget your place, Uzumaki," unfortunately Danzo was not someone who was easily intimidated. Shiori suspected it was required while maintaining a private army.

Heavens hold their breath, when the furious woman was one step away from physically expressing her rage. The tension flowed down a sewage of perdition only thanks to the blond man's forty-karat smile, who put his hand on Kushina's arm.

"Kushina exactly knows what she's doing, Danzo-sama. She's the only living Uzumaki we know of, so she is the best suited to teaching Shiori-chan everything she needs to learn."

"There is also a problem of the child's training." Interjected a woman who until now remained silent. "Once Tobirama sensei mentioned tradition of suspending shinobi training among children with Uzumaki blood until they are seven years old."

Finding an unexpected ally in Utatane Koharu, Kushina relaxed, barely.

"We have far more chakra than others so it's really hard to control it properly. With young, poorly developed chakra coils and massive chakra amount, attempts to use it often ended tragically, hence the sanctions. The older we get our progress is growing faster."

"The child is too precious to…"

The fact she loudly snorted, Shiori attributed on uncanny likeness between Danzo's voice and Gollum's hisses. Whatever was to blame, it was Kushina who saved her from an avalanche of glares that would fly towards her already traumatized person.

"It's not your call! What will happen to her, Hokage-sama?"
The man was tired. His office often was full of tension but now the few words people said felt like sand gritted in cogs between his ears. Hiruzen looked around at the faces, how the tightness of their jaws and shoulders were reflected in one another. His own guts had become tight and the usual ready smile was anxious to decorate his face. The hokage once more focused on the little girl holding Minato's pants for dear life. She stood in the room like the floor would give out under her tiny body and swallow her all. Shiori desperately tried to hide how horrified she was. She could willfully control her body movements to be not as stiff. She could make herself smile somewhat even if it looked pasted on. But her perspiration was ruling itself and in no time she had two staining patches under her armpits. No matter how devious the kid was, she was a five-year-old trembling mess and Hiruzen couldn't in his right mind distress her more.

"Take her home, Kushina. For now" the last part was added as a reminder they weren't done.

Minato didn't wait till the Hokage would change his mind. He grabbed both redheads and used Hiraishin, taking them home.

Ω

With all his brilliance Minato was a dumbass. He knew it when the yellowish, smelly portion of vomit landed on his shirt. It was only confirmed by those tortured golden pools clearly saying "you're an idiot". Kushina not only shared this view, she seemed to get it even further being pissed off. Maybe she was pissed off generally and not particularly at him? He certainly hoped so, otherwise he was as good as dead.

His hopes crumbled when she forcefully snatched the sick girl from his arms. The hopes dug into the floor, when she turned to disappear in the bathroom with such force that her enflamed curls smashed him in the face. His zombie status in their relationship was proven by next hour. The girls came out from the bathroom only to disappear in the depths of their bedroom – the room Minato probably wouldn't see for a long time.

The hard welcome that met the kid wasn't his fault. Honestly, he had no idea what was so alarming in Shiori that merited the presence of those old war mongrels. What was most disturbing, no one even tried to ask about the attack on Uzushio. It reminded him more of damage control meeting than anything else. Minato's mouth ran dry and his stomach turned in an unfriendly way. He felt as if his brain was either firing off a million very bad thoughts at once or offering nothing at all.

The man put down a notebook in which he had been doodling mindlessly for nearly an hour sitting in the kitchen. He stood and stealthily began to approach the bedroom, stopping by the entrance but hearing nothing. Perhaps they were already sleeping? He quietly opened the door. The room was silent, save for a pair of breaths, whose owners were snoozing like two logs. He crossed the room until at the foot of the bed he was able see them.

Shiori was on her belly, with a small frown upon her forehead and wrinkled nose. Despite it she looked so cute (especially wearing Kakashi's old shirt in shuriken pattern) that he nearly squealed. Minato had an inkling he would be wrapped around her little finger in no time. He had a weakness in form of Uzumaki charm. Genuine or precisely calculated, it was meaningless.

Kushina was a different tale.

She was exhausted, both physically and mentally, clutching the smaller girl as if she was going to disappear. The lovely locks tangled without their usual nightly braid that tonight was made only on Shiori's head.

Minato had never known his parents. He was one of many orphans in the Village so not having
family was nothing special for him, but for Kushina it was hell. It was like seeing someone's emotions bleed-out before you with a wound that would never heal. After Mito-sama's death it was even more apparent. After all these years she was still clinging to every soul she met, looking for someone to fill the unfillable.

He sat on the floor leaning against the bed. He was curious if fate would allow him a few hours of sleep before making him to get back from the world of stillness to cacophony of everyday life?

It appeared fortune granted him his wish, making him sleep even when hours later Shiori awoke to soft sheets. The girl slowly and reluctantly blinked, closed her eyes, and blinked again. Streaks of sunlight pierced the window blinding her. She sat up and all she had known was her stomach that felt like a black hole. Getting food was her fixation, thinking of anything else was just a waste of time. She dragged her feet off the bed, being careful not to accidentally wake up the still sleeping adults. She rubbed her knuckles onto golden eyes, watching her legs dangling above the red carpet.

Next to her knee Minato's stunning face was sloping back, and even drooling did nothing to diminish his magnificence. The worst was he wasn't only roughly handsome. His heart was as gold as his hair and his eyes showed the kind of gentle concern Shiori would kill for. The last night she awoke from a nightmare to his hand laid tenderly on her head, and instead of flinching like she usually did, she was calmed by it. He left his hand there and spoke with such a kind voice. He soothed her more by the way he spoke than the actual words. It felt as if she was enveloped in a blanket of his compassion and now, few hours later she was ogling him.

She winced at the thought. Theoretically speaking he was at least twenty years younger than her; and practically her hormones were still dormant so she shouldn't think like that. She justified her thoughts as admiration the perfect male specimen of homo sapiens, and sunk out from the bed.

The reborn woman loved sweets in her every life. It was an integral part of her being so; no wonder her eyes immediately focused on a big jar of cookies on the highest shelf in the kitchen. There was no way she could reach it even from a chair. Shiori was crestfallen.

She couldn't climb using chakra because she hadn't known how. She tried, of course, but it was far harder than it seemed. The big downfall of being Uzumaki – your control sucked. That's why the clan was so proficient with fuinjutsu; force capable of influencing nearly everything. Something making you a hacker in global net of physic laws. For example, gravity. Einstein said it was a consequence of the curvature of space-time caused by the uneven distribution of mass or energy resulting in gravitational time dilation, where time lapsed more slowly in lower gravitational potential. So forcefully changing at least one of the factors should…

It's funny how a brain could be so busy with billion ideas at once that it wasn't able to comprehend actions of the body. Shiori didn't know when, or how but suddenly she was sitting on the kitchen floor designing an antigravity seal. More suddenly she was giving it a first try. She stepped on a piece of paper torn from the notebook found on the table and activated the experimental formula. The next moment she was lying on the kitchen linoleum battered like a piñata.

It was even funnier how her brain refused to register a few flips in the air and the contact between her face and the ceiling.

It wasn't funny at all when Kushina came into the kitchen and screamed like a police siren. However, thanks to it, the girl had the possibility of seeing the most hilarious sight. Minato bolted into the room smeared in his own saliva, his head held on odd angle, with only one leg partially hidden in his pants. The scream had to interrupt the poor, stiff, semi-conscious man when he just started to dress.

"Shior-chan, what happened?"
"And why is there blood on our ceiling?" Added Minato after a moment. His rigid neck helping him spot the red stain.

"It was an experiment." Mumbled the girl trying not to be strangled by the woman dressing her bleeding nose.

"No wonder Suzu-senpai never wanted to leave you alone. You attract more mishaps than an Uchiha love-struck teenage girls."

Kushina glanced on a pile of ash that once was the disastrous seal and at the little redhead that made it. In Uzu from all her cousins she liked Shiori the least. She talked funny, never wanted to play and treated everyone like idiots. She was a stuck up know-it-all that drew the whole attention of her beloved senpai; in other words, she was everything Kushina hated and had what she wanted the most. Now the girl was her last relative and the kunoichi couldn't love her more.

"What were you trying to do?"

"I was hungry so I wanted to have that, Kushina-san." She answered pointing at the cookie jar without even a pinch of remorse, not caring about presenting herself as a little glutton. In the end she was Uzumaki and they loved food.

"Cookies," at least that she could understand contrary to the second part "and dangerous experiments, eh? It's good Minato can stay with you when I have a meeting with the barrier corps. Otherwise half of Konoha would have exploded."

The protests from the still sleepy man were of no avail. One pissed look and he was left with the moody child for half of the day. Most of the time everything was going smoothly. Shiori read silently munching cookies as if she wasn't there. Sometimes she asked him a thing or two about space-time seals theory, listened without a word, nod and scribbled something in the notebook she evidently adopted. Everything was perfect until he had to go and discuss the strategy for the frontlines with other jonins. He couldn't take her with him. A war council was no place for a child, even for Shiori. He also couldn't leave her at home. The curious spark in her golden plates clearly announced the next experiments. With who could he leave her?

The room was abruptly far brighter with a brilliant white smile. He had an excellent idea!

"If you are thinking about teleporting remember I puke, a lot."

Well, it was really good day for a little walk.

Ω

Shiori felt like a cuckoo's egg. The attack on the unsuspecting man was carried out in a flash – no pun intended. An older fellow with a prominent nose and head full of gray hair was walking on a street when bang, he held the little girl in his arms.

"Could you watch her? Thanks, sensei!" and the blue-eyed jonin was gone.

The man opened his mouth but nothing came out. Normally he would be in seven heavens if someone threw at him a woman, but the woman had to be at least legal, otherwise it would be just babysitting. The bushy brows knitted in a frown with realization that he was suckered like a total amateur.

"What the hell, Minato?! It's my last day before going back into frontlines! Come back, you son of a bitch, or I will put your balls into a nutcracker and…" He felt silent seeing the blank stare.
"Bad words."

"Oh, fuck."

"Another one." She loved to be a kid.

Ω

She was a rather open minded woman, with all this reincarnation into a manga shit and everything else she had to be, but some things even she couldn't grasp.

"Jiraiya-sama, why is using a three faced circulating loop necessary in the Dark Sealing Method, and why you are changing me into a pervert?"

As expected, her question remained unanswered. All the processing power of Jiraiya's brain dealt with uploaded by eyes data concerning shapes of women's anatomy. Shiori's glance wandered down assessing her curves or rather their lack. It would be at least eight years before she would start gaining assets needed for drawing his attention. Hell, she could be a fuinjutsu genius gifted for a mankind by gods themselves, but without a pair of boobs she was only an obstacle – the constantly whining one. Every man had his needs and urges he wants to fulfill, especially if it's the last day in anticipation of sinking in the nightmare of war. Shiori understood this, really, but she would be damned before being worse than some bimbo.

However, first she had to get down from the tree.

Some subtler methods she applied earlier did not work, so face set on feigned innocence she started tugging his wild mane rather forcefully.

"What's now, kiddo?" He asked, not taking his eyes off a rather well-endowed brunette getting out of the hot spring.

"I must go down, Jiraiya-sama," no reaction. "I need to pee."

The next second she was on the ground. From there the little legs carried her slightly further to the bathhouse fence where nothing stood in the way until a little scream escaped her.

"A snake, there is snake in the water!"

The pandemonium it unleashed was second to none. Women were running and screaming, some were tossing kunais (however Shiori hadn't the foggiest where they hid them), others were throwing jutsu on left and right, but after a moment every one of them got out from the water and disappeared in the changing room.

The greatest Konoha's pervert was furious. It was obvious in the way he loomed above her.

"What, in the name of Tsunade's boobs, have you done?!" he screamed, sending her look designed to peel her hide.

"I have told them there was a snake in the water?"

Jiraiya nearly pulled his hair out.

"But WHY?!"

"I was bored?"
"You're going to sabotage me all day, aren't ya? That's why you are constantly hungry, thirsty and want to braid my hair."

"Maybe?" The pouted pink lips and shy demeanor wasn't compatible with a spark of mischief in the supposedly innocent pools of gold. The kiddo was cute like a button but at the same time she was the Antichrist. The toad sage had to get rid of her.

And that's why now Shiori was dangling by a collar from an outstretched arm of someone she had been unceremoniously thrown at, again. With the last ounce of self-control, she was restraining the waves of vomit wanting to be introduced to the world. Tamagoyaki's smell and tea fumes attacking her nose weren't helping.

"What is that thing, Jiraiya, and why you are giving it to me?" Hissed a voice behind her.

The girl was torn between gawking at a toad summoned laying on the restaurant floor, tangled in some snakes, and the new man whose most prominent features were sharp with intelligence, glowing yellow eyes; black, glossy hair and cheekbones she was dying to touch.

It was official, she was in the presence of freaking Orochimaru. She felt like a rookie illusionist meeting Copperfield, Houdini, Gandalf and Voldemort in one person. It was literally the most brilliant man in Naruto verse. Heck, she couldn't be more awed by Einstein, Edison, Tesla or anyone else. In other words – she was drooling.

"Minato, the traitor, framed me in taking care of the kid; and you know it's my last day in the Village, so…"

"No." the phrase was full of disdain and definiteness.

"Come on, have mercy." Begged the taller man finally removing himself from the reptilian hugs.

"I came back two days ago. Do you have any idea how behind I am in my research because of this stupid war? Months. I need peace and quiet. Something that is not associated with children for a reason."

"I promise, Orochimaru-sama, I will be silent." Shiori put her most angelic face at the same time trying to not look too eager.

"You want to stay with me?"

An enthusiastic nod answered him but the true question was why he asked it.

"Why?"

"He was peeping in the hot springs."

Orochimaru was preparing a nasty tongue lashing but when he turned to his old teammate the man was nowhere to be seen.

Dissatisfaction plowed his brow as he dropped Shiori like some big, ugly bug.

"You will sit, breathe and do nothing else. Understood?"

Another portion of nods from behind the table later Orochimaru once more plunged into reading some files. The girl sat on a bench opposite to him and watched with admiration the long steady hands and the slender fingers of the famous genius, to artist and dreamer. An artist the snake sannin
was, although his talent expressed itself in the most complicated experiments in the territories of applied science she had ever seen, rather than in the usual forms of art. Sure, he wasn't too humanitarian in his research, but it was society glorifying murderers - varied only the cause in the name of the they killed. For her pursuing the truth was more noble than because my kage said so. But hey, she wasn't one to judge.

Shiori was mesmerized for half an hour, later, she began to get bored.

Reading files upside down wasn't easy but it was something to do. There were papers about few different studies. Shiori had time to read the end of the hypotheses of a new wind ninjutsu before Orochimaru began evaluating some kind of toxin. The woman never was a chemistry expert but she knew an error when she saw one. The handwriting was unlike the previous one, so the most likely sannin's assistant made a mistake in the calculations and now she was nearly bouncing, eager to share the knowledge. But she promised to be silent.

"What?"

The girl absently shrunk, almost completely disappearing under the table. She leaned out cautiously, allowing him to see nothing more than nest of red hair and big eyes.

"There is a mistake." Each word appeared to flow into the next and was spoken so quietly that it caressed the man's ears nearly having no meaning.

"Where?" Orochimaru seemed to be set to one-word sentences as if more effort was a waste of his precious brain-power.

Shiori leaned out more and pointed it with her chubby finger.

"Concentration of Alpha-Amylase is wrong."

"What else?" Two words, they were making progress. Nevertheless, she didn't know what exactly he was talking about. There was no other mistake she noticed but no talking also wasn't the best solution.

"The jutsu?" She tried, and not detecting growing scorn the woman continued. "I have been wondering if instead of moving the air molecules, we could completely take them away?"

Orochimaru frankly assessed her.

"What do you mean by take away?" A full sentence. Shiori wanted to cry from the happiness and pride.

"Create a sort of vacuum. I know that in natural environment it's impossible, but if we add to this a proper area barrier..."

Ω

Minato was going to die; he just knew it. What outstanding idiocy came over him to leave Shiori with sensei? The man was as responsible as a pyromaniac with a flamethrower. Who else would give a child to Orochimaru? The man scared even him! Kushina was scared for Shiori's wellbeing and intact of her genotype, while he and Jiraiya were also terrified by castration hanging over them.

When the rescue party crossed the threshold of the laboratory, to where not even Jiraiya would come voluntarily when sober, they gaped and at once fell silent. The coral haired girl was sitting on a table, wearing far too big google and lab coat, putting a sample under a microscope. She was alright; what
couldn't be said about the snake summoner. He was looking genuinely happy, what was - mildly speaking - disturbing. His placid demeanor disappeared immediately when he noticed the uninvited guests.

One slender brow went up.

"Can I help you?"

"Kiddo!" Jiraiya seemed to be the most cheerful, no longer having to worry about his manly assets. "I'm sooo happy that you are ok!"

Shiori hid behind her new guru, master and god; afraid to be cuddled in too sturdily arms.

"You left me," accused him a tiny voice. "And went peeping into the bathhouse."

The revenge was sweet; the only problem was that in the form of Kushina Uzumaki rage it was extremely loud.

"We're living in the world of hamsters."

Orochimaru grimaced but couldn't disagree with the girl.

"Too true."

---

All bow to mrsmiawallace88 because only thanks to her, you were spared from my feverish sentences (officially, I submitting a complaint to whatever god that invented a flu).

Also, like always thanks to everyone who's read/reviewed/alerted. To the next time ^^

P.S. (Watch out, self-advertisement ahead) If you like Black Butler universe, check my other story.
The adorable little girl, Uzumaki Shiori, that in reality was reborn and not a very nice soul, frowned, looked at her reflection in the mirror and began brushing her teeth.

The toothbrush was the sword of freedom for her. Brushing teeth - an act of rebellion.

In recent times someone was always preparing her a bath (daily running water! - hard to believe how such a detail could put her into a pure bliss); ironing her clothes (brand new ones!); and Kushina was cooking her every meal (and what meals it were! – soon she would start to gain weight). Someone even cleaned her shoes (not any shoes, but well-made, fitting shinobi sandals made from shiny red leather). Kushina and Minato were doting over her and Shiori loved the attention, but some things a woman had to do herself, and one of them was brushing teeth.

The brush slid smoothly over white, tiny pearls.

Yesterday, Kushina dragged the girl for a shopping journey. Minato wanting to redeem himself in the eyes of his fiancé, joined them as soon as he finished training team seven. Before all his sins were forgiven the poor man had to experience hours of wandering after them carrying tons of bags, not to mention pay for their content. It was one of the most bizarre experiences the reborn woman remembered. Shopping with Kushina reminded her massacring shop shelves alongside a tornado. Not that she had anything against it; Shiori liked to shop like any other girl, especially if the crux of it was providing her with many new things, starting from clothes and finishing on the sparkling crayons.

The girl washed out her mouth and thoroughly wiped her face with a towel.

A few years ago, if someone had told her that she would be quietly standing in the bathroom of two of the most important future corpses in the main plot, not even thinking about freaking out, she would feed them with Prozac. But then again it was how her life looked like now.

Deluding herself that she can save everyone wasn't in her nature. Getting a chance, the woman would try to change something, but not in a brainless, heroic and straightforward way. So far her main goal contained living a long, good, happy life. She already died once (or maybe more like once and a half, counting being sealed for a few years); getting into hot water just to improve plot that eventually would end well, was pointless and more importantly - far too dangerous.

She scowled, looking at her reflection. The mirror was a little unusual - slightly convex, reflecting much more than any normal mirror would. It gave a perfect view on trees and roofs outside the window. Shinobi’s paranoia at its finest.

The girl mopped her face with a towel and went to her new room, that, judging by the old toys she discovered in a closet, previously also had to be occupied by some kid. From a cupboard she took out a new dress. Shiori was accustomed to the practical, rarely nice clothes, but this dress was from one of the more exclusive shops; being even specially adjusted to her measures. Truth be told, clothed in a fain, blue dress and with the halo of her red hair she looked like Paddington Bear. What was apparently lovely, given the squeak Kushina made seeing her in the kitchen.

"I knew the dress would be perfect. You look so cute, Shiori-chan. I only wish you'd truly be as sweet as you look, without your usual snooty attitude."

"Well, you can't always have what you want, Kushina-san." She enlightened her cousin, sitting at

Pipes and parenting tips

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"Well, you can't always have what you want, Kushina-san." She enlightened her cousin, sitting at
the table and putting a napkin on her lap.

"And why you still call me san, dettabane?! You even call him your Mini-nii!" The older redhead waved a fork toward Minato, who had just entered the room, giving him a slight stinky eye. It seemed he wasn't entirely forgiven yet, at least not for taking Shiori's affection.

"Because he is a total hunk. Good for you, Kushina-san."

The blond haired jonin sweat-dropped, not knowing if he wanted to know.

"Should I even ask?"

"Probably not," answered the kid whose eyes were glued to the shishamo Kushina was taking out of the frying pan.

"Shiori-chan has a crush on you." Gloated the woman putting food on a plate. "Not that I can blame her."

"A cr- cr- crush?" stammered the man trying to surpass the wildly growing panic with a smile. Minato daily sent thanks to heavens that Rin wasn't infatuated with him (fear that Jiraiya sensei very effectively planted). He never was good with rejecting of one's romantic affections, especially if it was someone he cared about. Those indecently big, golden pools looking at him dejectedly would kill and bury him few feet under the ground.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Mini-nii. I just said that you're pretty." Shiori reassured him, calculating which piece of fish she should take.

"Hey, that isn't an excuse. I'm also pretty," protested Kushina.

"But he's prettier."

"True," no one could deny it. The first time Kushina saw him she thought he was too pretty to have any other favorable traits. It wouldn't be fair. As it turned out, life was rarely fair. Although in this case the woman was very pleased because of it.

"You know," mumbled Minato, far more relaxed, but not even a slight less blushing. "Men are handsome, not pretty."

Two redheads eyed him boldly, then glanced at each other.

"Neah," announced their united voices.

"Yeah, well…" Minato really needed to find another subject to talk about, his face and its prettiness had always been a rather sensitive topic. "What are you two going to do today?"

"I wanted to show Shiori-chan the Village - you know, beyond market district. And maybe take her to the library." The little girl's ears hearing it twitched like a dog's.

"I thought you have to meet with Iō-san today?" asked the blond, helping to put the last plates on the table.

"I promised to take a look at his new weapon, but I can't leave her. I'll wait until you're back."

"I can stay alone," protested the child but no adult noticed it.

"I'm afraid today it'll take longer. I must help Kakashi prepare for his evaluation, otherwise he will
I can stay alone." Once again she was ignored.

Kushina poured them tea and sat with Minato across the child still talking.

"Well, Kakashi isn't patient. Sometimes he's as bratty as Obito."

The girl wanted to repeat herself but in the last moment decided to change her approach.

"I want to stay with Orochimaru-sama!"

That they heard. While Minato choked on his tea, the older Uzumaki's jaw landed on the floor.

"Shiori-chan, I don't think it's the best idea," Kushina started hesitantly. "Orochimaru-sama is a very busy man…"

"But we worked together on completely new jutsu, and studied the poison from Iwa. He promised to share the results with me. I can help."

Minato made his face straighter than a poker player.

"No one doubts it, Shiori-chan. But you must understand that he is a little different."

"Yeah, so am I."

All at once, a blanket of silence fell over the room. It was creepily unnatural, like a morning without a coffee.

"You can't seriously think that further alienating him from friendly human contact will be good for him?" Continued the child furrowing her eyebrows, her disbelief was off the charts to the point that she even distrusted the sincerity of Minato's good intentions towards the snake sannin. "Monsters aren't born, Mini-nii. They're shaped by circumstances and people's actions."

If the previous silence was overwhelming, in this one it was possible to hear tectonic movements of continents and Shiori's intestinal peristalsis when she threw herself on the food.

Minato's brain, however praised to the skies by many people, wasn't able to fathom how anyone in one minute could be a little devious, five year old glutton and the moment later throw life wisdom effortlessly like some ancient sage. He looked at Kushina questioningly, hoped that she would have the explanation, but the woman only shrugged, mouthed she was always like that, and began to eat away the breakfast.

Shiori munched happily a rice ball while eyeing Minato's thoughtful expression. There was no way she would be deprived of the opportunity to spend time with the most brilliant mind she had ever heard of – monster, or not.

Ω

For the first time in forever Obito was glad Minato sensei was spending more time with Kakashi than with him. That get rid of the idiot's possible attention, because no matter how sporadic it was, Kakashi always gave him it at the worst moments. So it was obvious Kaka-baka would appear, against all odds, from thin air, when Obito would be putting his daring plan into action.

However, now he could safely knock on the door.
"You're late Mina… Obito?" Kushina was clearly not expecting him at her doorstep. "What're you…? You know what? It doesn't matter. You'll stay with Shiori, ok? Good boy!"

Patted on the head Uchiha blinked. The redhead woman was gone before he could open his mouth, and now he was left with the little oddity under his care. The said oddity was looking out from the living room with bored stiff expression. It couldn't be better!

"Obi-nii?"

"Hello, Shi-chan!* That's me, your best big brother ever." The boy smiled, putting into shame even Cheshire Cat.

"Why are you so happy?" He was far too cheerful, bordering on nuts. The reincarnated woman saw something like this in every Hitchcock movie; it was highly alarming. "What do you want?"

"Whaaat?" Obito was theatrically flabbergasted. "Why do you think I have some interior motives?"

"Obi-nii, you have all the subtleness of a public bedpan."

The boy's smile dropped immediately after being compared to a chamber pot.

"That wasn't nice."

"Yet you still want my help."

"I have a pipe that needs cleaning," he admitted embarrassed.

Shiori was staring at him, entirely red as a tomato. Her eyes and mouth were frozen wide open in an expression of dumbfounded shock.

"Need… you want to… a what?" She mumbled, hoping that her brain would restart in this century.

"I know you're five and it's odd to ask someone so young for a favor like that, but you're my best shot."

"Excuse me?" Her state of shock only deepened, what was clearly visible on her face, so no wonder Obito was more mortified with every second.

"Everything is dirty after we came back and it stinks terribly because of that thick slush when I fall, so my grandma wanted to help hence this morning she grabbed the tap but the cock was completely dry not even a drop and she told me we need to call a plumber but a good one cost a fortune and we're a little short for money because she was sick again and we spent almost the entire savings on medications not that there was a lot but we can't live without water and I thought that if you fixed that water mill maybe you can fix our pipes?"

The girl blinked. How could anyone say all that on one breath? He should suffocate! Then it came over her.

"You want me to repair the plumbing in your home?"

"Well, yes? What else could I want."

Shiori kicked her mental ass, rubbing the base of her nose. She had to get her brain out of the gutter; everyone thought that she was five years old, for the fuck sake. And the boy wasn't even contaminated by sexual frivolity of twenty-first century. Thank the providence Obito wasn't a Yamanaka or Shiori would have broken his mind-reading brain. She would never hear the end of it.
"So?"

"So?" parroted the girl still mostly in her thoughts.

"Will you help?"

"Yeah…"

Only later she understood she voluntarily signed up for more work.

Ω

Shiori sat piggyback on Obito's shoulders. Every centimeter of Konoha was filled with a crowd of people. It became clear that whatever they were doing, much of it was associated with screaming. The village wasn't as loud as Uzu (nothing was), but it also wasn't a place of anonymous, always rushing strangers like the big cities she lived in her previous life.

"We're here." said Obito, stopping in the center of a street.

The girl blinked looking around. At first, she thought that she was so occupied scrutinizing people, she hadn't noticed when they went into another area. However, it looked like they still were not too far from Shiori's new home.

"Obi-nii, you don't live in Uchiha's district?" asked the dumbfounded girl.

Obito snorted hearing it.

"This is Uchiha's district or rather street. Many of us live nearby, but it isn't necessary. When Konoha was build we were one of the first settlers, so we live in the center. There is an old compound of the clan head on the outskirts of the village, but it is used mainly for training. Only Fugaku-sama's family and few grumpy, old geezers lives there."

The girl had supposed Uchiha had been always ostracized, seems it wasn't the case. The building to which Obito was unlocking the door was old but well-kept and there was not even a single Uchiha crest on the outside.

"Also, the clan is too big," continued the boy, putting Shiori on the floor after they entered. "It would be weird. We would end squeezed together like these loony Hyugas or even worse, since we outnumber them at least twice."

At this, Shiori gaped. She understood that Uchiha died less often, having those damned dojutsu. Red eyes on – all boost cheat working. But to be so numerous without another, enough powerful clan to balance the forces in play? Decades ago, the Senju family fulfilled this role, but it was almost completely annihilated during the second great shinobi war. Existing situation was dangerous for Konoha and for Uchiha clan. They had power – yes, but also big, red mark on their back.

"They let you breed like that?"

"Hey, we aren't animals, we don't breed! Besides that, what has it to do with our… breeding?" The boy didn't know if he should be more irritated on the behalf of his clan's independence or the breeding term. "And what's wrong with you today, Shiori-chan? You're odd. You know, odder than usual."

"My new knickers are too tight. They cut off the oxygen out of my brain." She deadpanned.

"Further, breed is better word than reproduce; and I just thought that after the fiasco with Madara, the
"Uchiha would be out of Hokage's favor."

"Madara? I don't know any Madara." Obito scratched his head trying to pretend he didn't hear Shiori talking about reproduction. He never was in all this hail to the Uchiha thing some of his cousins believed. Well, he could care less about the clan as a whole, but if it was something so big as the girl implied, it was strange he never before heard about this Madara fellow.

"He was once your clan's head, Obi-nii. Alongside Hashirama he founded Konoha, but later he went all gaga. My granny said he was the most devious being she had ever met," Shiori left the part untold where the old Uzumaki looked at her dubiously and muttered: until you were born.

"What happened to him?"

"Officially – he was killed by the First but Granny doubted it. She said he was way too clever and whacko to die like that."

"She thought he's still alive? But he fought with the First Hokage, you know, THE shinobi god?" Protested the boy. For him Hashirama was the hero above all others. His superiority was an unquestionable fact.

"Yori-obaa-sama called Madara a genius and she was more nuts than me. So if you ever meet the ancient Uchiha, know he's scheming something against your village, friends and family. Promise me, Obi-nii, you will not believe anything he says, and run away as fast as possible. OK?"

Obito blinked crossing his eyes to focus on a chubby pinky finger in front of his nose. Shiori had to stand on her tiptoes to reach so high. He didn't know her long, but after the first ten minutes when she awoke, he never really thought about her like about a child. For him she was that weird thing, locked in a child's body, pretending to be sweet and innocent, and what was worse – being lame at it. But now, with puffy cheeks and so serious eyes set in pure determination on some fairy tale, Obito was sure she was just a snarky five-year-old Uzumaki. It was more than enough.

The boy smiled and made a pinky promise.

"I, Uchiha Obito, solemnly swear to never believe a word of the old psycho, Uchiha Madara, and run away from him immediately when possible."

"Good, and now show me those pipes."

Half an hour later, Shiori was laying under the sink in Obito's kitchen, pounding with a hammer against the old boiler. The reborn woman was torn between shimmering anger at indoor plumbing about what she knew next to nothing; and bursting pride, that her not so humble self may have just kicked the plot in the sack. How good it was, to had a devil-of-grandmother from whom you could learn so many things, no other five-year-old should know, and who at the same time was too dead to tell you bullshit? Sure, it wasn't certain the girl changed anything, but it was possible; and what's more important, it was possible with a minimal effort.

"How's it going?"

Shiori's stupendous death-glare clearly meant she wanted nothing more than dress him as a lettuce and feed him to the snails.

"Just splendid," she hissed. "If you don't count the fact that I have no idea what I'm actually doing, and that you haven't cleaned here completely. If I get dirty, I'll tell Kushina-san that you made me cry."
"But, Shiori-chan, She'll kill me!"

"I always knew my grandson needs a firm, female hand."

Shiori jumped and slammed her face into the pipe with such force that the echo spread through the plumbing in the whole house. In order to preserve imperative of narration, thanks to her hurt head water gushed from the tap.

Rough, wrinkled hands drew the child out from under the sink and put her on the table.

"I'm sorry, daisy. I didn't want to scare you."

"Obaa-chan, what have you done?! Kushina-san is going to slaughter me!"

In the next crazy five minutes the small Uzumaki was introduced to Obito's grandmother, Uchiha Nobuko, whose main purpose in life was embarrassing her own grandson. She was Shiori's kind of woman.

The girl rolled a green apple in her hands she got from the Uchiha boy as a bribe, eyeing it with caution.

"Is it poisoned or do you think you can buy my silence with one fruit? I'm not so easy, Obi-nii. Not to say, even Kushina-san isn't so stupid to miss this." She pointed at the purple bruise on her forehead of the size of the mentioned apple.

"Come on, Shi-chan." Begged the dark-haired chunin on the brink of panic. "Don't be like that."

"Look, we will take your hair a little to the front and everything's going to be alright. See?" Shiori regarded her reflection in handled by Nobuko-san kunai.

"You owe me a favor, Obi-nii. A really big one." She announced and bit the apple.

Since imperatives of narration had to feel cozy in their superiority, one tiny, shiny tooth has been stuck in the apple.

"Now, even Minato sensei won't help me… I'm doomed!"

"Who cares about your doom?! I'm toothless!"

Ω

"Shiori-chan?" The girl was unlike any child Minato knew. She invented her own kind of genius that the blond jonin with all his brilliance, and Kakashi – prodigy second to none - couldn't understand most of the time. Her madness was similar, that's why the man didn't even try to comprehend why Shiori looked like a mix between his two male students, just five sizes smaller.

"Don't ask, Mini-nii, please." Mumbled the child crossing the corridor. Obito's goggle and Hatake's mask covered nearly her whole face. She looked like a creep.

"Why do you look like a creep?" Asked Kushina with plate of apple-pie in her hands as if waiting for a right moment to add some witty comment.

Shiori hoped the Uchiha managed to escape far enough; who was she kidding? She wished Kushina would catch him and skin him alive with tea spoon. She took off the mask and lifted the goggles from her forehead.
The girl expected a meteor shower or maybe some earthquake, not handing the cake to Minato and following its gale of laughter. Kushina howled, slapping her hands up and down almost compulsorily, she couldn't even breathe. Fat tears rolled down her freshly pinked cheeks. It was several minutes before it subsided and Shiori loathed every second of it.

"Are you done?"

"No" true to her word, the redheaded woman started laughing again.

Shiori considered coloration of her cousin's pretty curls with the apple cake, but someone knocked at the door.

Ω

A few hours earlier, when the snake sannin saw Jiraiya's famous pupil at the door of his laboratory, he never thought he would be standing where he was now.

Orochimaru didn't like Minato but he also didn't dislike him per se. He had some respect for the younger man, especially looking at what kind of person he had grown to be, despite the questionable didactic skills of the toad summoner. Through the years of constantly being in Jiraiya's presence the blond demonstrated outstanding resistance to stupidity and perverted ways of life Jiraiya loved so. In other words: Minato wasn't an idiot.

It changed when he invited Orochimaru for dinner. Dinner in Namikaze's and Uzumaki's house, he would like to add, consisting homemade food prepared by no one other than Kushina, for which culinary marvels Jiraiya wrote memorials. The last time Orochimaru ate cooked mill was years ago, when he didn't have that irritating title and all troubles it implicated. Carefree years, when he wasn't necessary for functioning of the village and people didn't flee at his sight. Obviously, it mildly boosted his ego, but his time for experiments became very limited and cooperation with his peers were an even more horrendous task than before.

And of course there was the child.

After Tsunade did what none of her teammates had balls to do, and leave it all to hell, larger clusters of working neurons in one person were nearly nonexistent. Sarutobi sensei was constantly busy, meeting with his old pupils only to give them new orders. From the few people whose presence Orochimaru was able to tolerate without longing to commit a bloody murder, only Jiraiya was left, but now even the toad summoner was absent most of the time, since at least one of the sannins had to always be at the battlefield - it was priceless for the morale. Everyone else was dead; expect the child the lame-excuse-of-a-teammate threw at him two days ago.

The child, standing now right in front of him, wasn't only highly intelligent and knowledgeable beyond what he could hope to find in any youngster in Konoha. He saw in those golden eyes the same yearning of knowledge he had, and saw years ago in another redheaded woman. The child had the same brilliant mind as her grandmother and Orochimaru would be doomed if he wouldn't shape it according to his own design. The young Uzumaki was also respectful, boarding on awestruck, concerning everything he had done. The girl worshipped him but in no way blindly. She understood him.

"Good evening, Minato-kun, Kushina-chan, Shi… where is the child?"

"What are you doing, shrimp? Orochimaru-sama is your guest too, dettabane!"

Regardless of Kushina's words the girl was hiding behind Minato, hanging from his back with a grip
worth of Tsunade's super-strength.

"I'm sorry, Orochimaru-sama, I don't know what has possessed her." Minato was starting to sweat. He didn't invite to his home one of the most renowned shinobi in the world so he could see a zoo that was his new family. Actually, the smaller Uzumaki behaved like a rather stubborn koala.

"Child, stop," instructed Orochimaru. His voice was calm, precisely measuring each syllable. It was the kind of voice that didn't even blink.

Instantly the girl released her grip and was off Minato's back but she was far from acting normal. Shiori's face was covered with her hands and she openly refused to remove them. Kushina crouched down and whispered something into the child's ear.

"I'm five. I can act ridiculous; besides I don't act even half as ridiculous as I look." Her voice was slurred that it might as well emerge from the basement.

It was the last clue Orochimaru needed.

"All young ziphodont mammals have to lose deciduous teeth. It's natural, not ridiculous." He said leisurely.

Shiori studied the dark-haired man with piercing scrutiny, contemplating his point. The consideration had to end well since she showed them her toothless smile and bowed.

"Excuse me for causing the scene, Orochimaru-sama."

The man couldn't respond because another head full of red locks appeared right before his face.

"You actually talked her out of this? You talk her language!" To say Kushina was thrilled would be a huge understatement. "Orochimaru-sama, you don't know how glad I am you're here, dettabane! Sometimes I have no idea what to do with her. I will be grateful for any parental advice. Please come in!"

For some reason the words in Orochimaru's hindbrain changed a bit and sounded suspiciously like "the one to be devoured can enter." When the woman grabbed his hand and dragged him to the living room he realized that maybe he heard correctly. Wait? Had she just asked HIM for a parental advice?

___

Shi wrote by kanji 師 means expert and specialist

As always thanks to everyone who's reviewed/alerted/read, as well as to mrsmiawallace88.
Minato tried so hard that it hurt Shiori’s teeth. Kushina was her usual brash person and demanded to know all the secrets of the brain tuning to the younger girl’s frequency. Explanations that’s enough to use logical arguments weren’t taken into consideration. Orochimaru watched everything carefully, while maintaining a neutral expression of a man who was almost certain that his hosts were a little crazy. Nevertheless, he put up with it, because he just ate a delicious meal, and it would be rude to leave so soon. On the other hand, all the adults as one avoided looking into each other’s eyes.

Meanwhile Shiori sat quietly swallowing in whole all goodies she managed to put her hands on, and at the same time not looking like a perpetually dissatisfied cookie monster. She had always been of the opinion that fish and children shouldn’t have a voice, especially in the company of seemingly adult and reliable people; besides she didn’t want to behave like a savage in front of Orochimaru. Actually, thinking about it, adding up all her life spans she should be close to his age. Thinking about this further, it was just sad.

But nothing was sadder than the uncomfortable air hanging over the table like an ax, so the girl decided to open her mouth.

“Orochimaru-sama, if I may ask, how is the new jutsu going?”

The mentioned man glanced sideways with something between relief for interrupting the silence and overwhelming repulsion to the need to talk.

“Good but there’re some difficulties.”

“Shiori-chan mentioned something about it before. What are you exactly developing, Orochimaru-sama?” asked the second redhead, also wary of the previous silence.

“Actually, it was all Shiori-chan’s idea.”

Minato nearly choked. It happened extremely often when the girl was nearby.

“Shiori-chan came up with a new jutsu alone?”

“You don’t need to act so surprised, Mini-nii. I’m young, not half-witted.” The reborn woman could endure a lot - teasing her age, height, odd hair and eyes, hell even her chubby fingers, but she would never stay silent when someone was mocking her intellect.

“You should see her in Uzu, Minato.” Kushina snorted. “The Chief of fuinjutsu development often dragged her through the whole village like a wild Chihuahua. He was resembling a scorched chicken after her rather volatile experiments. After one she had a lifetime ban on access to the research facility.”

“Performance issues - everybody have them from time to time.” explained the embarrassed child. “Besides the ban was just temporary.”

“You mean that Bomaru-sama was at his wits end after a week of exploding in his face meals, and that one time when he found the ether in his aftershave and later woke up in a box signed warning – a nitwit – it bites. It was golden.”

“He had an IQ of a houseplant. And I put in there a supply of lettuce and water, and even some newspapers on the floor, so he wouldn’t mess too much.”
Minato swore then to close his locker in the bathroom shut and hid the key. He doubted any seals could help against the properly motivated Uzumaki.

“Don’t you think it might have been a little over the top?”

“It was a matter of principles and work ethics, Mini-nii.” In some weird way her lack of tooth made her sweet smile even more diabolic.

“What’s the new jutsu?” Kushina worked currently as the blond man’s lifesaver because for the third time today he looked like he was going to have a stroke in a minute.

“It’s a wind ninjutsu combined with a barrier. It creates a vacuum, suffocating whoever is inside.” Explained the snake sannin. “It’s really clever.”

The kid beamed from the prize.

“Unfortunately we have problem with maintaining paralysis, so the victim cannot step out of the barrier.”

“What if you make the barrier more sustained?”

“Then its frequency would be too slow to proficiently pump out the air.” Kushina’s question was answered by Minato, who was bumping fingers into his chin, thinking.

It seemed that a jutsu problem was everything the bunch of socially inept shinobi nerds needed to overwhelm their differences. The brainstorm between the three seal-masters was something no one normal would understand. Shiori was mainly silent, thinking the whole time, not wanting to say something stupid. When Kushina served proper dessert and their time together was closing, the girl decided to share her best idea.

“If it can’t be ninjutsu then make it a seal.” She hushed instantly under the scrutinizing gaze of three pair of eyes. “You know… like exploding tag? I think four layers. First one paralyze everything with chakra in a specified radius, then a barrier so the void could be sustained, third - getting rid of the air, and at the end a small teleporting fuinjutsu to deal with the used seals and get rid of the evidence. It could be really useful for ANBU. Clean, silent death. Without fully competent coroner it would seem like a natural cause.”

And then a miracle happened and not only Orochimaru smiled but also patted her head. It was a grimace and the pat was rather wooden as a furniture storage but not the less it was something. Shiori’s grin was so big, it was highly possible her cheeks would fall off.

“It’s brilliant, Shiori-chan, truly, but…” Minato didn’t know how to express his thoughts; especially with hidden but no less menacing frown the other man was giving him. “You’re five. Don’t you think that inventing ways to murder someone isn’t the best past time for someone your age?”

The lecture under the yellow glare changed into a sentence with fat question marks at the end.

“This’s a shinobi village.” Moutched the girl. “The past time of vast part of its residents hovers around thinking about transience of human life and the means to cause it. I don’t want to be a kunoichi, but every one of you kill on daily basis. If making it easier, so you won’t be the one killed, is something I can do, I’ll do it.”

Minato understood then, he shouldn’t worry about Orochimaru’s bad influence on Shiori. The girl couldn’t come under outside guidance at all, because from the very beginning she was under her own.
He remembered fights Jiraiya sensei always had against some of his colleagues for Orochimaru’s sake. Of course not literally, and never when the man was present, but many leaf shinobi openly thought that the snake summoner wasn’t naturally a paid-up member of the human race, except biologically and looking at his eyes and pale skin maybe not even that. He needed to be socially bounced around by fellow sannins, thanks to what he was constantly reminded he was in fact… well … human being. Truth be told, Minato hadn’t understood why his sensei was always defending the snake. Sure, they were once teammates, and once a teammate, always a teammate, but the man’s presence was alarming. There was just something wrong with him. He gave the odd feeling and making even other killers uneasy wasn’t something to belittle.

The problem was – Kushina’s and his little girl had the same vibe and it was in perfect resonance with Orochimaru’s.

He didn’t know if it was a good thing, but now, watching her smile, it was good enough. That vibe was to guard their loved ones, and the fair-haired man knew he would protect the girl as his sensei protected his friend.

Unaware of Minato’s over-interpretation of her behaviour, the young Uzumaki happily chatted with the rest of the adults about the new tags. Whole hour passed in a blink of an eye and Orochimaru was gone, sent back with a full plate of delicious leftovers.

“So?” Asked the child, clambering into Minato’s lap on the sofa.

“So?”

“How was the test run?”

“The test run?” the man repeated again and the little redhead having enough of it pulled out the big guns - she pouted.

“Seriously, Mini-nii. Stop it and tell me.”

“Tell you what, Shior-chan?” now Minato pouted. It was a full-fledged war of sickeningly sweet pouts. “It wasn’t a test, just a dinner.”

“Sure it wasn’t. And you and Kushina-san didn’t want to check if Orochimaru-sama will change me into suicidal maniac. By the way, nice sannins you have; creepy pervert, sinister genius and what? Gambler or a drunk?”

Minato sweat-dropped.

“Both actually.”

“Stop kidding me.” Then the woman vaguely remembered Tsunade as she was shown in the manga with her giant boobs and a bottle of sake always in the background. “Wait, you aren’t kidding me.”

“I’m afraid so.”

Shiori hmmed and assessed him again, this time with serious face.

“What’s the verdict, Mini-nii?”

The man scratched his chin with undisguised purpose rising the tension. Then without warning he was confronting the child with rough ticklish attack.
“The verdict is that you need to relax, kiddo.”

The girl’s laughter rolled out of her like waves on a golden, tropical beach. It appeared to disappear for a second only to build up and break to the surface once more. The blond was deaf for her pleads as if trying to squeeze out of her every giggle. Shiori was forced to call for backup even if it meant being a manipulative bitch.

“Kushina-nee-chan, help!”

The reinforcement walked out of the kitchen with a wet cloth in hand and a nebulous gaze.

“So now I’m a nee-chan, ehh? I’ll show you your nee-chan, dettabane!”

After that Shiori had to deal with not one but two attackers and her laughter could be heard from a mile away, echoing through the halls and into each and every room in the house.

In one of them a person stopped.

A long shadow crouched on the windowsill listening to the joyful sounds so uncommon for his ears. It was something new in this household just like the room he was in. Gone were the weapons and taijutsu scrolls; gone was the target practice shield on the wall and training dummy in the corner, even old bed sheets in kunais were gone. In their place was a mountain of colorful cushions and teddy bears (and one gigantic plushy pink frog, it was the most disturbing toy he ever seen). Overall everything that could be was fluffy, vibrant and nice-looking. Perfect kid’s room. Not his.

The short person jumped from the windowsill and walked to the bookshelf. The most problematic thing was the unpleasant feeling – mix of sadness, anger and loneliness. He knew he shouldn’t feel all these things but he had. This room could be still his yet it was his idea to move out. Kushina-san nearly begged him to stay but he couldn’t. This life wasn’t his, so how could it be that he was angered by a loss of something he never had. What he once had he tried to forget. If he remembered the hugs, being sheltered in his father arms or picked up off his feet the second his lip trembled, he wouldn’t be able to carry on.

He took one book out and started to mindlessly leaf through it.

He didn’t look for love. He didn’t expect anyone to care for him. Every time he thought about the ‘L’ word it was in the context of an enemy and how they would exploit it to their advantage. There was no room for sentimentality in his life. He was shinobi and the only important things for shinobi were rules and duty. He had become someone his father would have been ashamed of. But it was good; the feeling was mutual.

“What are you doing here?”

His first thought was disbelief. The child was louder than Obito, how was it possible he didn’t hear her? The second thought was need to flee. Before the book he previously tried to reed hit the floor, half of his body was outside.

“Wait, Hatake-san” The boy didn’t intend to. “Or I’ll tell Minato you were here.”

This worked. Kakashi gave her a thoroughly insulting stare but leapt back on the floor.

“What do you want?”

“Sheesh, you don’t need to look at me like I just kicked your puppy.” Mumbled the girl still a little flushed from laughing and opened the closet dragging something out of it. It was a box and when she
opened it the silver-haired boy’s eyes winched slightly.

“When I found them they were a little filthy, so I washed them. They are yours, aren’t they?”

They were. Four plushy dogs were his favorite toys. His first pack, at least that’s what his father called them when he gave them to him.

“For what could I need them? Toys are for kids.”

Before Shiori could answer she was left alone, not counting the growing waves of anger.

“Yeah, and what are you? A beardless dwarf?!”

The reborn woman cursed herself and the boy. She shouldn’t be so agitated by some brat. She was three times his senior for Buddha’s fat belly sake! The girl glowered at the box with toys and stuffed it back into the closet. Now, looking at her trampled book on the floor at least she was sure that no good deed was left unpunished.

Ω

The redhead girl’s stomach growled as she squirmed in her seat trying to silence the rumbling. She glared at the clock; it was lunch time. She should ponder the ways of cutting chakra circulation in paralyzed victims, but Shiori’s head was preoccupied. Her eyes glazed over, when she imagined the bento she left on the table in the kitchen. She was so thrilled by the prospect of working witch Orochimaru she had totally forgotten her delicious food this morning. She was salivating at the very thought of it.

With one more rumble she prized to the skies the old record player and music flying out of it. She would have never been suspecting that the snake sannin was such a music lover. He even hummed a tune under his nose a few times. If the laboratory was silent and he would hear her lamenting stomach the girl would be mortified to her dying breath.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Stop whatever you’re doing and go to the corridor.” Repeated the man, not taking his yellow eyes off the chakra charts.

The girl blinked. She was doing exactly nothing, so what should she stop doing? Wait, did he noticed she was doing nothing and was annoyed? Was he going to send her home? Separate her from the only brain absorbing activities in this village? Force to live her everyday mundane life full of idiots, musings about the upcoming doom and making her crazier with every hour?

“Stop panicking, Shiori-chan, and go eat.”

“Eeeeh?” How it’s possible that in front the only person she truly wanted to impress, she was behaving like a mindless cucumber?

“Nourishment is essential in maintaining the appropriate brain function. And even I don’t eat in here. This could contaminate the surroundings.”

Ooh, that made sense. But it didn’t change the fact she was screwed. Embarrassment of the century here she comes.
“Speak louder, child. We both know you’re capable of it.”

“I don’t have anything to eat.” She mumbled a little louder, toying with her fingers. Orochimaru for the first time actually looked at her and lifted one slender brow in untold question. “I left the bento Kushina made for me on the table. I’m sorry, Orochimaru-sama.”

“What do you want?”

“Eeh?” The next eloquent statement.

“I’ll sent someone for a food for you. This department is full of incompetent fools, so it will be no loss.”

“Can we go together?”

Shiori saw the shock registered on his face before Orochimaru could hide it. And, heck, the snake sannin was surprised, there was no doubt about it. He knew the child was highly intelligent and sought his company to get rid of her boredom. He, for his part, wanted to try and recruit the girl for his experiments. Not as a specimen but as a source of additional ideas; he wouldn’t want to unnecessarily aggravate the yellow flash and the Kyubi container.

Their mutual profit he understood, but the desire for common meal? That was something else entirely.

Had the young Uzumaki truly wanted to spent time with him or did she has some ulterior reasons? It had to be the second case. Orochimaru wasn’t material for a casual hang out.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Imagawayaki or dango or both!” And here was the reason, the bottomless stomach.

“I’ll sent for some…”

“Please, Orochimaru-sama,” the girl interrupted. “Please, come with me, pretty please?”

From when her eyes were so big, shiny and round? And why her lower lip was trembling?

“Are you trying to manipulate me with you childish charm?”

Shiori flayed him with blank gaze and shrugged.

“It would be nice to eat together that’s all.”

After a moment of thought Orochimaru agreed. In the end, what could have happened?

Ω

It was years from the last time he thought of himself as an idiot, but here he was doing it again. Everyone looked at him as if he was on the brink of murder or just kidnapped the girl bouncing happily in his arms. The child’s legs were too short to keep up with his long strides, and Orochimaru refused to lose more time than was necessary. So here he was, in the middle of the occurrence that had no right to exist, with a dango stick in his mouth and cheerful kid in his embrace. He asked Shiori to calm down and she did, for a whole two minutes after with her glee returned with a vengeance. It was like trying to tell a star not to shine. Those golden eyes were twinkling. Every single one of her muscles needed to move, to dance, to jump. She giggled and joked and chattered about fuinjutsu and other scientific subjects. Where one idea was coming out from her mouth there
was seven more queuing up in her mind. And all of that gathered considerable attention.

For example, now two women were eyeing him with growing distrust, at least until Shiori stuck the next batch of dumplings into his mouth and giggled. The chuckle was like an acoustic hug. It traveled through the humid autumn air, inclosing even strangers in its embrace. Even the most stoic of the passers stifled grins, and the two women’s glares morphed into a flirting smiles.

“See, you don’t need to be the scary one. You just need a little good PR. For first, you should end this constant brooding.”

The man’s brows knitted in a frown.

“I do not brood.”

“Orochimaru-sama, if your brooding was any more notable, it would be your main attack according to bingo books. Ninja armies would part before your broody face.” Orochimaru glared as if wanting to pin her butt to the next ramen stand and leave her there as a flag, nevertheless stuffed cheeks spoiled the effect. “Women in the Land of Fire would have broody offspring in your hono…”

The man smiled. Who would have thought that dango have so remarkable muzzling proprieties?

After eating the sweets, all the way back to the Science and Development division’s laboratories Shiori talked about ways to improve his image but to his own surprise Orochimaru wasn’t irritated. It reminded him past bickering with Jiraiya about some childish, unimportant details to Tsunade’s delight. The red head girl wasn’t the big oaf nor Senju princess but she turned out to be not the worst company.

The laboratory’s door barely swan shut behind them when the child went completely stiff. Her eyes were bulging with poorly concealed fright. Shimura Danzo was standing in the middle of Orochimaru’s workroom, reading his notes.

“Orochimaru-kun, Shiori-chan,” greeted the man and the addressed girl nearly melted into sannin’s side.

“Danzo-sama,” droned the black-haired man and put the small Uzumaki on the floor. “Shiori-chan, ask someone to get you home.”

“Yes, Orochimaru-sama. Thank you for today and goodbye. Danzo-sama,” the girl bowed and turned a little too slowly for it to be normal. When she spoke her voice trailed lifelessly, as if her words were unwilling to be heard. There was something akin of anger in her eyes; the gold hue way too sharp.

Ω

A week later the reborn woman was rolling over in her bed as a fish on a dry land. Every day of the past week she was with Orochimaru and in each of them she detected more disturbing things indicating that the snake sannin was in league with Shimura’s Foundation.

It wasn’t good, sure but it was utterly terrifying when she realized that spending time with Orochimaru and impressing him did nothing but further drew Danzo’s attention. Damn her arrogance and that stupid luck! Why she was brought into this world in Uzu? Couldn’t she be reborn from the start in the Leaf Village? Then she wouldn’t need to be recognized as a prodigy. Behaving like a normal, stupid child would make her crazy and bitchy all the time but at least now she would be safe; and now what?!
When Minato and Kushina will be dead no one would even ask about her. Shimura was going to brainwash her and then she would lose herself and die one way or another. All this rebirthing, adjusting to new life and dealing with bunch of idiots was for nothing; she was doomed and at the moment had a panic attack!

She breathed in and out but air didn’t enter her lungs. Begging for a breath her heart raced at incredible speed, lungs shallowly rose and fell. Contentment and security were nothing but a memory, and an invisible power crushed her small body from every direction. Each second flooded with dread made a permanent mark on her heart. She had to stop it. She had to do something.

Two wobbly legs barely managed to keep her vertical, but when the girl was certain that she would be able to stand up she headed forward straight to her caretaker’s bedroom. Maybe it was stupid and childish and totally unbecoming, but when she was cradled in Minato’s arms and listened to Kushina’s sweet nothingness she again felt safe, if only for a moment.

And then she knew. I she wanted to live, she couldn’t let them die. Otherwise she was lost.

As always I have to thank and gush over mrsmiawallace88 :D Seriously, I can’t thank her enough, so I’ll continue to be happily in her debt.

Ok, now when I’ve gushed somewhat suitably over my wonderful beta - big hugs and thanks to everyone who’s reviewed, faved, followed and read the story. To the next time ^^
Problems, beasts and blasts

Shiori's pillow was hard and cold. She felt it gently. It was hard and cold because it wasn't a pillow, but a desktop. It felt like her cheek was glued to the wood, but she didn't want to even start to guess with what. The events of the previous week oozed slowly through the dirty gauze of memory. The most important was the slightly crouched figure of the man the reborn woman despised with unbridled passion. Danzo was the main catalyst for almost all her problems.

Firstly, highly specialized research equipment or rather the lack of it. She would have had to be a brainless, drooling zombie to believe that those test results Orochimaru was always analyzing have been done in one of the Research Department laboratories. The building was small, neglected and suffered from a serious lack of financial and human resources. The Ninja government didn't support the funding of research on how and why things worked. It's enough to know how to destroy them. So, the girl's mentor had to have other laboratories, far more advanced and backed by a mountain of money. Hidden Villages not without a reason controlled financial income of their shinobi. Money meant power, and too much power in one's hands (especially if those hands belonged to a strong ninja) was dangerous. The Villages earned a fortune, soldiers responsible for this had to settle for scraps.

Secondly, every test on living creatures was performed on humans and what was the worst it wasn't out of necessity or truly evil intentions but from pure ignorance. No one in this world knew they could use other mammals! Shiori wanted to smack her head in the previously mentioned desktop just thinking about it.

Her last big problem was Orochimaru's study over cell implementation. He told her it was for medical purposes – and sure, it could be, but she had the nagging feeling that because of it the snake sannin had to leave the Village. Having someone like him on her site would make everything far easier. Fuck, if she only could remember.

The reborn woman couldn't approach this situation realistically without going mad. She had to worry about it if she wanted to by fully dedicated to rescuing her own sorry ass. And worrying about all this shit was like opening a can of ham in the middle of a swarm of piranhas.

With her sleeve the girl wiped her golden eyes, moist from frustration and lack of sleep.

"What's wrong with you?"

She nearly fell from the chair and five pillows on which she had to sit to reach the desk. It was a long way down.

"Don't scare me like that, Orochimaru-sama. And besides the fact that I almost had a heart attack everything is ok."

The man glanced at her over the table full of tubes and reagents, then snorted. In this one snort a mocking smile sounded far too clearly.

"So running all snotty and crying to Namikaze for a hug in the middle of the night is alright?"

Shiori froze. How in the name of the magnificent Flying Spaghetti Monster did he know that? Had Danzo put her under surveillance? Was there some ANBU guy going all Edward Cullen on her when she slept? The reborn woman hoped it wasn't true. Humans were defined by what they hate. There were many things she hated. Twilight was almost at the top of the list, just behind tea and
people's stupidity.

"But how…?"

"Minato told me, how else?" He mumbled and stirred a flask with violet substance; probably something with manganese.

"You two talk?" She didn't know what was more surprising; the fact Minato came to Orochimaru from his own free will or that the dark haired sannin actually admitted it.

"I'm scrutinized because of you; better appreciate it." Shiori was sure he meant not only her caretakers. "Besides, they told me to observe you because of these incidents. They think you're going through delayed nervous breakdown."

If his previous snort had a mocking smile in it, that one was hosting a full-fledged laugh.

"I've seen my family and friends die. My home, my whole world collapsed before my eyes. I have every right to be traumatized; even an adult would be affected and I'm a child."

"Well, and that's bullshit if I've ever heard one. We both know you're too smart to do these… sentiments." His sneer indicated that he was speaking at least about bestiality or other similar deviations. "You aren't affected by the past things you have no power to change. You are afraid of the future. The only question is why?" In his cold, yellow eyes was no room for pity, it wasn't a quality aiding survival. Sometimes, however, he could risk a little gentleness. "What scares you so, child?"

At first, Shiori didn't even speak. She only felt that her jaw dropped, and some small areas of her brain melted together. What could she tell him? What should she tell him? She settled on some small half-truths and bunch of farfetched but not impossible probabilities.

"I fear for Kushina and Minato; Konoha is at war and if they die I would be left alone without a place to stay. There would be no one to cook for me and do laundry; not to mention pay bills. I'm also worried about you. That bandaged guy was bad news. Grandmother said that if a bastard from Konoha, calling himself Shimura, would ever be interested in me I must tell her and she will kill him. He's interested in you and Yori oba-sama is dead. There's no one who can deal with him for us. I know you're super strong, Orochimaru-sama, but he has powerful political sway; that's two totally different things. He'll use you and later get rid of you; then who will help me stop the boredom? Not counting you, they're all idiots."

At the end Shiori was out of breath but she was pleased with herself. Just an appropriate amount of truth overshadowed by a large dose of self-interest and a pinch of praise as the icing on the cake.

"In other words, you're worrying about losing roof over your head, delicious meals, free labor and gaining overwhelming boredom?" A firm nod answered him. "Shiori-chan, go home and sleep." He offered with a tone of a man who tried to persuade future suicide to leave a window sill.

The girl nodded once more and jumped off the stool. Her nonexistent innate grace and lack of sleep made themselves known; the little legs buckled under her and met with the hard floor. Fat tears started to run down her cheeks and trembling chin.

"You awful klutz," muttered the sannin coldly. Evidently having already used the daily dose of human emotions.

Sadly, Shiori could only acknowledge it. She mumbled a goodbye and limped outside. The girl knew she should ask someone to walk her home, but she needed to be alone for a moment. She
slipped into the crowd outside the Research Facility and walked with the enormous swell of humans, since when they moved she also had to. She was like a tiny, red smurf; if her feet failed to keep up she risked being trampled underfoot. The laboratories were close to the hospital and in a time of war the area was crowded. There was nothing for it but to move with the mass, trying to stir in the right direction.

The rest of the way home Shiori survived in automatic mode. At the moment she wasn't able to think of anything. Once she tried, the thoughts diverged immediately. And as always, when the world went overboard, they ran in other places. For example, when she tried to open the closed door to the apartment, her brain was trying to remember the recipe for a pizza. If only Kushina was home, the girl was sure together they could cook something similar. Unfortunately, the woman was out and the younger redhead was alone with no means of communication.

She should wait for her or Minato but the reborn woman had one, new big problem. She was hungry. Nevertheless, she couldn't go back to Orochimaru. Not only would he know she went alone, but her knee ached and bled. She hated pain. Why couldn't Danzo's spy be so nice and let her in? She wouldn't tell a single soul.

Resolved, the girl slid down the wall and being careful with the wounded leg pulled a small scroll from out of her bag. She opened it and slowly ran a finger along the symbols. She should have made a seal akin to a pager, then she wouldn't be sitting on the ground like some stray. Or they could make her a key.

The five-year old suddenly noticed that the rays of the sun were obscured by something big.

"Are you alright… Why are you crying?"

Shiori blinked. She didn't even know she was doing it. The girl wiped her glassy eyes and pulled an impressive snot back up into her nose.

"I'm in pain, hungry and on my own." She wanted to ask him if he had anything to eat, when it dawned on her with whom she was speaking. The shiny bowl haircut, thick eyebrows and trademark green jumpsuit - before her stood none other than Might Guy. She knew what she had to do.

She burst into tears again.

"Ku- Ku- Kushina-nee-chan and Mini-nii aren't home and I don't have a key!"

The boy panicked seeing the waterfall of tears.

"Hey, don't cry. Such beautiful Konoha's little flower shouldn't cry. We'll find your Mini-nii… wait!" Guy eyed the building the child wanted to enter. "By Mini-nii you mean Minato sensei?"

"You know Mini-nii?"

"Of course, I'm the eternal rival of one of his students, Konoha's green beast, Might Guy – nice to meet you!" His shiny smile and thumbs up was sincere like never before. Seeing that, the small redhead stopped crying and rewarded him with a toothless grin.

"Hello, I'm Uzumaki Shiori, age five. It's nice to meet you. Do you have anything to eat?"

Ω

Finding his eternal rival was hard. He wasn't in his usual spots, expertly concealing every trace he could leave. Guy wasn't someone who'd give up easily, especially since he wasn't looking for
Kakashi to keep the flame of their youthful rivalry. He was doing it for the little red flower, currently sitting on his back, eating her ninth portion of dango. The young chunin sadly patted his pocket, where he kept his wallet - now almost empty wallet – but smiled none the less. He was helping the young, innocent maiden; what could be better to prove his youthfulness than that?

"Who you kidnapped this time, Guy-san?" sounded Ebisu's stern voice.

Guy's two teammates were standing with their sensei in the entry to Akimichi's grocery.

"It isn't kidnapping. I'm on a mission to help this blossoming beauty to find team seven."

The three new males critically inspected the small head full of rosy locks emerging from behind the always excited boy. She didn't look panicked, happily munching the sweets.

"Then where did you find the kid?" Inquired Genma.

"On the street."

"And you decided to take her just like that?"

"Shouldn't I?"

Shiori stopped listening to their conversation long ago, focusing on the smell wafting from the shop. It couldn't be true. After so many years she lost hope, but here it was – a miracle.

She sniffed the air like a dog and forcefully tugged Guy's thick mane, slightly bouncing.

"Guy-san, fooooooward, yupi-yup!"

The rest of Team Choza watched in disbelief how the boy, as befits a decent mount, walked around them according to the command of his tiny rider, who turned her large golden pools to the only adult in their group.

"Excuse me, sir, but what is this smell?"

"The smell?" the large man inhaled the air and chuckled. "You had a fine nose, little one. It's a new kind of beans from Grass Country. It's used to make a special beverage."

Shiori wanted to celebrate, sing praises to the heavens and dance naked in the middle of the street. She managed to find coffee. Her life made sense again!

"OK! Now we can continue our youthful journey in search of Minato sensei!" Shouted the green beast, grabbing two other boys and running in the other direction.

"But, but MY DRINK!"

"Don't worry little one, you can come back with Minato any day!" Shouted the huge man, waving her goodbye.

Akimichi Choza smiled broadly seeing the determined gleam in the child's eyes; he would be seeing her again – probably today. The new Uzumaki was really similar to Kushina in a matter of her favorite food. Minato was a poor man.

Ω

Guy wasn't stupid. Turning a blind eye on his peculiar style, he was kind, honest, straightforward.
and honorable in all his actions. In the world of shinobi these qualities were classified as symptoms of stupidity and provided him with an anticipated life span of a jellyfish in the blast furnace. But the reborn woman knew better. The odd teenager was on his way to becoming one of the strongest shinobi. He could be a precious ally, so their acquaintance was worth a little more craziness in her already abnormal life.

Now, they were going to the training ground thirty-six. According to Genma, who gained the information from the girl in the mission assignment office, Minato’s team was tasked with clearing that area. Even before entering in the main clearing it was obvious the info was correct.

"How, on the First Hokage panties, you want to be a jonin, when you're out of chakra after a few small jutsus?"

"Just shut up, Obito. You always can do it yourself. Oh, I forgot, you have only one chakra nature."

Kakashi was sitting on the ground with Rin trying to replenish his chakra, while the young Uchiha was standing over them with a smug expression. Far more interesting were their surroundings. The field was full of gigantic rocks, towering proudly over everything else.

"Hello to you, my eternal rival and his team!" Their presence couldn't go unnoticed with Guy's hyperactive personality.

Kakashi's arms sank hearing his self-proclaimed eternal rival. And he thought this day couldn't be worse.

"Shiori-chan? What are you doing here?" asked Uchiha.

The silver haired boy groaned. Today was officially one of the worst days in his life. Even worse than when Pakkun ate chocolate and vomited for the next six hours, mainly into his sandals.

"I'm looking for Mini-nii."

"But why are you with Guy-san and his team?" Rin wanted to take the child from the boy, but the small redhead was holding him like a vise. She clearly liked him. It was highly suspicious.

"I found her crying by Minato sensei's door."

"You were alone?" the kunoichi couldn't fathom that, especially considering Kushina's overprotective streak.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. Guy-san rescued me. And he fed me!" As in prize she patted his hair.

"Now I must know where is Mini-nii. I need him."

"Sensei told us he'll be back when we'll get rid of these rocks." Explained Rin.

"And because Kakashi has tiny chakra resources, this will take forever." Added Obito with ultimate faith in his knowledge.

"Worry no more. We're going to help you." Offered Guy, handing the redhead to the Uchiha and heading for the nearest rock.

"Guy, don't offer your help without asking us." Pledged the senbon wielder without any conviction. It was way too obvious this was daily occurrence.

"Without earth ninjutsu you won't do a thing. They're too heavy."
"Nothing is too heavy for the power of youth, my eternal rival. I'll move it or do two hundred laps on my arms around the Village!"

Guy was sweating and groaning, but no amount of muscle made the boulder to even flinch. Shiori had enough of this. Her mental wellbeing demanded coffee, so she needed the blond man and it meant these freaking stones had to be gone, instantly!

"Can't you blow them up into smaller pieces?"

"Sure," answered Obito. "But with what?"

Shiori shot him a glance worth of highly irritated cow.

"Exploding tags are expensive. Kakashi has a few, but we would need far more than that."

"Rin-chan is right, besides, standard tags aren't powerful enough to deal with these boulders."

Shiori listened to the young Uchiha's explanation and prayed for patience.

"Any of you have a seal paper?"

"I have some blank tags." Offered Genma.

"You're learning fuinjutsu?" Rin was impressed. Even Kakashi had too much trouble with sealing to want to learn it.

"Gemma-san is great in it." Confirmed Ebisu, proudly shifting his glasses as if it was his own achievement.

"I still have all my fingers if it's counts."

Shiori marched to him and held out her hands.

"Gimme."

Every pair of eyes anchored their attention on her short form. Shiori would face palm if she had one more hand. All this drama was unnecessary.

"Are you kidding me? These things aren't for children."

"I don't believe I'm saying it but I'm with Kakashi. Kushina-san would kill us if she knew we give you things that can go boom."

"I can handle it."

Kakashi sneered.

"You're a winy, spoiled brat. Can you even write and read?"

Shiori saw red, quite matching considering that her face was as red as her hair. Had he just called her illiterate?

"You brain-dead, retarded waste of space! Forget I have been nice to you or wanted to help. And if you ever would want your toys back I'll bite you!" The girl finished her lightly slurred toothless outburst with a loud hmpf and walked away from them.
When she sat under a tree something particular happened. The scroll she took out from her bag puffed, revealing a notebook in with the girl started to write, trying to tame her anger. It was a rather fruitless effort.

"Has she just summoned something?" Asked Ebisu flabbergasted.

Rin didn't like the girl, mainly because she was still hurt after her previous rant, but seeing her tiny form sulking, remained her Shiori was nothing more than a child. She wanted to apologize for Kakashi but Obito was faster.

"Ne, Shi-chan, don't worry about the bastard. We both know you're smarter than him." The boy slumped next to the angry Uzumaki. "And what toys? Is he still playing with them?"

"I'm not!"

"He isn't," confirmed the girl coldly. "But he's an idiot. I cleaned his old plushies and he didn't even thank me."

"You mean old, stuffed dogs? Few days back I saw Kushina-san washing them." Interrupted the medical kunoichi.

Shiori's face red with anger, turned red in embarrassment. Nevertheless, the color hasn't changed much.

"I told her to do that," she mumbled and tore a sheet out of the notebook. "One done".

"Wait, this is an exploding tag!"

"Brilliant observation, Rin-san," her words almost reeked of sarcasm. "The only convenient alternative is making sealing scrolls, but as spice-time fuinjutsu they're more complicated and time-consuming."

"So you have your own paper." Senbon in Genma's mouth twitched.

"Yes, but I don't see why I should use mine when I can take yours?" She yearned a coffee far too much to worry about some stupid facades. She threw the tag to Obito. "Go and stick it to that small rock."

The boy took it delicately in two fingers as if the paper would instantly cremate him when handled roughly.

"You can't seriously think it'll work?"

"Yeah, then take it." Obito was more than happy to give it away.

Kakashi took the paper and stuck it to the indicated stone; anxious to end this farce.

"Even if it'll work, Shiori-chan, I don't understand why use it on the small rock?" Asked Guy. "I can take care of that one without a problem."

"This is only a test. The stone has about ten inches in each direction. Combining the measurements with this tag's force I'll be able to calculate how powerful I have to make the next ones to blow up the bigger stones. Of course it'll be correct assuming their solidity is the same."

Kakashi blinked. He was used to the vision of spoiled, whimsical Shiori. Her clever version threw him out of balance like an attack from a predatory piglet.
After the flash of light and loud explosion as a result of which the stone broke up into several parts, Kakashi was sure his brain was knocked out by a whole flock of exceptionally bloodthirsty piglets.

Minato looked with a tired but no less brilliant smile on Shiori's face. An hour before, when he returned to his team and found far more kids than he had left behind, he was puzzled. Seeing them happily blowing up granite rocks while being led by his little girl, gave him a seizure of the size of Hokage's Mountain.

All the kids were excited; in the end, despise being ninjas, not every day they had the opportunity to toy with exploding tags. Very potent, unauthorized exploding tags made by a five-year-old adorable pintsize devil, that on the brink of collapsing from chakra exhaustion was teaching Genma how to wipe out his nearest surroundings in a second.

"See here? Activating the key in the core turns the chakra from neutral to the fire nature, seeking to further balance the chain. That, in combination with the air seal in the second layer, leads to the power phase of the collision - vapor cloud's ignition, what is followed by the positive feedback. In other words, the energy released as heat increases the rate of chakra circulation on the chain's loop path, further rising the amount of released energy."

The moment she ended her lecture and finished the last brush stroke, Obito grabbed the new tag and laughing like a maniac ran to the nearest boulder, sticking it with the explosive, before diving behind the mud barricade Kakashi made for their protection.

Five teenage heads carefully leaned out. Each of them with a pair of goggle, not unlike the one the man has always seen on the forehead of the still snickering Uchiha. Then the countdown started.

Minato couldn't believe it, but his ears stubbornly tried to convince him, that in the chorus of youthful voices one belonged to Kakashi. When the excited one sounded, a blinding flash came from the point where the tag was and a white cloud rose in the air.

"The next one is mine," roared Guy jumping from their cover.

"I think it's enough." The blond jonin butted in and in the next moment he had hands full of a bit of a shaky little lady.

"Mini-nii, you're late."

Sometimes, he wondered if the female part of the Uzumak clan had some special dojutsu. He could swear that the glare he was currently receiving made him feel guilty, even when he knew he wasn't the one in trouble.

"Maybe I'm a little late, but you're somewhere you shouldn't be at all. Why?"

*Damn this angelic face*, she thought trying not to sink into naughty thoughts, again. Minato was sexy as hell when he had this commanding, stern vibe. She needed distraction and misdirection.

"Because you didn't give me a key to our home! Its good Guy-san found me, other way I would be alone in the street the whole day."

Minato wanted to say something more but Obito interrupted him.

"Can we have her on the team? She's really useful; like a pocket demolition squad. Have you seen our explosives, sensei? I did wuu, and then was boom and the BANG! It was awesome!"
"Yeees, I've seen it." Shiori gulped. That smirk and cold gleam in his blue eyes couldn't mean anything good. "Just how I've seen six chunins letting a five-year-old child make an extremely destructive weapon, and used it without necessary percussion and supervision."

"But we had goggles and everythi…" Obito's protests died when he and Kakashi found themselves in a strong, one-handed headlock.

"Anyone else has anything to say?"

"I'm hungry."

And because of Shiori's bottomless pit and the fact that he was a hopeless sucker for those golden eyes, all of them were sitting at the table on the back of Akimichi's store, eating dinner and waiting for the odd beverage the small Uzumaki was very adamant about (Shiori told him if she didn't get it, she would tell Kushina everything; especially the part where he wasn't with his team as he should, because of with she could end as a pile of ash).

The oddest thing was the content atmosphere. Minato made his team to pay for everything, but his brain wasn't boiling and ears didn't want to grow legs and run from uncontainable racket of his students. Rin was - as always – calm, chatting quietly with Genma and Ebisu, while Kakashi was TALKING with Obito. They were allied against Guy, who tried to bribe Shiori to join his team, however now for both boys Shiori was an integral, albeit unofficial part of team seven, because even though she could be insolent like a little troll, she was able to make things go BUM, and that was more important than anything else. There was no yelling, biting, punching, threatening and name-calling or other word-creating efforts. Maybe part of it was thanks to Shiori sitting on Uchiha's lap, but the two boys seemed to honestly come along. To think everything his pupils needed to create a friendly bond was a life-threatening fun with explosive materials.

Meanwhile Shiori became fully aware that she never before realized how tiring the exhaustion could be. Creating so much explosive tags at once was a stupid idea, even if it was a step toward her dreamed coffee. The idea turned out to be rather counterproductive, since when Choza brought a jug filled with liquid miracle the girl was already happily snoring.

My dear readers, tons of thanks and e-hugs for your feedback, and as always the biggest hug for mrsmiawallace88, my lovely beta.
"What the cock is that shit?" mumbled the girl, not even thinking about sparing her red locks that were suffering tugging under her chubby fingers; nor her mood from the waves of defeat oozing from her being. "It's a critical shituation and quoting Shakespeare I'm like a beetle-headed, flap-eared knave."

"I don't know who is this Shaky guy but if Minato heard that, you would be spitting soap right now," assured Kushina, trying to reach the bed without touching any of the papers that were scattered all over the floor. In the bed lay her little cousin with raised legs propped against a wall. The five-year-old was glaring upside-down at the notes without blinking as if they offended her mortally. Not even the plate of cake in the woman's hands was able to distract the child. "You should eat something, Shiori-chan. That grumpiness of yours has to be tiring."

"I'm not hungry."

At that Kushina's jaw dropped.

"You aren't hungry?" the cake as well as rest of the world were forgotten. Kushina threw herself on the bed and began to scrutinize the girl from all sides, looking for signs of shortly impending death. "I knew we shouldn't leave you alone with that snake. What has he done to you? Has he…?"

"It has nothing to do with Orochimaru-sama and I'm not sick" hissed the smaller Uzumaki while pushing the hand away from her forehead. "I'm just frustrated, ok?"

"Frustrated? With what?"

"With that" grumbled the child giving her some paper scraps with hundreds of fuinjutsu symbols. "I'm trying to do some sort of remote life assessing seal."

"A seal? You were in that sour mood the whole last week because of some seal? Really, kiddo, you should come to me or Minato with it. We're quite good at it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know, but I also know it's impossible. There're three types of seals, given their duration. Most common seals have some chakra put in them once, then they lay dormant until are activated and used; after that they are unserviceable. Linked seals are connected to their maker's chakra. When the connection is served by distance, death or intentionally, they are dispelled. The last ones, constant seals, are launched by caster's chakra but are supported by a foreign source of power, like other people or natural energy, excellent examples are various jinchuriki seals. I know I need the second kind, but it works only on small distance, and what's more important there is an unceasing connection between the seal and the energy source; it can be found by better sensor creating a potential threat, especially in enemy territory and there is no way to get around it."

Well, the last part wasn't true, Shiori knew it. However, she couldn't do anything without months of free time, enormous capital and desire to introduce the shinobi world to satellites and space travel and that was big Hell No. She was gaining a headache thinking about normal planes, bombing and ninja paratroopers; long-range ninja-missiles were more that the reborn woman could imagine. On the other hand, inventing fuinjutsu data transmitter and placing it into orbit was an interesting project. The girl huffed and hit her own face a few times; this universe had enough violence without modern ways of killing from her old world.

Meanwhile Kushina almost hyperventilated. The last thing she wanted was Shiori identifying her
furry problem. The child would be mortified, or fascinated; the woman didn't know what would be worse.

"It's true, that's why nobody uses distant assessing seals. For what exactly do you need them, dettabane?"

"It's for Minato's team," grumbled Shiori reaching for a piece of cake. The older woman breathed a sigh of relief seeing it.

"I didn't know you're worrying so much about them. Maybe you have a fever?" The kid jerked from her and glared as if wishing the woman to spontaneously combus. "Don't give me that look. It just odd for you to worry about someone, especially Rin-chan. You don't even like her."

"I can still worry. It's not like I wish her to die or something."

"I know, Shiori, and you can worry but just for your information, Minato won't let anything to happen to his precious little ducklings."

"But what when he won't be there. The moment Hatake-san is promoted, he'll be the new team seven leader and Mini-nii will be transferred to the frontlines."

Kushina sighed. It wasn't mystery that the war was at its tip, every village was exhausted and thus desperate; so was Konoha and Minato was one of the most powerful Leaf's shinobi. If not for his teaching responsibilities, he would almost never leave the combat zone.

"Kakashi is a really good ninja."

"Yes, but he is an ass and Obito is an idiot."

"Obito? Oh, it's about Obito!" A shiny smile spread, dimpling her cheeks in a way her fiancé found both cute and concerning at once. "You like him, don't cha Shiori-chan?"

The girl looked as if the muscles on her face began to strike. Everything about her was slack, even her shoulders drooped giving her eyes the ferocity of a sleepy hippo.

"I'm five and he's twelve. That's disturbing, Kushina-san." Nevertheless, the older woman could as well be deaf to her words.

"Your latest nerve-wracking and that odd animosity against Rin-chan - now it's all clear. You have your first crush. I'm so proud, dettabane! Don't worry, I'll help you! Oh, just wait until I tell Minato, he'll be so happy!"

Shiori would worry about Minato's newly discovered paternal instincts and Obito's wellbeing in the nearest future, if not for much more urgent danger of being strangled by Kushina's enormous hug.

Ω

Obito sighed. He was a good boy. He always had the impression it was one of the major flaws of his character. That's why when Shiori arrived this morning at his house and demanded repayment of debt which he apparently gained giving her an apple, that took away her tooth, he couldn't say no. The boy was most concerned about the nature of this payment. Other children often asked friendly ninja to help them train. But the little Uzumaki wasn't like other children. Shiori was lazy and hated pain so while saying that if he would come every afternoon by the next two weeks to the training grounds eleven and train, everything was going to be forgiven; his first reflex was to run and don't look back.
But here he was. Waiting.

When the head full of rose-colored locks appeared on the horizon, Obito wanted to say hello but he had enough sense to notice that the girl's smile was as merry as the one that swims rapidly toward the drowning man – having a fin at the top.

"Hello, Obi-nii!" She was way too happy; he was starting to get scared.

"Hi?"

"Ready to train?"

"Yes, but..." Obito gulped. The world around him suddenly became like a crystal clear dread - this special variation of it, that had nothing to do with fangs, darkness or ghosts, but it had all in common with two golden polls full of mirth. "Do you really want to train with me?"

"I? Train? When have I suggested something like that? You'll be sweating profusely, while I'll be watching your struggle."

"So, you will be training me?" This he could bear. It was going to be easy. Shiori was a tiny devious thing but he doubled she was versed in regular ninja stuff. At least the ones that didn't go boom.

"Don't joke, Obi. I found you an excellent teacher."

"Teacher?" Who could she frame in it? Minato sensei had a meeting with Hokage, so who...? "Wait, don't tell me it's Kushina-san?"

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you."

Gawking at the owner of the new voice Obito had to admit it was worse. The boy sweat dropped.

"Hell- I mean hello, Orochimaru-sama."

The young Uchiha heard many disturbing rumors about the man in front of him; he even met him a few times, mostly in the company of sensei's sensei. Each of these meetings ended the same - the boy came out with a vague but nagging impression that he barely managed to escape alive.

"Orochimaru-sama, you came!" The girl bounced and leached to the man's leg with a big, adoring smile. And what was even more horrifying, he patted her head.

Obito's brain halted. Never in his life he would believe that the snake sannin would be pleasant to anyone or that someone might adore him so much to actually hug him and later still have all hands.

"Of course, I promised haven't I?" then he moved his unnaturally yellow eyes on the gaping chunin. "I must admit that I expected someone else, but well. No-one sensible would ever tell he understood women. Obito-kun, if I'm going to train you, first you need to run."

That Obito could do. Truth be told he wanted nothing more. The only unforeseen thing was the weight of the five-year-old girl that he was suddenly holding, and a cloud of smoke from which emerged a fifteen-foot-long snake. It looked angry and hungry – never a good combination.

Contrary to his pet, Orochimaru was absolutely calm and slightly amused. Obito had the impression that the sannin was reading his thoughts.

"You two really should run. Fast."
The teenager barely had time to turn around when the snake's fangs cut through the boy's blouse in an enthusiastic attempt to rip out his guts. After a childish shriek (it was only Shiori, there was no way he would scream like little girl), his legs started to move, not waiting for his brain and its obvious and slow commands.

Meanwhile Orochimaru chuckled. It wasn't an ill intended snicker nor a villainous laugh. It was more akin to a giggle. Apart from the children who now were only a vanishing point on the horizon, responsible for that giggle was the memory of this morning.

Ω

"I have proposition."

Orochimaru's yellow eyes lingered over the child's hard as nails expression. Shiori was the only person capable to such appearance while chewing a bunch of sweet dumplings.

"Proposition?"

The girl swallowed while nodding, what resulted in the bite falling to the wrong hole and she started choking. A blond woman walking next to their bench sliced him with angry gaze. Even her golden locks shining in the morning sun couldn't get rid of the sensation of disdain for the incompetent parent figure, radiating from her. Not that Orochimaru gave a fuck about that.

"More like a deal. You'll help me and I'll give you means for quicker and easier experiments."

"Oh, and where's the catch?" One slim brow went up.

"You'll need to train someone."

The man rolled his eyes. Lately Sarutobi sensei also bitched about handing on his knowledge for a well-being of future generations. It's good that from time to time there was a little redhead running around him.

He could tell Shiori the same thing he told Hokage.

"I already have a student."

"You have?" the girl was clearly puzzled.

Orochimaru ate a dumpling.

"I have you. That's more than enough."

"But it's a reaaaally good deal. I have few brilliant ideas about genetics and Minato's student isn't completely incompetent. He has potential to be a true kickass."

"Child, you'll end telling me your brilliant ideas one way or another. You are too greedy for compliments and want my approval." Shiori wanted to protest upon hearing it but the sannin wasn't done. "More interesting is the reason why you're melding into Namikaze's team? What are you shaming this time?"

"I'm not shaming!" The girl puffed up her cheeks, giving herself the appearance of a frustrated hamster; however, one yellow and doubting stare later she gave up, looking even more frustrated.

"I'm worrying about him because…” her face went from slightly pink, reddish to completely crimson. Her next words sounded like the greatest blasphemy. "I have a crush."
Orochimaru's jaw slacked; then he blinked, looked straight ahead and addressed an empty space.

"You. Have. A crush?" He didn't look convinced.

"What? You think I would admit to something like that if it wasn't true? What could possibly be worse, for me to want and cover it up with something so, so stupid like a crush?! It's embarrassing, ok?"

The man didn't know what he should say next. He had a vague impression that if he would further upset the girl, she would explode not unlike a volcano. Orochimaru ate the last dumpling. He supposed there were worse prospects than Sakumo's son.

Ω

"She's gaining on us, Obi-nii!"

"Something without legs shouldn't be this fast!"

"Then maybe you'll stop and suggest her that!"

"No thank you, and besides how the heck do you know it's a she?!"

"I don't know, it just has that expression on the mug, it's kinda remind me of pissed Kushina."

"Oh my god! We're so dead."

Such conversations were heard by birds, ninjas and few cats that decided to nap in the afternoon sun on Konoha's roofs. Shiori was sitting on Obito's back commenting the serpent's progress, at the same time trying not to vomit.

"If we want to lose her, we should run somewhere that smells. Snakes have very sensitive sense of smell. Thanks to it they hunt their victims."

"I got it, Shi-chan."

The boy took them to the industrial area on the outskirts of the village that besides of workshops was full of textile mills and abattoirs. Jumping over one of them Shiori had a gastric crisis. With plump fingers she clutched her mouth shut, stopping the rising waves of acid.

It was a very bad idea.

Note to all – never, no matter what condition, let go of the person you're sitting on while flying twenty foots over the ground, because even in the world of manga gravitation is something more than simple suggestion, at least most of the time. This time for sure, because the girl fell.

Shiori fell and landed on something soft - well, softer than pavement; something that said "moo-o-y-y-o-r-m". The redhead bounced off it and fell on something smaller, what did "squeak", then she rolled down further on something even smaller, and apparently made from feathers, what began to peck her.

Hooves trampled her hands; very large and wet noses breathed on her neck while Obito was still gone. On the other hand, also the female, bloodthirsty snake was absent.

The reborn woman hadn't had much experience with animals in her life (no matter which one), unless they were served on a plate. When she was little the first time, she had a pink plush toy of Porky from Loony Tunes. She read some books about farms for her nephew and younger cousins –
they had pictures. Nowhere were there mentioned scorching, reeking breaths. Cows, according to those books should do "Moo." Every child knew that. They shouldn't make noises similar to a sea monster, and spray saliva like some machine gun.

Shiori stood up trying to avoid getting even more dirt and other unspeakable things on herself and move away as far as possible from the hen which had previously been greatly offended by her falling ass. So the girl backed away from the glaring chicken but stopped when something poked her in the back. It was a pig. But not a small cute pig like Babe, Piglet from Winnie the Pooh or even her Porky. This pig was the size of a donkey. This pig had tusks. And was not pink. Its sharp coat was black with a hint of red. This pig gave the impression of one that beheaded hounds, ripped out horse's guts and ate a hunter.

The little Uzumaki was scared, sore, dirty and began to feel hungry; as if that wasn't enough Orochimaru's summon just fell in the midst of other animals bringing total chaos. The pig-monster lowered the head. It didn't have enough space to charge, but it could still push. When the animals crowded around and frightened began to break through the fence, Shiori chose the only possible way out with a single word on her lips that could illustrate her situation.

"Fuck."

Ω

Obito panicked. Being chased by an enormous nin-snake was one thing, but loosing Shiori was far more terrifying. She was so tiny, the reptile could swallow her and not even noticing. Where could she be?

Exactly then the earth trembled; from the end of the street came a roar. It was a horde of animals and it was heading in his direction.

Ω

Kakashi was buying offal for his dogs when he smelled the upcoming animals and their fear. Few seconds later he felt the ground shaking and heard the noise. People ran away. Then he saw the river of running animals and something else. Something large and muddy, what was approaching in treacherously slow pace. From the distance it looked like a very fat centaur, half man, half ...

Actually, as Kakashi realized when the creature was closer, half Shiori half hog.

The girl was crying, and some parts of her apparition suggested that recently she was close to the ground, the heavily fertilized one. When a massive pig trotted beside him the child shouted.

"I'm afraid to go down! Help me, Hatake-san, please!"

"What the fuck?!!" Shouted Obito, who just jumped from the roof. "Don't stand there, Kakashi. We need to do something!"

The silver haired boy always knew that his teammate was prone to troubles but that was new even for him.

"Don't cry, Shi-chan. We'll help you." Yelled Obito.

"How you get there?" Asked Kakashi while they ran alongside the moving animals.

"It was the easy part! I grabbed it by the ears, and instantly after that I was here! Now stop asking stupid questions and do something!"
"Hold on!"

"And what else can I do?!"

Even ninja parted before the pig. Half a ton of breeding hog didn't encounter traffic problems, at least not for long. However, two chunins exchanged several hand-signs and took action.

The air was filled with flying kunais. A trained eye might notice that attached to them were ninja wires, cutting off some of side roads of escape. Then Obito was climbing down from one wire and grabbed her. It would work if the child wasn't holding so tightly to the pig; instead, they both ended up on the creature.

Shiori wanted to cry even more if it was possible, they were going to die here, when she felt a tug and the next moment her world turned upside down and she was sick again. That stupid boy threw her! What was she, a freaking ball? Sure, Kakashi caught her and the reborn, filthy and very green-faced woman returned the favor vomiting on him.

When Orochimaru found them his eyes encountered the sight of running around animals and pursuing them Uchiha policemen. One of them was noting down Obito's explanations, trying not to lose his pencil to the boy's spontaneous gesticulation. Meanwhile the little redhead hung upside down, because Kakashi attempted to bang the pavement with her forehead, although Shiori was using this position, squeezing the boy's knees and trying to stick her teeth in his left ankle.

That was his new life. The sannin didn't know if he should cry or laugh. He did none, but in this particular moment in history it was clear he spent too much time with the odd child.

Orochimaru face-palmed.

Okay, here is the next chapter ^^ I hope you're enjoying my story even a tenth as much as I writing it.

Also usual thanks for my outstanding beta - mrsmiawallace88 ;)
Some scenes in this chapter are from OVA “Far reached hope” – well, sort of, you will see.

I wish you a pleasant reading.

„You need to mix tofu and mochiko, so the dough shouldn’t be too loose nor too firm, see? It’s like an earlobe”.

Shiori nodded. The five-year-old didn’t understand how she should see the consistency of the mix, sitting on the other end of the kitchen, but days ago she noted that such action worked the best on Kushina. Minato used it for years. To quote Borg from Star Trek: resistance was futile; especially dealing with Uzumaki women.

“You’re lucky that Obito loves dango just as you. Minato likes my cooking so much it’s a real drag convincing him into going to Ichiraku. On the other hand, you and your lover boy are crazy. Who, in the right mind, doesn’t like ramen?! It’s against the laws of nature, dettebane!”

“It isn’t that I don’t like ramen, just…”

“You two don’t like any kind of soup, I know, but it’s ramen! How do you get to eat properly without it?!”

The smaller redhead sighed. Kushina could rant about ramen all day. As mentioned above it was pointless to try and stop her or engage in dispute about classification ramen as healthy food, so the girl settled for contemplating how she found herself in this madness.

The reborn woman thought that her cousin would eventually stop torturing her with that alleged crush, and probably she would, if Shiori didn’t showed the intelligence of amoeba. When Orochimaru inquired about her constant scheming, the girl (possibly because of her prior momentary cerebral hypoxia) blurted the first thing she could think of – nothing else that the imbecilic Kushina’s phantasmagorias. And now everyone thought it was true! Even Minato was a little bitter towards Obito, who was already dragged through hell by the snake sannin on a daily basis. The girl wanted to throw herself from Hokages Mountain thinking about all this idiocy in the air.

It had to be contagious. There was no other way Orochimaru and Namikaze could be this stupid.

“Oh, now it must boil two, three minutes.” Said Kushina, tossing the dumplings into a large pot. “About your other recipe, are you sure it’s correct? I have never seen anything like that. I really doubt Obito will return your feelings if you try to poison him.”

“Suzu-nee-chan taught me it. I’ll show you what…”

Shiori hadn’t had enough time to jump out of the chair before a big fat “no” could be heard.

“It isn’t necessary, Shiori-chan. Just sit there and don’t move.”

The small redhead groaned. She was truly proud of the reputation of a walking disaster, which she managed to get already in Uzu. Everyone in her old Village knew that if someone had the youngest Yori-sama granddaughter doing laundry, cooking or dealing with other domestic work it would end in combusting clothes (for ninety-nine percent altogether with a basin and water in it); exploding roof and no longer existent kitchen; or other cataclysm, which results were often a cross between a decent
refurbishment with the game *hunt for the other lung*. In other words, Shiori was left alone to her laziness and fuinjutsu experiments.

Unfortunately, now she was also banned from the stove and everything in five feet radius. The reborn woman wasn’t anything special in the kitchen in her previous life but she was able to prepare a decent meal.

“It will be alright, Kushina-san. Believe me.”

The older woman hesitantly eyed the girl and a bag of flour.

“You know I know about the time you exploded a flour, right?”

“It isn’t surprising. It was a hot topic in the Village for some time.”

The older Uzumaki smiled as if remembering a long forgotten wonder.

“Especially the part about Bomaru-sama’s burned eyebrows. Seriously, Shiori-chan, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you did it on purpose.”

The child gave her a big-eyed look of innocence which would make the saints cry, if it wasn’t accompanied by a large toothless smile and sinister dimples.

“But Kushina-san, how could I know that hydrocarbons in a sprayed flour display so high flammability?”

“The same devilish way you know everything else. Ok, kiddo, take the chair and come here but don’t touch anything and watch out. If you end blowing up my kitchen it will be the end of that coffee of yours.”

The girl’s brow furrowed as her mouth turned grim.

“You are evil, Kushina-san.”

“And you better remember that, dettebane!”

Ω

Sun shined between lazily swaying leaves, among the bird trills. It didn’t fit too well with dozens of shurikens and kunais protruding from almost every tree and bush in the forest clearing.

Among it all stood three chunins from team seven and their sensei who was beaming with pride. His little ducklings were really growing, even the one culprit who stole affection of his little, golden-eyed, devious princess.

Looking at his torn sleeve Minato wasn’t only proud, he was much more calm about his team wellbeing and safety, when he wouldn’t be around.

“Good, you actually hit me.”

“Ooh! Oooh! Hitting sensei, that’s amazing, Kakashi!”

Rin was clearly impressed with her silver-haired teammate and his skills, what, to put it mildly, fucking irritated the other boy.

“It was only one hit. It isn’t all that praiseworthy.” Answered Kakashi coldly as if trying to be even
more cool. Obito resented him.

“I can do it too, you know!”

His further protests weren’t presented to the world because of something solid and heavy, what suddenly found itself on his head. It turned out to be a large picnic basket, held by no one other than the diabolical crone, which Minato sensei was unlucky enough to call his fiancée.

“Nice timing, right?” Asked the woman, daring him to say anything, but the young Uchiha had no time to react, since Rin was more than delighted seeing the older kunoichi.

“Kushina-san! Yay!” The medic-nin nearly started to salivate smelling the aroma coming out of the basket. Even without it everyone knew Kushina’s cooking had no equal.

“You all doing your best?” The redhead’s question was clearly directed towards the sulky, dark-haired boy, who looked as if he was about to fall over. From the moment Kushina told Minato about Shiori’s infatuation with one of his students, she saw that the ball of sunshine the blond man was, started to emit something more than comfort and empathy. And to think that everyone said it was she who was overprotective. When Minato heard the news, at first he was motionless, then in an odd way, he started to resemble a growling bullterrier. Most of the shinobi were very possessive of the few souls they cared about; nevertheless the fair-haired jonin had never showed it to such an extent. He was a scary father figure.

On her part, Kushina couldn’t imagine why Shiori liked the flamboyant boy. He was too… well, good and stupid for her. However maybe it was exactly the case. Stupid people often were capable of things that the wise wouldn’t dare to even consider. Obito had this particular variation of stupidity which was difficult to fool. And the only thing more difficult than forcing him to understand one idea, was persuading him to quit it. The boy just didn’t know what giving up meant. So if the girl needed him for some of her shames then… yes, that had to be it. It was a far more realistic perspective than Shiori falling in love. That would be fundamentally wrong. But still, there wasn’t a reason not to give her a hell because of it.

Unfortunately, Minato had been too focused on the warding off the possible admirers of their adopted daughter to think soberly.

“They’re doing great. We were just about to take a break.” Assured the blond man.

“That’s good. Here’s the lunch.” Kushina generously removed the basket off Obito’s head. “Your order – Kushina’s special. Shiori-chan helped me. She put her whole heart in the meal. She even gave me the new recipe.”

Only then team seven noticed a small redhead hiding behind Kushina. The girl looked like she would rather be everywhere else but there.

Alright, I love the food you make, Kushina-san. Thanks!” Rin took the basket from the woman and smiled to the child. “Thank you Shiori-chan. It’s really nice of you to cook for us.”

Kushina was awestruck. Her eyes seemed to sparkle a moment before she dived and crushed the petite medic-nin in a bear hug.

“You’re just so cuuute! You’re such a good girl, Rin, you know? You’re so nice and caring and always ready to help. Unlike the other girl I know. Maybe if she wasn’t such a brat, she wouldn’t have so much trouble getting a boy she likes.”

Shiori looked at Rin and her embarrassingly smiling face, whose owner wanted to make the world a
better place, even if the world would rather have something else. The little Uzumaki groaned. Her overall mood had to share the Uchiha boy, who made the same sound.

Kushina as if slapped, let go of Rin and approached the grumbling, young man.

“Let me get this straight. Shiori and I take the time to bring the lunch all the way out here to you guys. She tried very hard to please you, and that’s the kind of thanks she gets from you? Hmmm?”

“Hey, I didn’t ask any of you to do that! I’m not even hungry!” As it’s widely established, at this moment his stomach growled.

Kushina sighed and decided to try another approach. For Shiori’s sake. She put her hands on his shoulders and attempted to explain.

“Trying to be tough is ok, but first go ahead and eat something. I mean, you can’t fight on an empty stomach, can you?”

“I don’t want it!” Obito however was too proud and stubborn for his own good. “I won’t take anyone’s handout! I can fight without food!”

Kushina smiled. Shiori seeing it, as precaution walked away a few steps, hiding behind Minato, who with Kakashi were already sitting on the other site of the clearing.

“Hey… you’re pretty manly.” The woman’s voice was sweet and warm like hot chocolate, until her aura changed and the ruby locks hadn’t started to float in the air. Just then her fist connected with the boy’s skull. “Yeah, right… Like I would ever say something like that to you!! Now, no more out of you! Eat! Being healthy is a part of being ninja! What you said just proves that you’re nothing but a little kid! And apologize to Shiori-chan, I won’t let you hurt her feelings like that!”

“Well, you know what…?”

“There they go again.” Mumbled Rin, stopping near the rest of the team.

“Let just eat. Ok, you three?” Proposed Minato putting Shiori on his knees and opening the basket. Besides the usual goodies there was something he had never seen before. “That’s the thing you helped Kushina to cook, Shiori-chan? The new meal?”

It looked like a big, flat cake, on which someone with closed eyes threw a bit of almost everything that was in the fridge.

“It smells nice.” Commented Kakashi sniffing the air. “What is it?”

“It’s called pizza.” Answered the child, taking a piece and gorging it with a gusto. “Come Kushina-san, Obi-nii, or there will be nothing left.”

The boy eyed the smaller redhead and the food in her hands. Why, the hell, no; she owed him for that tortures she put him every evening. Obito strolled to her and plopped next to Minato. The man snapped his jaw full of white teeth that seemed to creak, when the girl came down from his knees and sat on Obito’s.

The issue of building a dungeon in the basement and throwing Shiori into it until she would be at least sixty seemed to be as promising as possible. There were too many men like Jiraiya sensei. Minato would be damned before he would let any of them touch his little girl. Obito was fairly secure, besides the boy was head over heels in love with Rin, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Summarizing, it was a mess.
At the same time Shiori looked at Obito with pride, but also with a bit of concern. Thanks to Orochimaru and his pets the boy was faster and more agile than before. His nin and taijutsu also were more efficient. It was like a double-edged sword. Her actions could have salutary effects, but there was always a possibility she completely destroyed the last chance the world had. Although it didn’t seem likely that a bit improving of Obito’s skills could significantly affect Tobi, given his future power.

A hug saved her from dwelling in her thoughts.

“It’s delicious! You’re the best, Shi-chan. I can eat it every day.”

“Heh, what was it, Obito?” inquired Kushina. “I thought, you said that you won’t take anyone’s handout, and now you want it daily? You know, brat, you would need to marry her to eat like that every day. What you say on that, dettebane?”

Obito’s glance flickered to giggling Rin and a flat stare given him by the child chewing its food. Even now her golden pools were too sharp for someone her age. The boy peeked into them and saw how the next layer of her person looked back at him from inside.

“Nah, Shi-chan is like a lil sis, and family feed each other, right? Besides, then I would reconsider to forgive her?”

“Forgive me? For what?”

“Are you kidding me?! For the torment you sentenced me to! I tell you, Shi-chan, Orochimaru is crazy! CRAZY!”

“Wait,” Kakashi butted in. “What do you mean? Are you training with one of the sannins?”

“It isn’t training, Kakashi. It’s hell! You thought that from where I have all those bruises? The man is psychotic. And don’t let me even start about his summons…”

Using the general distraction, Shiori took the last piece of pizza. Listening to the discussion of Obito’s daily dreadful ordeals, that apparently fascinated his teammates, the reborn woman felt like a mad scientist, who attached the head, pulled the lightning to a crackling electrodes, and now saw her work tottering march to the village.

Now she could only wait for the torches and pitchforks.

Ω

“You know, Kakashi really is getting a lot better.” Mused Kushina, sewing Minato’s torn blouse. To think that the little, grumpy boy caused the damage was a bit unreal. Not so long ago he was napping on Minato’s lap, just like Shiori was doing it right now. The two of them were practically their children. The woman supposed it was a good preparation before they would have their own. She only hoped that their child would have better childhood, and a little different attitude.

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” Answered the blond man, glancing from a photo album to the small head of rosy locks on his laps. He had to have some similar thoughts as Kushina, because he lovingly caressed the child’s head. “For his age, he is doing great.”

“Rin is growing well, too. They are really becoming a good team.”

“Don’t tell me you forget about Obito?”
The woman’s needle stopped for a second.

“He is hardly more than a bragging little half-pint. He is always tripping over himself, he can’t throw a shuriken straight and his jutsu setup is just… I doubt even the Snake can help him. Orochimaru said, Shiori told him that the idiot will be a kick-ass in the future. He for sure needs some more work.”

“Well, it’s just like you said.” Agreed Minato with a knowing smile. “Obito does have a lot of things that he needs to work on. But still. His bright and outgoing attitude is very important. Obito being there deepens the bond between everyone on the team. Even Shiori-chan took a shine to him and that’s a fact. I mean, he has to be something special if the two Uzumaki like him so much. He is your favorite, isn’t he?”

“Oh, are you sure about that?” the woman joked standing up and gave him the repaired blouse. “We should put her to bed or tomorrow she will be more grouchy than usual.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” The man gently took the child in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He chuckled when the girl crinkled her nose and muttered something about flying toads. Kushina watched as he changed her and put to bed without waking her. Minato would be a marvelous father. Well, actually, he already was; thought the woman looking out the window at sleeping Konoha.

“By the way, is the location of your next assignment going to be decided soon?”

“Yes, I should find out for sure in just a few days’ time but…” He hesitated for a moment, sensing the change of breathing among the bedclothes. Hiding this was pointless, it would come to light sooner or later. “I think that’s going to be at Kannabi Bridge.”

“Kannabi Bridge…” Muttered the older redhead as if it was a prayer. “I hope the war ends soon.”

“So do I, Kushina. So do I.” Minato kissed the girl’s head and unnoticed for the older woman wiped with his thumb a single tear running down on the plump cheek.

Ω

She could swear the looks the boy was giving her could be the definition for "glaring." The girl bet if she checked the pages of a dictionary all she found would be those nonchalant, steady eyes. It wasn't just that they were monochrome. His eyes matched the way he felt towards the world: dark and cold. The whites of his eyes contrasted harshly with the pitch black iris that sunk deep into his head. Its depth reminded her of a black hole; an air of emotionless and unsettling sorrow emanating from his gaze.

The smell emanating from him was even more upsetting.

“You stink.”

“Shiori-chan!”

“I’m not rude, Mini-nii, I’m just stating the truth. He needs a bath.”

“Stating the truth sometimes can be rude. Then, it’s just better to hold it back.”

“Can I have it on paper?”

“On paper?”
“In the case of future arguments?”

Kakashi couldn’t believe how he could ever think the little gremlin standing next to him was just a stupid, winy, spoiled girl. Well, Shiori was winy and spoiled but she wasn’t stupid. He had to give it to Obito; the other boy from the beginning tried to convince them that the girl had a sinister mastermind. She could be useful, heck, she was useful and she could even be likeable if she wasn’t so arrogant, rude, vain and bratty.

“Hell, what stinks here?!” Asked Kushina, entering the room. Maybe the rudeness was an Uzumaki trait? “Shiori-chan, what a dead, freak animal you took home from the lab this time? I swear that after the last time I will give you to Orochimaru for good if you pull a stunt like that one more time!”

“You promise?”

“You shouldn’t be so happy about that, dettebane!”

“Easy there, Kushina.” Minato pulled the taller Uzumaki away from the grumpy child. After the night he told them about Kannabi Bridge, Shiori was much worse than normally. The two redheads were constantly on each other’s throat. The blond supposed it helped them deal with the tension, but unfortunately it meant he was in the middle of their bickering more time than he was not. “It is just Kakashi who stinks.”

“And who is rude now, Mini-nii?”

“I hope it’s true, Minato, because if I find one more hairless rat with six legs in my tube I will show you all what a true tantrum means!”

“Come on, Kushina-san. I apologized already. Moreover, where should I put it? At first I wanted to place the rat into the sink but the animal was too big.”

Kakashi massaged the bridge of his nose and marched to the bathroom. After his jonin evaluation he needed a bath – an image of a gigantic zombie chimera between a bald rat and a spider swimming in the bathtub materialized in his mind. Maybe he would take a shower? Yes, definitely a shower.

Meanwhile, Shiori was packing her gift for the newly nominated jonin. In a way she was angry at Kakashi. She knew she shouldn’t be, but she was. Recently she was angry at everyone. But seriously, would he die if he was still a chunin? Couldn’t he catch a cold or break a leg? Then Konoha would send someone else on Kannabi and all the known shit wouldn’t happen.

“You are thinking about something, right, Shiori-chan?”

“It is an activity, to which sometimes I use my brain, Mini-nii. Although this may seem odd.”

The man sighed and sat down beside her on the bed among the masses of colorful pillows and toys.

“I know you’re worrying about them and me but it’s ok. It’s completely normal. You have a good heart, maybe sometimes it is hard to see it under your snotty attitude, but you have one. You don’t want to see the people you care about get hurt and I am the same. I will protect my precious people no matter what. Everything will be alright, I promise.”

She wanted to scream that nothing would be alright but a bitter lump stuck in her throat. The biggest problem wasn’t that she didn’t care. It was exactly the opposite. The reborn woman cared, she cared too much about that idiotic boy who she tried to save to do the first thing she thought about, the only rational one. A single appropriately selected seal would be enough and the Tobi problem would disappear. But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t kill the first soul she thought about as a friend because
she cared. Oh, how she despised this word. Caring was her biggest fault, the gravest disadvantage. And yet the reborn woman knew she would destroy the world if it meant rescuing her and the four people she loved here.

One of them lifted her up. Minato put their foreheads together and their eyes met. His were blue as a summer sky and his smile warmer than the gentle sun. That smile she loved so happened to be the first thing in the new world that awoke these damned sentiments in her soul. The bonds she had now, the ones that made her heart beat, were at the same time a terrible burden. Caring for their futures and for them to care for her - yet what was to come would bring comfort to no one, least of all for her. They were all disposable people, the rungs on the destiny’s ladder.

“It’s happy day, Shiori-chan. Come, I see you have a gift for Kakashi.”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, pressing a small bundle to her chest. Her new family, her mentor and her friend – she was way too selfish to let any of them die.

Ω

Kakashi blinked. He had never before seen tags like the ones he got from Shiori. There had to be something wrong with them, because Minato sensei snatched them almost immediately and Kushina shrieked like a hammer drill.

“What the heck, kiddo? What were you thinking giving him something like that?!?”

“It’s a particular design. It’s the first time I see it.” Minato was clearly intrigued. He knew more Uzumaki seals than anyone else outside of the clan, but this variation of an Uzu exploding seal was something new. In other words, for ninety-nine percent it was dangerous.

“It’s a Suzu senpai seal. It’s potent like a six-point fire wave tag.”

“What?!” Minato turned white like a chalk. “Shiori-chan, what were you thinking giving him weapon like that?”

“It isn’t a weapon, Mini-nii. It is for his new hobby.”

“New hobby?” Minato said in a tone of a man, who at any price tried to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Yup, everyone needs a hobby. I thought that Hatake-san may want to test himself in the mining industry. The seals will be very helpful, if one day he would want to try and move a small mountain.”

The blond man hunched a bit in his chair. It turned out that the end of the tunnel was on fire and the arsonist hid behind false smiles and golden, sorrowful eyes.

Ω

Every step Kushina took sounded like the timer on a bomb to the reborn woman. She couldn’t stop it, reverse or slow it down. Each one dragged her forward, helpless and nervous to the appointed meeting. The terror was like an invisible monstrosity, sitting grimly on her shoulders, that only she could hear when it was sharpening its fangs. But unless she would turn back time, drag the sun from the blue firmament and send amnesia into the world, she couldn’t do a thing.

And there they were. The whole team seven stood in the Village’s gate.
“Are you ready?” asked Minato. They were, like animals being gathering together into a truck driving to a slaughter house, only the animals didn't know where they were going, Shiori did.

Their “yes” was like a howl of butchered donkeys.

“Kushina, Shiori-chan,” the Jonin knelt down and ruffled the girl’s rosy hair. “Be good, listen to Kushina and try not to blow up the Village when we are gone, ok?”

The five-year-old blinked and grinned. She tried very hard but it was hollow none the less.

“I will try, Mini-nii.”

“See you soon, little one.”

Kushina smiled sadly. Shiori’s knuckles were white. The girl had to squeeze them almost to the blood, otherwise she would attach them into Minato and never let go. Those golden eyes had frozen over like a winter pond, robbing them of their usual warmth. The adult woman wanted to restore the child’s spark but her insides were too moist with unshed tears. Kushina even in Uzu knew Shiori hid some sort of pain behind that cynical wall, but now it was evident on her face and the woman wished it would just go away. She knew that was a selfish want, people had a right to be hurt. They didn’t have to ask for it - it just was there, like the old pair of socks you never liked. The older Uzumaki understood – she felt exactly the same. But now she couldn’t let them see. She had to be a rock for the younger ones.

“All right, be careful and do your best, guys!” Kakashi and Rin being sweet kids nodded. The scrawny Uchiha glanced away, waiting for her harsh words. “And you, Obito…”

“What?”

Kushina couldn’t disappoint him. She pointed a finger just before his eyes, to help him focus.

“You’re clumsy and you’re hasty. And you’re a blundering fool, too. And add knucklehead to the list. So be doubly careful out there! Because if you come back injured and make Shiori-chan cry, you will get more than my fist. Got that?!”

The boy smirked.

“Who do you think I am, anyway?! I’m gonna become hokage, Uchiha Obito-sama! And I would never make Shi-chan cry. Please, there is nothing to worry about! I will make the mission a success and then come back with everyone without a scratch! That’s a promise!”

That stupid boy never failed to warm Kushina’s heart.

“You better keep that promise!”

Shiori couldn’t watch how they laughed. She glanced at Kakashi and caught his eyes. He was just as uncomfortable as she.

“Hatake-san, please take care of everyone.”

“We will complete the mission. Don’t worry.” He assured her but instead of thanks he was met with a frown.

“It’s not the same, Kakashi-san. Just…” He had an impression she wanted to say more but the girl only sighed. “Just be careful, alright?”
“Don’t worry Shi-chan, I will watch out for him.” Obito hugged her from behind. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, putting his chin on the top of the girl’s head. Despite the heaviness in her stomach, it fluttered at the show of affection. She sunk into the warmth of his, thankful for the simple gesture. His touch made the morning air warmer somehow, a little less scary.

“You better watch out for yourself.”

“What?” The boy clutched his heart in a mocking hurt. “You don’t have faith in me? Even after all these hours with Orochimaru and his hellish pets? If I lived through that I can live through everything.”

“I doubt Orochimaru-sama ever seriously wanted to hurt you.” Rin tried to get him back on the ground.

“I know that. Besides even the big, scary legendary snake sannin don’t want to make Shi-chan angry. Regret that you haven’t seen them together. It’s like a dream or like a nightmare, depends how you look at it.”

“I think it is enough, Obito,” said their jonin sensei. “Or Shiori will kick you as the goodbye.”

True to his words, the redhead girl’s cheeks were puffed and red.

“You are an idiot, Obi-nii.”

“Come on, Shi-chan, compared to you everyone are idio…”

The mass of the five-year-old child’s body hit him with a momentum.

“Just promise me, you will remember all of your promises.”

“Will do, kiddo. It’s a promise of a lifetime.”

Shiori shook his little finger with her pinky. She didn’t know if anything she did changed the plot. Obito was stronger; the boys were actually talking with each other and Kakashi had a few of hers exploding tags (Minato confiscated the rest). They should be back, every one of them but the plot was a heartless bitch, so just as well they all could die.

The two last Uzumaki in Konoha watched as their precious people walked for war. War in this world was unlike the conflicts in her previous one. Not only because of the technology. There almost nobody wanted to fight, not really, not in the full flagged war. Here, parents sent their children into battle and were proud of it. It was sick but it was also a common occurrence. Single death could assemble a community, even a whole country. Many deaths, hundreds of them could give birth to an idea, be used for good or evil. More deaths were far ticker; it wasn’t the same. It was enough to make it bloodstained enough and people would keep on living their ordinary lives. It was like a safety shutdown. Humans just weren’t designed to cope with that kind of annihilation and so they didn’t. They lived and tried to be happy.

Maybe Shiori also should try it?

Kushina took her hand.

“What do you think about some dango?”

“Dango, not ramen?”
“Hey, I’m trying to be nice here. Better be grateful or forget about dango!”

“Oh, ok, sheesh. Don’t be so touchy. But can we have a double portion?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed to crinkled slits.

“Who do you think I am? We will have a triple portion! At least two of them, dettebane!”

My huge, heartfelt thanks to mrsmiawallace88 for her ever-faithful help. Also tons of thanks to all of you who read, followed, favorited and reviewed this story. Let me know what you think of this chapter.

Thanks once more and to the next time ^o^
A little vacation

Dreams about rats, mice, guinea pigs and other kind of rodents that thanks to Shiori's advice he now used in his experiments, rose along with him like air bubbles, when Orochimaru slowly emerged from the black abyss of sleep. Recently, he valued the most a few short moments directly after waking up. It was when solutions were popping up. He suspected that some parts of the brain were awake at night, working on the problems of the previous day to present him the results as soon as his eyes opened in the morning.

Now, however, there was only an inhuman racket coming from the door. He grimaced. Someone clearly decided that either the door would open or they would come inside with them but… it shouldn't be happening! Besides his two moronic teammates no one dared to haunt him in his own home. For the fuck sake, even they would think twice before doing it, knowing his nonexistent morning temper! Ninety-nine percent of the population of those cretins in the Village probably hadn't even thought he had a home; apparently assuming that at most he occasionally hibernated in some cave on the Konoha's outskirts.

And so Orochimaru's brain erased the noise that his ears couldn't possibly hear.

Nevertheless, the persisted sounds bounced off the walls, not giving up.

He swore. The chakra responsible for the absurd uproar was more or less familiar. The snake sannin slipped his feet out of bed and without looking, reached into the nightstand. One yellow eye opened and with undisguised irritation glanced at the clock. He groaned. It was nine. He slept two hours. Two hours more than yesterday or the day before.

He stumbled across the room, plotting the bloodiest murder his brain was capable of at the moment. Crushing his tormentor's head with the clock held in his hand, seemed highly adequate to the situation, if he just could start thinking straight and not fall asleep right away. Accomplishment of unlocking the door was accompanied by an ominous growl that greeted the potential beheaded corpse. However, the anticipated terror proved to be in vain.

"Orochimaru-sama!" Not so much the loud voice backed him from the door thwarting his vengeance, as the body that pushed him inside.

Kushina blinked. The man looked like he just came out of a whirlwind. His usually gelled locks stuck up as if hit by lighting, repeatedly. The Uzumaki woman began to open her mouth, but luckily for her, closed it without comment. Orochimaru's face saggy like wet cement materialized centimeters in front of her, surrounded by a black, thick cloud of doom and gloom.

"Orochimaru-sama?" this time her voice was barely audible.

"What, on earth, do you want, woman?"

"Well…" the kunoichi didn't know what to expect when she marched into the legendary sannin's apartment the first thing in morning, but certainly it wasn't seeing him barefoot in lilac, satin pajamas, embodying the best example of a no-morning-person she had ever seen. It was totally incomprehensible, but she couldn't forget that she was there for a reason. "It's about Shiori-chan."

"Of course it is." the man mumbled, trying to brush away some hair from his eyes. "What did she do this time? Maybe blew someone up, or better herself?"

"She didn't do a thing and that's the problem. Yesterday, after Minato and his team left I was afraid
she will start crying or something but she was ok. At least until we returned home. She locked herself in the room and had been staring at the ceiling ever since. She didn't even come out for dinner."

"She haaaaasn't ate anything since yesterday?" He asked yawning. He had to admit the news were slightly disturbing.

"Not at first, but later in the middle of the night a strange noise woke me up. It was Shiori-chan. She sat on the floor devouring everything in the kitchen, even my instant ramen. She hates ramen!"

"Give her some dango" mumbled the sannin and slowly started to move towards the bed. He knew from experience that dango was the best solution to almost all problems associated with the little redhead devil.

"But…"

"Then give her a lot."

"I have already tried, but she doesn't want any!"

Orochimaru halted in half a step before he could toss himself again in the depths of bedsheets.

"She what?"

"Please, Orochimaru-sama, help me. That's unnatural. She's scaring me, dettabane!"

The man blinked, trying to understand the implication of her words. Even in the half-sleep state his brain began to send odd sensations. It was something resembling some of this stupid sentiments, especially akin of concern and worry… his common sense had to be far more gone than he thought. But on the other hand, he knew Kushina wouldn't give up easily, and he really wanted to go back to sleep as soon as possible. The fastest way to do that was submit to her idiocy.

"Ok."

Ω

A lost civilian boy cried for his mother, an Inuzuka girl frantically searched for her missing dog, merchants screamed out deals on the top of their lungs to attract clienteles, who desperately tried to bargain for the lowest prices. Konoha's market was a place that was always flooded by the sea of people. Some could think that in the time of war it would be empty, but it was the opposite.

Citizens of the Land of Fire liked their ability to breath and in the sake of maintaining it, they fled from the rural areas near the frontlines to safer places; and aside from the Capital, Konoha no Sato was the safest place in the country. Hokage greeted refugees with open arms, especially considering the fact that those who managed to get there weren't the poor ones but rich merchants and farmers, who had brought with them majority of their possessions. Every ninja that went to the frontlines was replaced by at least three civilians. Such policy only increased the difference in prosperity between the Village and the surrounding lands; but during the war, it was one of hokage's smallest worries.

The ANBU sitting on a roof scanned the market with sharp eyes, disguised with a kingfisher's mask. He couldn't spot a single empty place between the stalls. The morning autumn sun mercilessly shone down upon the bazaar. Beads of sweat glistened on everyone's forehead, turning many faces flush due to the boiling heat. It was the warmest October in years. The salty stench of sweat mingled with the nose tickling scent of spices and the sweet smell of flowers emanating from Yamanaka's flower shop. All of these smells mixed together and gave the place a rather distinctive odor, hanging in the air from dawn to dusk.
Fortunately, he didn't have Inuzuka's sense of smell. Otherwise he would be nearly blind. To this post always was assigned someone with kin eyesight and analytical mind. Kingfisher was a proud owner of both these skills and, therefore, every day for more than three months, he covered the same position. It was monotonous but at least it wasn't boring.

The height of his days were nearly daily visits from two individuals that, however unlikely it seemed, always came here together. The first time Kingfisher spotted Orochimaru with a child, he was sure that the strange sannin finally showed his true colors and kidnapped the girl. The ANBU wanted to call in reinforcements, until he nearly fell from the roof, seeing as the small redhead fed one of the most dangerous people in the world with a stick of dango, laughing and bouncing at the same time. When he reported this to Hokage, the old man dropped the pipe from his mouth with an expression of horror clearly painted on his face, that after a while melted into confusion. Then the Third began to laugh so hard that a river of tears ran down his cheeks. From that day Kingfisher saw the odd pair almost every day.

What was more peculiar, with time he observed more changes. The snake sannin appeared here frequently even alone. Not only coming through, but actually buying things; more often than not - sweets. Shopkeepers weren't glaring at him, but smiling. It was obvious that nobody really terrifying could be seen in the company of someone as cute as the small, toothless girl. Because of the lovely item regularly sitting on Orochimaru's back, Kingfisher nearly spit on himself a few times, seeing women flirting with the sannin.

Nevertheless, none of it was as startling as the sight he was now witnessing. The Nine-Tails jinchuriki flew through the market like a scarlet comet, which tail was, however, not red but violet. After activating his byakugan the man found out that the purple thing was nothing else than drowsy Orochimaru, wavering helplessly like a flag in the wind.

The ANBU would rub his eyes if they weren't covered by the mask. He needed vacations. Very long ones.

Ω

In her previous life the reborn woman would have been pulling out the cork from the bottle of buzz, not caring too much about its content, as long as it could peel off rust from corrode metal.

She knew she shouldn't behave like that. She truly did, but in no way stopped overflowing her waves of terror. Ten tons of helplessness crushed her, squishing her insides like a really extreme ride on a roller-coaster. Her throat tightened so much that she couldn't swallow, not even talking about eating. She was able to only stare at the ceiling, imagining the most horrible atrocities the future could bring towards her. From the nerves and hunger the next misfortune that fell on her was a headache of the size of Pangea.

She wasn't so self-destructing to suffer it passively. The girl dragged her sorry ass to the kitchen to force some food in herself. The only problem was that when she started her stress fueled her hunger and she couldn't stop, until there was nothing else to eat in the whole house.

Shiori covered her face with a plushy toad. She would end mad long before any info from Kanabi reach the Village. And now once more Kushina entered her room, attempting to snatch her from the clutches of despair. The older Uzumaki could try but…

Something was wrong.

It was far too quiet.
A pair of golden pools peered out from under the frog only to bulge with fright. Before her stood the girl from The Ring with the white skin; long, tangled murky hair and air of upcoming death surrounding her. The ghoul moved slowly forward and collapsed like a log on the bed next to the paralyzed child.

Shiori opened her mouth to scream but a thought popped into her head. This ghost was way too large to be a young girl. Besides it smelled of hydro aldehyde.

The little redhead holding up a fluffy toad like a shield, approached the creature and brushed its hair from the face. The half-dead, pissed look was no less scary but at least it was familiar.

"Orochimaru-sama, are you all right?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answers to, child. It makes you look far less intelligent than you really are." He mumbled into the mattress. "And now be uncharacteristically kind and go to sleep."

The man immediately began to flow again in the coveted land of dream, when he felt something warm and soft nuzzling into his side. The feeling wasn't unpleasant, but it was at the same time new and odd. He should never let anyone close to him like that, but it was different. He didn't know how but it was.

The next thing he recognized was the lack of warmth. He lifted the eyelid just to see the ends of rosy hair disappearing behind the door and heard slamming of the second one, most likely to the bathroom. Then something poked him in the arm.

"And what? You know what's wrong with her?"

Orochimaru wanted to ask what is wrong with whom, but he remembered where he was and why exactly he was here. He could say anything just to shut up the babbling woman standing over him.

"With Minato we knew she was traumatized after Uzu, she was just hiding it really well. He and Obito are great with her, always making her smile and forget, but I don't know what to do. She is afraid to lose everything again, I know, I was the same. Mito-sama helped me, but I'm not like her, dettabane! I'm not tender, patient nor understanding. Shiori-chan needs someone who she loves and now Minato isn't here and I…"

Kushina was on the verge of tears. Orochimaru could tell her the child loved her, but he really doubted it. He needed them both to disappear at least until Namikaze would come back. The child wasn't essential for his research at the moment, collecting data from implanted cells was an arduous task, that required silence. Something impossible to obtain with a nerve-wracked Kushina in the same Village.

"Take her somewhere."

"Excuse me?"

"Take her away from the Leaf. All her memories of Minato-kun and his team are from this place. The most optimal solution would be taking her somewhere, where she will be able to focus on other things than her worries."

The woman hummed, drumming one finger on her chin, after which she squealed and locked him in a hug that could bend steel rods.

When the insufferable redhead was gone, the sannin felt a tantalizing desire to hide from the world
thus he covered his face. After a minute he realized what he used to do so. Disgusted he looked at
the huge pink toad.

A possessive roar echoed inside of him.

Shiori shouldn't had anything like this. It looked stupid, just like Jiraiya's moronic mug, and that was
something unacceptable.

Ω

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

The girl puffed her cheeks. In a fit of dumb ideas Kushina decided to take Shiori, accompanied by
two more shinobi, on a little vacation to the few old Uzumaki shrines outside the Village near the
Capital and to the city itself; where the Festival of Dancing Leafs was just coming to an end.
Because of that the reborn woman was now suffering her next voyage filled with hopping from tree
to tree a la squirrel on crack, and holding back her earlier breakfast from returning to the world.

In spite of notoriously fucking her fate, the child regressed into one incredibly annoying donkey.

"Are we there yet?"

"NO!"

Kushina clenched her teeth. Shiori was infuriating! The whole way the kid was doing everything to
piss her off, moreover, with excellent result.

The two fresh chunins had the fun of their lifetime. Yamashiro Aoba was openly laughing his head
off and even Hisako, young kunoichi from Aburame family, was smirking at the older readhead's
misfortune under her hood.

Shiori behaved properly only in Dead Mask's Shrine, after the woman scared the girl with a vision of
Yori's spirit haunting her from the grave, because her granddaughter didn't give the dead due respect.

The child mumbled something about the old crone don't giving a shit about other dead people, but
still she lighted an incense and prayed.

Shiori seriously didn't want to risk an encounter with the dead Uzumaki matron. If Edo Tensei was
real so could be ghosts, and old, deceased kunoichi's shrieks weren't something her nervous
consciousness looked-for right now. She even pried to whatever gods that had it in for her, so they
would kindly stop messing with her life and put all their bias where sun doesn't shine. In other
words, with a holy conviction of her anti-authoritarian inclinations she told them to suck it.

The biggest surprise awaited Shiori in the capital. It turned out that according to the Land of Fire
custom, every heir of the clan had to be officially registered in the palace's books that were available
to the public only twice a year – now guess what brilliant idea Kushina had. Yeap.

Normally this was done with a big fuss, but because of war and the nearly extinct status of their
family, the old monk stared at them for only a second with a facial expression worth of a brick,
before closing the book with a bang.

According to the rules - that Kushina hadn't bothered to read - the two last certified Uzumaki weren't
a proper clan. They needed a few more things, for first other legitimate redheads. Kushina with
blazing eyes was angry like hell. While Shiori just let out a short, resigned huff. The heir of the clan with no political sway, money, lands nor official allies or not, if Minato and Kushina ended dead, she would also be gone in no time. And now they lost half a day struggling with bureaucracy.

In such splendid mood their happy bunch of misfits watched the famous parade. And if something was capable to break two Uzumaki women from their temporary murderous tendencies, it was it. In the end, it was tradition. If one rich man or the other thought that they shouldn't do some things (cackling like a hen for example) just because they seemed ridiculous, ought to immediately go back home and be laughingstock for their less pompous brethren.

A lot of upper class gathered on the streets of the capital, with all their splendors. And there was nothing more stunning and shiny than an aristocrat dressed for an official ceremony (unless someone could find a way to puff a parrot - perhaps with a gaskets package and some gas?). But nobility had strong competition, since among other guests were councils of the oldest and wealthiest ninja clans. Shiori snorted seeing the old Hyuuga lady tense like a bowstring, glaring at an equally puffed Aburame woman.

"That's Shiriko-sama. She is quite nice, normally." Hisako clearly felt need to justify her family, who now looked everything but nice.

"Well…" Shiori swallowed a devoured piece of ikayaki. "I suppose an opportunity like this even in the best wakes a coxcomb."

Ω

"Stop laughing and just take them away!"

"Oh come on, Shiori-chan, they just want to say hi."

"You know where they can stuff th… KUSHINA, FOR A FUCK'S SAKE, STOP THAT!"

This evening situation in an inn in a small city of Nankoku, two days' road from Konoha, was as follows:

The single man in their group rolled on the floor, hyperventilating from cackling like a mad hyena. One woman sat speechlessly, trying to hide in her hood and high collar overpowering her face flush of mortification; while the other female was shoving hands full of bugs into the child's face. Mentioned child hung from the rafters on the ceiling, screaming.

Shiori had no idea how she could forget Aburame's special jutsu from hell, but she did and now she was paying for it. The reborn woman hated bugs. Put her on top of a skyscraper; she would spit on passers-byes below. Shut her in some dark, tight place; she would try to sleep. Give her a rodent, amphibian or a reptile and she would cuddle them to death. Show her an arthropod, especially with some chelicerae's and Pedi palps, and you would never see her again.

"Kushina, I swear if you don't stop, I'll blow off your tits and shove them down your throat! Mini-nii will be crestfallen!"

"This kid is the best!" roared Aoba, wiping tears from under his sunglasses.

"I don't know if children should speak like that, Aoba-kun? Why, because they will be even worse as an adult." Mumbled Hisako. Her clan was always alienated because of their abilities and symbiosis with chakra insects. Kushina's behavior for sure wasn't helping Aburame's reputation.

"It's Kushina-san brat and she is alright with it. Take it easy, Hisako-chan. It's just a harmless fun."
The somber kunoichi couldn't see anything harmless in making a child cry. Even if the child was as grumpy and rude as this one.

Suddenly, all laugh and shrieks stopped. There was an explosion and cries of terror from the outside seconds after a red halo appeared on the horizon.

"What the hell?" muttered Aoba, carefully looking through the window. "An attack so deep into our territory? How did they break through the border and come up here not alarming any patrols?"

Kushina swore. Her eyes immediately focused on the rose haired child, who hanging from the ceiling seemed to shrink and be even more tiny than she was in reality. The older woman took the girl in her arms. In that moment both Uzumaki were terrified; both for Shiori's sake. The demonic chakra and adrenaline coursing through Kushina's system was shutting down her logical thinking. She wanted nothing but to run and beat the living daylights out of the people responsible for putting so much fear in those golden pools.

"Hisako-chan, scout situation with your insects."

"Already on it, Kushina-san." Said the hooded kunoichi. "At least fifty assailants engaged four leaf teems, six miles on northwest from the city. One enemy squad broke through and is heading here. More chakra's coming from west indicates that the main battle takes place there."

Their forces near Nankoku was meager at best. The city was important because of its numerous, renowned forges, but at the moment the majority of shinobi stationed in the area were delegated to the capital. It would take at least two hours for reinforcement to arrive. They needed to help and protect the people – Kushina knew it, but the child's trembling form in her arms was her main concern. Heck, where was Minato when she needed him? She wasn't good in making decisions like this. Separating her heart's whims from things needed to be done. The worst was the knowledge that she indeed could make a difference. She could safe so many.

Swallowing her grief and fear, Kushina put the small, red bag over Shiori's shoulder and pushed her to the Aburame.

"Stay in the city and help the civilians evacuate. If they manage to get into town, go east to the Sora-ku. Aoba-kun and I'll engage the main forces and wait for support. And you," she grabbed Shiori's chin. "Listen to Hisako, do everything she says and for once in your life time don't be a brat."

After this the two of them were gone.

The reborn woman couldn't tell what exactly happened after that. She was being carried from place to place, surrounded by a lot of hurriedly muttered orders, screams and upcoming explosions. Some locals barricaded themselves in their homes, while others tried to carry as much as possible and leave the town, the rest fled immediately not thinking about anything but surviving.

And then the earth moved. It shot up to the sky, only to crush onto half of the street like a tsunami. Hisako jumped. People all around were crying and dying but the kunoichi as hell wasn't stopping for anything.

The reborn woman's eyes stayed glued to a one particular corpse no much larger than her own body. It was shattered under a boulder next to crying and screaming woman. In all her fears for the future, she hadn't taken into consideration anything like this. She lived already through one battle but it was different then. She knew it was coming. She knew every redhead she was familiar with in her first five years of life would die in one swift attack. She knew there would be fire and blood; lifeless bodies lying everywhere around. Then, she was prepared. Now she was not.
She tried to think of something, anything she could do when the world swirled in a blur of red and yellow lights. Her hiss of pain when she crushed into older woman, was lost under a loud bang of explosion. The next moment unfocused golden eyes met hovering over her kunai. The boy wielding it couldn't be older than thirteen and he was going to kill her. He wanted it.

But he wouldn't.

Insects flowed around his shoes like water at first but in seconds they were already over his knees and heading upwards. They weren't behaving like the harmless ones Kushina scared her with a few minutes ago. They were like some evil genetically engineered weapon. They moved too fast to be stopped. The small Uzumaki couldn't look away even when they reached his face, entering into his nose, ears and lips. Single uncontrolled jerk and muffled scream later and it was all over.

Shiori felt the insects through her cloths while they were coming back into Aburame's body. It was the most grossing feeling she could imagine, at least until a surge of blood covered her hair. Hisako neck was cut open and her body crushed the girl down.

The reborn woman came to terms with one fact. It was the end of her struggle. It was time to die- and then the aggressor disappeared. She didn't know if he missed her or thought she wasn't worth his attention. One way or the other he was gone.

For a moment she wanted just to stay there and don't move. She was tired of this world, of death and pain constantly looming over her head but when the ground began to shake again, her body alone decided and dig out under the still bleeding corpse and ran.

Sprinting she noticed a stranger wearing leaf's uniform, who jumped from roof to roof. He also noticed her but his face grimaced in indecision. The small, terrified girl was completely alone. He should help her, he wanted to do it but she would be nothing more than a burden and he already had his own responsibilities waiting for him in hotel room two streets away.

Shiori was sure he would ignore her but the man changed his mind in the last moment and swerved in her direction. It saved his life. If he had remained on the old course a millisecond longer, a sword would pierce him through. Konoha-nin released from the mouth a fireball as a distraction and threw shuriken precisely into his opponent's eye.

The girl blinked and then her vision was obscured by green vest before they shunshined. As could be expected her hero was awarded by her slightly predigested dinner, when they reappeared. Even if the man noted it, he didn't react. He sat her on a tatami mat next to a second child, who only looked at her blankly. All her previous thoughts vanished in the wind. Heck, and people said she had big eyes. This kid had huge. It was like looking into a set of black mirrors. The only disturbing thing being how calm they were. As if they weren't in the middle of battlefield but in a garden, having tee, chatting about the weather.

"Hello," said the child. Shiori thought it was a girl but she wasn't sure.

She tried to response but she couldn't. Her voice seemed to do what the rest of her body wanted and ran away. The pretty kid seeing this smiled reassuringly and took her hand.

"What now, uncle?"

The man glanced at them before going back to setting traps in the windows – whoever would want to enter that way would meet with bunch of deadly, sharp and nearly invisible ninja wire.

"I'll put genjutsu and a barrier seal around this room so it should be safe. You two will stay here no
matter what while I'll go and draw away their attention. You will **not** go out, understood?"

Ok, that was one scary look. How could they possibly be related? The kid looked like a porcelain doll (he was even a little creepy like one), while the man not only had more brown than black hair, and completely different cheekbones, even his presence was everything but comforting. He looked just pissed. Well, the reincarnated soul was able to understood him. If she had on her head two imps while being in a warzone, she also would be livid.

After the absurdly calm kid nodded the man walked out and ostentatiously loud closed the door.

They sat unmoving, listening to the noise outside and a clock steadily ticking on the wall. Shiori's brain turned off. She could only wait for help and be comforted by a child. The kid probably was younger than she even without her previous lifetime. The reborn woman was pathetic.

Then the hell broke loose.

The building trembled but stood defiantly in face of elements raging outside. They had to be losing, if so many enemy's shinobi was able to reach the city. Shiori had seen it before. In time the enemy would see through the illusion, brake the barrier and come here. They would… The door burst open.

The small hand let go of her when the kid moved forward, kunai in hand. The first thing that crossed the threshold was smoke. The second one was the leaf ninja. He was limping and profusely bleeding.

"We must go! Now!"

Shiori couldn't move. The man seeing this picked her up and slowly started walking into fire. The black smoke flowed across the corridor, filling her lungs. The coughing was immediate just like tears that filled her eyes. Fire licked around as if meaning to play when something overhead crashed. The ceiling was falling.

Shiori didn't know is she was unconscious a moment earlier but now, when the golden pools looked at the word, they saw that the man was trapped under the wooden beams while the kid tried to pull him out.

'Don't be stupid, run!' The brown haired shinobi meant it to be a yell but his words were barely audible.

"I won't leave you."

"It's an order!"

They arguing was pointless. Fire was everywhere. They would all choke to death before they would burn; not even talking about running away. She would die here, once again… Oh, damn fuck this! It was a total bullshit! She hadn't died, was reincarnated in this freaking world, plotted against upcoming doom, was sealed for years and plotted all over again just to die here now!

The girl pulled out of the bag a scroll and unsealed her notebook.

"Hold your breath." She ordered, tearing out one page. It was just a prototype but they hadn't other options.

Shiori nearly activated the seal before noticing her companions were gawking at her with opened mouth. The girl forcibly shut the youngest's lips and glared at him with the best Orochimaru's impression she could muster. "Hold your breath, damn it! And you too!"
They both did it this time.

She just had to correctly calculate reach and… The seal shined with blue light before pressure dropped and the air disappeared. Lacking the fuel, fire went out in second. Deactivating the seal, air came back, filling the vacuum.

The girl examined the wooden debris. She couldn't use exploding tags without the risk of harming the man or dropping the rest of the building on their heads. She grabbed the kid and started tugging him to the exit.

"What are you doing? We need to help him." She/he protested.

"We cannot help him or sit here like some ducks!"

"She's right, Itachi-chan. You need to go."

All the reborn woman's being halted when her brain registered what heard her ears. She was in a fucking warzone with tiny Itachi Uchiha - the most tragic character in Naruto, over whose death she actually cried, reading this stupid manga!

The small Uchiha heir analyzed her arguments and decided that the odd girl was right. He grabbed her hand and dragged her still speechless form outside. Well, at least now Shiori knew that this doll-face belonged to a boy.

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I know, I'm awful human being (plz don't kill me, at least not in some boring way). A lot of you wanted to see what's going to happen with Obito but I'm afraid you need to wait a little longer – the almighty plot requires it, you'll see.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thanks' for all yours comments, favs and alerts. It helps me immensely.

And as always HUGE thank you to the brilliant and wonderful angel that is mrsmiawallace88 :D

To the next time
Chapter 11

Distance was all that mattered for the two children sneaking between buildings in different stages of ruin. They were shadows, a mere outline of darkness dancing with flames on the wall, a passing smudge in an abandoned alley. One's movements were short and so smooth that normal eyes wouldn't even notice as they slinked through the coldness of the night. Meanwhile, the second one moved jerkily, like a cheap stop-motion animation.

Itachi's eyes fixated on the slightly taller figure ahead of him. He wasn't sure what to think about the odd girl, who in one moment was terrified and unable to utter a word, and in the second was fuming at him like seasoned kunoichi, who had every right to be seething. At the same time, she was using seals he hadn't ever heard of as if it was a perfectly normal thing.

Now she was trying to drag him somewhere, remaining hidden from any unwanted eyes. The kids turned the corner and ran down a streetlamp lit avenue. The redhead noticed that the backyard fence of one of the collapsed buildings had a rectangular hole and she pulled Itachi through it. There they stood, hearts in their throats, as still as statues for what seemed like an hour. Two golden pools focused on him in something akin to annoyed resignation for world's overwhelming senselessness.

"Take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?" He couldn't hear her right, could he?

"Take off your clothes." She repeated even more irritated. Sounds of fighting were coming closer.

Itachi instinctively squeezed his shirt. Walking around naked was inappropriate. Uchiha always had to be proper and modest, especially him – his father told him so. His mother told him that if someone would ever tell him to undress, Itachi should hit them between their legs and run to her, so his dearest mum could kill them. Sadly, none of these options were possible. The boy doubted the toothless child would be pacified by such an attack, probably she would try to hit him back or worse - start crying. Itachi would like to avoid this possibility at all costs. Nothing was more shameful than bringing a woman to tears, even when said woman wasn't even in her puberty yet and was lacking a tooth. His mother and her holly anger were unfortunately also unavailable at the time, so he had to deal with everything on his own.

"Cloth…?" Before he could ask what she meant, the girl started to pull off a yukata smeared with blood from some boy's body protruding from a collapsed wall nearby. The dead child was similar to him. The same high and black hair. From this angle the differences was practically unnoticeable - it could have been him. We are not meant to kill each other, he thought. *Ninja are supposed to protect their homes, not destroy other people's lives. What kind of insanity gets us into wars anyway? Kids are not collateral damage; each one is precious. Each one matters.*

Quiet sounds of slurred words brought him back to reality.

"You can't march around with that crest on your back." Muttered the girl, tugging the dirty cloth with all her nearly nonexistent might. "You may as well sit and flag yourself: here I am, the heir of the renowned Uchiha clan, come and get me. Set of shinobi tools for first three assailants gratis."

The tiny hand tightened its grip around the kunai, the redhead however hadn't noticed it, being too busy robbing a corpse.

"How do you know who I am?"
"Firstly – you just confirmed my suspicions. Secondly – think. You're led from the capital in one of the few times when new clans' heirs can officially be recognized. You're around the right age and were coming back before any other VIP, because it should be safer, so you're even more important than they're. Oh, and you look like a little princeling and speak way too formally for any normal kid. It truly wasn't so hard to figure this out." Shiori mumbled, finally managing to undress the body. "Here, take it."

When she turned around, she was met with a pair of large, obsidian eyes looking at her in wonder.

"You are smart."

Despite the compliment the girl's cheeks puffed in anger, in which she forcefully pushed the yukata into his arms.

"And what of it? Shouldn't I be smart because I'm a girl or because I'm young?"

"No!" Itachi was at loss. He wanted to praise her, not make her angry. He bowed. "I am sorry if I offended you. Do not be mad, please. You are really smart. Still, you do not look like someone from the Nara family or any other clan I know about and that is odd. That is all. I apologies if my words wronged you."

"Statistically, basing your deduction on my appearance, I should be a hyperactive moron. Lucky for you, I'm not, so put it on. And in the name of everything what isn't absurd in this hellish world, stop bowing." The redhead begged in a mix of irritation and embarrassment.

The boy however bowed even lower.

"I am sorry but I cannot wear it."

Shiori's plum face puffed even more as her skin gained a rosy hue that complemented her sunny eyes. Non the less juxtaposing it with her bloodstained hair, the effect was rather terrifying.

"And pry tell me, my dear comrade in misery, why the hell not?" She hissed.

"Our clan is our pride. Shinobi shouldn't…"

"You're just out of your diapers, for the Hashirama's sake! You're a kid, not some bloody ninja! Put it on or I swear on every single dango I've ever eaten I'll make you wear it!"

At the moment Shiori couldn't care less if someone heard them or not. Earlier, when her brain barely moved from its torpor, as she noticed the Uchiha fan on Itachi's back, she nearly choked. Shouldn't ninja at least try and hide in the shadows or something? Wasn't it in their modus operandi? But NO – of course it couldn't be as simple as that. From every shinobi family in Konoha, she just had to deal with the proud and pompous Uchiha clan and its prodigy. For all his supposed brilliancy the boy was… well, he was a brainwashed with patriotism; cute, little thing in the middle of a military clash. True genius or not, despite his blank and calm appearance, he was afraid just asshe was, if not more. The reborn woman couldn't just leave him here alone. She hadn't remembered if something like this happened in the original timeline but if it was true, then no wonder it left a toll on his psyche; and that Itachi did everything in his might to stop upcoming conflicts. Even if it meant royally screwing up.

And now she fucked everything over. As always.

If not for her presence Itachi's uncle should already been dead for a few hours and never come back to the hotel. The little Uchiha would go somewhere and do something that certainly had nothing to
do with following one terrified, revived soul from another dimension… in other words, the whole situation should be totally different. Maybe thanks to her, the boy wouldn't be so traumatized, opposing the whole thing alone, but now his future was uncertain. He could die in every moment from literally everything, and then only gods, Einstein and Elvis knew what shit would happen.

"Done."

The girl assessed him critically.

"Even in rugs, you have to look all suave and royally, don't cha? You don't have to answer. It's a rhetorical question." She added, seeing as the boy open his mouth. "Come, we need to find a safe place and wait there, until it'll be over."

Itachi once again was dragged like an impudent child. He didn't know where to, but he believed the toothless girl with her whole eccentricity and determination knew what she was doing. Otherwise they were both doomed.

Ω

His target was jammed between two higher buildings. It looked squeezed, as if the neighborhood was threatening to crush it. The sign looming over the entrance looked ancient, some letters had become illegible because of peeling paint. Nevertheless, the window was clean and the things on display were clearly expensive. There was no theme or color coordination through them as they were crammed together rather than thoughtfully arranged. When the door was pushed a bell rang. The bright room was much longer than it was wide, resembling a corridor with shelves supporting its walls.

One deep breath and last glance around later the man dived into it, as if afraid of being noticed. He walked into the unknown territory with the grace and ferocity of seasoned shinobi. He had seen a lot of bloodbaths of which many were his own doing. He was involved in countless battles and visited numerous battlefields. But nothing prepared the one of the legendary Sannins for this.

From every side and angle creations of all shapes and sizes peered at him. Everything here was vivid, referring to his deeply hidden instincts, buried by time and instilled with its passing social norms and expectations. Orochimaru's brain was screeching from information overload. His famous comprehension was crumpled by a single visit in nothing else than a toy store.

With a single stare he sent a clerk to the back, not wishing for any witness of his atypical behavior.

On the left side were hoarded toys for girls and on the right for boys, meanwhile on a long table in the middle lay a whole troop of plush animals. Despite her odd quirks Shiori still was a little girl so the man turned left. Walking among the small, ornament and ridiculously girly music boxes, tea sets and encrusted with shells, mirrors and matching hairbrushes, he knew he made his first mistake.

Everything here was way too feminine for his little devil's taste.

His bright eyes swept over a pink ribbon. It would terribly crash with her rosy locks and finally, thanks to her pouting and trembling lips, it would end on him. Subconsciously he touched the tip of his locks. Jiraiya once expressed his regret that the snake summoner wasn't a girl, because he had the prettiest hair in Konoha, and even Kushina with her flaming mane had to acknowledge his superiority. After that Orochimaru put twice as much effort to sleep as far away from the slightly older male as possible - especially when some sake was involved.

The next thing that caught his eyes was a hand-sewn doll. It had light brown buttons for eyes and blond hair in two ponytails. Even kanji for gambling was present at its back. Tsunade as the First
granddaughter always was immensely loved in the Village. Her fan-club seemed only to increase after obtaining the Sannin title and even her defection (or as everyone called it – momentary absence) hadn't changed it.

Orochimaru snorted. He would like to see how everyone would react if someone else had done something like that, especially someone as suspicious and shady as he. There would be a manhunt, that's what. He… he blinked. The world had to be joking! His feet turned to the other side of the room, where exactly opposite of the place lay the plush Tsunade, on the table with boy toys was an army of miniature Jiraiyas. It had to be him. No other model could look like a cross between toad, troll and twerp.

Potential customers apparently shared his opinions about the appearance of his former companion, because a whole pile of his likenesses pointed out an almost complete lack of interest in it. Especially comparing it with a single remaining doll presenting their female teammate. Nevertheless, the scientist wasn't surprised. What kind of mother would buy the representation of a well-known pervert for her children, who she for sure at least once hit in the face? Even Orochimaru would be a better role-model by a bystander's standards. What was truly surprising was the fact that he was apparently right.

On his right was a slightly smaller pile of black haired dolls. Orochimaru took one carefully as if it could bite him. Long, inky locks – check. White skin and purple markings – check. It even had his serpent eyes. The only problem was that his likeness looked even more feminine than Tsunade's. In fact, if it had lightly blue hair it would look just like his mother.

Orochimaru as if burnt put down the doll. He hadn't thought about his parents since the last soul he acknowledged to honestly like died. It was nearly five years ago. That god forsaken day when he went to bid farewell to one more person. Just that grave had no headstone. Traitors of Konoha didn't deserve it.

The table crackled under his hand.

The dark hired Sannin wasn't a hero. Some would call him a monster. Everyone would do it, if they knew he was partially responsible for the recent abductions, even the child. Actually it was so absurd it was at the same time tragic and enormously funny. None of the trio of Konoha's legendary Sannins deserved their titles, because frankly speaking none of them gave an authentic fuck about the Village. For him it was the source of materials for his research. For Tsunade – cause of her grief; while for Jiraiya a factory of unwanted responsibilities.

Nawaki and Dan loved the Village and they died for it, not even knowing for what atrocity they sacrificed their lives. For it, their existence had no significance, being just two stepping stones in the road to a bright future. The only person who knew the Leaf with all its filth and lies, and still loved it despite it, ended as a disgrace, as a thief who dared to reach out for something that belonged to the Village. Years of faithful service were irrelevant because he decided to take his own life. Orochimaru hated this wretched place almost as much as he hated death itself.

No, mourning of the dead was useless. The human lifespan was useless.

"When I was told where you are, I had to see it with my own eyes."

The Sannin's face instantly went blank.

"Sensei." There was no trace of disdain in his voice. "Why do I deserve the honor?"

"Can't I just seek the company of my favorite student?" Asked Sarutobi, standing next to the younger
"The last time I've seen Biwako-sama, she complained about your absence at Asuma-kun's birthday party. You, sensei, and free time in one single sentence is a big oxymoron."

The Third hokage laughed.

"Just like you and a toy store, and yet here you are. I swear, the next time I'll find Jiraiya-kun in Kannon's temple of virginity."

"He went there once." Mumbled the snakes summoner and spun a rubber kunai in his hands. Given to Shiori it would end as a missile against Kushina's head. "He crept there to peek at some young priestesses. The idiot."

"Ah yes, I remember it. Tsunade kicked him through a wall and a few trees."

"Just like million other times." His brows twitched, nearly knitting in a frown. "As much as I like to recall the old days, sensei, I would be grateful for the true reason of your presence."

The sight that escaped Hiruzen's parched lips was slow, as if his brain needed a few seconds to process his next words. His eyes remained fixed on the jonin, who with interest was measuring a colorful, plushy snake. The world was ending.

"Shiori-chan will like it." Assured the old man, seeing his pupil's hesitation. At that Orochimaru openly sneered.

"And that's what worries me."

Hokage coughed, hiding his growing smirk.

"Despite everything she's just five."

Orochimaru knew it, and that was one of the more disturbing facts about the girl. Even he was far more childish at her age, constantly strolling after his parents. He wasn't spending the majority of his time in laboratory, pondering genetics puzzles and creating new fuinjutsu formulas. The Sannin was really curious who she would be in a few years. Nonetheless, she for sure would be his by then.

"Besides," continued Third far more morose. "She'll need a little happiness, after their way back."

Suddenly Orochimaru's face felt tight, like being natural wasn't an option any longer. His usual calm had been replaced by a carousel of ideas, each one more worrying than the last.

"And why is that?"

"She's going to see some nasty things. We won't be able to clean up all the bodies before the end of the festival."

"What bodies?"

"An hour ago I received report about the attack on Nankoku. It's Kumo and Iwa. It looks like they're working together and what's even more worrying, they managed to get so far into our territory undetected. I already sent a backup, but I need you to go to the border and examine how they managed to get in."

The Sannin's heart rate was accelerating as his mind replayed the image of Nawaki's death on a short loop, replacing the boy's corpse using a smaller one with a halo of rosy hair. With a rest of his
conscious mind he counted the days and distance, after which he cursed.

"Orochimaru-kun?"

"Kushina wanted to return earlier. They're there."

Sarutobi seemed to age at least ten years in one second. If anything happened to the girl, Kushina would go on a rampage. Konoha already was in a tight spot, they couldn't afford to lose nine-tail's jinchuriki. Additionally, granddaughter of that old witch seemed to be only thing able to awake in his pupil some sentiments. Something even him and Jiraiya were unable to do.

"Just hurry up."

Ω

A large part of the reborn woman's brain was cut off, but of course neurons transmitting pain worked with irritating efficiency. Nevertheless, some thoughts still operated in its depth. Spreading one fat fact for consideration: they were going to die.

Even if a moment ago she'd been paying attention, she would have been hard pressed to dodge the gust of wind that knocked her back. If not for Itachi that caught her, she would end as part of a nearby ruin in which they were now hiding.

"Oh, common kiddos. Don't cha wanna play with us?!” In their ears rang a screechy voice, belonging to one of the four kumo-nins that were standing before the building, taunting their future victims.

The boy was holding her up with one hand, in second clutching small kunai. His doll-like face was set in pure determination to protect. Shiori was in awe. She didn't know if it was caused by his courage or ignorance for their situation, but the young Uchiha impressed her non the less. The little motherfucker was far braver than her.

The girl took a deep breath. She had to think. Slightly burned, chubby fingers rifled through her fuinjutsu notes, but there was no more exploding tags or other dangerous seals she could use. The only thing left was her numerous not working properly doodles for vacuum barrier and gravity seals. However, if they manage to surprise the bastards, maybe they would gain enough time to escape.

She snatched one page, handing it to Itachi.

"Attach it to the kunai and throw under their legs as if you couldn't hit them. When it'll start, be ready to run, ok?"

The boy nodded and did as he was told. The kunai flew in a slow arc through the air and with a clatter clumsily bit into the ground, causing a barrage of hysterical laughter that didn't stop until the seal stared to glow, however then it was already too late.

The kumo-nins screamed, but in one second their shrieks were drowned by a crash of breaking bones. Their bodies began to fall to the inside; starting from their skulls, ending on toes. After three seconds the children were left gawking at four piles of squished meat and blood.

"Ok… it wasn't what I had in mind, but I guess it also works." Mumbled Shiori, too mortified to do anything else. "Now, we should…"

The girl stopped, seeing still perplexed boy, frozen with open mouth. She hadn't broken him, had she?
"Hey, Tachi-chan, are you there?" Waving in front of his nose had no results. Ok, Huston, she had problem. She needed to do something, otherwise some new idiot could find them.

The reborn woman did the first thing that appeared in her mind. She poked him in the forehead. Repeatedly. Not carrying at all about possibility of changing the symbol of Uchiha's fucked up brotherly relations.

After fifth poke the boy blinked.

"Are you with me?" Answered her one, small nod.

"What was that?" His voice was so stressed she nearly cuddled him to death.

"True be told I've no idea. Come, we have to go."

And once again Itachi was dragged by a slightly taller girl. This time to a shore of the lake on the town outskirts.

"We need to get to the other site. Can you swim?" Asked the redhead, checking if her bag was secured and everything inside properly sealed.

"I can, but would not it be faster to run on the surface?" Itachi involuntarily winced at her sour expression.

"I can't walk on water. Actually, I don't ever know if I can swim. I never before tried it, ok?" She added fuming. It wasn't her fault that in Uzu ocean currents were too strong to try and learn it. Besides, even in her previous life she barely floated on the water. She never was an outdoor type of person. "Also, going underneath will be safer."

"Safer?"

"I haven't seen anyone using water jutsu yet, so the lake should be left in peace. We'll be harder to be noticed, and even then no kunai or shuriken will reach us."

"It will not?"

"The density of water stops practically every thrown weapon before it dives further than one meter. You know what? We don't have time for it. Are you going or not?" She added stressed by odd glint in those onyx eyes.

This time it was the boy, who took her hand, walking into water.

"Just do not let go."

"Don't worry, Tachi-chan. I don't intend to."

Half hour later on Nankoku's lake opposite shore, an old duck almost had a heart attack, seeing two very odd things. They were more or less of human child size, but bent almost double. They were equally covered with slime or mud, or maybe compressed mixture of both, so felted that even small plants ventured their roots into them. When those creatures climbed into a natural hollow in the scarp and pulled over themselves the leaves and sticks they had piled up, they were perfectly hidden until daylight would broke again, and even then they would be pretty hard to spot. Crouched down, they were remarkably similar to the long-forgotten compost heaps, that were wheezing rather loudly. However, the old duck wasn't there long enough to hear voices coming out from within.
"Are you cold?" asked slightly taller heap of compost.

"Not really." Answered second one, but the first seemed to look at it doubtfully, probably because of the sound of chattering teeth.

"Well, I'm freezing here." Whispered first one and cuddled to its companion, who after a momentary shock snuggled up with redoubled force. "Better, Tachi-chan?"

The smaller compost heap, that in fact was Uchiha heir, hmed in affirmation and after a moment of hesitation asked a question that tormented him for a long time.

"Excuse me, but what is your name?"

"You mean to tell me I haven't introduced myself?" The girl face-palmed making a loud splash. "Sorry. I'm Uzumaki Shiori, age five. It's nice to meet you."

Boy only nodded and snuggled even closer if it was physically possible. The silence of surrounding them reeds made the reborn woman blood as cold as the night air that crept around them. Deprived of any wind the plants stood still. Not counting sound of fighting on the other shore, there was no noise or rustling. It was as if nature conspired to keep them in the dark, not daring to even whisper. Then the boy broke the silence.

"Why they were attacking us, Shiori senpai? We are only children; they should not do it."

The redhead really wanted to make him understand that she wasn't his senpai, and that his formal speech pattern was giving her a royal headache, but seeing those large, troubled diamonds she couldn't worry him further. Instead she tried to answer him.

"It's a war, Tachi-chan, and at war everyone is killing another ninja just because some jackass in a pointy hat told them to. Normally most of these people wouldn't be enemies, some could even become friends, but on a battlefield you fight and win or you die. It isn't right, but this is how it is. Shinobi rules state that human life is replaceable, that ninja is nothing else than their Village's tools. Tools don't feel, don't cry nor love, but we do. Everyone wants to live and that's main reason why every shinobi kills even innocent civilians – not for the sake of their Village, Kage or other stupid ideals. Because when it's raining cats and dogs, and a man wades waist-deep in corpses, there is no time to check the rules. Besides, they are senseless. Most speak only when you're allowed to be killed. But back to the topic, you must understand that no matter from what Village people are, they all are afraid to die and just want to go home."

Shiori didn't care that her words couldn't possibly came out of any five-year-old's mouth. The kid trembling next to her deserved the best explanation she could give him. She was way too scared and cold to think about consequences. She wanted nothing more than sleep. Not only she was dead tired, the boy also was closing his eyes… The reborn woman mentally kicked herself.

"Hey, Tachi-chan, we cannot sleep, do you hear me? Or we may never awake again. Talk to me, about anything you want. Tell me about yourself, your family, hobbies."

Black, hazy eyes tried to fix on the kneeling next to him toothless girl. Slurred words slowly escaped from dark-haired boy's frostbitten lips. Itachi told her that he was four, lived in big house with his mother and father. He liked books, the most about Leaf's history. His favorite food was cabbage and onigiri; his mother made the best – especially with seaweed.

"It sounds very nice. I'm sure it's delicious. Who knows, maybe I'll try it, when we get home."

"I will be delighted to host you in our home."
"And then we'll have a talk about your language."

"I speak properly, do I not?" Asked flabbergasted boy.

"You're speaking so formally it's killing my brain. But don't worry, we'll fix it." She stroked his hair, while flashes of explosions on the other shore were getting stronger.

"Ne, Tachi-chan, I have a request. Well, two actually." Seeing the boy was attentively listening, the young Uzumaki continued. "Can you don't say anything about the thing my seal has done to those shinobi. If they knew, I'd end in the middle of warzone faster than I can say dango. And for the other thing - when you'll see your mum, cry as much as you want."

"But shinobi…"

She interrupted him with a huff.

"Don't show their tears, I know, but you aren't shinobi. Besides I thought we established that these rules are stupid."

Itachi opened his mouth to reply but only a short yelp left him, when something emerged from a water. He wanted to shield his senpai, but Shiori squalled in delight and flung herself at it. It proved to be a scary looking man, whom the girl was hugging for her dear life.

"Orochimaru-sama, you've found us!"

"Of course I have found… wait, what us?" The man dragged his yellowish gaze to the second heap of compost, that the girl dragged forward.

"That's Tachi-chan. I've found him and I'm going to keep him."

If Orochimaru wasn't his own terrifying person, his jaw would hammer in the mud, but he couldn't do it, so it remained in place. The only sing of his inside turmoil was single elegant brow soaring up.

"And Orochimaru-sama?"

"Yes?"

"I'm hungry."

"Of course you are."

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ANOUCMENT: I've one thing to say to you, my awesome readers. From the next chapter there will be a little omake at the end of every chapter, so if any of you want to read about something that was only mentioned or have any other idea or wish just let me know.

OK, this is a place where gush over you guys, so thanks for reading. Also as always I'm bowing before my dear mrsmiawallace88.
Coming home

With a wild glint in her violet eyes, but the peaceful face of someone who methodically performs brutal murders every morning, Kushina grabbed a man and used him to hit several others. When around her was a circle of free space and a moaning mountain of formerly fighting shinobi, she jumped on the pile and put her hands to her mouth.

"Shiori-chan! Where are you?!"

"Kushina-san, I don't…" Aoba didn't think that he still had so much energy in his bones to so strongly slam his jaw. But then again, standing before the gaze of the redhead kunoichi even a corpse would do it with nothing more than a loud click.

Lilac eyes closed. Kushina tried to stop her imagination, so it wouldn't show her any amateur horrors on the inner surfaces of her eyeballs. Unfortunately, after they stumbled upon the body of the young Aburame, the woman's brain had been funding her marathon of endless terror, that deepened by every minute, which they didn't find Shiori. But the girl had to be there, somewhere. She just had to be. She couldn't be gone.

Then, from nowhere the redhead kunoichi felt a faint but no less familiar chakra heading north, and dashed for it as if chased by the devil himself.

Meanwhile, the smaller Uzumaki was experiencing dizziness and seasickness delivered in a single, compact, greenish package.

"Orochimaru-sama, please slow down."

"If you knew you're going to be sick, why did you eat all those ration bars?" asked the Sannin, running through the battlefield with two tiny bodies hanging on his back. After he found them among the reeds, he waited with the kids in their hiding spot until dawn came and the majority of the enemy's army was defeated, to take them to a medical camp. However, he didn't expect the necessity of enduring so many groans of misery from his little protégé along the way.

"But you gave them to me and I was…"

"Hungry – yes I know. You're always hungry."

Itachi was listening to this odd banter between his senpai and the scary man, who, to his astonishment, was in reality one of three legendary Sannins. His senpai had to be even more amazing than he thought to know a man like that. He glanced at the girl next to him. If not for the layers of dirt and dried blood on her face, a weak tint of red embarrassment would be visible despite her sickly green complexion.

"I'm growing Uzumaki. It's not my fault that we need more sustenance to pervade our chakra reserves. It's genetic."

The snake summoner had been deprived of the opportunity to express his opinions on the genetic of gluttony when something scarlet flashed before them.

Itachi blinked. A woman, who was his mother's old acquaintance from her kunoichi days was rather brutally hugging the toothless girl that was now changing color from greenish to purple.

"Oh, shrimp-chan, I was so worried. When I saw Hisako, I thought, I thought… I love you so much,
dettebane! I don't even care if you're an insolent, devious oddball. You're my oddball and no one else – even Minato's; ok, maybe I can share with him but that's all. You don't need to worry any longer, from now on I'll protect you always, dettebane!"

"Excuse me, but I don't think she can breathe." Mumbled Itachi, interrupting the woman's logorrhhea.

"Eh?" Kushina released her steel grip, focusing her attention on the second child, giving Shiori a moment to breathe. "And who may you be, little cute?"

"That's Tachi-chan." Explained Orochimaru. "Shiori-chan found him, and she's planning to keep him." He added with something between fascinated disbelief and horrified sadism.

The woman squalled, and in the next moment was showing her distinct affections by even more distinct force hugging two children at once.

"You two are so cute, I could eat you!"

"Please, stop it, Kushina-san. It's unsettling." Wheezed the reborn woman, but attaining no results she decided to use more direct means of persuasion. One small elbow hit square and fair in the face of the older Uzumaki. "Stop it, dammit! You're scarring him for life!"

Thanks to Shiori's counterattack the boy managed a single rational thought. The danger of the previous night wasn't over. Evidently maternal instincts weren't terrifying, making itself known just in his mother. Every woman was scared when her children were in peril, but they were even scarier, when after everything their kids were safe in theirs arms, ready for a very long lecture with a large dose of displaying disappointment and inducing guilt – rather worrisome fact.

"Itachi?"

The boy blinked. His father stood three steps behind the Sannin, face blank and composed as always.

"Otosama."

Now, it was Kushina's time to blink and open her mouth in bewilderment, the effect spoiled by Shiori's elbow still jabbing her cheek.

"Uchiha-san?"

"Uzumaki-san, Orochimaru-sama."

Orochimaru refrained from further recitation of the names of the people present, he already witnessed more than enough courtesy for someone standing in the middle of recent a battlefield.

"What are you doing here, Fugaku-san? I wasn't aware you were send here." He asked.

"I have come here for my son." Explained Uchiha, focusing his attention on the smaller kid, as if wanting to make sure that all these tons of mud really were hiding his son.

"Of course he's your son." The Sannin dragged his pained eyes from one child to the other. She just had to mix-up with Uchiha's heir. She just had to, because why the hell not?

"Next Uchiha, eh? Seriously, cousin, what about Obito?" Kushina's grin wasn't indicating anything good. "I thought you lovmp..."

The girl's elbow once again was used, this time to cork the insufferable woman's lips. First impressions were important; it was enough that she stood in front of the head of the Uchiha clan,
looking like some swamp monster, which in addition reeked of stale cabbage, ash and blood. More embarrassment wasn't needed, thank you very much.

"Otosama, I was saved twice by s..." Itachi hesitated for a moment, feeling the girl's scornful gaze. Ah yes, she didn't want to be called senpai, right? "By Shiori-dono." He finished clearly pleased with himself.

Said girl was fuming. That kid had to be a hidden, sadistic jerk or a totally oblivious, sweet moron. There wasn't a third option, and from the previous two the reborn woman didn't know which one was worse.

"So this is the young fuinjutsu master Handa mentioned. I should have guessed that it would be an Uzumaki." Fugaku zeroed his hawkish gaze on the small redhead and slightly bowed to her. "Uchiha clan is in your debt, Uzumaki-san."

Shiori bowed back, not knowing what to say. It was one massive positive of Japanese-like culture in this world, bowing was always the safest option.

"Is uncle Handa alright?" asked Itachi.

"Yes, we have found him. He is in the camp under medical surveillance."

"Ehh, Handa-kun was wounded?" After several attempts Kushina managed to completely immobilize Shiori, freeing her mouth from the offensive elbow.

"He has a few broken bones and smoke poisoning but he will be alright." Explained the older Uchiha.

"Good, Minato would be crestfallen otherwise. But wait. Fuinjutsu master?" Kushina abruptly stopped smiling. "What have you done this time, Shiori-chan?"

The girl's cheeks puffed.

"I haven't done a thing. The building was burning so I used a vacuum seal to get rid of the oxygen and put out the fire. That's all."

That interested Orochimaru.

"So it works?"

"Of course it works. But way too much chakra is wasted on the activation loop and it's too hard to determine the range. We should..."

"Ok, I like this scientific mambo-jumbo like any other girl but I think that's enough for now." Instructed Kushina seeing Fugaku's growing curiosity regarding Shiori, who was just starting her normal unbearable for any normal person monologue. Drawing attention of major clans wasn't something her little cousin needed at the moment. "We should go back to the Village as soon as possible. This isn't the place for children."

Shiori wanted to notice that there weren't many things here they hadn't already seen, but exactly in this moment Itachi cuddled up to her side and squeezed her hand as if being afraid to let her go. The girl didn't know if he did it consciously, because the whole time he hadn't moved his gaze away from Fugaku.

The said man had to also notice it, because he only sighed (at least the reborn woman thought he did,
because as is fitting for a true Uchiha, Itachi’s father had only three facial expressions: blank, scary and scarier).

"Kushina-san, could you take Itachi with you? I should stay here and help."

"Actually," interrupted Orochimaru "I require your clansman assistance. Sharingan would be useful in the investigation."

"Of course, Orochimaru-sama" agreed Fugaku and once again turned to Kushina." I will send a message to my wife. She will be waiting for you at the gate."

After having said that, the two man disappeared in clouds of smoke, leaving the older redhead woman with two bewildered kids in her arms.

"Shall we go home now?" asked Itachi, not knowing what he should feel, after his father left him with this weird woman, just like that.

"Yeap, cutie-pie, we are going home."

"Kushina-san, I'm begging you. Don't jump."

"Will see what I can do, shrimp-chan."

Ω

To the reborn woman's utter disbelief, Kushina really avoided every unnecessary leaping whenever she could. Four hours later they were crossing the gate of Konoha no Sato without further adventures. The grownup Uzumaki hummed old lullabies the whole way but only Shiori lost her fight against exhaustion, falling asleep and waking up every now and then. The little boy was silent, and as glued to Shiori's side as at the beginning of their journey. Kushina chewed her lips to a chip, trying to stop her constant snickering. Poor Minato, first Obito and now Itachi. The blond man was going to have a stroke and then introduce some strict anti-Uchiha police in their home, after hearing about this new development. Oh, why she didn't take a camera. Not only would she have brilliant blackmail material on her devious cousin, but also something to traumatize Minato with. Pity.

"Itachi!"

Three pair of eyes focused on the running woman, who in a blink of an eye was next to them, snatching her son into her arms.

Shiori studied the boy with piercing scrutiny. Firstly, there was timidity, which turned into relief when the kid embraced his mum. Itachi bit his lips, closed his eyes and clenched all his muscles trying to stop the upcoming shakings. Unsuccessfully. The boy glanced at his new senpai and in instant his body was wracked by raw sobs, while he shook like a leaf. Recent fright consumed his every cell, swelling them with terror. One fat tear after the other gave rise to a whole river, accompanied by heartbreaking whimpers and even a few hiccups.

"Oh my God!" Kushina panicked, throwing her arms around like a fish flung on a land. "A second ago he was ok, I swear, Mikoto-san! I don't know what's happened, dettebane!"

"It is alright, Kushina-san. Thank you." Assured the black-haired woman, too focused on her terrified son to notice anything else.

"Well, then… bye!" squeaked the older Uzumaki and in one powerful jump, found herself on the roof of a nearby building with a slightly green but still evidently pleased Shiori.
"What, the hell, have you done to him?" Kushina's glare was nearly animalistic, especially with that sneer and fact that she was holding Shiori by her dress collar like some misbehaving kitten.

"What?"

"Don't try your what with me, pumpkin. Itachi-chan was alright until he glanced at you. Then he started crying."

"And how exactly is that that my fault?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking! And don't even start to pitch me an excuse. You have that smug smile, glittering eyes and dimples in your chubby cheeks. You made him cry. I don't know how and why, but you did. I thought Itachi was your friend, Shiori-chan. You can't upset your friends, dettebane!"

"I didn't upset him, Kushina-san. Besides, not every tears are wrong. He's a traumatized kid - he should cry, its healthy."

Kushina hesitated, what happened rather often when Shiori mentioned subjects that had no right to be discussed by any five-year-old. She ran a hand over her dirty face, as if kneading the invisible dough of her thoughts.

"Then what about you?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Kushina-san?" To that one sentence Shiori wove expression of someone who falling into a chasm, has to stop and ask for the way down. Such imbecility on her face was highly disturbing.

"You're impossible, you know that?"

"But how can I be impossible when I exist?"

"You, you... No dango for a week!"

"What?! But Kushina-ne-chan! You can't punish me because I'm cleverer than you!"

"Then watch, dettebane!"

Accompanied by similar bickering, the two Uzumaki reached home and their living room, where Minato sat on the sofa. In the first impulse Kushina wanted to jump on him and kiss him senselessly, but luckily Shiori's demands for right of first bath stopped her enough to actually look at him.

She didn't like what she saw.

The love of her life sat hunched as if wanting nothing more than disappear. His golden locks were in total disarray, as if not wrenched only thanks to more overwhelming need of using his hands to cover his face or punch something. Considering that now Minato was hiding his face, and his knuckles were all red, he probably did both. There wasn't much what could put him in this state, and the woman was afraid to think of any of them. She put Shiori down and carefully walked over to the couch.

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Meanwhile the reborn woman just blinked. Despite the warmth her skin was icy, all blood averted her brain, making it numb. After a moment and a few soft sobs from the adult's realization hit her - "freeze" wasn't going to work here anymore. Apparently "escape" was the new directive of the day, but it wasn't slow like a conscious choice. It was abrupt and so her legs exploded into swift,
unyielding motion. The bathroom's door shut after her with a soundless click.

She took a long bath, soaking knee deep in silence. Water dripped from the tap, each drop echoing around the room like a cymbal, yet she didn't move to stop it. From the window were emanating sounds of traffic and bird songs, by now it had to be late afternoon, but today there was no Kushina's usual hustle and bustle when making dinner. Nor Minato's stories about his team's new craziness. It meant that the reborn woman's fragile happiness was over, before it really had a chance to take root.

She came out, dried herself, changed into new fluffy, pink pajamas and flitted into her bedroom where she buried herself under the covers and fell asleep. In the middle of a night she was awakened by the bending of the mattress.

"It's Obito. I'm sorry, Shiori-chan. I'm so sorry."

Frustration boiled inside of her so much, the girl thought she might explode. She wanted to shout, had a tantrum and beat her hands in his chest like a toddler. She wanted to vent and let it out, but it would mean saying words that were hurtful. It would be so easy to be cruel. In her previous life the reborn woman wanted to unsay things many times, take them back. She slowly learned to control her temper but now she didn't give a shit.

"You were late again, weren't you? The Yellow Flash never is on time when it really matters. Never."

He was gone instantly.

Ω

There was no sound in the house, yet everyone was moving. Moving but not talking. Kushina walked back and forth in the kitchen, making more food than any army could eat. Minato was doing small repairs in the flat that he had been meaning to do for months, but somehow now they were more pressing than ever.

Shiori stayed in her room, trying to drown in books but was unable to read even a word, foot tapping up and down like some idiotic clockwork toy. She royally screwed up, there was no lying there. She had been heartbroken, yup - well, she still was – but hurting Minato was counterproductive, no matter how good it felt. She needed to apologize.

Dressing up she couldn't get rid of the thoughts that it all was so stupid she had no words for it. How stupid all the big and mighty of this world had to be, to participate in a war from which none would come out victorious? How stupid it was to send a bunch of kids on a nearly suicidal mission? How stupid Obito had to be to kill everyone because of Rin? Wait there and go back!

Half of the head full of rosy hair stuck in the neckline of a blue dress. The most stupid was no one else but she! From what the reborn woman remembered Obito hadn't gone all gaga by just sitting in that cavern with Madara. The turning point was Rin's death, so if he won't see it…

The girl put on her clothes and like a bullet burst out of her room. There was no time for grief if there still was a chance to fuck up the Almighty Plot's shit, but for that she needed Minato's and Kushina's cooperation.

The blond man tensed, crouching behind the couch and screwing a power outlet to the wall, when he heard a pair of small feet stopping behind him. With a screw in his mouth he turned to meet those scornful, gold eyes. To his surprise they weren't full of disdain nor disappointment. Shiori’s gaze was hot like a burning sun and deadly serious. She clapped her hands together and bowed.
"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all these things. It wasn't my place, nor had I any right to judge you. My grief was talking through me. I don't blame you, Mini-nii."

Kushina could only smile watching how Minato embraced the child. Shiori's words devastated him yesterday. He was so full of grief, the woman thought it would consume him completely, living nothing but empty shell. It was good to see these two together could get up so fast and get going.

Ω

From what Shiori found out, the Kanabi disaster ended just like she remembered. Obito was crushed under a gigantic rock and Kakashi gained super-uber-eye-mod and mental scar for life. Rin went out of it without a scratch, as befits a typical, annoying heroine. But even if the outcome remained unchanged, the road to it was slightly different, giving the reborn woman an undeniable evidence that the Almighty Plot was a true, stubborn bitch.

The girl had no idea how and why there were six hostile shinobi when she remembered far less, and how it happened that Kakashi lost his right eye and not the left, but neither changed the fact that this world somehow worked out everything exactly as it should have been. The knowledge woke in her something akin to primal terror nearly as frightening as resolve of her cousin that was now dragging her to the hospital.

It turned out that Konoha's health care package didn't cover cases of mental trauma; and Yamanaka clansmen, who were sometimes working as resident psychiatrists, were too busy digging in the brains of war prisoners, to bring out one silver-haired jonin from abyss of apathy. Nothing could lift his spirit, so Kushina and Minato decided to take a different tactic. They wanted to annoy him until he would actually do something more than staring at the ceiling.

And who was the most irritating person in Kakashi's book? Yeap.

Kushina slightly opened door to a room, where the teenager recently resided, giving Shiori a chance to glimpse inside. Limp pile of covers and human parts lay on the hospital bed. But emanating from it an aura of doom apathy and the fact that the boy even in that state could easily kill her, wasn't her main problem (actually she was happy to troll him especially thanks to this factors). That tittle belonged to a bunch of animals in the room.

"I cannot go there and upset him like that. There are puppies, none of you mentioned puppies!" complained the toothless girl in a half-whisper. "Now I'm feeling bad. Why the hell am I feeling bad? What is happening to me?"

"Maybe you're growing up?" Kushina suggested mockingly.

"I seriously doubt it."

"Just go there and be yourself. That'll be more than enough." Snickered the woman shoving the younger girl forward.

Shiori cursed, skipping a few steps by the force of momentum, before she halted right in front of the biggest dog she had ever seen. It reminded her more of a calf than a dog, especially the young one. It could bite her head off not even trying.

A wrinkled eyelid went up, showing the pitch black pearl eyeing the child. The dog sighed opening its snout and licking itself, putting the tongue to its nose. It was enough to say Shiori was grossed out.

Meanwhile a few feet away on the bed, Kakashi was once more reliving in his mind the last minutes
of his best friend. The memory made him feel dead inside. The only thing left was fear, fear of ending the same way. Obito, contrary to him, was a good boy and he didn't earn what he got; the young jonin couldn't imagine how anyone could deserve an ending like that.

It was Kakashi's fault and now the masked boy was afraid to get up and meet the next day. How could he when Obito had none left? Only he hadn't been allowed to be afraid, to feel guilty and dwell on one insignificant lost life. He had to be soldier and killer, when Obito was just a simple clown who helped others. There was a point in life of Konoha's shinobi after which the famous will of fire was expected, regardless of age. He reached it far faster than his peers. A few too many promising qualities and his childhood vanished far before Kakashi's teen years began. And so the son of the White Fang raised to the expectations; seeming to be as detached on the inside as he was on the outside, perfecting a mask of composure and competence. The person he presented was mature, talented and professional. In truth he was the same kid he was at five, finding his father's dead body lying in their kitchen in a pool of blood. His whole life was just a farce, a house of cards. Now, when the whole thing came apart, it revealed an abandoned boy - the boy who still grieved over the person he was before the world collapsed. Before he learnt that "forever" could be dreadfully short. Nearly as short as someone sitting on his bed.

Kakashi focused his one good eye on the small redhead suspiciously looking at Pakkun. The young pug was sniffing her, but not sensing anything suspicious, after a while went back to licking Kakashi's hand.

"Listen, Hatake-san," began the girl, massaging the bridge of her nose. "I don't even want to be here but Kushina-san made me, so I'll annoy you until you'll react or go grey. Wait, it's too late for that. Let's stay with becoming bald."

There was no reaction. The girl poked his cheek. Still nothing.

"I swear if you don't blink or something, I'm going to kiss you, smearing my salvia all over you."

There was no reaction even when she stopped a breath away from his forehead. Shiori had a feeling it was going to be really long visit. She toddled to his medical chart and started to study it but not seeing any significant test results she put it away.

"You know, without Tsunade this place is a mess. You should watch out or one day you'll end lacking a kidney or other sensitive part between your legs, if you stay here much longer."

Silence.

"You're a jackass, you know that, Kakashi-san?"

Even griever silence.

Shiori's headstrong determination showed itself when the redhead licked his face - only to suddenly start spitting in all directions.

"Don't tell me your dogs licked you before!"

The boy fulfilled her request speaking nothing. The girl growled and resigned fell on the mattress. After five minutes of counting panels on the ceiling (320 to be precise), she rolled over the bed.

Just as Kakashi felt the first wisp of breath on his neck, Shiori's hand moved around his middle, warm and soft. In a second her tiny body was molded to his own, sharing her body heat as easily as she shared her harsh opinions.
"Everybody needs a hug now and then but I warn you. If you tell anyone about it, I'll deny and give Gai-san a homing seal, so he will be always able to find you. You won't escape, ever."

"Something like that doesn't exist." Mumbled the masked boy under his mask, that was really well hiding his nervous lockjaw. No self-imposed silence was worth such visions.

"I would make it just for you. You should feel special."

Kakashi snorted and glanced at the forest of red hair with something balancing between curiosity and bitterness.

"I thought you liked him. How can you be so…?"

"Alive?" It was her time to snort. "Obito was one of few people I genuinely liked but he isn't here anymore, you can't change it. I already once lost my whole world but I had to get up. There wasn't another option, because life is always going on, no matter if you want it or not… And now after my marvelous pep talk, be a nice jackass, Kakashi-san, hug me and shut up."

He sniffed annoyed but buried his face in her locks, being careful not to hurt his bandaged eye. The reborn woman told him nothing but the truth. She lost everything when she died and nothing he might do could change Obito's fate. But she wasn't the same, she had knowledge and so she started plotting. It was on her head to make sure that everyone she cared about were coming home.

Out of the blue something heavy jumped on her. Actually it was few somethings.

"Kakashi-san, why are your dogs attacking me?! Tell them to stop! They're licking me! Bad mutts! VERY BAD!"

Kakashi's laughter was heard on the entire floor.

**OMAKE**

20 years earlier or something like that; inn - somewhere in Fire Country

"It's my room, go somewhere else." Barked Jiraiya, seeing his dark-haired teammate laying down to sleep on a nearby futon. Why he had to share a room with this pompous ass?

"There is no place else. Sarutobi sensei told me to sleep here." Answered Orochimaru opening a sealing scroll. "I assure you, that perspective of sharing any space with you displeases me much more than it does you."

"You're too modest, snake-face. Don't underestimate your power to be a pain in the..." loud puff and cloud of smoke from the scroll interrupted him, revealing a bag from which Orochimaru pulled out a pillow. "What the hell is that?!"

"Pillow?"

"It isn't normal pillow!"

"It's my special nap pillow. Also pretty comfy. Several dozens of the finest gooses gave their all so I could snooze in comfort. DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT IT, JIRAIYA!" He threatened, seeing the boy getting ready to pounce.

In order to stand Orachimaru's company the hyperactive boy had to occupy himself. Somehow a
simple card game seemed to be the safest option. As it turned out - not necessarily.

"Hurry up and discard before Shinigami will march in to take me!"

Pale boy blinked, lifeless like a bookkeeper in a cast.

"Very well." The white hand put his cards on the floor. "Gin."

"AGAIN?!"

"It hardly requires advanced mastery in differential calculus to grip a miraculous sequence of as, two, three. It would be 54 points; new record."

"Shut up and deal. I don't remember the last hand I've won."

"Seriously? It was so few I thought they would stand out in your memory."

"On the second hand I'll just read something before turning in." Mumbled Jiraiya, rolling to his futon and hiding behind a book.

"Ah yes, highlight of human culture - manga." Mocked the smaller boy.

"It happens to be my favorite!"

"What gin rummy is to games worth skills, manga is to literature. Therefore, I'll be merciful and share with you something civilized." He said, almost reverently pulling from the bag a gramophone and few discs. "I give you light in the darkness - opera".

"No way! I hate opera!"

"Closed mind is an empty mind, Jiraiya-kun. Just listen and I guarantee, you will be carried away on a majestic clouds of a musical ecstasy."

Orochimaru played his music and after first six notes Jiraiya wanted to throttle something. Preferably something effeminate.

"That chick sounds like banshee in a bear trap!"

Five minutes later Sarutobi Hiruzen was trying to understand, how in the name of First Hokage, in one moment he was admiring alluring feminine shapes through the hole in the fence, and in the next one, was watching as the inn they were spending the night was trampled by gigantic frog and snake, that now were trying to escape before equally gigantic snail.

His genins were hopeless. He had no idea what they could possibly grow into. Nothing good, that was for sure.

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One omake as promised ^^ I don't know why, but I've always imagined Orochimaru as completely devoted musical nerd. And for the regular story, yeap Kanabi happened and now true scheming is going to begin. Also Uchiha family enters the stage so be prepared for more Itachi, and Shiori's attempts to make him behave like a small kid should.

Thanks for reading/following/favoring and so many great revives after last chapter. And enormous thank you for my fabulous beta, mrsmiawallace88 you're the best.
Peony meant bravery, pansy – caring, while daffodil respect; at least from what he remembered. Kakashi never had lessons of hanakotoba as they were typical for kunoichi classes, but he learned a few things in passing. Even if he was totally ignorant, it would be impossible to overlook the amount of thought and work Rin put into a bouquet for him. It was a small thing but very elegant, contrary to the monstrosity standing next to it. The wild bush from Gai included dahlias, freesias and lilies to name few rather inappropriate flowers (that in order meant good taste, childishness and hatred), and now was the object of interest to his dogs, especially Akino, who seemed to have some sort of personal grudge against the overwhelming scent irritating his sensitive nose.

Looking at the pile of puppies it was hard not to crack a smile, at least if you weren't one bratty redhead, who despised everything that wasn't sterile clean. Shiori had to be the only child he knew that wasn't cooing over his pack, because no matter how useful they were, no one could say they weren't also sickly adorable - even if Bull was eating bed's leg, Bisuke was scratching walls and the rest tried to smear their slob all around the place. They were in constant motion, wagging, wriggling and jumping. His puppies were a breathing store of pent up energy waiting to release itself on the world. Medic-nins told him to uphold summoning jutsu for the time being, so they could monitor his chakra levels. Kakashi doubted they hadn't regretted their decision these days.

Pakkun raised its head from the boy's chest and sniffed the air. Its tail started to waggle like crazy, tapping out rhythm of some frantic polka, to which the other dogs joined after a second. In crescendo the puppies sprang in the direction of the opening door. Their back legs swung outwards as if almost losing balance when they leaped up, landing on Kakashi's new visitor, whom now they were licking furiously.

"Hatake-san, do something with this stupid mutbleh! Stop putting your tongue into my ear, you overgrown fleabags!"

"They just like you, however I don't know why." He added in a low voice. No matter how entertaining the shrieks of the young Uzumaki were to Kakashi's sadistic ears, the boy knew they would bring unnecessary complications, because where was this little brat, her loud cousin followed right behind. "Boys, that's enough. Come here."

The pack listened to their alpha, happily wandering under his bed, leaving the distraught child to her own doings, that at the moment consisted mainly wiping off their spit.

"These mutts aren't hygienic. How can they even be here?"

"They're ninkens, not normal dogs. And they're clean." Protested the masked boy. "Why are you here, Shiori-chan?"

"I bring you a gift." announced the girl, desperately rubbing her ear with a handkerchief.

"A gift?" That was rather uncharacteristic for her, at least as far as he knew the kid.

"Yeap, a splendid gift of certainty that you won't keel over and die. He should be here the moment he finishes speaking to your medics."

Kakashi had a gnawing idea who this mysterious he was going to be and he didn't like it. At all. The world, as if wanting to admit that his fears were justified, materialized the serpent man in the room with his usual dangerous aura and a little unusual evident irritation almost simmering from his
"Child, I hope you don't intend to pursue any medically inclined career path."

"I?" On Shiori's face was something what could only be described as the epitome of the mightiest possible deadpan. "For hours listening about others people suffering, surrounded by their germs? Sacrificing my time and energy to ease their pain, because of the kindness of my good, soft heart?"

Apparently both men had the same problem imagining this, since Orochimaru only snorted and in few swift steps stood looming over Kakashi, unceremoniously removing his bandages, what clearly hadn't gained approval of the dogs, that now where growling at the tall man. One glance from those snakelike yellow eyes was more than enough to send them back under the bed; with one exception. The smallest puppy began to growl even fiercer and when that hadn't deterred the shady fellow, the pug pierced the man's trousers with its tiny, needlelike teeth.

"Bad dog." scolded the little redhead and picked up the dog. Looking straight into its eyes, she tried to explain. "Orochimaru-sama just wants to help. He's the most competent person in this abode of debauchery to check on Hatake-san. Normally, he wouldn't even bother himself with your master, so be a nice doggy and be grateful."

Reprimanding the dog Shiori was so passionate, she didn't notice when she moved the pup closer to better convey the message; and so she gained one powerful lick through the face.

"You little shi…"

"Language, Shiori-chan."

"Buuuut Orochimaru-sama," wailed the reborn woman. "This fur ball has some dirty, sticky vendetta against me. I cannot simply do nothing."

The Sannin sneered but it wasn't addressed to Shiori, at least she hoped so. The girl toddled closer to see what displeased the man. The only possible explanation was a problem with Kakashi's sharingan. The boy had his mask on but the longitudinal, red scar was clearly visible on the upper half of his face.

"What's wrong, Orochimaru-sama? Was the transplant rejected?" she asked, giving voice to her own and the boy's worries.

"The eye is going to work, if that is what you are asking. Its efficiency is another thing, even those cretins noticed it." The two dumbfounded stares forced him to explain his point further. "Kakashi-kun, your eye will work as any other sharingan but the amount of chakra, which it will consume is incomparably higher. Your body will go through chakra like Shiori-chan through dango."

The silver-haired teenager clearly paled at the comparison.

"Is it normal?"

"Well," Orochimaru pondered the girl's question. "It's the first case of transplanting sharingan to a non-Uchiha, at least officially and not the one when the new owner is hunted and killed by the clan before anything could be assumed, so it's hard to say. However, there's no scientific reason why it couldn't be far more efficient; especially when its ocular power is freshly developed."

"So it should work fine?"

"It shouldn't work at all." said Snake Sannin in a supremely bored tone. "At least I've no idea how
it's working with so poorly executed surgery. Your friend, Kakashi-kun, had no proper knowledge nor skills to do something like that, not to mention the circumstances of the whole ordeal. It really shouldn't work, and yet here you are."

"I understand. Thank you, Orochimaru-sama." Mumbled Kakashi, with trouble closing his new eye.

"So nothing can be done?" Shiori was however as adamant as at the beginning of their talk. It couldn't be just it. "You can fix it, right, Orochimaru-sama?"

He had to turn away his head. The child regarding him with that absurd little crooked smile of hers and that whole ocean of adoration rocking in her golden pools, always stirred in him a desire to satisfy her whims. He knew he was being manipulated but was still convincing himself that he was agreeing to it just to be able to use the girl in the future. He couldn't be getting soft, right?

"True, it is in the range of my expertise, but I doubt Uchiha would let Kakashi-kun to keep the eye then. I believe it's better the way it is."

"But if they agree, would you do it?" The child was clearly sent to this world to complicate his life. In no other way the girl could know how that devilish dimples worked on him, especially after the time he thought she might had died. The man just pried she wouldn't blink and tilt her head. She did. To made things worse, in tandem with the puppy she still squeezed.

"I suppose so." He hissed through clenched teeth.

A loud squeal came from the length of his knees, that in the next moment were attacked by an enormous hug (the pug at the last second evacuated from her arms under the bed).

"Great, thank you, Orochimaru-sama. You're the best!" Shiori turned on her heel and headed for the exit, but was stopped by two things. The first one was the Sannin's voice.

"Child, wait for me. You're not going anywhere alone."

The second one was Bull, that moved extremely fast for something so big and generally resembling some fuzzy icebreaker. The enormous pup crawled out from under the bed and stood on its two hind legs, put the remaining ones on the girl's shoulders and knocked her to the ground no problem, only to lay down on her. The other puppies eagerly joined tormenting Shiori, whose face was getting as crimson as her hair.

"Get off me, you portable germs containers! It isn't some slapstick comedy, dammit!"

The two men just blinked watching the absurd scene.

"She's planning something." Said Kakashi with trepidation in his voice. "Why? She doesn't even like me."

Orochimaru watched how the teenager unconsciously touched his new eye. The boy had to think that Shiori was doing it for Obito, but the Sannin knew better. The girl was everything but sentimental.

"Sometimes it's better to remain blissfully unaware. It's healthier." He handed the bandages to Kakashi. "I'll send a nurse to put it back. Goodbye, Kakashi-kun."

The young jonin half-aware observed as the man pulled the girl by her collar from under the mountain of dogs and calmly walked away with the still fuming child, throwing ridiculous threats left and right.
The moment the door closed, his pack started whining after their favorite new pet.

Ω

Uchiha Mikoto always knew she wasn't the best mother but she also hoped she wasn't the worst. Now she had mixed feelings. What even remotely good mother would feel relief seeing her only child crying? She had.

When the Village reached the news of the attack, she thought that her heart had just been broken into a million pieces. Fugaku told her to stay put and was instantly gone. The hours she waited for any news were the most terrifying in her life, even when she tried do everything not to think about the horrors her little boy was going through. She focused on cooking Itachi's favorite onigri, but none she made was good enough, so she ended with so many plates, they almost didn't fit in the kitchen. There were so many, that she had trouble getting to a window when a messenger crow started to tap the glass; well, she would have had trouble if she hadn't simply marched over them without any care.

She wasn't sure she cried reading that Itachi was unharmed and coming to Konoha with Uzumaki Kushina. The only thing that indicated it was the smeared ink on the note. Mikoto managed to compose herself as well as she could (which wasn't much) and the next thing she knew she had her lovely, little boy in her arms.

The Uchiha matron smiled glancing at the four-years-old sitting at the kitchen table and reading an old scroll from the clan library. Worth mentioning was the fact that the scroll was far bigger than its reader. Her son was a true genius, but his recent tears confirmed her hopes that he was also her little boy. The woman knew he was their future, be she believed he should stay a child at least until he would go to the academy. To think that earlier Fugaku was actually considering taking Itachi to the warzone, so the child could wholly understand what being a shinobi meant. If then Itachi would start crying she would… well, her husband should feel like a tremendously fortunate man it wasn't the case.

"Itachi, do you want one more onigri?"

"Thank you, mother, but I am full." Squeaked the tiny voice behind the scroll.

"So maybe we can go on a walk?" Asked the woman, gently taking away the boy's reading material.

"I am sorry, but I would prefer to read, if it does not do you that much of a difference."

Mikoto sighed placing the scroll back on the table.

"If you say so. But it is such a shame. I wanted to talk with Kushina today, I have not thanked her yet for rescuing you, but on the other hand I do not want to leave you alone." Itachi twitched hearing Kushina's name. "Who knows, maybe her little cousin also will be there?"

"I will be ready in five minutes, mother." Declared the boy, slid off his chair and very carefully walked from the kitchen as fast as possible while not running. In the end he didn't want to seem too eager.

Mikoto couldn't control herself any longer. She burst out laughing.

When Itachi talked about the attack, he was very methodic and refrained like seasoned shinobi, except the time when he spoke about the little, bloodstained and dirty girl – then his eyes sparkled. No matter how sad it was, her son had no friends. Children were simply too… childish (not to say stupid) for him; he couldn't understand them. And then from nowhere appeared a girl, who wasn't just as bright as he was, she was smarter – at least from what Itachi told her.
Her husband also advised her to keep an eye on the little Uzumaki. Possible asset as he put it.

Yesterday Kushina was more than happy for her proposal of a playdate for their children, and so today the Uchiha matron took her bag, her son's hand and walked out of their home to meet two redhead Uzumaki.

Ω

The reborn woman was never one to look a gift-horse in the mouth, so she didn't comment the accidental meeting with Itachi and his mum, after Kushina dragged her from home. Shiori needed to talk with Fugaku and the easiest way to do it was through his son but... THIS WASN'T NORMAL, GOD DAMMIT!

She stood in one place, pressing a big, white and fluffy towel to her figure. They were in a bathhouse. That stupid, stoned with pork ramen woman took her to a freaking bathhouse!

Shiori's cheeks puffed, gaining more reddish hue with every passing second. Her changing coloration wasn't the fault of high temperature. It also wasn't because something so mundane as embarrassment. The reborn woman was never a prude; especially here and now because she was five. She could stroll through Konoha naked like a newborn baby and the main problem of seeing it in the crowd would be her possible cold and irresponsible parents. Scandal – total zero.

The same applied to Itachi. He was even younger than her, and no woman in the bathhouse spared him more than a glance for another purpose than commenting his adorableness.

Shiori had another big problem with this place.

It was completely and utterly unhygienic.

Pure water without chlorine or any other disinfectant. She had no idea who was there before, using it to clean their freakish body; for example, an Aburame with all those crawling insects came to mind or some Inuzuka with their dogs and dogs meant fleas... Oh gods, how she despised it all! There were moments when getting dirty and germ-infested was necessary. This certainly wasn't one of them.

She wanted to turn around and run back to the changing room but the embodiment of evil was faster. The older Uzumaki smirked, wrenched the towel from Shiori's hands and poured a bucket of soapy water on the girl.

"Now, I'll scrub you! Get ready, shrimp!"

Itachi hid behind his mum soaping himself as fast as he could. There was no way he would let this exceptionally lively woman assist him. His mother only laughed seeing the distress of the two children. Father was right. Women were cruel creatures.

Something red flashed before his eyes and with a loud splash landed in the bathtub laughing like a mad hyena. At the same time another something walked to him. It was a snowman made from foam and the only distinguish thing about it were its golden eyes outshined by recent failure.

"Shiori-dono?"

"If you truly must call me like that, I prefer senpai, pfhe!" She shivered accidently swallowing a bit of foam. "I need to rinse myself, now."

As if her wish was a world command, a large wave splashed right into her, leaving the girl spitting
"Very mature, Kushina-san. Don't you think you should be little more tactful in Mikoto-sama company?"

A delicate hand patted Shiori's locks.

"It is alright, Shiori-chan." Assured the dark-haired lady. "I know Kushina from the time she was still genin. Actually, my husband, then my fiancé, spend more time on his patrols running after her than doing anything else. She was always very… spirited. If she behaved otherwise it would not be the same. It is refreshing."

Shiori had to bite the insides of her cheek not to scowl, resulting in a smile that looked as if someone slid under her nose something rather reeking. Because of Kushina's imbecilic ways making a good impression on Uchihas was simply impossible.

"If you say so, Mikoto-sama."

The Uchiha matron just smiled and put two children in the tub. Shiori wasting no time, scrambled to Itachi's side and not paying attention to his obvious embarrassment glued herself to him. She hoped that Kushina had enough sense to not try and drown her, risking at the same time the life of the future clan's head.

Was the reborn woman ashamed, using a four-year as a shield? Not at all.

"Tachi-chan, protect me from this bad lady suffering from major case of mental indolence."

The boy didn't know what indolence meant but he knew he would be protecting his senpai no matter what, so he nodded and gave Kushina the best Uchiha glare his pudgy face was capable of.

"Those two are too adorable" cooed Mikoto.

Kushina just smiled. They were adorable all right, but she had an inkling that Shiori treated Itachi more like a pet than a friend. Oh, but it would change, Kushina was sure of it, mainly because she intended to cause it.

Ω

The newest addition to Konoha's gastronomy map was a blast. At least in Kushina's mind. Shiori couldn't see anything extraordinary in famous Ichiraku and so after the semi-pleasant visit in the bathhouse, while her cousin was eating one more portion of the soup chatting with Mikoto, the girl was window-shopping nearby with Itachi faithfully toddling half-step behind her.

Shiori noticed a nice set of hair clips. Maybe she should bring Minato here and not so gently let him know how pretty it looked or just simply guilt trip him about something completely insignificant.

What however would put his golden heart in a state of strain sponge? No matter how you looked at it, she was still slightly resentful towards him.

In that moment karma made its presence known, showing that plotting one-person demise can be contribution to a would-be-conspirator suffering.

Sobbing was one of the sounds that put the human brain in overdrive, so it was natural that hearing it Shiori instinctively located its source and then wanted to be as far away as possible from it. It turned out to be a scrawny kid being extremely aggressively pushed by a group of older boys behind a trash bin in the entrance to a side alley; because with her luck it couldn't be some drunkard she could
easily ignore, it had to be someone heartbreakingly pitiful. How many idiots in distress she met these
week? If it keeps going on she was going to break some record.

A loud cry came from the alley.

She nearly fused her nose with the glass. It wasn't her business. Kids cried for no reason, she knew,
she was one of them. No number of tears or pathetic sounds could get her interest; not even this
sniffling noise full of anguish and echoes of running footsteps. Oh for the sake of double expresso,
why was she only resistant to it?!

As could be deducted, Itachi wasn't unaffected by the sounds of assault and sprinted straight to it, so
in the exact opposite direction to where Shiori wanted to be. Hell, before she could find Kushina that
adorable idealistic moron would be in big shit. Was she really so afraid of a few half-witted teenagers
to leave a four-year-old baby at their mercy? Maybe they were bigger than her but she was mentally
older for the fuck's sake!

Shiori fixed her dress and full of conviction marched to the alley where Itachi was already standing
between the beaten kid and his five tormentors, that were far taller and mean looking than she
thought. Self-loathing her stupid heroic moment the girl frantically signaled to Itachi to run away but
if the boy saw her, he hadn't shown it.

"Leave him alone." That was the tone that clearly promised a world of pain for any sight of
disobedience. The tone of a true Uchiha.

However, Itachi faced people having survival instinct of a lemming.

"And what do you think you're doing, brat? You wanna end like that shit?"

"Hey, that's enough" interrupted the recent punching bag and shakily stepped before Itachi. "You've
business with me, not the kid."

"But you are letting them beat you." Protested Itachi.

"No one is letting us beat them!"

Shiori had enough testosterone for a century. She groaned and walked to the little Uchiha and patted
his head grinning as if suffering from really onerous toothache.

"That's enough Tachi-chan. And now, gentlemen, please, all this's unnecessary. I think each of us
should go our own way and forget this unpleasant incident, what do you say?" Her smile and words
had no effects beside general belief that the newly arrived redhead was an idiot.

"Forget?" Asked the boy resembling a pink hippo. "Because of him our friend is dead!"

Under the accusations the boy seemed to shrink and it wasn't just any feat in his case. The lad looked
like a stunted sapling that would break at the slightest gust of wind. He wasn't much taller than her.
Nothing more than skin and bones. If not for the normal clothes Shiori would think he was some
street urchin.

"This is war and at war people die. That's just what they do." She really had enough of this
conversation. "And now I'm asking you to be nice and go away."

"Or what, you carrot top?" And here came the most ridiculous nickname ever. Shiori almost face
palmed.
"Yeap, that's the moment when I'm telling you my sly plan. I think not. KUUUSHINA-NEEEE-CHAAAN, HEEELP!"

The children's lungs were a true marvel. Her voice wafted across the streets clearly like a siren alarm and in the next second a curtain of red hair was everything what the golden eyes could see. Thanks to some kind of Hiraishin or other teleportation technique all kids were able to admire the Red Hot-Blooded Habanero in her full powerful wrath.

"What's going on here?!!"

The teenage attackers screamed something about monstrous vegetables and ran away leaving only clouds of dust, one irritated woman and three coughing children.

"Shiori-chan!" a tough hand bumped said girl's head. "How many times need I tell you: stop getting into trouble and making other children cry! It's mean!"

"Wait! How exactly is this my fault?"

"If not yours then whose? Itachi's?"

They both looked at the big eyed, bewildered boy. The only thing he could be guilty of was stirring an irresistible desire to cuddle him to death.

"I believe it was the fault of those boys who just ran away." Uchiha generously explained to her.

"These two wanted to help me, nothing more. I swear, Madame." Assured the dark-eyed child attempting to pull back his snots and frantically wiping his face. He wasn't wishing for more trouble to anyone; especially the two small kids that tried to help him, even if one was doing it unwillingly.

"These two? As if he and she? Helping?" Kushina had a hard time assimilating the concept. To be sure he understood about who she was talking about, the older Uzumaki rather indelicate pulled Shiori's cheek, earning a loud squeak.

"Seriously, I can be nice. From time to time." Muttered Shiori, massaging her sore face.

"Yeah, and I can be as dignified as Hiashi." mocked the crimson haired woman.

"I don't know who the bloke is but I already like him." The words got her the next bump in the head. "Cheeky shrimp," mumbled Kushina and focused on the new child. "And who are you, exactly?"

"Shisui, Uchiha Shisui." Answered the now identified boy, heralding Shiori's upcoming headache, because the girl wanted nothing more than start banging her head in a wall. Someone had to really hate her up there. She demanded answers, dammit! What was the probability to meet this peculiar boy from all people in Konoha?

On the other hand, at least one of them had fun. Kushina's snickers turned into a full-fledged laughter within seconds.

"Seriously cousin, you had an Uchiha-radar or something? It's even more odd than funny. Maybe you should start collecting them?"

Was Kushina right? Was Shiori meant to catch them all? Was it some sick equivalent of PokemonGo?. Wait, then she would have had to meat Madara and that was a big HELL NO! Two future-self-sacrificing-idiots in one day were more than enough for her; an ancient badass was
completely unnecessary.

"If I start bringing home boys like some strays, Mini-nii is going to get an aneurism."

"You don't need to bring them home immediately. This one, for example, had to be fattened first. Just look at him. You can't be chubbier than your boys."

Itachi assessed the boy suspiciously. Maybe he was from his clan but it didn't make him any more trustworthy. Not only wasn't he protecting himself, even when it was clear he could easily defeat his tormentors; now he was called his senpai's boy. She couldn't take this Shisui guy home just like that. Shiori was his senpai. And so his brilliant four-year-old brain had a splendid idea.

Itachi took Shisui's hand.

"I am Uchiha Itachi, your cousin. I will take you to my mother. We will take care of you."

As could be predicted Kushina cooed over Itachi's loveliness and dragged them back to Ichiraku, where she left Mikoto. The Uchiha matron regarded Shisui with something bordering between pity and trepidation but took care of him non the less. It turned out that the new Uchiha was eight and just started his last year at the Academy. This caught Itachi's attention, because if the older boy also was a prodigy then maybe he wouldn't look at him oddly and call him a freak. He could even be friend material, but first they had to explain a few thing regarding Shiori senpai.

The redhead girl had another thing on her mind.

When sizable bowls of ramen were set before them, the reborn woman wanted to cry. This day was awful. First, she was smeared with dog's slob; then nearly drowned in water probably containing at least seven thousands colonies of different germs; met people who she wanted to avoid at all costs and now she was going to be poisoned.

Golden pools full of dread met Ichiraku's owner happy face. Yeap, she was going to die.

OMAKE

Few days after Shiori arrived to Konoha

It was official. Shopping with Kushina was more tiring than a pentathlon.

Shiori wasn't feeling good. Actually, she wasn't feeling at all. She was tired, sweaty and bored, because even the perspective of new clothes couldn't recompense hours of Kushina's lively company (Minato dragging his sorry ass behind them wasn't feeling better than the girl). The only possible option to not go mad was turning off her brain. Unfortunately, thanks to this precaution Shiori didn't note where they were going to eat, at least until she was sitting on Minato's lap at the counter.

"Prepare to be amazed, shrimp." Announced Kushina bouncing in her seat.

"I'll try to contain my excitement." Only someone deaf and blind wouldn't be able to spot her cynicism. "Kushina-san, you know I don't like broths."

"Broths?! The cook in outrage dropped a spoon. "I'll let you know, little lady, that it isn't some broth. It's even a ramen. It's Ichiraku Ramen."

"Easy there, Teuchi-san" Minato, the lovely voice of reason, shielded Shiori in his arms. "I'm sure she'll love your ramen the moment she tastes it."
The man grumbled something but went back to his pots with just one more glowering look. In the meantime, Shiori made herself comfortable in the blond jonin's arms, mentally preparing her taste buds for the unpleasant flavor.

"Heyo!"

The small Uzumaki almost bit off her own tongue. Unexpectedly, just before her nose appeared a face smudged in flour. Its owner was a girl the same age as Shiori, sitting on the other side of the counter.


The single possible interpretation of Shiori's grimace had to be disgust. Not only this child was an incoherent moron, she also held out her hand smeared to the elbow in some stinking, meat slime.

There could be only one answer.

"No."

The same could be said about Ayame's reaction.

The brown-haired girl started crying. Her wails mangled with barrage of "shrimp", "Shiori-chan" and "you brat"; while Shiori couldn't care less. With some luck this would be the last time Kushina dragged her here. The reborn woman was completely apathetic to the whole mess and her apparent rudeness to the moment she encountered Teuchi's gaze. It was murderous.

Thinking more about it, in the Village of full professional killers getting hemlock or arsenic couldn't be too hard, right?

Shiori gulped. No more ramen for her, ever.

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**Next chapter done. Let me know what you think.**

**Thanks for all your comments, favs and follows. And as always I bow before my lovely beta - mrsmiawallace88.**
One autumn day

A slamming door right before her nose - just one more fabulous incident on this beautiful autumn morning. The reborn woman's splendid mood that day wasn't due only to the fact it rained cats and dogs. There was also one little matter of Minato and Kushina going on a mission. At first she was even happy because it meant spending three whole days with her favorite Sannin, who somewhere between their shared dinners and the last saving escapade, became Shiori's nanny on demand. However, when Minato and she went to his laboratory the serpent man was nowhere in sight. It appeared he had been suddenly sent on an unexpected mission and that raised two troubling thoughts in the young Uzumaki's mind.

Firstly – Minato didn't know about it and he just came back from Hokage's office. Shiori was aware Hiruzen wasn't the youngest lad, but she doubted he had such severe sclerosis to forget mentioning this tiny detail. In truth, Orochimaru had no official obligations towards Namikaze and his little ward but all concerned sites knew better. So, if Hokage wasn't the one who sent the Sannin away, who else could it been? No one else than the freaking Danzo! Orochimaru still worked for this substitute of a human being, doing god knows what, even when she gave him so much scientific facts and methods; and that irritated her to no ends! He was a freaking genius, screw this, he was the freaking genius. How could he be so imbecilic to associate himself with that bandaged monster?

Secondly – maybe it was petty of her but why didn't the Sannin say goodbye to her? Was it too much to let her know he would be out of town, doing something amoral, what could probably lead to his death? Was it too much to ask from him? She was worried, damn it! Not that she wouldn't be worried otherwise but still… it vexed her to no ends!

And now she was nearly struck in the nose! And by who? By Uchiha freaking adorable Itachi, that's who! He opened the door and seeing who was standing in his doorstep, apologized, asked them to wait a moment and shut the door with a bang.

"Well, that was… odd?" Mumbled Minato, improving his grip on the reddening girl in his arms, who looked as if her brain might boil and burst out of her ears at any second.

"I still don't understand why I can't stay alone. I would be alright." she hissed through clenched teeth.

Before the jonin's blue eyes flew a sequence of images showing Konoha in various stages of destruction, but in every one of them a little, giggling redhead was standing in the middle of it.

"It's for your own good, Shiori-chan". Answered Minato, omitting the detail that it's also (or more likely especially) for the good of all around. "Besides, Mikoto-san is a great cook. It would be shame to not take the chance and try her food."

This reasoning seemed to subdue Shiori, who in fact had to talk with Fugaku, no matter how reluctant she was about it. What was wrong if as a recompense for her stress, she could eat something delicious?

As if summoned by their thoughts the Uchiha matron appeared in the doorway.

"I'm so sorry! I have no idea what possessed him." She apologized clearly as much embarrassed by her son's unusual behavior as intrigued by it. "Please, come in."

After they left their muddy boots in the hallway (Shiori's were rather clean because she flatly refused wading through the puddles) Mikoto went up the stairs losing no time to check Itachi's strange
manners. Not knowing what to do being left in the hallway, Minato followed the woman, willy-nilly taking Shiori with him. What befell them on the upper floor was indeed an interesting view.

Itachi was trying to hide the protesting Shisui, wrapping him in a futon like curd in a pancake. At the same time throwing weapons and scrolls that were lying around to a cabinet.

"Itachi-san, what are you doing? It isn't funny." Rasped the older of the boys, who now was almost fully wrapped in the mattress.

"I need to clean up the room, before senpai will see it."

"But why are you cleaning me out of here?"

Itachi's eyes were as enigmatic as a black hole, not betraying even the slightest thought; not that Shisui had time to contemplate them while being violently immersed in the depths of bedding.

"Itachi, I let Shisui-kun sleepover not for you to smother him in the morning. It is rude. Even more than leaving our new guests outside." No matter how disapproving his mother's words were, her tone showed nothing more than amusement.

"I'm sorr…" the boy paused all activities, for the first time noticing the blond man.

"No way." Itachi's astonishment was undoubtedly shared with the second Uchiha youngster, who managed to put out his curly head and now was openly gawking. "You are the Yellow Flash, aren't you?"

It was Minato's turn to be as red as Uzumaki's hair. The man was indecently modest for someone so famous.

"That's my Mini-nii." Shiori answered for him, having nothing against soaking in his glory.

"He's your brother?" Shisui got out of the futon and now was doing everything not to start bouncing around his idol.

"Being precise, he's my cousin's fiancé. But he's more like a daddy to me than an older brother." explained the girl bluntly, not realizing what her words caused in the blond man's heart.

Itachi wasn't surprised by the redhead's relations with one of Konoha's biggest heroes. His senpai was great so it was totally logical for her to have a great father figure, but it still hadn't explained their presence in his home.

"I do not want to seem dissatisfied with their visit, mother, but what are Shiori senpai and Namikaze-sama doing here?"

Mikoto's grin could only be described as worrisome.

"I wanted it to be a surprise. Shiori-chan is going to stay with us for a few days. It is great, right?"

The little boy's mouth formed a perfect o while his eyes focused on the girl as if to verify it. At her rather lame attempt to smile he blushed and quickly turned his head away.

Normally seeing it Minato's brain would be in overdrive but for now everything he could think of was one word. *Daddy* bounced off inside his skull, causing on the surface something what Kushina fondly named as Namikaze's special funky, dopey smile.
For the first time in a while Shiori could wholeheartedly tell she was full. With a small hand, she patted her belly. Mikoto's onigiri truly was splendid, and for some unfathomable reason the woman made too much of it even for an army, so for once the girl didn't have to limit herself.

"Shiori-chan, do you want seconds?" The black-haired woman's voice asked, coming from the kitchen below.

"Rather sixth." Murmured Shisui, suspiciously looking at Uzumaki's belly. It had to be some sort of special power, only Akimichi could eat so much without exploding, and even they were fat, while Shiori was only slightly on the chubby side.

"It is her seventh." Corrected Itachi, happily munching his third portion, while the girl loudly declined his mother's offer.

The children were scattered on the floor in Itachi's room eating lunch, surrounded by mountains of scrolls and books about fuinjutsu, which Shiori brought alongside plenty of other necessary things (like three sets of clothes for each day; personal, super-fluffy pillow and something that looked suspiciously like a teddy Orochimaru).

Uchiha's heir swallowed his last bite. He was happy. He couldn't remember when was the last time he felt like that. Probably never, especially considering that he wasn't in his parent's company but with two young kids. Itachi's experience with other children so far wasn't good. They didn't like him, calling him names and sometimes even threw stones at him. They weren't bad, they just couldn't understand him. He was stronger, smarter, more mature; in other words, he was better and so he was alone.

Two onyx disks focused on his companions.

Shisui was quietly explaining the fuinjutsu basics he had learned in the academy. The curly haired boy was smart and kind, and for the first time Itachi was sure that somebody entirely understood him. Well, at the beginning he wanted to spend time with the older Uchiha to prevent the Uzumaki girl from befriending him, but later he simply liked it. Shisui was older but treated Itachi on a par with himself; he wasn't disregarding nor glorifying the younger boy. There was respect between them, but not the kind that you get from someone who wants something from you without giving anything in return. It was the respect from two persons who truly understood what they bring to the situation, that were worthy and worthwhile. The two of them truly were alike.

Shiori senpai wasn't like him or Shisui. She was different but what was more important she treated him differently. For her he wasn't genius, clan heir nor future s-rank shinobi; the girl didn't want him to be any of them. For her Itachi was a normal, smart, four-year-old boy. No one ever before treated him like that, not in the patronizing way but as a child who should laugh and cry, not caring about more important matters than sweets and toys. Everybody else anticipated something from him, even Shisui. Uphold the Uchiha name in one arm? Push back the tide of history with a single scoring glance? And many other equally impossible deeds. Shiori was his emotional morphine, dulling the unforgiving world.

The redhead was slightly older than him and far more knowledgeable in many things, so she took care of him without expectations; for her it was natural and he liked it. However, Shiori was vulnerable in many ways. Contrary to her mind her body was weak, she couldn't mold chakra or even properly throw kunai even if her life depended on it. So, it was natural for him to take care of her. He was hers and she was his as it should be.

It had to be what people called bonds. That warm feeling of belonging somewhere with someone, and Itachi felt he belonged to this room with these two, his first true friends. He also felt something
poking his forehead. He blinked and followed two chubby fingers with his gaze which were pointed between his brows.

"He reacted. You think he is back?" asked concerned Shisui, whose head materialized just before his nose.

"Tachi-chan's like our washing machine. If it crashes, you need to hit it." Said the girl and for good measure poked him one more time.

"I was just thinking, that is all."

"That's all." Shiori corrected automatically, officially on a crusade against Itachi's too proper speech pattern.

"So, will you do it?" Asked Mikoto standing in the doorway, who had to come when he was immersed in his thoughts. "It would be a real shame if all the food go to waste. You can take at least some for Fugaku to the police station."

The asking was naturally only rhetorical and no more than five minutes later the children were wading through Konoha's muddy streets. Shiori further pulled a cap over her ears, in the face of cold wind not caring about far too big pompom on top of it. Sitting piggyback on Shisui's shoulders she was in better situation than the boys, who already had wet shoes. She eyed them with sympathy, that after a while evolved into annoyance. These kids weren't walking through the puddles; they were walking ON them! It wasn't fair, these two were so tiny, they shouldn't be able to do it, especially when she couldn't.

Despite all her objections to go out in this weather, the reborn woman managed to turn it to her advantage. When Mikoto lamented over wasted food, Shiori was enlightened and asked if she could take the leftovers. True be told when she saw how much "leftovers" were in the fridge, she thanked heavens she had a sealing scroll, otherwise she would need a mule pull. And so, after they went to the police station and gave the food to a Uchiha orderly officer, they headed towards their new destination to with Shiori very carefully opened the door.

"It's clear." She breathed with relief.

"And what could have been here?" Shisui had no idea what could be worse than a nurse, who chased them a moment ago, seeing their mud-covered shoes and wet patches they left behind.

"A pack of filthy, drooling mutts."

"My dogs aren't filthy." From the hospital bed announced the teenager, whose face would show an expression of repulsion caused by the need to endlessly repeat the same thing, if it was visible. Nevertheless, his voice couldn't hide his irritation. "What do you want this time and who are they?"

"I've brought you something and they're beginning of my cohort."

Kakashi blinked.

"There is so much disturbing things within this sentence, I won't even start." He mumbled and encountering hostile eyes of the smaller boy, he refocused his attention on the redhead, who now climbed onto his bed and pulled out a sealing scroll to give it to him. "What is this? A bomb?"

"It's Tachi-han's mum's onigri; it's yummy. And why would I give you a bomb?"

The young jonin nearly said that he deserved it, but in the last second he bit his tongue; lately he did
it more often than he liked. Kakashi seemed to be quite calm and composed, at least until someone noticed that he avoided his own eyes in a mirror.

"You can call it a hunch." He mumbled instead.

"More likely shinobi paranoia." Corrected the girl, whose words were the last sounds before the room became painfully silent.

The reborn woman wanted to kill something. How was it possible that she, the most antisocial person at her university and later in the lab, was now surrounded by even more screwed up people? They're children, shouldn't they babble pointlessly and gain friends in a second? More importantly, why her every idea was ending as an immense disaster? Sure, her plan to create connection between Itachi and Kakashi, the same day she intended to ask Fugaku for permission to fix Obito's eye, was as subtle as punch in the inner ear but she cared about results, not subtlety. She was five-year-old Uzumaki, anything else would be suspicious, well, more suspicious that she already was.

"Are you Hatake Kakashi?" asked the older black-haired boy, while the other looked ready to bolt through the window. "And Namikaze-sama is your sensei? That must be great. I'm Uchiha Shisui and that is my cousin Itachi-san."

Kakashi was on a brink of stroke. Not only that tiny monster brought Obito's two clansmen, who should hate him for principle alone. She also… it was too terrible to even think about it, so he just asked to end his misery.

"You kidnapped Uchiha heir?"

"Eeeh?" Two golden pools blinked. "I've kidnapped no one. Tachi-chan is mine."

To prove her point the girl patted place next to her on Kakashi's bed and Itachi reluctantly but nonetheless sat there and for good measure took her hand.

"See?"

The silver-haired jonin indeed saw and that scared him even more. Especially the part where she was speaking about the two boys omitting the friend part, as if they were her toys.

"Kakashi-kun. I… oh, I didn't know you have visitors." Rin that just waltzed to the hospital room seemed to shine. "Hello, Shiori-chan and?"

"Uchiha Shisui and Itachi, we're friends of Shiori-san, kunoichi-san." The answer flew out of the boy's mouth drawn to single sincere smile.

After their introduction Rin and Shisui chattered for few minutes that the reborn woman spent on plotting the best ways to corner Fugaku. However fruitless, it was the only useful thing she could do now; which was interrupted by Itachi towing her to the door.

"What? What are we doing? Where are we going?"

"We are going to visit Obito-san's grandmother." Declared Shisui, claiming her other hand. "Rin senpei was on her way there, and she said Nobuko-obaa-san would be delighted to see you. She isn't feeling well. You should visit her." The last sentence was muttered with conviction of rightfulness and knowledge that it was the last thing Shiori wanted to do. Because seriously, Shiori wasn't anyone too important in Obito's life but Rin was the reason he died. Calling the situation awkward would be putting it mildly. "Don't worry, Shiori-san, we'll be with you all the time."
"But I don't want to go." Protested the girl, trying to drive her feet in the ground. "And Rin shouldn't. I don't know if you're aware but it's her fault Nobuko-san grandson is dead."

"But what if that lady just does not want to be alone?" Asked Itachi, tilting his head and blinking that adorable black eyes.

These two kids were devious.

"She don't want to" Shiori corrected mindlessly his flawless grammar, letting them drag her whenever they liked. This was going to be the most uncomfortable visit she ever witnessed.

Ω

Nobuko-san was in far worse state that Shiori imagined. Bedridden, sickly pale with cracking voice; she joked that only her eyes were still young as befitted a true Uchiha. The reborn woman didn't have it in herself to deny it. Obito's grandmother was weeks older than in the day Shiori meet her, but her grandson death had taken years from her lifespan; changing vibrant, quirky grandma in tired of life old woman.

She was happy seeing them, even Rin who apparently visited many times before. Shiori didn't know if the medical kunoichi had been doing it to silence her conscience or if she sincerely wanted to take care of Obito's last direct family. Maybe both?

The petite Uzumaki once more glanced at a goggle Nobuko-san gave her. It was an old pair with scraped, faded paint and little cracked on the left eyepiece. Shiori ran a finger along the inside of the strap, where few black letters announced the name of their owner to the world. Could she one day give them back to Obito and genuinely smile knowing what she did?

"That's my house." Shisui took her off from his shoulders and gently put on the ground.

Its look hadn't improved Shiori's already somber mood. It wasn't because it was a shack, no matter how small and clearly unkempt it was, with patched roof and bunch of young, LOUD children running around. The main sore point was a man standing before it with the kids.

"What the hell? What is he doing here?"

"Are you talking about Danzo-sama?"

Instead of the confirmation the girl shoved them into the nearby bushes.

"You two know him?"

To her relief Itachi denied but Shisui only nodded.

"Danzo-sama was my mum sensei and her father teammate. After mum and her twin brother died, Danzo-sama has been helping Tamiko oba-san take care of me and her kids."

"This guy is nothing but bad news." Muttered Shiori trying to change the old bat it a torch with her gaze. Sadly, it wasn't happening.

"Is he an enemy?" Itachi knew it was unwise to dismiss Shiori senpai's warnings.

"He's one of the Village Elders." Deadpanned Shisui.

"That doesn't mean he can't be bad!"
"Who can't be bad?" Asked male voice over their heads.

The children jumped and the girl could scream only because she bit her tongue a second before.

"Danzo-sama..." Started curly haired boy.

"Idea." Finished Shiori, gaining back her voice, however squeaky it sounded. "Shisui wanted to ask if he can spend one more night with Tachi-chan and me. I told him it was bad idea. I just wanted to go. I was afraid his aunty won't let him. And hello to you to, Danzo-sama. Didn't your mummy taught you, that it's wrong to sneak like that?"

The five-year-old smiled but it wasn't so bright due to her recent nerve breakdown and growing teeth. Her grimace confronted face full of kindness and good humor in which the reborn woman could believe if she didn't know better.

"Shisui-kun was right, Shiori-chan. You need to ask, otherwise Tamiko-san would be worried. And it's true, my mother though me that but later my jonin sensei taught me it's what shinobi do."

"Well, I don't wanna be ninja so for me it seems silly." The little redhead had a sadistic pleasure seeing cracks on Danzo's perfect mask.

"You don't want to serve the Village? It's the biggest honor..."

"Nuh uh, I wanna be a seal-master and Mini-nii and Kushina-nee-chan are alright with it. I will do all sorts of powerful tags to help Tachi-chan, Shisui and Orochimaru-sama. I'll be better even than my granny."

The more direct "piss of from them or I'll blow up your brain" and she would have had to tattoo it on his forehead. It wasn't wise, but the man worked on her as a red rag to a bull. Nothing decreased her intellectual capability like fear and anger put together.

Shisui had to read her like a book, and the next chapter titled "antagonizing the creep" wasn't to his liking so he took over.

"Danzo-sama, do you think I can go with them?"

"I believe so..."

"Thanks, Danzo-sama." And they were gone, not stopping until they reached Itachi's room (after two streets the older boy had to carry her because muscles in Shiori's legs went on strike).

"Uzumaki, are you mad?" Hissed Shisui, throwing her onto the floor.

"Probably more than you can imagine." The reborn woman droned and frustrated bit her lip. She had an idea but at the same time, prayed to a first god ready to hear her, that she was wrong. Hell, she just had to know. "Shisui, did Danzo-sama in any way sent you to Itachi?"

The eight-year-old went silent.

"He... I believe he told my aunt that I should befriend Itachi-san if I got a chance. I doubt she would agree to let me here if not for that. She's very proud woman; not wanting help from anyone."

"He's a grownup and old war mongrel. I doubt someone like him does anything without ulterior reasons." Shiori knew she was right. She was using them right now.

"So he's an enemy." Concluded Itachi from the beginning knowing his senpai was correct.
"Let's call him person of interest. For now," Agreed Shisui, ruffling younger boy's black mop.  

"Shisui-san, stop it."

"I don't think so, Tachi-chan."

In cascades of laughter the reborn woman like a mantra repeated that she was doing all this only for her own good. No matter how adorable those two miniature Uchihas were, she wasn't developing any sentiments toward them. Complete, zero, null, nada, nothing at all.

Right?

OMAKE

**Few days after Shiori and Itachi went back to Konoha.**

The reborn woman liked fluffy things. Many times, buying toys for kids in her family, she wished to be younger. So, plushy things were alright but if they were also pink, glittering and/or with lace it was a little too much. Now, standing in front of rows of shelves containing similar trinkets, she dragged her suffering gaze to the serpent man standing next to her.

"With all due respect, Orochimaru-sama, but what are we doing here?"

"As I've told once already, you can choose one thing from here that I'll provide. I think back there are toys more to your liking." He said, nonchalantly pointing to the rear of the store.

Shiori following his advice ventured into toy store's unknown depths. After fifteen minutes of digging through plushy mountains from which one snake caught her fancy, the girl noticed the sannin's sadistic smile blossoming, while viewing two of his summons tearing into pieces something disturbingly resembling a teddy Jiraiya. There was a whole pile of these monstrosities… just next to a smaller pile of something with black hair.

Orochimaru cringed hearing Shiori's squeal. She jumped into his arms at the same time shoving something soft into his face.

"I wanna this one! I gonna luv him to death. Pleas, pretty pleas." She begged with childish voice.

Serpent eyes focused on… of course it had to be it. That pintsize devil just had to find chibi him. Inspecting how the girl squeezed and cuddled the toy the man involuntarily winced. Thank gods he wasn't in its place.

"On one condition, child. You shall not speak like that ever again."

"Naturally, Orochimaru-sama. I promise. It's just… you're so cute!"

"Cute?"

"Of course. Just look at your big eyes, and that quirk on your lips, and that tiny hands."

Orochimaru groaned. It was official, like the rest of his companions the child was mental.

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My wonderful readers, thanks for reading the next piece of my story. I hope you liked it and that you won't need to wait so long for following chapters (yes, I know it's up to me but, hell, life hapens. You know what I mean ^^ )
And in the end but not the least: Hail to my lovely beta, mrsmiawallace88, who I adore dearly.
One autumn night

It wasn't important what the reborn woman thought before and how probable it was or wasn't - nothing changed the fact that Uchiha Fugaku wasn't a jerk, or at least it seemed so. He was a bit emotionally crippled and a variety of his facial expressions for sure could use some work; but the moment the man rolled his hopelessly tired body into Itachi's room, just to wish him good night and manly clasp the boy's shoulder (Uchiha men don't do affectionate gestures like kissing or cuddling), Shiori knew he truly loved his son. She saw it in his eyes, it was the same kind of warm gaze with which Minato looked at her a few short seconds just before nestling her to sleep.

The red-haired girl hugged her favorite toy Sannin, now labeled lovingly as Orochi-chi and snuggled into a pillow purring. To her relief, the two Uchiha boys soundly went to sleep; without additional chattering and pillow-fights typical for all sleepovers in her previous life. After the day she just had, the young Uzumaki couldn't be more happy because of it. She eyed the dark-haired children lying on the other side of the room and couldn't understand the purpose for which served such a distance, because if those two of the most adorable and innocent boys in existence wanted to do something improper the few feet of additional space between them wouldn't do any difference. Truth be told, with her lazy person it was a totally different matter. The reborn woman was wholeheartedly against getting up from bed for whatever reason, even if she was pulled out of it by pair of particularly burly oxen.

Nonetheless, no matter how much her sluggishness and mental wellbeing demanded sleep, her bladder knew better, waking her a few hours later and forcing her to take a night stroll to a loo. Apparently, the big supper they had wasn't only her personal undoing because Shisui's futon also was empty. If the girl wasn't so sleepy she would be fuming that not only she had to go to the completely different part of the house to use a bathroom, because more than one would be superfluous luxury even for a clan head; she apparently also had to get in a line! But since the reincarnated soul couldn't function properly right after waking up without a cup of coffee, regardless of the incarnation, the world was safe and mostly asleep.

The redhead put Orochi-chi in a collar of her pajama, so no one would even think that she had some evil intentions and the girl moved ahead. There was no sound beside the tapping of her feet on the hard floor. The night was starless and the moon was covered by murky clouds that blended in with the rest of the sky. The relentless downpour of the day had since tapered off into a softly falling mist which managed to paint the area in a strangely bizarre light when the street lamps caught on the tiny droplets of water granting each lantern a delicate golden aura.

It was quite probable that in other circumstances Shiori would stop and spent a while contemplating this scene heralding the upcoming change in the weather, but when a child's bladder was clutching as if thrown into an extruder, there was no time for any nonsense. The only thing that managed to halt her determined march was a bunch of voices - agitated male voices, that were coming from behind a closed door.

"Tekka-san, it really isn't…"

"What? They're doing it with premeditation and you know it! The Village is sending Uchiha to the most dangerous areas. We have more causalities than any other clan."

"Hokage-sama believes in our power, that is why he entrusts us the most delicate tasks. Uchiha was one of the main foundations of Konoha right from the start."

"Fugaku-sama, with all respect I've to agree with Tekka and it isn't only the two of us who think like
that. There're others, some're even talking about the incident when you've become the head. They're
calling you usurper who committed a coup and now is hiding behind Konoha's elders. They're…"

Shiori stopped listening, forcefully blocking her ears with her hands. She was in enough shit as it
was, she wasn't in need for any more nor did she sought it. The girl wanted to get back on track and
soundlessly slipped through this hellish corridor but as if sent by Satan himself, near a half-open shoji
panel leading to a garden, was sitting a young cat - the black and white ball of fur was ready to
pounce on a flock of moths surrounding the lantern which illuminated the entrance. The girl held her
breath and shut her eyes. She couldn't watch how her doom unfolded!

After a second survived in blissful ignorance, one poll of gold glanced at surrounding her world,
encountering two black eyes from which a disbelief peered out, slightly dulled by the sizeable dose
of resignation. The meaningful gaze belonged to Uchiha Handa, Itachi's uncle she encountered
before; whereupon the man was left with a broken leg, that even now was still in a cast.

The unlucky male sighed and pushed the girl to a corner with his crutches.
"It was only a cat but we should save this conversation for another time. There are children in the
house. It would be unfortunate if they heard us."

Three pompous men walked out of the room. Shiori couldn't see them fully, hidden behind Handa's
legs but what was more important they couldn't see her. The reborn woman was frightened out of her
wits. Her legs trembled, her chubby hands were sweaty like a long-tailed cat in an apartment full of
rocking chairs; and what was the worse – she went totally numb and dumb.

The girl had no idea how she entered the dreadful room and was now standing in front of Fugaku.
"Uzumaki-san," Itachi's father didn't seem too surprised by her presence anchoring his attention on
her trembling figure. "For how long have you been standing there and what have you heard?"
"If I tell you I heard nothing, you won't believe me, right?" His gaze told here everything. "I thought
so."
"Then?"
"I heard nothing significant, really. Just about some malcontents that don't like how the things are -
but that's normal. Everywhere has always been and always will be one unhappy bunch or the other.
No to mention they're a horde of idiots. Your clan is bigger than any other in Konoha, it's obvious
you're going to have more causalities – at least directly; looking at it as a percentage Uchiha probably
won't differ from the norm."

The girl's uncontrolled word cap ended with the lack of air in her lungs. The moment of silence in
which she needed to catch a breath seized Fugaku's younger brother.
"And about the presumptuous coup?"

Shiori answered before the oh so needed air managed to reach her brain.
"As far as I know Madara was the last legitimate Uchiha's head. After he eloped a new chain of
command needed to be developed and in a shinobi clan it must involve some fighting. That's all for
me; no takeover, just a simple bloody evolution of governing system." Seeing their faces, she
hurriedly added: "Of course that's my humble opinion but what may I know? I've the political
awareness of a lemming."

The horrified child watched with dread as the rock, commonly known as Uchiha's clan head, moved
to cover his face with his hands - no longer able to even look at her, and that could mean only one thing. She was going to be brainwashed! One look into those cursed crimson eyes and her memories would be gone. They couldn't do it, they just couldn't! Her precious brain wasn't something anyone should mess-up with. Fugaku was going to... quiver?

It was odd but it was precisely what was happening. Fugaku was trying to stop the upcoming mirth so much his whole body was shaking. The redhead glanced at the other man, who tried in vain not to crack a smile.

"What's so funny?" asked the girl, not seeing anything comical in her own terror. She clutched her Orochi-cchi so hard as if she could squeeze the true Sannin out of this toy.

"I was just thinking about my son's infatuation in your person."

"Infatuation? He isn't infatuated in me! He's just, he's..."

"Obsessed?" Handa suggested.

"Interested. He's interested. And I'd like to mention it's all his doing. I had nothing to do with it, I swear!"

Fugaku's black eyes, so typical for the Uchiha, studied her with piercing scrutiny.

"You're a very interesting person, Uzumaki-san, therefore Itachi's interest. Also, he is my son and so he has a good taste."

"Thank you?" Shiori was dumbfounded. The best solution seemed to be flowing with the tide, regardless to where it would take her. It couldn't be worse than looming over her brainwash. In the end, they couldn't just kill her, right? At least the probability of it was significantly lower than the present danger of spontaneous combustion from shame, when her poor bladder wouldn't last in the end and it'd be going to let up.

She really, really had to go to a bathroom – and so she needed to deal with everything at once.

"By the way, Fugaku-sama, you meant it when you told me that Uchiha owe me?"

The man looked at her as if she was a radio, not a person who is there to be interacted with. At first glance his pleasant demeanor hadn't changed but in his posture was rigidness absent a few seconds ago.

"You saved my son and brother. We are indeed indebted to you, Uzumaki-san."

With his every word the child was nervously stepping from one foot to the other as if dreading that he might confirm it. When he did she bit her lips.

"So, if I'd ask for the possibility of Hatake-san keeping Obito's properly functioning eye, you have to agree?"

"What?" The younger man wasn't sure he heard her right. "You are asking for what?"

"For granting Obito's request. He died as a hero and his last wish was for Hatake-san to use his sharingan's potential."

"It's a matter between the clan and the Village." Stated a clearly agitated Handa.

"Exactly, and relations between those two are now just great. Fulfilling my request not only would
let you banish a potentially risky obligation to a child, but also have an excuse to do as Obi-nii wanted. No one would dare to imply that life of the Uchiha heir is less important than a single sharingan, especially one that has been freely given away. Fugaku-sama, sleep on this thought and give me your answer, preferably before Mini-nii will come for me. Now, excuse me but I've to go, I really need to pee. Good night."

And she was gone, leaving two flabbergasted men behind. Their usual superiority fled faster than a gambler from a bookie, with no intention of returning all too soon. Handa hesitantly looked away from the door behind which the girl just disappeared, and eyed his older brother.

"Minato mentioned that Kushina's little cousin is a slightly peculiar kid. I really doubt he knows exactly how peculiar she is."

"You know what is the most peculiar?" asked Fugaku. "That she has a point."

Meanwhile Shiori was threatened by an impeding flood of truly biblical magnitude. She was running as fast as she could without any excessive movements of her thighs; visualizing every dry thing she could think of: deserts, hot summer weeks, dry-cleaning. Nothing even slightly wet, especially if it was related to any kind of gulping, slurping or other watery inclined noises.

As often was the case (or more likely always), her thoughts about not thinking about such things brought exactly the opposite effect. Luckily only one corridor was left, then half of it, just a few feet.

Shiori pounced at her Holy Grail, in the flight untying her bottoms and then she bathed in surrounding her catharsis. The girl closed her eyes in delight and when she opened them again her golden pools at first were not able to register what they were seeing.

Itachi's little stool, which the boy used to reach higher, stood before the sink supporting Shisui's feet. The curly-haired lad was gawking at her or rather her reflection in the mirror in front of which he froze with a hand outstretched as if to gouge out his eye. His red eye.

Both children stilled, assessing each other with the silent accompaniment of falling liquid. Shisui was first to rejoin the semi-coherent world.

"I… you… I'm going outside." And he was gone faster than she could close her mouth with a click, not even thinking about formulating an answer.

The reborn woman blinked. Was that sharingan or just her imagination? Shisui was only eight but… oh, fuck it. She hoped he would ignore it and just go to sleep as any other embarrassed eight-year-old boy would do, after seeing a pissing girl. She already dealt with enough Uchiha drama for one night. She wanted to be back in Morpheus's kingdom, nothing more.

Walking out from the bathroom Shiori carefully opened the door. It was clear. At least she thought so until she looked down. Shisui was crouching, supporting a wall and judging by his face also a weight of the world. The boy's hands hung limply over his knees, his eyes were hollow, blankly staring before him. The only thing his appearance lacked were two wet paths of tears.

"Can we, you know, talk?"

A very firm NO sprung to her lips but she couldn't utter it. Instead she just sighed.

"Do I really look like someone who wants to hear your life story?"

"No," he admitted. "And that's why I want to tell it to you."
The redhead girl was simply dumbfounded or her brain's capability exceptionally dropped alongside the pressure in her bladder.

"Shisui-san, I really doubt that I understand you correctly. You're trying to tell me, you want to unburden your conscience by telling me your dirty secrets since I don't want to hear them? That I've been doing everything totally wrong? Should I be some overemotional, sweet and caring moron, then I'd be left in peace?"

"You don't care so you won't judge." The statement came out rushed, wrapped in a tone that was hardly audible. It was a unique hollow sound, empty and practiced. Like an echo, a voice that could never quite claim itself to be something of its own.

The reborn woman headed to a small crack in the panels leading to a porch outside without another word. The downpour was slowly but unmistakable ending. Now, rain was falling like it simply couldn't think of anything better to do. There was a laziness in it, as if it could barely be bothered to obey the will of gravity.

The girl sat on the veranda and held her bare foot out so the droplets splattered on it. They were large and soft, not like the crazy heavy shower earlier. She bent her legs under her chin and watched the remnants of the drops run downwards between her toes like tiny rivers. Shisui crouched down next to the redhead, also looking at her feet as if they were a treasure map hiding way to an unimaginable wealth.

The steady drumming on the roof was eventually interrupted by the boy's tale, spoken with detached coldness.

"Due to the lack of capable shinobi in the Village, it was decided that the best of students from the academy are going to deliver messages between checkpoints inside our territory. Iwao and I were sent to a camp near the north border. We reached it and left the scrolls without any problem. There wasn't any feedback message so we weren't as alert as we should on the way back. It was a surprise attack. It was patrol from the Rock. I don't even know how many of them were there. The situation was bad but out of blue it changed for worse. The combat attracted another shinobi, they were from the Mist.

We tried to slip away and regroup using the commotion. Those two fractions were killing each other rather quickly and finally there was almost no one left. And then at the end we were again attacked directly. A rock kunoichi buried Iwao and an injured mist-nin under a stone slope and attacked me. I reacted without thinking, killing her. After that everything went silent. I was the last one standing. At least until I heard Iwao calling for help. He was trapped underground with the enemy and apparently, none of them could use earth ninjutsu.

After a while he stopped shouting and was just banging his fists against the wall, and I stood there among the corpses. I wanted to help him but more than that I wanted him to die, so that the noise would stop, but ... but once it subsided, it still echoed in my ears, because I could, I could, I could try to help him but I was too afraid it wasn't him but the other ninja. I was just standing there. I... I killed him. I killed my friend, my best friend."

At the end his voice cracked and what his appearance lacked a moment ago, appeared with a surplus flowing down like a cascade on the boy's cheeks. The curly-haired kid hurried to brush the tears from his face. He knew it would lead to sympathy, and sympathy would lead to more tears.

He glanced at the little Uzumaki sitting next to him but she wasn't looking at him with sympathy, pity nor concern. It was bewilderment and then shock. The moment the expression on the girl's face changed she pounced at him. Shisui, more thanks to reflex than clear thinking, ducted and ended crouched on his tiny assailant, who stared to hit his face with the toy.
"What are you doing, Shiori-san?"

"What I'm doing?" She angrily whispered through clenched teeth. "What are you doing flashing that thing around? You don't know who is looking, you dumbass."

Shisui flinched away and deactivated his crimson eyes.

"So you know what it is."

"Apparently." Huffed the girl. At the beginning of his tale she saw his eyes go red; it was astonishing seeing a fully developed sharingan on someone so young but Shisui supposed to be a prodigy, so she shouldn't be too surprised. However, when his three tomoes started to spin around, changing shape, she nearly had a heart attack seeing a true mangekyou. "Seriously, you shouldn't show them to anyone. If someone knew…"

"But I don't want them! Those eyes are cursed. I shouldn't have them."

The reborn woman regarded him as one would a child in the middle of a tantrum.

"You know it wasn't your fault, right?"

"Of course, it was. This… only someone who kills his best friend can unlock that." He mumbled, once more hearing this damn banging, coming from the bottom of his memory.

"You truly are a dumbass." It was what? Two, three in the morning? She really wasn't in the mood to such conversation but it seemed she didn't have a choice. "You think that some god is sitting up there, monitoring every Uchiha deed and when necessary giving you… these? It's connected with a specific brain function. I suppose an extreme self-loathing is the factor causing some sort of unique chakra that wakes it. That's why those eyes are so rare. Otherwise your every power-hungry clansmen would have them."

"But…"

"It wasn't your fault. You just think it was, that's more than enough."

That was everything she intended to tell him. The counseling session for the distraught Uchiha was over. The world might end nonetheless she was going back to bed. The girl stood up but before she managed to make a step, she was grabbed by a strong hand.

"Who are you?" asked Shisui. His dark eyes searching her golden pools. "No five-year-old can be like that."

"I'm an alien from another dimension, that tries to change your future because it sucks." The reborn woman told him the truth, at least to some extent, and as she suspected, he believed none of it.

"You're odd."

"And in addition sleepy, so can we go back?"

The boy agreed and the two children strolled back to Itachi's room, where Shiori slumped into her futon, ready to forget about the damn night. However, it was rather hard when someone loomed over her like an executioner over some unfortunate soul.

There was almost no light but Shisui's outline looked embarrassed enough.

"Can I… you know?"
Shiori only sighed lifting the covers.

"Just get in."

They had to be really tired because the next moment both kids were sleeping. Contrary to the other small shape that dug out of the bed sheets and silently snuck to the girl's cot. The figure had to emanate a significant portion of confusion and displeasure to actually wake up the little Uzumaki.

Itachi was making quite an impression of Edward Cullen, watching her sleep, and no matter how she hated that (Lord have mercy) book, she couldn't just ignore his hurt vibe. The rose-haired girl decided that she preferred to be squeezed between two little boys rather than be starred at the rest of the night. She made him some room and when he delightedly scrambled under the covers, still careful not touching her, Shiori snuggled him to her side. She only hoped none of them would drool on her.

OMAKE

(An hour after Shiori's and Orochimaru's visit in a toy store- Namikaze's kitchen)

"Give it back.!

"No way!

"Kushina-nee-chan, please."

"Good try kid but NO."

"This isn't fair."

"Someone once told me that life isn't fair. Oh, wait. It was you."

Shiori's brows knitted in a frown. Her insane cousin was dangling her new toy over the girl's head and making fun not only of her but also of the Snake Sannin (both the stuffed and the real one). It was going for over twenty minutes and the little Uzumaki had already tried everything: polite asking, no so polite asking, crying and even flattery; nothing worked. That left only one option.

"Give it back or I'll tell Mini-nii I heard you two making really funny noises last night and that something was banging against a wall for a reeeeeally long time. I'm going to add that if you had some kind of fun and left me out of it, I'm very sad and disappointed. Of course it'll include teary eyes and quivering lips." Her singsong voice turned smug. "He'll be so mortified you won't get laid at least a month."

Kushina reddened, paled and at the and her jaw dropped.

"You wouldn't dare, dattebane."

"Try me."

"Try you what?" The exact moment the blond man walked into the kitchen, sunny smile, golden locks and all.

"Nothing!" Cried the taller redhead and threw the toy back to Shiori as if it was a burning coal.

The very pleased child presented her newest property.
"Mini-nii, look what I've got from Orochimaru-sama. Isn't it cute?"

"Rather disturbing." Mumbled Kushina but closed her mouth with a click when the little girl mouthed something very similar to *celibacy*.

"It's interesting." The man replied diplomatically, as befitted the next Hokage. "How are you going to name it?"

"Name it? It's Orochimaru-sama."

"Yes, but when you'll be talking about Orochimaru, we won't know which one you mean."

Shiori pouted. Not only Minato was way too adorable for his own good and her mental wellbeing but he was right.

"How am I going to name my Orochimaru-sama, hmm…?"

"What do you say about Orochi-cchi?"

Kushina face-palmed. The love of her life had many admirable qualities and skills but naming things wasn't one of them. Shiori was going to…

"I love it!"

The kunoichi drilled the bouncing kid with dubious look but both adults said nothing until the girl happily left the room. Then the woman comfortingly patted Minato on the shoulder.

"Orochimaru is going to be mad. Really mad."

"He won't hurt Shiori's feelings. He adores her; no matter how insane it sounds."

"You're right. Her he won't hurt."

The second the man understood he went completely blank.

"I'm so dead."

"Yeap."

---

Happy New Year my beloved readers! I hope you all had brilliant time last night. Thanks for sticking with me all this year. I wish you many great stories and chapters ahead of you (I'm kind of wishing it for myself and my stories, aren't I?).

Also I was a little bored during Christmas and made an illustration for this fic. So if any of you want to see how Shiori, Minato and Orochi-cchi looks like in my head you're welcome to check it. Here's the link (just delete spaces): seriel-drake. Deviantart /art/ Shiori-and-Minato-654533679

Oh, I also made a short animation for Christmas. It's more Star Wars than Naruto orientated but if you want you can check it too.

www.youtube watch? v=dSJnIqNWscI&ab_channel=SerielDrake

And as always thank you, mrsmiawallace88. You, my lovely beta, are the best ^^
Forgiveness and stuff

Orochimaru wasn't happy per se. Most bystanders seeing the Sannin marching through Konoha wouldn't see any difference between his present and usual gait. Seasoned shinobi, who knew him rather well, might risk and tell from his slightly more relaxed frame, that the serpent man just succeeded in some of his more disturbing projects, and was now silently boasting.

However, Orochimaru wasn't in any of this moods. If he had to describe his current frame of mind, what word would he use? The Sannin brushed a lock of silky, ink hair away from his eyes. Just like he said he wasn't happy. He also wasn't gleeful nor elated. He was simply pleased. He not only managed to find Danzo's old spy rather quickly and persuade her to return to active duty. He also came across a noteworthy boy, whom he could interest the Root's master.

Orochimaru's mouth turned grim. The entire time that old bat very clearly never mentioned Shiori. He was dangling her untouched subject over the Snake Sannin's head, daring him to mutter a word. To say that the tension was unpleasant would be as accurate as naming Jiraiya someone healthy interested in the opposite sex. Luckily recruiting that boy, Kabuto if Orochimaru remembered correctly, could divert the insinuated attention from his child.

Shiori in the Root. Orochimaru had headache just thinking about it.

"I'm not picky. I can eat everything, Mikoto-sama, really. Of course, as long as it isn't any kind of soup or anything too liquid."

Why every time the man saw that miniature devil she had to be eating, demanding to be fed, or at least talk about food? Now, she was standing with her newest pet and his mother at a vegetable stand on the market; poking some tomatoes.

"So, you won't eat a relatively sizeable number of available meals." Commented the Sannin. "It's quite picky if you ask me."

"Hello, Orochimaru-sama." The Uchiha matron lightly bowed her head; a gesture that her son quickly repeated while the little Uzumaki ostentatiously lifted her nose and turned away fuming.

"Shiori-chan," scolded the woman. "Greet Orochimaru-sama. I am so sorry. I do not know what happened to her. She usually is very well-behaved."

Hearing this the Sannin barely restrained a snort. Shiori was many things but being polite for sure wasn't one of them. Nonetheless, the girl's behaviour was odd. She treated many people like nothing more than mere bugs (mainly his co-workers in research department, who she regarded as complete fools – very deservedly so), but she never was like that to him.

"Shiori-chan, be a nice girl and say hello." Mikoto once more attempted to coax the greeting out of the child.

The rose-haired girl's glance flickered for a moment to the man, but seeing he noticed her gaze she quickly shot her eyes back to everything else but him. To more clearly present her displeasure for the world, she crossed her arms with a huff.

"I don't see why I should be nice to someone who was so naughty."

Orochimaru lifted one brow. He might seem to be merely amused but in reality, the naughty comment made the wheels in his brain roll in full speed. What could the child possibly mean? Had
she deducted some of his unauthorized experiments, abductions or his other Root's works? Apparently, he wasn't the only one interested in the answer because many of shinobi in the hearing vicinity very carefully weren't paying attention to them.

He knew he shouldn't get too close to anybody – especially to a mere child.

"I am sure you are mistaken. Orochimaru-sama is a great shinobi. One of the greatest Konoha ever had. He couldn't behave so bad." Mikoto said as clearly as thunder on a summer day. She was in a tight spot here. She didn't want to make the girl cry nor insult one of the legendary Sannins. Furthermore, she noticed the unwanted interest, they had gathered. Such attention in ninja world hardly ever ended pretty. Why did Uzumakis always have to bring enormous trouble, even if they were nothing more than pocket-sized, cute brats?

"He could and he was!" insisted the girl, blushing both with anger and shame for her next words, that were muttered much quieter. "He didn't say bye-bye, when he was going on a mission. I didn't know he was gone until Mini-nii and I went to find him. I was worried."

"Excuse me?" the serpent man couldn't believe his own ears. Her each following word was muttered even softer than the previous one, so he had to have misheard her. It couldn't be anything else.

This time Shiori boldly met his eyes. A fierce storm swirling in her golden pools unmistakably showed that the girl was really upset.

"I was worried, ok? I know I've no right to be but I was. You were gone and I couldn't hug and kiss you for good luck, so you would come back in one piece."

"And you truly believe this stupid superstition works?"

It was a very wrong thing to say.

"I was sickly worried". Shiori's tone hadn't belong anymore to a querulous child but to someone who was hurt. "When you're worried for someone you care for, you aren't rational. You are super-duper ninja, Orochimaru-sama, but you aren't immortal. A big war is going on there and many things can go wrong and I have very vivid imagination, like very, very vivid. You might have ended fighting kage or tiled-beast or, or army of demonic, mutated bug-squirrels. And yes, I know my hug wouldn't make you invincible or anything but maybe, just maybe, you would have tried a little harder to get back home, knowing that someone who loves you, is waiting here for you. That's all."

The reborn woman kicked invisible dirt on the ground. This was it. Her utter humiliation. Even with all this manga reincarnation shit, she normally wasn't so out of character from her old self to change into some overemotional, gibbering idiot in the middle of a crowded market. However here she was. One insensitive comment from this ingenious snake fucker and bum - her brain and the last ounce of self-respect were gone. Instead she was going crimson as a beetroot, radiating heat like Mount Doom. Put the one ring on her forehead and it would instantly melt. She wanted the earth to open and swallow her whole. But there was no saving from the shame. It was absolute torture. Absolute humiliation. Absolute…

"Orochimaru-sama, where are you going?" Asked a tiny voice Shiori recognized as her own. Seeing the man leaving without any announcement made her panic. The only person with whom she could openly discuss science, politics and other things requiring more complex words than three-syllabic; was now too ashamed to be even seen with her. She was ruined!

Nonetheless, the snake summoner stopped his gait and shot her one long, hollow glance.
"I've thought asking if you are hungry was pointless. So, are you going or what?"

The girl's mouth fell wide open but Mikoto helped her close it.

"I suppose it is going to be the best I'm sorry, you are going to get." Whispered the woman, nudging Shiori, so the girl would once again start breathing.

Reaching the same conclusions, the five-year-old rushed as fast as she could, only to stop in front of the dark-haired man and lift up her arms in universal sign of carry me, pretty please. A request which Orochimaru unquestioningly fulfilled.

The moment the girl was seated in his arms, she started to vigorously babble about everything she ate and read about during his absence. Stopping only when she noticed the Uchihas were almost out of her sight, exactly in the same place she left them.

"Mikoto-sama, Tachi-chan, what are you doing?! Come on!" Shiori yelled and questioningly looked at the Sannin. "They can go with us, can't they?"

The man didn't even wince only thanks to years of practice in Jiraiya's company. With every passing second, he had more respect for Minato. The man had to be a true saint to endure the two Uzumakis and the Toad Sage this whole time. Or maybe the blond was just some sort of sadomasochistic maniac? However maybe Orochimaru himself was such maniac? Why else would he voluntarily expose himself to those manipulative, golden pools of devotion?

"I wouldn't dare to separate you and your Tachi-chan. Besides with your appetite I'm sure I won't notice any difference in the bill."

And so, the most uncommon group ended in a nearby dango stand, while the sweets formed a convenient bridge over that awkward abyss.

Orochimaru swallowed a dumpling. The situation was odd. He was eating sweets with this child, heir of one of the Konoha Great Clans and mentioned heir's mother. It could imply many political consequences and conclusions if not for the casual atmosphere surrounding them. The man smirked. Danzo was going to flip, and nothing could highlight the Sannin's day more than this ancient ulcer's nasty humour and associated with it gastric indisposition.

A next dumpling was swallowed. Thinking about weird situations, earlier, when Shiori overwhelmed him with her anxiety speech, it was far more offbeat than anything else. The serpent man wasn’t surprised by the girl's reaction; Shiori was rather prone to those funny panic attacks of hers. The most peculiar was its reason. She cared for him. No one cared for him in a long time; at least in that innocent, childish way. And any trace of innocence in this diabolic kid was strange and rare but no less precious.

He glanced at her. The Uzumaki had to indeed had some bottomless pit of a stomach, to devour food like that. How on earth she hadn't vomited yet, was completely beyond him. He also couldn't understand why she insisted on bringing the chibi-him everywhere with her. The toy was far too big to fit in her bag, so it was fastened to the bag's strap by a purple ribbon; and just like that was dangling there for everyone to see.

Quite visible was also a boy with a big pack, who just parked himself between the two Uchihas.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to wait until the laundry was done. But here it is - three sets of freshly clean sheets."

"Thank you, Shisui-kun. You're very helpful." Mikoto praised him. "I hope you had no problem
"Not really. It was a fair guess." He answered glancing at the girl that was still devouring food, then he did a double-take and whispered over Itachi's head. "Ne, Shiori-san, that man looks just like your Orochi-cchi."

Orochimaru experienced a lot of different things in his life. Not many of them could break him. He was known for his cold and imperturbable demeanour. But even such mannerism sometimes had to recognize superiority of circumstances and succumb under their pressure. And because this was one of those rare times the black-haired man choked on the dumpling.

Looking at it objectively the Sannin still was in a better position than an Anbu, who had just fallen from a nearby tree.

"That's Orochimaru-sama." The girl introduced the choking man.

After a whole two seconds an awe on Shisui's face was replaced by astonishment.

"Is there any living legendary leaf-nin you don't know?"

"Probably."

"Orochi-cchin? You named that thing Orochi-cchin?" the evidently aggravated Sannin cut in, managing to catch a breath.

"Yeah, it's a nice name. It's cute."

The man rubbed his temples.

"Why have you even named that thing?"

"I had to. Otherwise it wouldn't be clear if I'm talking about you or him."

"It wouldn't be known whether you're talking about me or some cotton stuffed doll?" He made sure.

Shiori looked at her mentor with pity and resignation.

"We're talking about Kushina-san here, duh."

It was too much. Shiori's *duh* was the last straw. Mikoto started to shake. It was too hilarious. In the last moment, the woman clamped a hand over her mouth. She couldn't show one of the most notable shinobi in the Village that she was laughing at him; and so she excused herself, asked the Sannin to escort the girl at the fish market in one hour, took the two boys and in the blink of an eye disappeared in the crowd.

Orochimaru's genius often encountered serious difficulties when it came to dealing with other people. He could masterfully manipulate them but staying with someone in the same room without thinking about the person's decapitation was downright impossible. Now he was thinking about decapitation of the whole street.

"How can you stand all those people?"

"The secret lies in the self-suggestion" Mumbled the redhead, munching three dango too much in her mouth. "You just have to believe that their stupidity amuses you. Ok, I'm done. We can go."

But before she climbed onto his tall frame Shiori wasn't bothered to abandon two untouched dango
sticks, so she put them in her bag for later.

With a much lighter wallet and arms full of a content Uzumaki, Orochimaru strolled through the Village. Tailing him Anbu apparently decided that the main show was already done and returned to his post.

"If you want to talk about anything sensible, child, I advise you to do it now." Suggested the Sannin.

"Well..." when Orochimaru saw that pink hue returning to her cheeks, he knew something serious was afoot. "I was wondering if you remember our conversation with Hatake-san?"

"Go to the point. That meekness doesn't suit you."

"You can freely fix his sharingan."

One slender, black brow went up.

"You were able to convince Fugaku?"

"He agreed to Hatake-san keeping properly functioning Obi-nii's eye. And because it isn't working as it should be now, so it's obvious it has to be repaired."

"Shiori-chan..."

"I repeated the properly functioning part a few times and I even have a reliable witness. Besides I really doubt that Fugaku-sama will run to the Elders or Hokage complaining that my cute five-year-old self made a fool out of him."

Orochimaru smirked. He knew there was a reason he liked that little gremlin.

Ω

Her own bed! Shiori toppled into it, relieved to rest her tiny body on something softer than a simple futon (exactly on a thick mattress, two fluffy blankets, eighteen colorful pillows and twelve mascots of different sizes - if someone wanted to be specific). She reverently rubbed her cheek against her plushy pillow. Everything was so incredibly thick and irresistibly soft, like a billowing cloud. And no one was going tonight to suck to her like some famished leech. Just simple undisturbed, silent slumber.

Not that staying with the Uchihas was bad. Food was quite tasty and the boys were likable enough, but after a week away from her room and bathroom it was good to be back. Earlier today, after breakfast Kushina came to take Shiori home. Minato also was back, as well as a large group of leaf shinobi, who was send from the frontlines thanks to a recently signed ceasefire.

The Village was in an uproar. Everywhere on the streets reunited families were visible to everybody who managed to unglue themselves from their loved ones. Making a little more effort it was even possible to hear some timid mentions of the end of the war, expressed by the more positive individuals. In truth, it was a long way to go, but at least now there was a right direction.

A knock sounded in the room, announcing a head full of golden curls uneasily peering inside.

"May I come in?"

"Sure, Mini-nii. My heaven is your heaven." She replied somewhere out of the fluffy trenches.

"Great" the man mumbled sheepishly and knocked straight into a lamp standing at the entrance.
Shiori sat.

"Is everything alright?"

"What? Yes, yes of course. Why shouldn't it be?" When he started to laugh scratching his cheek, the girl knew she was subjected to a bullshit.

Whatever he was doing, Minato was having a hard time, so the reborn woman decided that she would let it slide; just this once.

"Okay, so…. Do you need something?"

The jonin took a deep breath and braced himself. For some unfathomable reason Shiori stirred in him more respect than the whole Rock army.

The girl seeing this also sat straighter.

"With Kushina we've been engaged from a very long time and I would like to ask you for permission to actually marry her soon."

Shiori's posture once again slacked.

"I guess it makes sense." She said. "With the end of the war on the horizon you want to finalize it before they'll give you the hat. Then it would be far more difficult with all this establishing of the alliances and the whole rest of the politics. But seriously, Mini-nii, you know you can do way better than Kushina-san, right?"

Minato massaged the bridge of his nose and plopped on the cushion mountain next to the girl. After a moment of silence, he eyed her bashfully.

"You really think they'll make me the next Hokage?"

"Yeap." Such a short and certain reply without a moment's hesitation made him feel warmed as if in summer rays, regardless of the flimsy weather outside. "There is no one else better for the job; so, I'm sorry Mini-nii but you're screwed."

Ok, now he wasn't feeling so warm and mushy anymore.

"Come on, Shiori-chan. It won't be so bad."

"Yeah, right. You know how much work Hokage has? A whole bunch of it. Limitless mountains of paperwork and hordes of eternally dissatisfied nitwits. And when was the last time you saw Third's face. You know, like truly looked at it? It's awful. It's more wrinkled than Hatake-san's pug's muzzle. So, it was nice to meet you, when you were handsome and actually had a life."

The declaration caused a moment of stunned, disbelieving silence, which usually took place after Shiori's comments.

"Alright… now going back to the marriage." the blond man reminded, when all the threatening paperwork and hordes of nitwits moved to the back of his mind. "You don't have anything against it?"

"Only if you're fully conscious and sane and you're sure you don't want anyone else."

"I decided it a long time ago." He assured her.
"Then I'm ok with it."

Minato was glad but at the same time lost some confidence, so the smile he gave her was somehow wooden.

"And you know a few things will change then, right?"

Shiori's mouth turned pale.

"You want me to move out?"

"WHAT?!" The blond had no idea where this came from. He wanted to stop the girl before drawing other hasty and totally wrong conclusions, but she already started to rant.

"So, I have to give away my room? Start working? Doing chores? Pay for my food? I hope it isn't the last one, because it'd be a real drag."

"Of course, not! You don't need to do any of those things."

"Then where's the problem?" She was somehow concerned that she couldn't locate it.

"I'm going to be your legal guardian!"

Two golden pools blinked owlishly.

"Aaaaand?"

"Are you really ok with this?"

"Yeah. Besides to tell the truth I've thought you already are. Thinking about it now it was stupid. There were no legal grounds for it."

It took a second or two for the news to sink into Minato's brain. Then his lips stretched wider into a huge grin. The reborn woman seeing it also gave him a smile. Her was a lot smaller and couldn't feed a nuclear plant, but she was pleased that he was happy. In the following moment, she felt him squeezing his arms around her and plopping a kiss on her forehead.

"Thanks, Shiori-chan."

"No problem, Mini-nii. But I have one request."

The blond man's sapphire eyes looked at her in concern.

"Yes?"

"Make sure that at the wedding there is something more to eat than ramen."

Ω

Later that night when the girl was alone, all she could do was looking at the ceiling.

Everything was going forward. The war was ending. Minato and Kushina were getting married. Rin's death was just around the corner, and so was Naruto's birth. And the worst was, she hadn't any idea how much time was left to those clusterfucks. But one thing she knew, she had to hurry.

The tiny body rolled off the bed and pulled out one of the children's books from under it. Minato had
bought it for her before he realized his mistake. It was a colorful, thick thing about adventures of some sort of donkey or other future sausage. At least it seemed so before it was opened. On vibrant illustrations were squeezed small swirls of black ink, that were a mix of languages the reborn woman knew from her previous life. Additionally, here and there was painted a caricature of some cute pet as a smoke screen.

Someone would probably call it an overkill, but the girl preferred to be safe than sorry. In the end, you couldn't be too careful planning a murder.

OMAKE

Morning; kitchen in Itachi's home

The reborn soul was just finishing her breakfast when Mikoto walked into the room with a storm commonly known as Shiori's cousin in tow.

"Hellow kiddos, and hello to you, Fugaku-san." Greeted the usually over-energetic woman. "I hope you were a good girl, shrimp."

"Shiori-chan is an angel," assured Mikoto. "And Itachi and Shisui simply adore her. Every morning I found them cuddling together. They were so sweet. I have even taken photos."

Shiori's chopsticks stopped a few centimeters before her mouth. Her golden eyes anxiously eyed Kushina, who hungrily snatched a bundle of pictures from Mikoto's hands. It was going to be a pain.

Shisui thought similarly, because he went all red, while Itachi apparently saw nothing wrong with it, finishing his natto with gusto.

The red-haired woman dangled one exceptionally sweet photo before the girl's nose, in which Shiori was tightly flanked by the boys, who were practically sleeping on her.

Shiori knew she had to nip it in the bud or she would never hear the end of this.

"You sly, sly girl, you see what I have here?" Gloated the kunoichi.

"A perfect illustration of a typical herd behavior of young mammals?"

"What?" Kushina once again inspected the picture.

"Yes, young mammals are usually nestling together to keep warm. Even Hatake-san's pups are doing it. Sadly, often they're doing it while lying on me. And I'll tell you, they stink." Added the girl wrinkling her nose.

"However, does not it mean that they also want to keep you warm? Maybe they think you are part of their pack?" Inquired Itachi.

"Doesn't it." Shiori as usual corrected the boy. "But that's interesting point of view, Tachi-chan."

"Don't change the subject, shrimp-chan!" Interrupted Kushina.

"Why not? It's a normal photo. We aren't participating in any sexual conduct or anything."

Hearing it Shisui went even more red, bordering now on a deep burgundy. Itachi limited himself to pulling the girl's sleeve.
"Shiori-senpai, what is a sexual conduct?"

Shiori's lips started to form the answer but Kushina's arms prevented it. The woman grabbed her little cousin and laughing like a maniac was heading to the exit.

"I think we'll already go, dattebane. I'll come for her things later. Once more thanks Mikoto, Fugaku-san. Bye-bye." And the two Uzumakis were gone.

Fugaku let out a long, tired sigh. Thank gods, those two already departed. Now everything would calm again. At least he thought so until he encountered the inquiring eyes of his son.

"Oto-sama, can you explain to me what it is?"

It was time for the most commonly used phrase in history of fatherhood.

"Ask your mother."

The next chapter done. Thanks for all your comments/favs/follows. And as always I'm looking forward to the next ones.

And traditionally here I bow before my lovely beta - mrsmiawallace88. She is the best!
Jiraiya loved Leaf Village more than he could describe - even with his extremely rich vocabulary. Especially on days like this one, when he was ecstatic that someone thought and let him and many others come back from the front lines.

Earlier, through the fall, the only problem with weather was the omnipresent dampness and impenetrable layer of clouds. Sometimes, even for weeks the sun was completely hidden behind their gray, ominous wall. As time moved on to winter, nights stretched – keen to arrive but unwilling to pass. Leaf-nins couldn't sleep any longer in the open only with their shinobi uniforms for cover and each other for warmth. The nights were as vicious as a bath in a frozen pond would be, taking away their body heat until their lips turned blue and teeth chattered. Making a camp or using chakra to warm up was rarely possible in the middle of this hostile territory. There were times even the Toad Sage began to tremble, then finding natural shelter was a matter of life and death.

The grey-haired man fumbled with his fingers, savoring the warmth radiating throughout his body from his chakra coils. The temperature was dropping with every hour, he wasn't so much feeling it as seeing in his own condensing breath. However, the cold (nor anything else for the matter) wasn't able to stop kids from being kids. A playground he was passing was pure chaos at recess; busy with sprinters, chasers and all kind of games. There was something in this mayhem that brought him more peace than anything else. He could sink back to different times even if only for a moment; and forget the present, future and everyone who demanded something from him. Sarutobi sensei, Minato, Orochimaru and many others – he wanted to make them happy, truly he did, but contrary to his willingness to please them, if he told them what he wanted, no, what he needed to stay sane, they would never understand.

Jiraiya's growing solemn mood was forgotten in the first millisecond as something dropped on his head, only to be joined by hundreds of similar somethings. It wasn't snow but driving, freezing rain. Fortunately, the man was separated from his destination only by a few more steps.

When he reached it, he couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from rising. Shinobi truly were creatures of habit. They had to have everything under control and subjected to appropriate procedures, whenever it was possible. That's why Sensei was always smoking his pipe for ten minutes after every even hour; Minato was making pro and con lists in his mind to solve every problem; Tsunade had to drink three and a half cups of sake before she started gambling; and why every Thursday Orochimaru was sitting at the same table in the same restaurant reading a book and gallantly eating sukiyaki hot pot* for hours – just like right now.

The Toad Sage looked around at the busy tables. The restaurant was full. He passed an old couple eating side by side, sharing one sake bottle, studiously fixed on their meals. However, the second his ears caught a sound of chuckle among the bustle, he changed his route. As could be predicted, a group of young women in their thirties that were collapsing with helpless giggles became his next target. Just when he was going to dazzle them with his charm, a stern woman dining alone nearby looked on, frowned and spat in his direction. Ok, maybe he would reschedule all that dazzling for another time, his male teammate for sure was missing him through these six months.

And so Jiraiya came back to his original track and a minute later with an enormous smile, meaning better be delighted to see me, plopped on a cushion across Orochimaru's kotatsu**. Nonetheless, the dark-haired man clearly wasn't speaking the same non-verbal language as he wasn't even bothered to rise his eyes, and just turned a page in one of his boring books. As always with those two, it came back to the same old argument: which one of them was going to have his way and in good humor
piss of the other? And hardly anyone was known to be more determined than Jiraiya.

"Look who is here!" the Toad Sage announced once more, grinning like a fool.

"I'm far too well familiar with your current whereabouts, Jiraiya. Thank you." The serpent man's monotonous voice droned, while he still couldn't be troubled to glance up. "Maybe you should rather focus on restraining your impulsive advances directed to everything on two legs what relatively resembles a young humanoid female."

"Oh, come on and shut it already!" How on earth could that pale buffoon piss him off within a minute after such long separation? It was Jiraiya who should irritate him and not vice versa, damn it! "It was just once! Once, you hear me?! And that guy really looked like a lady. He had almost as pretty hair as you. It wasn't my fault."

"No, it wasn't." Agreed the Snake Sannin, surprising the other man. "I suppose at fault were hectoliters of sake Tsunade and you drank the previous night."

"Exactly!"

"I just don't understand how you didn't notice it through the night? There are some relatively obvious differences in human anatomy between opposite genders. I can present you with a few medical diagrams, if you like?"

A loads of profanities didn't fly out of Jiraiya's mouth only because of the melodious giggle of an attractive waitress, who had just come to take the latest client's order. The gray-haired man sporting a fake smile, hoped that the discomfort that bathed the moment would be short-lived. He staggered, breathing heavily, unable to digest the defeat from the hands of his teammate in front of the green-eyed beauty.

"Can I get you something, gentlemen?"

Orochimaru again butted in before Jiraiya had a chance to open his mouth.

"No, thank you. My… acquaintance was just leaving."

"Orochimaru, you…"

The words bogged down in Toad Sage's throat, when his teammate instead accepting insults like a true man would, seemed to focus on something under the kotatsu and then took a shirataki noodle from the pot with his chopsticks, only to pull it under the table. Immediately, some invisible force began to tug the noodle with a slurping sound.

Jiraiya blinked. He still was sober, right? Right. And Orochimaru never was someone prone to pamper those ugly reptiles of his, right? Right. Furthermore, a hooker wouldn't fit under there; he already tried it some time ago, right? Right. Then what, in the seven hells, was that?

Set in hard resolve to slay whatever mutated monstrosity Orochimaru hid there, Jiraiya plunged under the table. What he encountered was far from anything he anticipated. There was something like a tiny bum, clad in blue fabric; tiny, red bag; and two equally tiny feet. And all of that in a second disappeared on the surface.

The man cautiously leaned out from under the material, zeroing his eyes on quite a familiar pintsize gremlin, who was sucking in another noodle. Ok, Jiraiya knew that kid had to be the reincarnation of Satan himself, but the last time he checked any kind of visible evidence of his knowledge was absent. However now two red, pointy horns proudly grew from the girl's head. Was she finally
openly admitting her true nature or did Orochimaru perform some experiments on her and thought an addition like that would be the best fitting?

After closer scrutiny, it turned out that the horns were fake, being nothing more than plastic hair ornament. So, the devil still was hiding in a box; but forgetting about the conspiracy level of infernal powers, something else was more important.

"What is this thing doing here?" Asked the flabbergasted Sannin.

Orochimaru glanced at the child.

"Apparently sitting and nourishing herself."

"You know it isn't what I mean!"

"Minato-kun left her here." answered the yellow-eyed man tediously, putting food from the pot into his bowl.

"And you what? Just sat here and didn't protest or anything?" In that Jiraiya simply couldn't believe. Orochimaru wasn't exactly a babysitter type; no matter from which side you looked at him.

"Agreeing to it consumed less time and energy than opposition would. Besides she is potty-trained and mostly silent."

"And what with the… you know, the horns?"

Shiori mumbled something but with full mouth it sounded like: ıkrousvenge, degowndrkg.

"What?"

"Kushina gave them to her. And apparently, they glow in the dark." Orochimaru mercifully translated.

"Horns or not that brat is evil." Announced the Toad Sage with full conviction.

"It's a five-year-old human child. It's enough to keep her well-fed and warm to deal with her."

As if to illustrate his words, Orochimaru threw a piece of beef in the air that Shiori caught with her teeth with impressive skill. The Snake Sanin acknowledging that the case was closed, returned to his book and full bowl, while Jiraiya shifted his attention to the munching child.

Was it so simple?

Jiraiya always was someone who had to check everything on his own skin, and so he took the next slice of meat and threw it just like Orochimaru did a minute ago. However, unlike his teammate's, his beef's piece didn't land in the girl's mouth but on an elderly woman sitting nearby.

That little shit didn't even stir from her place on purpose!

The assaulted woman slowly picked up the offensive meat from her hair and narrowing her hawkish eyes to crinkled slits pursued the room, until her gaze stopped on their table. The Toad Sannin wearing his most dashing smile accusingly pointed at the five-year-old. However, for someone so long living in the ninja world, Jiraiya wasn't too good in choosing his battles because against Shiori dimples and crooked smile (that seemed so genuinely sweet with just the right touch of shyness) he was hopeless. An unexpected warmth rushed through the angry woman, who again focused all her mentioned anger on the bulky man and muttered something under her breath, but then did nothing
more and just pick up eating - dissolving the situation.

"You little..." The grey-haired nin's words hit the empty air since Shiori once again climbed under the table. Jiraiya wanted to dive after her but fate apparently had other plans.

"Jiraiya-sama, you're back! Minato is going to be so happy, dattebane!"

No one other than Kushina was beaming standing over him, practically vibrating with energy.

"Kushina-chan beautiful as always." Joked the man, but the ginger kunoichi took it in a different way.

"How many times do I need to tell you to stop bullshitting me?" The woman's knuckles cracked ominously, sending shivers down his spine. When she decided that she raised sufficiently severe terror, her demeanor completely changed turning to the other man. "I'm sorry, Orochimaru-sama. It took me more time than I've thought."

The Snake Sannin dismissively shook his hand.

"It was no problem. Shiori-chan as always was an interesting company."

"Great. Then it's time to go, shrimp" Kushina ducked under the table and after a minute of turmoil successfully pulled out the demon-child and an enormously thick book. The older Uzumaki eyed it suspiciously. "That brick isn't yours. Shiori-chan, where is your book? The pretty one you got from Hokage-sama? That about those blue ninja monkeys?"

The child's face broke into a broad smile of complacency – not unlike one belonging to someone, who intended to change her converser's life in a small pot of bubbling horror.

"I traded it."

"You did what, dattebane?"

"I exchanged it for other goodies." Explained the girl; her mirth only growing. "It was a great deal. That book was silly, but I got a bag of chocolate cookies and a lollipop. Really yummy lollipop."

Kushina didn't even blink. It was a matter of dignity.

"Yummy lollipop, sure, I understand. And the new book?"

"Orochimaru-sama" That proud tone clearly meant that from now it was one of her most valuable possessions.

"And how will Hokage-sama feel if he finds out that you exchanged his gift?"

"Don't care."

The woman sighed and took Shiori with all her belongings under one arm.

"Ok, now, if we have everything under control I'm taking the brat. Once more; thanks, Orochimaru-sama. It was nice meeting you, Jiraiya-sama. Ta-ta." And the woman marched away from their table, taking with her the waving child. At the door Kushina halted remembering something and called.

"Dinner is at five - please come!"

Jiraiya grinned. One more reason he loved Konoha – Kushina's cooking.
Minato was clearly surprised seeing the man at his doorstep.

"Sensei, what are you doing here?"

"What are you talking about, kid? Your girlfriend invited me." Announced Jiraiya, pushing a bottle of sake into the blond man's hands and stepped inside.

"She did?"

"Oh, then I'm the big surprise, eh? So, better be grateful that my magnificent-self, the famous Sannin and the greatest connoisseur of feminine charms honored you with my presence."

Unfortunately, not everyone was so honored with his presence.

"Oh, it's only you." Mumbled Shiori disappointed, leaning out from behind Minato's legs.

"Only me? Were you waiting for someone else, brat?"

As if to answer his question someone knocked at the door, making Shiori completely forget the Sannin and with a delighted squeal let in the new guest; who apparently not only was anticipated but also ready for such welcome, bravely enduring the overjoyed child.

When Jiraiya was able to register what he was seeing, and that he was seeing no one else but Orochimaru, his mind switched on a turbo mode using emergency stashes of common sense - as any other human mind would do, trying to construct a solid anchor to normality and prove to itself that what happened didn't happen, and even if it happened, it wasn't so damn important.

Besides, his teammate (or whatever imposter, genjutsu or other nightmare it was) that not counting a nod of greetings wasn't paying any attention to them, was fully focused on the young girl who very adamantly dragged him to her room; or at least tried to do it.

"What's the matter, child?" asked the Snake Sannin calmly.

"Something horrifying happened and you need to help me." With every unsuccessful pull Shiori was getting more flushed.

Orochimaru glanced questioningly at Minato but seeing the bemused smile on the blonde's face his concern turned into curiosity.

"What might be so disturbing that it requires my immediate aid?" Now Shiori was more crimson than red and her pout was so extreme that nothing more than a quiet mumble escaped from her mouth.

"Speak louder, Shiori-chan. We all know you are capable to do it."

The girl's cheeks puffed, resembling something akin of a vengeful canary.

"I don't understand that stupid book! It's just so grrrrrr! What moron wrote it?"

Jiraiya tried to remember the said book. When he succeeded, and recalled it from his memory, he could only connect in pain with the rage-possessed demon-kid. He doubted that the girl could even correctly read the title; not even speaking about a thousand remaining pages. *Reflections on the soul nature and their specification in the context of simultaneous yin-yang energy feedback with emphasis on yin-release technical usage* – he got a headache just thinking about reading it. Actually, did the little gremlin even could read?
"That journal was written by Senju Tobirama - second Hokage." Answered the black-haired Sannin. "Doesn't it occur to you that maybe the problem isn't the book itself but the person reading it?"

"NO! The book is simply stupid!" And with that Shiori dragged her mentor to her room and with a loud bang slammed the door.

"Ok…" Jiraiya took a deep breath and looked at his pupil with a gaze he nearly never used in relation to him - that is, as to a complete idiot. "One time I can understand, really. I thought it was momentary lapse of judgment. But twice in the same day? Have you gone totally bonkers when I wasn't around, Minato? Leaving Orochimaru and a kid in the same space for more than five minutes? It's crazy!"

"You were the first one that left her with him." The Jonin reminded him.

"Exactly! And I'm not the most sensible person – ask anybody you want. Besides, it was my last day in the Leaf, I needed to find some fine birdy or two for a night. I wasn't in the right mind then." He ended in a whisper.

"Sensei…" Minato wanted to explain but resigned in the last moment and just took his teacher to the dining room. "Do you trust me, sensei?"

"Sort of."

"Then believe me. They are good for each other."

Jiraiya couldn't imagine what the scientist could gain from the girl (besides a headache) but he decided to focus on the heavenly aromas emanating from the kitchen.

"Oi, Kushina, Jiraiya-sama just came for dinner." Said Minato.

"Oh?" The ginger woman peered into the room. "Hello again, Jiraiya-sama. What a surprise!"

The tiny nagging he felt from the doorstep evolved into an elephant that on the rump had painted: you weren't invited, you sucker. Orochimaru was!

"Are you back for long, sensei?" Asked the blond adding another plate to the circular table and snatching the Sannin from his gloomy thoughts.

"No one knows a thing. For now, Yuhi-san commands the remaining army on the northern borders while Shikaku and Sand's troops are watching the west. Mizu is silent for now. Too silent if you ask me, but hey; we must be thankful for small miracles, right?"

"You think that the truce is really possible?" Enquired Kushina, placing tureen of soup on the table.

"Tsuchikage and Raikage aren't too pleased with it. Hell, Onoki probably would rather eat his own hat than admit the Rock couldn't dominate us; but in truth every Village is exhausted. Thousands lost lives, ending supplies and growing unrest among the civilians." Jiraiya uncorked the sake and sighed. "It isn't that there is a choice – the war has to end."

"Good." Summarized the woman. "Dinner's ready!"

Minato braced himself for the coming avalanche but this time the girl slipped into the room silently but at the same time grumpily like a surging thundercloud; and plumped into her chair with a disgruntled huff.
"Shiori-chan?" Minato worriedly touched her arm.

"She is just angry because she can't understand the soul's topic." Explained Orochimaru sitting on the other side of the girl.

"Because I refuse to accept that some things are, simply because they are. There must be some rules governing this whole spiritual world. Otherwise it's just stupid."

"The Spiritual world belongs to the issue of faith. And believing is as important as seeing, feeling or thinking." Minato soothingly stroked her red locks. "You believe in your own soul and in the Gods, right Shiori-chan?"

"I guess." Mumbled the reborn woman. The problem wasn't in her lack of believe. How could she not believe in these things when she knew them to be true? She was there. She passed it. You could say she even bought a t-shirt! "But I want to know how it all works."

Her pleading eyes landed on Orochimaru.

"Researching such things could be interesting but it's hard to see a practical application of the subject, Shiori-chan."

"And how exactly you two want to research it?" Kushina wasn't sure it was the best idea. Shiori could come up with the idea of experimenting on the Uchiha boys. Gods knew Itachi would be more than willing to help his senpai with everything. That boy was too sweet for his own good. "You can't put a soul under a microscope, shrimp."

"I know that! It's just… it's stupid but I won't give up. I'll understand it – somehow." And to emphasize her resolve she threw herself on the food.

Jiraiya's eyes were jumping from his friend to the child like a ping-pong ball, when his brain analyzed the data, he leaned to the man and whispered.

"Are you sure you never fooled around with some Uzumaki woman? That brat must be yours. Otherwise it would be too creepy."

Orochimaru regarded his teammate with eyes heralding the imminent end of his life.

"I'm not you, Jiraiya. I do not fool around."

"I was just joking, geez." Exhaled the Toad Sage, even if he wasn't joking. "Why you always have to be so touchy?"

"Because I have to put up with you." Responded the serpent man, murderously biting a slice of tofu.

"How is your book, sensei?" Minato threw in, wishing to avoid the disaster hanging on the horizon. Without Tsunade the other two Sannins weren't so prone to direct bickering but he wasn't willing to risk it. Especially so close to Kushina and her new tableware.

"Actually…" The man smirked and dug a pile of papers out from an inside pocket of his coat. "I'm done. It still doesn't have a title but I'm sure something will come to me in time."

"That's great, Jiraiya-sama." Beamed the blonde and took the papers to admire the finally completed work of his teacher.

"It still needs a beta-reading and some amendments. I hoped that you would…"
"You heard it, Shiori-chan? Work just right for you." Minato threw the pile right under the nose of the girl who carelessly flipped through it.

The reborn woman wanted to tell him she wouldn't do it - it would be an unnecessary effort and she had more important things to worry about – but Jiraiya's shriek interrupted her.

"Carefully, Minato! This is my only manuscript! If she'll damage it, I can't vouch for myself." The Toad Sage paled seeing the dangerous gleam in those golden pools. "Come on, brat, it isn't a toy. You can't even read properly so you can't play with it. Now, be a good kid and give it back to uncle Jiraiya."

Shiori blinked the sudden urge to blow something up away, preferably something huge and ugly.

"Me? illiterate?" Her calm rage could freeze over a volcano. "I'll show you, just wait."

She grabbed the manuscript and fled to her room in a rush. The banging door was the last noise that reached their ears.

Orochimaru smiled radiantly, and when the Snake Sannin was smiling like that it meant someone was in a big shit. He slurped in a noodle.

"I hope that book of yours is a true piece of art."

"Shiori-chan won't do anything to it." Minato tried to calm down his teacher, who by now was ready to stand up and break into the child's room to save his life's work.

"But Orochimaru…"

"You don't need to worry." Assured the black-haired man. "The child won't harm your precious book. However, I can't say the same about your self-esteem and future of your writing career."

"Yeap, Shiori-chan can be merciless." Admitted Kushina, having a great time observing the misfortune of the old rascal. "Most of the time I don't know half of the words she uses. You need to be brave, Jiraiya-sama."

"Stop bullshitting me. They are bullshitting me, right, kid?"

Unfortunately for the Toad Sannin Minato couldn't muster anything more than a lame smile.

"I'm sure it won't be so bad, sensei."

OMAKE

Two hours later, when their guests left, Shiori was sitting on the sofa in the living room with a bowl of chips, a box of highlighters and the infamous manuscript. She was so immersed in proving how far away she was from being an uneducated, normal five-year-old brat; that she missed the imminent danger, despite heralding it sounds of running paws.

Underlining a whole paragraph and writing WTF under it, she had enough time to hear her name clumsily pronounced by a few unfamiliar barky voices, before she was knocked over by a familiar pack of mutts.

"Mini-nii, we're being under attack! Don't you ever dare to put those tongues near me, you four-legged bug vessels."

The dogs started to bark happily but the smallest pup just lowered his snout almost touching the girl's
nose and woofed.

"Shi-ior-ii-chan pla-lay!"

As it isn't so difficult to guess, the reborn woman like any other grown up soul from our dimension meeting a talking dog had done the single possible thing - she screamed.

"What the hell?! That thing talks!"

"They all are talking. Well, they're trying." Clarified Kakashi removing Pakkun from her body.
"Teaching them human language isn't so simple."

"Can you teach them to stop harassing me?" Asked the girl fixing her rose tresses, before her scientist-part awoke in her mind. "How it's even possible? Doggies can't talk, right?"

The young jonin unconsciously rubbed a bandage on his eye and sat next to her.

"Normal dogs can't talk but like I already have told you, they are ninkens. Many ninja animals can talk and have other human qualities thanks to blood-contracts shinobis sign with them. Minato sensei never showed you his toads?"

"Nope." Shiori cautiously patted the pug, whose tail began to wag happily. After a second the other seven tails joined the rhythm.


"I'm busy…" whatever she wanted to tell next was drowned in pitiful wails. "Ok! Ok you freaky mongrels, when I'll finish the chapter I can throw you a ball or something… But remember! One lick, just one and you can forget playing with me ever again."

The dogs apparently were satisfied with the proposal as they laid down around the sofa.

Kakashi looked quizzically at the miniature Uzumaki.

"You're more friendly to them than before, why? I didn't think you would play with them, ever."

"If they can talk, it means they're sentient beings and that means correct communication is possible." Mumbled Shiori writing the next unpleasant comment.

"They were sentient before." Deadpanned the teenager, not knowing if he should feel aggrieved or flattered on behalf of his pack.

"But now I can negotiate with them and in this lays the whole difference."

The boy wouldn't even begin to consider what she was talking about. Obito was right; that devious brat sometimes could be scary. Once again, he rubbed the covered eye. Why couldn't he stop thinking about him? Obito was gone. It was pointless. He had come here to stop torturing himself with memories of Kanabi so he should think about something else. The silver-haired lad glanced sideways at the scribbling child.

"What are you doing?"

"Turning the dream of an old man into ashes."

See? Scaaaaary… sounded Obito's voice in his mind and Kakashi couldn't disagree with him.
"Stop it."

One single visible onyx eye blinked.

"Stop what?"

"Whatever you are doing." Clarified the girl with a huff, but for him she didn't make it clear enough. She had to notice it since she continued. "You're hurting yourself. I can't focus on my work when you're wincing repeatedly."

"It's good to know your priorities."

Those golden pools sharpened, inspecting his figure with unnerving thoroughness.

"You came out of the hospital less than a week ago, after a major, innovative surgery. You should be careful, otherwise Orochimaru-sama's hard work will go to waste. When was the last time you ate, Hatake-san?"

"Ka-shi no fo-od day." Barked Pakkun jumping on the couch.

The boy wanted to scold the pug (he never thought their ability to speak would turn against him) but Shiori was faster.

"Doggies… hold him."

In the next moment Kakashi felt several jaws gently but firmly clenched around his arms and legs; and a few pairs of paws restraining the rest of his body. He couldn't release himself without harming his pups so he remained in place, shooting the red-head and his disloyal pack an annoyed glare.

"Little traitors. Shiori-san, what are you…?"

He couldn't finish. The girl pulled off his mask and shoved a handful of chips into his mouth.

"Good puppies." Shiori patted the nearest dogs. "And that, Hatake-san, is fruit of proper communication and speaking about proper... Kushina-san, Hatake-san needs a proper nourishment!"

Not understanding what was all the screaming about the older Uzumaki entered the room.

"What now, shrim…” Her tongue went on strike. It was something new, even for her devious cousin, who pointed at her prisoner.

"We need to feed that moron. But first, Kushina-san, you have to stop cackling and stand up from the floor."

Auntie Wikipedia explains:

*Sukiyaki (鰹焼, or more commonly すき焼き) is a Japanese dish that is prepared and served in the nabemono (Japanese hot pot) style. It consists of meat (usually thinly sliced beef) which is slowly cooked or simmered at the table, alongside vegetables and other ingredients, in a shallow iron pot in a mixture of soy sauce, sugar, and mirin. The ingredients are usually dipped in a small bowl of raw, beaten eggs after being cooked in the pot, and then eaten. Generally, sukiyaki is a winter dish and it is commonly found at bōnenkai, Japanese year-end parties.

**Kotatsu (炬燵) is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, formerly a charcoal brazier but now electric, often built
OK, this is a place where I gush over you guys, so thanks for reading, following and favs. And of course for your reviews. They're making my days ^^

Also as always I'm bowing before my dear mrsmiawallace88.
"Stare or don't, it won't change a thing." Shiori had a way of not mincing her words, fingers clenched tightly over a fiercely pink pen in white cats. For such a tiny brat, she was kinda badass; Kushina had to acknowledge that. The red-haired woman shifted in her seat, her eyes still resting on the girl as if the child was a bowl of ramen.

"But, shrimp-chan, can't you hurry up a little? We need to crush that old perv."

The pen stopped, hovering an inch over a sheet of paper.

"What we are you talking about, Kushina-san? It's I who need to read and review this. I've been doing it for the last two days. Please, enlighten me: what kind of contribution have you brought to this glorious activity?" With the amount of the young Uzumaki's sass it was possible to paint a barn.

"I'm feeding you, bringing you that awful coffee, doing laundry and giving mental support." the kunoichi counter on her fingers. "We're a team. Totally perfect trio."

Shiori dragged her suffering gaze to the third part of the said perfect trio - the Sannin, who from the beginning stubbornly ignored the two redheads in his laboratory. Orochimaru, however ingenious, was an ass who wouldn't act against the girl's cousin if it wasn't completely necessary - the required time would be too inconvenient for his busy person.

"Soaring over me like an angle of misfortune doesn't exactly count as a support. It's more like harassing used to exert mental pressure."

"It's positive pressure." Insisted Kuhina. "Everyone needs it. Right, Orochimaru-sama?"

The man didn't even flinch calmly mixing some green goo in a tube.

"Orochimaru-sama?" Repeated the woman but still having no response she moved closer to the scientist. "Orochimaru-sama? What the hell? Why isn't he hearing me? Has he something in his ears or what?"

The girl looked up.

"Oh, it's probably the cheese from our lunch. Clever."

"Cheese?" Kushina leapt to see the improbable dairy product. However, the moment the Sannin quirked his elegant brow at the woman glancing into his ear Shiori added,

"Or he's just using chakra to protect his inner ear against external stimuli."

The next moment the girl had to hide behind her mentor's legs; otherwise the taller Uzumaki would whip her like cream.

"I don't even want to know." Mumbled the man ignoring the raising pandemonium around him and went back to his tubes.

"Shrimp, you should know that I'm a really forgiving, likeable and generally fantastic person. But I'm afraid you irritated me one time too much." A smile appeared on the woman's face; a smile that haunted Minato in his worst nightmares. "It's payback time, dattebane!"

One hour later Kushina wasn't so sure about that whole payback business. Shiori as a principle hated
everything concerning planning her and Minato's wedding (Kushina just knew it was because her devious cousin had a massive crush on the blond jonin, and was simply jealous), but here and now the girl was running around with Kushina's female entourage – and what's the most scary, she wasn't complaining. The older Uzumaki could play her passive aggressive bullshit games and the child would only smile, nod and give every impression that she was the cordial looser of the skirmish. Shiori wasn't just her normal pleasant version in front of Mikoto. The girl was chatting with Rin and that could mean only one thing – they all were going to die!

"What about this one?" Asked Yoshino twirling a greenly-gold kimono around and bringing the redhead out of her panic attack.

"It looks just like the one you had marrying Shikaku." Deadpanned Kushina.

"Exactly, and I've a great taste."

"Actually, it's quite good." Commented the Uchiha matron. "It deepens the ruby hue in your hair."

No matter the kimono was quite lovely; if Shiori was a dog her ears would be dropped and she would be growling. Not to mention she would probably bite Kushina's ass. Shopping didn't bother her and Mikoto was easy to tolerate, even Rin's company she could endure. However, when Kushina introduced her to Nara Yoshino, fresh wife of the Nara heir and bearer of Nara's genetically enhanced intelligence, the reborn woman thought she was going to flip her shit.

Why couldn't she meet some kind, gullible and always having food Akimichi? But NOOO if not some red-eyed, self-sacrificing bastards or creepy, limping miscreant; now it was time for this world's version of Sherlock Holmes! It changed nothing that the Nara woman wasn't as dangerous as her husband because for sure he also was going to pop somewhere nearby, naturally in the least appropriate moment, just to screw Shiori over. The only blessing was the apparent lack of maternal instinct in the new woman, who left the girl mostly alone. The reborn soul liked attention but now she was content just to stay invisible. So, for now, her only involvement in the whole ordeal was preventing the disaster, mistakenly called as Rin's aesthetic sense.

"What about this one?" At least the medical chunin acknowledged Shiori's supremacy in fashion department. The older girl showed her a pink colored kimono.

"Get a shade lighter and…" the tiny Uzumaki dove into a pile of materials and pulled out a dark obi. "Also, take it. And for Hashirama's sake, do something with those purple markings. War paint isn't the best makeup for a wedding."

The young kunoichi's doe eyes grew so much the girl thought they were going to pop out.

"But, but it's family tradition. It shows our strength and spirit. We wear them from the day we are named." Rin bit her lips. "Shiori-chan, do you really think it can ruin sensei's wedding?"

The reborn woman truly disliked that girl. Being so sweet should be prohibited. She wanted to puke. Nonetheless she had to change her behavior for the sake of the greater good (mainly her own). Having in mind the change shouldn't be too swift as not to arouse suspicion, the girl theatrically huffed.

"Just come to me some time before the ceremony. I'll somehow change the design to make them more sophisticated. Maybe some little swirls or flower pattern?"

Rin wasn't convinced.

"Shiori-chan, are you sure you know how to do it?" The kunoichi wouldn't be surprised if the five-
year-old ended painting something awful on her face, simply out of spite. Rin really wanted to warm up relations with the sensei's adopted daughter but Shiori in no way was easy to befriend.

"I know a few things about clothes and makeup. My sis was one of the prettiest girls in Uzushio, she showed me what to do to look pretty." Explained the child while her golden pools shifted to the older redhead. "And now I constantly have Kushina-san to worry about. All those baggy dresses, yuck."

Rin couldn't stop a giggle, seeing Shiori pulling a disgusted face.

"Kushina-san always makes that expression when she speaks about cleaning your room. You know so much about being a big girl, Shiori-chan. Maybe you could help her and clean it by your own?"

The child sighed like a venerable, old lady forced to deal with some callow brat.

"Maybe I could but it doesn't mean I should." Shiori threw a silver ribbon on the older girl's pile of things to buy. "Kushina-san needs someone to dote on, otherwise she feels useless and alone."

"So, you're being lazy so she can feel useful and know that she has someone to love?"

"Pretty mu..." Shiori couldn't finish because someone decided to throw some sort of overgrown bush on her head. The plants were artificial contrary to her irritation that was far too real.

"It suits perfectly." Announced Yoshino adjusting the garland of white flowers on the girl's head. "Just the white dress and you and my little cousin, Kasuga-kun are going to be adorable together."

Screw the Nara intellect, that woman's bossiness was making Shiori carving for a pole (it didn't even had to be a pole, really, any kind of stick would do), because in that moment Yoshino looked to her like a piñata. There was no way Shiori would be anywhere near with any one from that clan.

"But, but..." her panicked eyes halted on Kushina. "I thought I can go with Orochimaru-sama?!

"Sorry, shrimp, but no can do." Answered the older redhead inspecting some velvet material.

"What? Why?! I know you want the wedding to be small and simple but you have to invite Orochimaru-sama!" Otherwise she would be sentenced to association with all those nitwits.

"Don't worry. Minato already invited him. It's just that he can't go with you because he's Jiraiya-sama's plus one."

Shiori's face changed. Now it resembled a brick. A repulsed brick.

"You want him to babysit that old froggy."

Kushina merely shrugged at the accusation.

"Someone has to do it and Minato will be a little busy that day sooo..." The violet eyes sparkled with mischief, not unlike one pair of golden pools had in habit. "You need someone else as your date."

Now the reborn woman wanted that stick to bite herself into a pulp. She was being manipulated and only noticed it when it was already far too late to change the outcome. However, the most horrifying in this whole perplexity was the fact that Kushina played a role of the wheeler-dealer; and that was just wrong on so many levels she didn't even know where to start complain.

The girl knew Yoshino was Kushina's old genin teammate so it was natural she was going to be on the wedding, no matter her new social standing. However, it wasn't so obvious in other cases. The
ceremony had to be a top-secret deal - Minato had too many enemies for it to be otherwise – and that meant as few guests as possible, and if they invited one clan's head they would need to invite all the others. Then the wedding would be everything but small and quiet. Shinobi didn't do small and quiet in big gatherings; especially when alcohol pushed to the top their ambition and competitive streak.

Shiori, as any other polite, repulsed and resigned to its fate brick turned to Uchiha matron.

"Mikoto-sama, can I take Tachi-chan to the wedding?"

"Not so fast, shrimp." It seemed her cousin hadn't caused enough mischief for the day. "Itachi-kun is his own person. You need to ask him out. Nicely."

The smaller Uzumaki really wanted to wipe off that smug smile from Kushina's face. Asking Itachi wasn't a problem, but being maneuvered into it was. She was outsmarted by... judging by the three greens all three women was at fault. Shiori had become a victim of conspiracy. She, the little deviant, was being screwed and just wasn't right.

She took the garland off her head. At least it was pretty.

"I want one made from living flowers."

If she had to be manipulated at least she was going to be bitchy about it.

Ω

"It's going to snow."

"Hm."

It was the whole conversation ongoing for the last fifteen minutes on the Uchiha's porch. From time to time the silence was disturbed by a slurp of hot tea or clang of cleaned weapons. The two boys weren't talking but they were more than content with each other's silent company. Truth be told, Shisui liked the younger boy so much because he could stay quiet for more than five minutes; contrary to his aunt's kids.

"Can we train after supper?"

"Sure, Tachi-chan."

Just as Shisui thought, his words had a desired effect. Itachi leveled him with a glowering look, while his cheeks turned pink.

"Do not call me that."

"Why?" The older Uchiha whirled a kunai around his finger. "Uzumaki-san calls you that the whole time and you've never told her to stop."

"But that is Shiori-senpai." Mumbled the boy, methodically rubbing a cleaning paste into his shuriken set.

"What? You like her more than me? It hurts, Tachi-chan. it really hurts. And what about that senpai thing? I'm older than both of you. If anyone should be called senpai, it should be me."

At the teasing, the smaller boy turned even more red. He wanted to say something but Shisui won't ever find out what it was, because in that exact second they heard a pair of steps running toward them. A moment later from around a corner appeared a big pompon with attached to it colorful hat,
under which stack out the mentioned little lady, who flung herself between them. The boys managed
to collect everything sharp from the floor in the last moment, otherwise the girl's tush would look like
a hedgehog. When she was focused on something, her mind was so one-tracked, that her awareness
was completely null.

Shiori zeroed her golden pools on the younger Uchiha as if he was her lifeline.

"Tachi-chan, you haveto go with me to Mini-nii's wedding." She announced in desperation.

The four-year-old barely managed to nod, before from the direction which Shiori had just emerged,
her cousin jumped on them. The boys blinked seeing her. Both Uzumaki were peculiar; each in her
own way. Nonetheless, it was something new to see the panting Kushina, tugging behind her a
mountain of shopping bags in one hand, while the other carefully held a bowl of ramen.

"Shrimp! How dare you run away like that?!"

"It wasn't any dare." Explained the girl with obviously false placidity. "You told me to ask Tachi-
chan to the wedding and I just did."

"Did she?" Shisui flinched back when the woman turned to him like some starving gorgon.

"Yes?"

The kunoichi's shoulders dropped. Asking if Itachi agreed was pointless. But maybe… This time she
grilled the smaller kid.

"Nicely?"

The boy vigorously nodded, grabbing Shiori's hand for support. Kushina wanted to scream.

"When you proposed to stop in Ichiraku I just knew you're planning something fishy. But beware,
shrimp, it isn't over!"

The tiny redhead just smiled and patted Itachi's head.

"Don't worry, Tachi-chan. She won't do anything more to embarrass us. I'm going to watch her like
a hawk. Besides she already has everything what she wanted."

Judging by Kushina's sour expression that was a blatant lie but Shiori was good in them. Especially,
when no one could tell her bullshit since Mikoto (with no smaller pile of bags than Kushina)
marched to them with a big grin.

"So, are we going?"

"Yes, you are." Grouchily mumbled the redhead, still couldn't get over missing Shiori's moment of
helplessness.

"Excellent! Fugaku is going to love my new kimono. And maybe he will for once wear a new
one…"

Kushina snorted.

"That man wears the same thing for how many years? Actually: Does he have the whole closet of
identical clothes?"

"He doesn't like changes." Mikoto tried to defend her husband but seeing her friend's doubtful gaze
she gave up. "Oh my Gods, I'm going to be so embarrassed"

"Not necessarily." In that moment, the gleam in Kushina's eyes very, very disturbingly resembled Shiori's just before one of her daring plans. "Maybe you should send the boys to us for a night and start presenting the things you purchased from that white, lacy set?"

"You think?" Uchiha matron blushed not unlike her son few minutes ago.

The sparkling of those lilac eyes was a sufficient answer.

Ω

Two pairs of black eyes were trained on each other. The heavy eyelids narrowed a little too slow to call it a blink. The irises were so stationary than if not for swarming in them displeasure they would seem dead. It was as if their owner's brains were suffering a massive short circuit and were struggling to compute. However, the glaring contest wasn't the only war going on. The other one resembled a game of push and pull. When a hand stretched a little further it had to stop, forced by a quiet but no less threatening growl and flash of sharp fangs. When the hand backed away the rumble cased, drowning everyone in dead silence. It was repeated every minute or so.

Jiraiya grimaced and with a huff tactically retreated to his previously taken position - that is he comfortably settled on a sofa in Minato's living room. His adversary however still followed his every move with unnerving scrutiny.

The Sannin grimaced even more.

"Kakashi-kun, do something with your dog." Demanded the man but to his charging the addressed teenager didn't honor him even with a glance.

Sakumo's son was sprawled on the carpet between rest of his animals, tenths of fuinjutsu scrolls and the little devil who lazily patted his silver hair.

For some time Shiori wondered how on Earth Kakashi managed such hairstyle (was it some gel or other hair product or just one of those irrational, shitty manga things?) so no one should be surprised that when the boy sat next to her on the floor to see what she was reading, the redhead sized the occasion and put her chubby fingers into his tresses.

The girl's inner scientist wanted to laugh in glee. It was because of his chakra nature. Electric currents flowing through chakra coils electrified his hair, making them stand at attention. And what was even more awesome it caused a tickling sensation on the tips of her fingers when she touched him.

Kakashi at the first contact instinctively stiffened but after a second understanding there was no threat, he relaxed under the surprisingly nimble fingers. When Shiori touched a spot on the back of his neck the teenager transformed into a boneless goo and put his head on her laps. If anyone asked he was doing in just to entertain the little gremlin, in no way he liked it.

"He's only practicing guard command." Sluggishly spoke the young jonin.

"But why he has to guard my manuscript? Especially from me, the author? Call him off, Kakashi-kun."

The boy obediently opened his mouth to dismiss Pakkun but Shiori had other ideas. She once again scratched the spot on his neck.
"Mini-nii asked me to beta-read it and I'm going to do it for him even if Jiraiya-sama is being a grumpy scared cat. So, the doggy is staying where he is or I'm going to stop petting you."

The old man was very powerful and experienced shinobi but right now he lacked the right means of persuasion so Kakashi with no regrets ignored him and submitted to further mollycoddling.

Now the Sannin was more than sure that child was a demon. No, screw this, she was demon princess. Bloodthirsty, spoiled demon princes, who was send to this astral plane just to made him miserable.

"You're devious little thing, you know that?" Answered him very smug and enthusiastic nod "Maybe you should be trained as a seduction specialist. Gods know you're already familiar with the basics."

The girl's smile only grew. As far as smiles go, everyone would like to be possibly far away from that one. Preferably on the other half of the world.

"Great idea, Jiraiya-sama. You should suggest it for Mini-nii. I'd really like to see how he hiraishin you into a black hole."

That petting had to brainwash the normally sullen boy. Otherwise he would never snicker into her laps.

"What the fuc… funk, is a black hole." Jiraiya knew it couldn't be anything good but he preferred to be ready for every possibility.

"A black hole is a region of space-time, exhibiting such strong gravitational effects that nothing - not even particles and electromagnetic radiation such as light - can escape from inside it. The simplest static black holes have mass but neither electric charge nor angular momentum. While the mass of a black hole can take any positive value, the charge and angular momentum are constrained by the mass. Due to the relatively large strength of the electromagnetic force, black holes forming from the collapse of stars are expected to retain the nearly neutral charge of the star. Rotation, however, is expected to be a common feature of compact object…" *

"Enough!" Jiraiya's big hand not only covered the girl's mouth but half of her face. "I swear, if you aren't Orochimaru's spawn you has to be Satan's."

"Sensei, is everything ok?" Asked Minato peering into the room.

"Of course, why shouldn't it be?"

Shiori's frigid gaze spoke something totally different but the blond man didn't want to poke her already fragile temper so he left it be.

"Great, dinner will be in an hour. Shiori-chan's friends should be here by then." The jonin very carefully omitted any gender characteristics those friends possess.

Suddenly, something hit a window making all three shinobi to tense. They were in a middle of the Village. They should be safe. Sadly, in shinobi world safe didn't exist.

Jiraiya pushed the girl into Kakashi arms and carefully walked to the window. What he saw apparently wasn't dangerous since he scoffed and opened it, letting in a cold air and a few white petals.

"Maybe you should invest in some bars, Minato. Apparently, you're going to need them faster than you think."
The blond looked out of the window and decided that in spite of all, his sensei was a wise man. Minato knew that danger of Shiori slipping out through a window was nearly nonexistent but it didn't mean no one would want to slip in through it. The sapphire eyes dipped down. Those two boys standing below his window, were really sweet and innocent kids, whom his little princess seemed to easily tolerate and that wasn't a small feat. He might even be tempted to say they were her friends. And that was the problem - they were friends, for now.

The reborn woman oblivious to Minato's inner turmoil looked outside only to be kissed in the nose by frost. She knew it was winter, she had seen many in her previous life and exactly five in this world but it was first snowfall she had seen after she died. For what she heard it was also first snow in Konoha in the past three years.

The snow hugged the Village like a newborn baby, soft and clingy. It was like the street had been put to bed, hushed under nature's glacial eiderdown. How odd it was to look on that sight, so familiar and yet so different. What was once the hokage mountain had become three gigantic, white-bearded old men, resting under the heavy sky; distinguished and mantled in their thick, silvery cloaks.

Everything was white. Everything besides two black dots from with one was frantically waving.

"Hello Namikaze-sama! Shiori-san, come out! We're going to have a snow fight!" Yelled Shisui.

The reborn woman liked snow. However, she liked it the most while sitting in a warm room with a cup of coffee and a good book. Snow had one trait that bothered her endlessly.

"But it's cold!"

"Come on, please! if not for me then for Tachi-chan! He has never before seen a snow!" Shisui wasn't giving up. Especially seeing how the red-haired girl tried not to smirk at Itachi's blushing cheeks. "You two will be together against me! And I swear, I won't be throwing snowballs with full force!"

Ok, she had to admit she wanted to go and play with them, no matter how childish it sounded. Now she was a child, she could be as immature and silly as she wanted. On the other hand, most likely she was going to end cold and wet; and that was something she would rather avoid. Her coat wasn't warm enough to protect her from that weather, adding to it Shisui's future snow assault she could as well go there with no coat at all… However, there was another option.

"Wait a moment, you two!" After the shout, the girl immersed herself in her fuinjutsu notes. After a minute of scribing she jumped up and running back to the window, out of blue stuck a tag to the Sannin's back.

"What the hell, brat?!"

"Shiori-san!" Minto reprimanded her at the same time that Jiraiya. "You cannot use unauthorized tags on people. It can be dangerous."

But the girl more than in their words was interested in the toad summoner's health.

"Are you feeling good? No dizziness, rash, itching or any boiling organs?"

"What?" the man was clearly out of his depths. "Of course, not. I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be?"

As it was more common in every next conversation, no one cared to answer him. Instead that little gremlin turned to the blond man.
"See, he's ok. This is a simple warming seal. Nothing serious." Shiori beamed at him and stuck identical tag on herself. "Now can I go out and play? Please, Mini-nii? I'll be careful, promise. Thanks. Call us when dinner will be ready. Bye-bye."

And the girl was gone.

The Sannin blinked and then chuckled. Minato was a really poor sod. That child was going to give him a heart attack before he would hit thirty. The snicker stopped abruptly, when Jiraiya felt a rising warmth on his back. Swiftly he detached the tag and eyed it with disbelief.

"That fucking shit is working."

It was Minato's turn to blink at the other man.

"Yeah, it is. Wait, sensei, the whole time you thought Shiori-chan was just playing?"

"Of course, I thought she was playing! She's five, for fuck sake." He eyed the tiny figure in yellow that just walked to the boys only to be pounced at by the taller one and buried in a snowdrift. He once more focused on the tag. It was simple but rather ingenious in its simplicity. And to think she did it just like that... Jiraiya smirked. "Not Orochimaru's spawn my ass."

OMAKE (well, sort of)

Somewhere far away from Konoha

Inside here blackness was eternal. It was like an invisible energy, crushing his body, squeezing the remains of life out of him. Air was freezing here, sending some violent chills down his spine. Light reached neither walls nor ceiling, confining his vision to a small circle of dancing orange cast by a torch hanging over him. It was his only source of light and warmth.

That small flame was his only companion. The only companion he wanted to think about. He bit his lips. Pain was relentless. It was everywhere but it wasn't wholly bad. It was his anchor to reality. He knew it wasn't some sort of nightmare only thanks to it. The agony rising in him like waves of a tide, the stone table he laid on, barely visible outlines of roots growing out of the ceiling. Everything was better than thinking about that freakish white guy and the old man, who were nursing him.

Normally he would be grateful for saving his life. He had been. At least until that ancient, skeletal man, who looked like he could keel over and die at any second, told him his name.

In that moment, he vowed he would always believe that pintsize devil, no matter about what absurdity she would babble. Gigantic demons, aliens, other worlds – he was good with everything.

For now, he was doing the last thing he ever thought he would do. He was listening to Bakashi's advice. That arrogant idiot told him once, that he should just shut up his trap and look like a fool, because it was all he was born to do. And now he was doing exactly it. He was behaving like an idiot, unaware that he was living in a den of monsters.

But it wasn't the only thing he was doing. He was also prying for his friends, for their safety. And he was waiting. Waiting for a right moment to get back to them.

*I'm lazy so I took it from Wikipedia.

Ok, next chapter done. Thanks to my dear readers, especially those who comment – you're making my day.
Oh, and my eternal thanks to mrsmiawallace88 – best beta ever.
Shiori groaned when Rin jumped, again. Putting a makeup on her rosy cheeks wasn't an easy feat. The new, tiny swirls although looking from afar like the kunoichi's normal pattern had rather complicated and detailed design; all that racket coming from the next room wasn't helping. Every time, every damn time, when some unexpected noise was heard the teenage girl involuntarily twitched.

"Stay still, Rin-san." The child pleaded for a hundred time in the last twenty minutes.

"Sorry." Apologized the older girl, none the less jumping once again when something (what sounded suspiciously like a book) had a meeting with the other side of the wall. "Are you sure Kushina-san is going to be alright?"

"My cousin is more resistant than a cockroach. Today's important and I guess she's feeling just a little angsty."

Rin wasn't so sure about that. First time when she heard a scream from the other room, it made her hair strand straight up on the back of her neck. It was the loudest, most piercing screech she had ever heard. It sounded like a wild panic. A scream of hysteria and disbelief, bordering on terror. She would call it something more than just a little angsty.

Three chubby fingers caught her chin and turned her face right and left.

"Ok, I'm done. It can't be much better and I don't want to overdo it." Shiori hauled a mirror in front of her nose. "What do you think?"

Rin blinked once and twice and then with enormous grin choked the tiny redhead in a bear-hug.

"It's lovely. Thank you, Shiori-chan."

The reborn woman was so surprised by the sudden show of affection, she wasn't able to try to protect herself - even her elbows, which more than once helped her get away from undesired cuddling, were now uselessly pressed between them.

An unexpected help came in form of a knock on the window, in which a head full of golden locks was visible. Rin let Shiori go and hurriedly opened it for the man. Snow might have melted down but it still was cold outside.

"Sensei, what are you doing there?"

"Well..." the blond sheepishly screeched his neck stepping inside. "Kushina doesn't want me to see her before the ceremony. Something about a bad luck. Is she still so...?"

A sound of shattering glass was sufficient answer. Minato cringed.

"So she is." Sun the man usually resembled was dimmed by a dark cloud. "I wanted to make her happy. All this doesn't sound like happy. Maybe we should postpone the wedding?"

"No way, Mini-nii." Shiori lived through enough hell this few last weeks, she would be damned if she had to repeat it. "Kushina-san is happy. Actually that's because she's so delighted, she is even more afraid than normally. She thinks that maybe she isn't good enough for you and that she will screw it up."
"But she…!"

"Yeah, I know: Kushina-san is perfect and you love her more than anything. What's more, she knows it all, but you have to understand that women just do that. We fret and worry no matter if there is a reason for it or not." Explained the girl seriously with all her five-year-old knowledge and experience. "It's normal. That's why Kushina-san is showing her frustrations in so direct manner. She just needs to vent and then you two can marry, have kids and live happily ever after. However I'm afraid the flat is going to need a small renovation at the beginning of this ever after."

Minato sweat dropped.

"You're probably right."

"I'm always right, Mini-nii, remember it."

Rin covered a blooming smile with her hand. Somehow the little Uzumaki being so somber and insolent was making her even more cute. Apparently the blue-eyed Jonin thought similarly since he cooed over the child.

"I regret you can't be with us before the ceremony, Shiori-chan. I'm sure Uchihas will take care of you but I would prefer for you to stay with us all time."

Shiori reassuringly patted his leg.

"It's only a few hours and later I'll be next to you in the first row so don't worry. In no time you'll be Kushina's-san husband. But remember, Mini-nii, if any of you change your mind, I can always marry you."

Minato laughed but the reborn woman inwardly glowered. She was talking seriously. Why couldn't she be a little older, hell, why had she to be sealed in that damned basement for all these years? Minato was perfect male specimen of homo sapiens. Screw this, he was more like some demigod, a demigod to whom she would always be nothing more than a little sister - and where was justice in that, damn it?!

"I shall remember." He assured her. "But if you girls are finished, we should get going. I don't have too much time. Are you packed, Shiori-chan?"

The girl nodded and passed her red bag over her shoulder.

"Yeap, I'm set and ready. But wait," Shiori drilled him with a sorrowful, golden gaze. "Mini-nii, please tell me we aren't going to hiraishin. You do remember that I puke, right?"

"That's why I asked a friend for help." Answered the Jonin and pointed outside the window. True to his words a man in official Konoha-police uniform was waiting, hanging upside down from the ruff. To some of that shinobi shit the reborn woman would never be able to get used to. "Handa-kun, take care of my little girl."

"Stop worrying, you mother-hen." Grunted Uchiha and grabbed Shiori, who barely managed to put on her hat. "And try to not be late for your own wedding, mister Yellow Flash."

The child cling to Handa's vest for dear life, when the man started to walk down on the wall.

Rin could swear Shiori mumbled into his green cloth something about philistines violating the laws of physics, what gained her amused snort. In few seconds the kunoichi was left just with her teacher, who stopped smiling and massaged his temples. Rin hadn't seen him so tired in a long while.
"Are you ok, sensei?"

Minato sighed, his blues shifting to a photography standing next to Shiori's bed, on which Kushina was hugging Shiori and him, while the child tried to bite her – it was a happy memory. He gently touched it. The glass protecting the paper was cold but he still could feel warmth spreading in his chest on par with the anxiety taking root in his abdomen. In that moment he understood all too well why Kushina was raging in the next room like a dragon.

"I'm ok just… We already are a happy family. Have been since the night we took Shiori home, when I saw her and Kushina snuggling together. I know Kushina want a proper family, and they both deserve it. For me that ceremony won't change a thing but for them…” he went silent for a second in which dread overwhelmed him wholly. "Many people want to hurt me, Rin-chan. If I became Hokage there will be even more of them. How can I force it on them? All that danger that comes with my dreams. Maybe I should just tell the Third that I gave up upon being his successor? There are other candidates and now I have more important, well, personal things to protect."

"Don't you even dare to think about it, Minato!" Shrieked Kushina, who unnoticed slipped into the room. "You always wanted to be Hokage. It was first thing you ever told me. I won't let you give it away for me and Shiori, dattebane."

"I'll put you both in danger."

"You'll put us in danger? Then what should I say?" Kushina was panicking. She caught Minato's hands and pleadingly squeezed them. "Mito-sama told me that to conquer monsters and their hate we need love. I love the whole you, also that part containing your dreams. If you give it away it won't be you anymore, Minato, and I need you – the entire you."

Rin didn't hear anything else. She slipped out through the window, not wanting to impose on such private and romantic moment. Those two were clearly made for each other, just as if they were a part of some grand fairytale. A prince charming and his beautiful princess (both capable of some serious ass-kicking – in the end it was a ninja fairytale), together fighting against evil, only to –how Shiori put it? Ah, yes: to live happily ever after. The young kunoichi hoped that someday she also would be such princess in someone's eyes.

Sadly, Rin didn't know that true life wasn't a fairytale. More than anything else it resembled Greek tragedies, where fate had a habit to regularly plays with human's lives as if it was nothing more than a game of chess; no matter if those lives belonged to normal folks or princes and princesses, no chess piece ever was indispensable.

Ω

"Handa-san, are you also going to be at the wedding?" Asked Shiori, trying to keep up with the grumpy male.

"Hm."

"Was it an affirmative or denying hm? It's still hard for me to distinguish them."

Handa glanced back at the running after him tiny troublemaker. How could something so short and cute-looking be so infuriating? Especially when it was smiling just like the child right now? The look of sacred innocence on that particular chubby face was simply horrifying. He had to get rid of it from his mind, otherwise he wouldn't be able to sleep soundly.

"I'm going. Otherwise Minato would be disappointed. That's also why I'm with you. Maybe my
brother forgave you, but I won't so simply forget your meddling in Uchiha business."

"But that eye isn't in your skull or any other Uchiha's; it's in Hatake's-san socket, so I think it's mainly his business." That maddening smile evolved in even more maddening look of feigned incomprehension. "True, Hatake-san can be a cretin sometimes, but he cares for the Village and will do everything to help achieve its goals - and Uchiha's goals are the same as Konoha's, right? If that's so then I don't see where's the problem."

The man groaned inwardly (no Uchiha would do it otherwise), maybe Fugaku was right? Maybe tying that little monster to the clan would do them some good? Gods only knew how much trouble that brat could make, but on their side she would be undeniably useful.

"It's grownups business – that's the problem. Seriously, brat, you are far worse than Kushina. She always was loud and bold; true be told I've never understood what Minato saw in her. That red hair of her was his fixation. Whenever he saw them he followed their trail like a lost puppy. Once he was so engrossed in ogling her, he actually collided with a street lamp."

"Mini-nii bumped into a lamp? And he was a stalker?" Shiori had a hard time imagining it.

"He was obsessed, just like Itachi-kun. Maybe it's something in your Uzumaki bloodline?"

"Firstly, Tachi-chan isn't obsessed with me. Secondly, maybe the more powerful shinobi, the crazier gal he needs so she actually can withstand his paranoid lifestyle?"

Handa snorted very un-Uchiha-like. The kid had a point. For once, his sister in law was bat-shit-crazy when she was angry and so were Kushina and Biwako-sama. That women were more scary than any ninja army.

"Shiori-chan!" and here was an excellent example. Mikoto like a tornado grabbed the confused girl and disappeared with her in the house faster than he could blink.

Matrimony was something he never would be able to understand.

Ω

He had no idea what he should do or say. He didn't even know what he should think. He, however, knew a few things. He knew Namikaze-sama and Kushina-san were getting married in two hours. He knew his parents shouldn't be invited, otherwise it would bring a very serious political consequences. And finally, he knew that his senpai and he were manipulated into going to the wedding together so his parents could attend the reception. He also knew senpai didn't like it, at all.

Itachi fixed a sash on his kimono. He wanted to make Shiori happy so he arranged a bowl of dango for her, that girl loved her sweets. Unfortunately his mother saw and confiscated it, claiming that it would spoil their appetite. The only other things that could improve Shiori's mood were her fuinjutsu scrolls and Orochi-cchi – none of those items Itachi possessed and that was creating another problem. What could he do to make his senpai happy?

Yesterday, Shisui told him that to make a lady happy, he should do what any other man does on a date, only adding to the younger boy's complete bafflement. Itachi had no idea what people did on those dates or even what they really were - and so he asked his mother. The woman started giggling hearing his question and explained that a date was a meeting of two people who liked each other. The only other things that could improve Shiori's mood were her fuinjutsu scrolls and Orochi-cchi – none of those items Itachi possessed and that was creating another problem. What could he do to make his senpai happy?

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the Village in nice clothes, exchanging compliments, holding hands and sometimes even kissing.

Itachi gave one more powerful tug to his obi, trying to fight the flooding waves of embarrassment. In no way this was a date. It was a ruse, nothing more… at least he really hoped so. He couldn't kiss his senpai! What if she didn't like it and got mad? She would stop liking him and that would be awful! He took a deep breath. He wasn't going to treat it like a date, unless he could see that senpai thought otherwise – then he would be a man.

The boy glanced sideways on the little redhead trying to twist a flower crown pinned to her hair.

"I swear, Tachi-chan, your mother glued it with a freaking superglue. That weed won't budge even an inch."

"Mother used chakra so it will not fall off. And you do not need to rearrange it. You look pretty." the last part he emphasized. Not because it was untrue (his senpai looked beautiful) but to observe her reaction. Sadly there was none. The girl huffed, resigned and sat on the stairs.

"You think Mikoto-sama will take much longer? She does remember that you and I need to take care of the reception gifts, right?"

The boy sat next to her. Normally he was very proud of his clan but now he wanted nothing more than to be disowned.

"I am sure mother remembers but I am afraid I do not know how much longer it will take. Father can be difficult where his formal attrie is concerned."

Shiori would pull out her hair if earlier she hadn't spent half of hour being subjected to Mikoto's tugging and brushing. Instead, she just face-palmed. That formal speech of his was really killing her brain. It seemed every woman had her own cross to bear. Mikoto had Fugaku's distaste to ceremonial clothing; she – Itachi's speech pattern and the whole "the world'll end shit"; while Kushina… Kushina got Minato, she had no problems whatsoever and it wasn't fair.

"I hate this day."

Ω

Jiraiya had to admit, his little pupil was far more devious than his golden locks indicated. Putting two adorable children in charge of accepting goshuugi* was ingenious. Such amounts of adorableness for sure was warming all hearts and opening all wallets. In addition, if one of those cuties was the devil's spawn then all those wallets were completely cleaned out.

The man couldn't decide if he should admire Inuzuka Tsume's ass or that pintsize gremlin's act, which started the moment the woman gave an envelope to Shiori. Every time Jiraiya saw that particular sickeningly-sweet smile on that kid's face, his brain was turning on the defcon one. This situation was no different.

"Thank you, Inuzuka-sama. It's very generous." Shiori passed the envelope to Itachi who also thanked the woman and bowed, before putting it on the table. "You see, Tachi-chan, I told you Inuzuka-sama is great. Her gift is almost as thick as Hyuga-san's."

Tsume froze. Inuzuka and Hyuga clans were so different that their animosity surprised no one.

"Those pompous bastards…" She grumbled and with shinobi's speed took the envelope from the gift table. "Sorry, sweetie pies, I'm afraid there was a misunderstanding. My mate, the moron, can't even count." She added a few banknotes. "Now it's ok."
The girl once again took the much thicker packet.

"In Mini-nii's and Kushina-san's name I thank you very much for your generosity."

"No problem, kiddo." The woman flashed her a feral smile and conspiratorially leaned over the children. "Mine is thicker than Hyuga's, right?"

"By far." Shiori whispered back.

When the clearly pleased Inuzuka marched to the reception room, the two thirds of legendary Sannins approached the table making Itachi bow in greetings while the girl was barely able to hold back. She had to treat every guest the same, showing them respect and appreciation. Bolting and hugging the serpent man like a koala, wouldn't be very appropriate. She had to limit herself to beaming.

"Orochimaru-sama, I'm so happy you're here." And she truly was, at least until her golden pools focused on the other man. "And you, old froggy, are late."

"Late?" Jiraiya was starting to develop a nervous tick whenever that child was talking to him. He tried not to grid his teeth. "Orochimaru and I came here together. Why only I'm late?"

"Because today you're to act as Mini-nii's father. You should have been here earlier." Her tone could freeze over the hell. Actually the toad summoner for the first time noticed how much this demon child resembled young Tsunade. That wasn't a comforting discovery. "And I'm sure you've made Orochimaru-sama late."

"He couldn't find his offering." Explained the dark-hired Sannin giving Itachi his gift.

"Snitch" mumbled the other man also handing to the boy his envelope.

The little Uchiha seemed to be somehow intrigued by the newest goshuugi. Something the demon-child noticed and eyed the packet, then she just theatrically sighed and wrapped her arm around the smaller kid's shoulder.

"See, Tachi-chan, that's how a cheapskate looks like."

"I'm not a cheapskate! I just have my own personal expenses. I can't give away everything"  

"Right…" Shiori looked as convinced as if someone just told her that the moon was made of cheese. "I stand corrected, Tachi-chan, that's how a perverted, egoistical cheapskate looks like."

The boy hmmed and carefully regarded the perplexed man with those large onyx eyes, that felt like an endless stretch of midnight sky was looking into your soul. Jiraiya was clearly growing more uncomfortable with every passing second so he relocated his focus on the creator of this whole mess. There was one thing he had to clarify.

"I'm Jiraiya, one of the legendary Sannins, known for his strength, intelligence and good looks; I won't let you con me into giving you more money, like you did with other guests."

"Someone who have to clarify that he is intelligent, hardly ever is. Besides I'm conning no one. I'm just sharing a few facts that can increase Mini-nii's income. If anyone decide to act on it it's their own decision."

Jiraiya wanted to say something but Orochimaru had enough of their bickering.
"Just give her the money." Advised the serpent man.

After a lot of glaring, mumbling and expressing general displeasure, Jiraiya slipped into his envelope a few more banknotes and after handing it over marched to the reception's banquet hall. Seeing both men settling into their places as a family of the groom, Itachi crossed them out of the guest list.

"Everyone are already present, Shiori senpai."

"Thanks the Force." The girl put her hands under the tablecloth, where earlier she sketched a few fuinjutsu formulas. After a short shot of chakra and a loud puff nothing but a memory of the table and a small scroll was left. Shiori hid it in the boy's pocket and tugged his hand. "Now come, it's going to start in five minutes and we have to look important and cute."

Ω

The wedding reception of Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina was held on February 21th in a civilian restaurant. It was small and simple ceremony with no more than twenty five guests. There was a small podium on which an old priest performed a purification ritual and blessed the couple. Shiori and Itachi were also sitting on cushions on the podium, representing Kushina's family, while the Sannins were seated on the other side as Minato's next of kin. Shiori had to bit her tongue to not burst in laughing when her cousin gulped a cup of ceremonial sake a little too eager and choked. A feat she and Itachi nearly repeated when it was their turn for a ceremonial drink. That stuff was truly horrendous.

After the official ceremony ended, not wasting even a second Shiori jumped into the blond-man's arms. It was time for a public display of fluff.

"You two really have done it. I'm sooo happy." The reborn woman truly was pleased by their marriage, mainly from the legal point of view. If Minato, the future Hokage, was her legal guardian, the probability of Danzo snatching her away was significantly smaller. She knew that looking at how the Village took care of Naruto in the manga, it wasn't anything sure but it was better than the alternative.

"You're happy because it means end of the preparation work. You're just lazy." Said Kushina flipping the girl's nose.

"That too." She admitted.

Kushina chuckled. Her cousin sometimes was way too predictable. The woman noticed the second child standing nearby. She picked him up and kissed in a cheek.

"Thank's, Itachi-kun. I'm really glad you decided to accompany Shiori today and act as my family."

"It was my pleasure, Kushina-sama. On my behalf and my clan's, I would like to wish you and Minato-sama all the best."

"Kiaaa, you're so cute." The woman cuddled him like a teddy bear. "Can we keep him, Minato?"

"I'm afraid Shiori-chan has already asserted her right to his person." Interjected the snake Sannin. "My best wishes to you, Kushina-chan, and congratulation, Minato."

"Yeap, congratulation, kiddo." Jiraiya clapped his pupil in the back nearly sending him on the floor. "You finally scored your grand prize."

"Thanks, sensei."
"Oh, oh and we have one more gift for you, right, Orochimaru-sama?" Shiori started to bounce so much, the blond had a hard time holding her.

The black-haired man smirked and gave her one more envelope. This one was cobalt in yellow and red snakes. Shiori pushed it in his face.

"Look, look."

The jonin and his new wife looked. It was some sort of a pass.

"It's a free time pass for the whole next week." Explained the girl seeing their perplexed faces. "I will stay with Orochimaru-sama, while you can have your honeymoon."

The gift was met with a much warmer reception than the girl expected. She was engulfed in Kushina's bone crushing hug together with Itachi, who was already starting to get a little blue.

"Thank you, Orochimaru-sama, but it isn't necessary. We would manage, somehow." Minato didn't want to trouble the older man. He knew Shiori could be a handful.

"I need someone to bounce off some of my new ideas and I believe the child expressed it as avoiding a severe mental trauma."

"Yeah. Everybody would be happy. And you can visit me whenever you miss me, Mini-nii." Assured him the girl who managed to loosen Kushina's hug of death. "Besides is only for a week."

"I doubt Kushina will give you time to miss anything." Jiraiya winked to his pupil gaining a bump in the head from the mentioned woman.

"Old pervert."

After that the reception was a blast. Food was delicious (Kushina and Shiori spend a week tasting dishes from every restaurant in Konoha – it was the only part of the wedding preparation the girl liked), music loud and sake flowed in streams.

Shiori officially took possession of the table with deserts, glowering at anyone who dared to reach for a dango. She shared it only with Itachi and that's when he agreed to dance with her. The boy was red as a beetroot when she asked him and paled only when their song ended. Shiori escorted him to his parents table; the poor boy completely crashed, even poking his forehead wasn't helping.

"You broke him." Stated Kakashi, slipping next to her like a freaking shadow. The girl jumped in fright. It was good she just finished her next portion of dango otherwise she would end as a shish kebab.

"Don't scare me like that! And I haven't broken him. He's just… tired. Yeah, tired. He's very young, you know?"

"I think you two are adorable." Commented Rin, who also sneaked to them unnoticed. The reborn woman was sure that with all those shinobi around she would get a heart attack before the night ended. "Especially when you danced. Itachi-kun is smitten with you. it's sweet, Shiori-chan."

"Not you too, Rin-san. Tachi-chan isn't smitten. He's four, he doesn't even know what that is." Shiori had enough of all that teasing. She was feeling like a pedophile because of it. "He's so strongly attached to me because of the circumstances in which we met, that's all. AND DON'T TOUCH MY DANGO, HATAKE-SAN!"
"You won't be able to eat all of them."

"Just watch. I have all night."

Rin's medical training turned on. Her face adopted that ominous grimace of displeasure.

"You will get sick if you eat them all."

"If that's the price I need to pay for a patch of heaven, then so be it." And to illustrate her conviction Shiori devoured the next dumpling.

"But!"

"Let her be, Rin. She won't eat them all." The teenage boy swiftly bit off the last dumpling from the red-haired girl's stick.

Shiori had no idea how he managed to do it with masked face but it wasn't even half as important as preventing it from happening again.

"**Do. Not. Eat. My. Food.**" She hissed through her teeth. Her hunched form radiated animosity that was like acid - burning, slicing, potent. However Kakashi only smirked, or at least she thought so seeing his eyes narrowing to crinkled slits.

"Only if you convince Orochimaru to dance with you."

Shiori blinked. He wanted her to do what? Not that it was a problem, it wouldn't be easy but she already planned to do so. Many important shinobi were present and dancing with her would for sure warm the snake Sannin's public image. If she also could gain guarantee of exclusivity for her favorite food, she had nothing against it. She only hoped the Sannin was drunk enough.

"Wait here. And that's Orochimaru-sama for you."

The girl totled to the main table where the Sannins were seated with another guest who apparently came uninvited. Not that anyone would say anything to Hokage. Shiori also ignored the older man and jumped into her mentor's arms. Adoring a shinobi had its perks, for once thanks to their reflex they always managed to catch her when she pounced on them.

"Orochimaru-sama, do you love me?"

All the man fell silent as if on cue. It was strongly charged question on any woman's lips, even if she was no taller than their table.

"What do you want, child?" Orochimaru preferred to be practical. Shiori was sober (he very carefully removed any alcohol from her surroundings when she wasn't looking. The child was curious and he too well remembered when Jiraiya convinced him to get drunk when they were young; he preferred to avoid Shiori with a hangover), and she wasn't inclined to being too emotional, so it was simple that she had to want something. However the girl was relentless.

"I want to know if you love me."

Jiraiya and Hiruzen had a hard time stifling their laughter. Normally, Orochimaru would already go away or make his accoster unconscious; but this was the only being for which the man had a soft spot. He couldn't do what he normally did and that meant for them great entertainment.

"I am inclined to… tolerate your company more than other peoples."
"So you love me?"

It was too much. Jiraiya banged his fist into the table and laughed like a hyena on crack.

"I…" the serpent man gulped out loud. What could he say, especially in his sensei's and idiotic teammate's company?

"You do not love me?" Those golden pools normally could force him to do unimaginable things. Adding to it welling tears and trembling bottom lip was simply cruel. The loud sniff was his nail to the coffin.

Orochimaru panicked but he wasn't the only one. The other men also stopped snickering and with growing dread observed sniffing child like a ticking bomb. The yellow, sneaky eyes searched the crowd looking for head of blond or red hair; but of course the couple had to disappear when they were the most needed.

"Shiori-chan, do not cry."

"Orochimaru-sama, hick, doesn't, hick, love me." The muscles of her chin trembled as she hiccupped.

"I don't love you, child."

"So, hick, will you, hick, dance with me, hick?" The golden hue shined with hope only magnified by collected moisture. "Right? Hick."

Orochimaru knew he was being played but despite this he felt an enormous relief that it was only that and not a sincere meltdown. He doubted he would be able to survive it.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Nope, hick."

"I thought so."

Ω

Orochimaru was a great dancer. When he twirled her, the reborn woman felt like a small bird learning how to fly, flailing around and finally taking off with outstretched wings and wind swept feathers.

They gathered a storm of applause after which Shiori could in peace indulge in eating her dango. The only odd thing was Itachi. The moment Orochimaru let her go, the Uchiha heir was at her side, from which he hadn't stepped away yet. Now, he was dozing into her arm with a half-eaten dango in his grasp. The young Uzumaki had no strength nor desire to reach for it. It was the last dango stick in the reception, she had eaten all others, and now she was sick. However she wasn't complaining, not at all; it was more than worth it.

"You two should go to sleep." This time she didn't even blink when Kakashi was gathering them into his arms. "I will leave your boy with his parents and take you home."

Shiori yawned. It was way after midnight and the celebration was at its peak. She had to give ninja one thing, they knew how to party. Minato and Kushina were happily chatting with the Uchiha and Akimichi couple, while Handa was loudly snoring in his chair. Apparently that particular shinobi couldn't handle his alcohol.
"Let them be, Hatake-san. They are having a great time. Tachi-chan can go with us but not to home. Take us to Orochimaru-sama's."

The teenager with arms full of half-awake children consulted it with the adults and gaining the permission and a key to the Sannin's place (it turned out he didn't need to worry about wards - Shiori knew how to deactivate them), he walked out into the night. He preferred to babysit those two than a bunch of drunk shinobi, when they would start to bicker - and they would. Smashed ninja always did.

He accelerated his pace. Sadly, he had forgotten than one of his wards had a weak stomach and had just eaten way too much sweets.

"Shiori-chan don't do it! Hold it in, you here me?!"

Why Rin had to go home earlier? Why?!

OMAKE

Namikaze household; a night before the wedding

Orochimaru with a vengeful streak bit into a soft surface and closed his eyes with delight when dark, warm and thick cream-like substance poured in his mouth. He sank into a sofa, humming in tune with an aria playing from a record player he brought. If a few months earlier anyone told him that he would be at complete easy in the Yellow Flash's home, babysitting his child; the Sannin would mercifully kill the poor sods; saving them from lifetime full of delusions.

However life was full of surprises. One of them was the tiny Uzumaki's announcement of desire to bake cookies. Orochimaru took it with a dose of doubt, being familiar with the girl's reputation of walking disaster. Non the less, after a few minutes of convincing he agreed to observe her work in the kitchen and if needed prevent a disaster. Additionally, he promised to not tell a word about it to anyone – Shiori worked too hard for her reputation of the laziest bum just to lose it because of her sweet tooth.

Devouring his third cookie the serpent man had to lament over Uzushio downfall if rest of the Whirlpool Village's cuisine was anything like this chocolate wonder.

The child slumped next to him was reading a book he brought for her. She had a problem holding it up so she leaned it on his legs and with no further difficulties studied the book. Suddenly, the entrance door opened and a group of women fell into the corridor (quite literally, with giggling Kushina and Mikoto on the bottom). Apparently their hen party wasn't so funny without any male companions and so they crushed Namikaze's flat.

Shiori flayed a bunch of intoxicated women with unimpressed look. Mainly because she was as sober as a newborn baby.

"Kushina-chan is back so I will leave." Declared the Sannin, before any of the women would had a chance to stand from the floor and notice him.

"You cannot leave me alone with them!"

"I can and I will." The man stood up from the couch but Shiori pounced and grabbed his leg.

"Please, Orochimaru-sama. You can't leave me alone, please."

"I smell cookies!" Yelled an excited woman's voice. "Kushina-chan, you made chocolate cookies for
us!"

"I didn't… Oh **fuck**, shrimp-chan!"

"It wasn't me! Orochimaru-sama bake them!"

Orochimaru muttered something under his breath but sat down. It was going to be a hellish evening – he just knew it.

TBC

*goshuugi (ご祝儀, "gift money") money offering at weddings in a special envelope. Close family pay about twice as much as friends.

**Ok, I'm sorry for all mistakes in the chapter. I hope my grammar didn't offend anyone**

the author humbly bows her head, hoping for forgiveness

**Also thanks for reading and so many comments and likes. Your positive reaction shows me I'm doing something right ^^**
Angels fall

„I've seen angels fall from blinding heights
But you yourself are nothing so divine
Just next in line“

(You know my name by Chris Cornell)

Something was mercilessly wrenching and yanking his hair until he wanted to scream bloody murder even while half-asleep. Kakashi's hand went up and grabbed five chubby fingers severely tangled in the messy, silver curls that lapped and devoured his assailant's hand like a nest of white snakes.

He blinked. The hand belonged to no one else than the bratty redhead, who was spread over his pillow like an obscene puppy, profusely leaking puppy. But to be just, she also was being slobbered at by the Uchiha heir, who was currently glued to her leg. Why Kakashi had been sleeping with those kids he had no idea… no, he blinked, he remembered it.

The previous night, after suffering from tons of death glares, complaints and stench of vomit, when he managed to safely escort them to Orochimaru's house, he planned to leave them alone and simply go home. However, Shiori had another idea. The tiny gremlin persuaded (or blackmailed if any of you insist on calling a spade a spade) him to stay with them, at least until they would fall asleep. Sadly, he missed the implication that his cooperation included not only preparing bed for them but also getting them ready for sleep. He would never forget the shrill panic on Itachi's face, when the two boys were together closed in the bathroom with a towel, toothbrush and a little too big cat onesie– if it wasn't Shiori who provided her own extra-pajama, Kakashi was sure the smaller boy would bolt through the window at the cuteness and utter un-uchihaness of it. Later, the red terror forced the young jonin to comb their hair, lie down with them (it had nothing to do with a promise of petting his hair) and with some trick put him to sleep (again, it had nothing to do with petting his hair). And so here he was; lying with two adorable children, from which one was doing everything in her might to make him bald; and a snoring… Someone had to be fuckin kidding him!

Kakashi's brain halted and strolled away, wanting to never come back. He closed his eyes, counted to five and opened them but unfortunately, he saw the same thing.

Orochimaru was sprawled on Kakashi's other side not unlike the sannin's little protégé, luckily unlike her he wasn't drooling. However, the man was fully clothed he still smelled like a distillery. Yeah, drunk, seasoned shinobi lying next to him wasn't good news. The more experienced ninja was, the more dangerous he might be in such state of implied vulnerability. And you couldn't get much more experienced than a Sannin rank.

He had no illusions that one false move and he would be swiftly and efficiently beheaded. With feigned naturalness, the boy released his locks from the girl's firm grip and carefully not to disturb the man or the children, slid from the futon; but only when he slipped out of the bedroom Kakashi allowed himself a sigh of relief.

Then the masked jonin's brain halted for the second time this morning.

Just before him lay another member of Konoha's legendary trio, sprawled in an uncomfortably looking pose. Although Jiraiya's bottom - as it supposed to be - was on a couch, his legs protruded above its backrest, while his upper body was on the floor under a coffee table. And he smelled. A lot.
Kakashi held his breath (this was one of those stenches even his mask couldn't stop) and silently went to the exit. Putting on his sandals the teenager had one last look around the place. When he saw it yesterday for the first time only one thing hit him from the entrance – it's normality.

It was reasonably big for one person to live comfortably. With white walls and dark floor, furnished in traditional style it was elegant but not too standoffish. It spoke about good taste and practicality. Truth be told it suited the serpent man just right but for some reasons Kakashi expected something more like a dark dungeon or a gloomy lab. Not an ordinary house. The only slightly abnormal thing here were books and scrolls. Living with sensei and Kushina Kakashi had become accustomed to omnipresent papers but oddly in Orochimaru's flat he couldn't spot anything about ninja arts so far. There were volumes about history and politics, geography, biology and math. There was even some poetry and a whole shelf of music notes.

Kakashi suspected the scientist wouldn't be so stupid to keep his research at home but still to find here anything else… The boy clenched his fists. Were they all truly so deep, they couldn't see people in their own comrades? Only monsters? Were they even humans anymore?

"Hatake-san?"

One onyx eye blinked. In the corridor stood Shiori sleepily rubbing her face. Maybe he was caught off guard in one shoe, in the middle of a mental breakdown but the white-haired teenager couldn't stop a snort looking at the drowsy child at the drowsy child in a tiger onesie, especially when she was dragging her favorite toy-sannin on the floor. Kakashi thanked heavens that Sensei discovered his doting parental side after he moved out. If Minato tried to buy and make him wear something like, Kakashi would probably go AWOL and spend the rest of his life as some root eating hermit in the mountains.

"Are you still feeling ill, Shiori-chan?" Because he certainly would if he would eat so much as she did the previous day.

But the child only clicked her lips two times as if she had to think what exactly she wanted from him. Then she patted her tummy.

"I'm hungry. Feed me."

The boy sweat dropped. It wasn't even funny anymore.

Ω

No one would be able to tell what thoughts were hiding behind those two golden pools following the teenager looking through kitchen cabinets in search for breakfast cereals. The girl snuggled into her Orochi-chi to ensure it.

The fourth month since the Kanabi mission was slowly ending. Kakashi's eye was mostly healed. He still had it bandaged but it was only precaution in case of unexpected excessive nerve strain. Orochimaru said that in two weeks there would be no need even for that. That the boy would be all right. Shiori doubted it.

In her previous life, her cousin had a dog once. A little, ugly mongrel – it was nothing special. Whenever her family went to visit, it just was there sleeping or eating. Until one day the dog was gone. She had never seen such anguish like the one that tormented her cousin in the next weeks. He was thoroughly devastated. It was nothing more than an animal but for the thirteen-year-old it was his best friend. Everyone gave the boy time to mourn and as days passed he was getting better but as far as the reborn woman knew, he never again had a pet.
Before her stood a similar thirteen years old kid. However, he didn't lose a dog. He watched as his best friend was buried under a pile of boulders. People gave Kakashi time to mourn – the whole month – and thought that now everything was back to normal. That he was back to normal, because why not?

In times like these she truly couldn't understand this world. It wasn't enough that society made kids kill. It didn't even treat them as soldiers, they were nothing more than tools. This was a child for fuck sake! A child in pain. And because of her meddling those two boys had been even closer than in the canon. Because of her there was only more pain. She had to make Kakashi stop tormenting himself. She didn't need more guilt gnawing at her subconscious when it had been already being eaten by a hundred other worries.

"Stop grimacing like that. I got your carrels." Shiori jumped when he put the food right before her. "Maybe you shouldn't eat if your stomach still hurts?"

The girl packed a spoonful of flakes into her mouth and cautiously pulled the bowl to herself.

"This is mine. You won't take my food again." Kakashi could swear she growled at him. It was way too early for this.

"I don't want to take your food. You were frowning like Pakkun when he ate chocolate. It's called concern."

"Ehh, I'm concerned that you've forgotten about my coffee. Seriously, who forgets about coffee in the morning?"

"Why am I even trying?"

"Cos, you want to be in Mini-nii's good book." Answered the girl munching her next spoon of carrels and completely ignoring the rhetorical nature of his question. Kakashi made her worry about him and so she was pissed and there was only one good way to deal with it – graciously sharing with everyone around.

"Should you even drink that thing?"

"Mini-nii allows me."

"Because you bewitched him." Groaned a new voice whose owner barely stumbled into the kitchen and crashed on a chair. Jiraiya's mouth opened to make another note about the tiny redhead's kinship with the infernal forces but the Sannin merely closed his mouth with a loud clamp. "What the fuck is that?"

Shiori's eyes retraced where the man was directing his accusatory finger. It had to be in her close vicinity… wait, he was pointing at her toy! How dared he?!

Apparently the Sannin dared, even very much so since he laughed so hard he started to cry.

"Stop it right now!"

He didn't. if it was possible his mirth only grown. The reborn woman had enough of it. That fool wasn't mocking only her toy. Doing it, he was insulting her and her science-guru. She was rather angry since she caught a glance of that downtrodden teenager, but now she was simply livid.

Kakashi sincerely thought the girl might start crying at any moment but in one second all her anger seemed to evaporate; in its place remained only a cold calculation. The boy flinched when the kid
slid off the chair and without a word toddled to the bedroom. The silver-haired jonin felt torn. He knew he should at least try to reason with the toad summoner but on the other hand he also knew that whatever Shiori had in store for the cackling man, it would be entertaining.

There was no more time for musing since the child waddled back to her seat with a bunch of papers and a highly disturbing sadistic gleam in her golden pools.

"I've put an exploding seal on your manuscript. It's on timer and the only thing stopping it from doing biig kaboom is my chakra. If the manuscript end up being away from me before I dissolve the seal, the work of your life will be nothing more than a pile of ash. So please, stupid froggy, stop laughing before I'll blow it up."

The Toad Sannin wiped a tear from a corner of his eye. The demon-child's words somehow broke through the hangover and his howling and slowly registered in his mind.

"C'mon, devil-chan, you won't do it. She won't, right?"

"She may." Answered Kakashi, slowly retreating to the window. That brat was way too happy for it to be a simple bluff.

"And she will." The redhead assured joyfully. "I already revised it all and even though then it'd be nothing but a waste of my time, I'm going to make it go boom!" The maniacal cheerfulness disappeared from her voice, replaced by a hiss. "So ssstop laughing at Orochimaru-sama's expense."

"Ok, ok, don't be so touchy. Kakashi-kun, give her that coffee she wanted." He added barely moving his lips. "Now, kiddo, when we have all that drama behind us, tell me, what do you think about my masterpiece?"

"I…"

"Just, just do it quieter, wouldn't ya?"

"NO!" Shiori started speaking with that childish, irritating voice that was making the people listening to it crave to have a bucket on their heads. "Now, getting back to business…"

It wasn't given for the reborn woman to get back to business because to the room entered something gloomy, what under closer scrutiny turned out to be their host. Orochimaru slumped on the chair next to his teammate, mumbled something and seemed to fall asleep again.

Kakashi experienced a yearning to pinch his cheek to see if the scientist was still alive but not considering how stupid and suicidal it would be, the papers in Shiori's grip still were a bit too risky for his liking.

Said girl however did nothing. She was already familiar with Orochimaru's morning behavior - mainly consisting of channeling his inner zombie, and so she continued.

"Truth be told it isn't as bad as I though..."

"See, I told you that my extraordinary…"

"Only half of it is total rubbish. With the second part, maybe we can do something."

"Wait!" Heavy dissatisfaction plowed the Sannin's brows. "What do you mean by rubbish? It's…"

"Infantile, clumsy, ungrammatical, repetitive, with no plot nor believable characters. The only thing it
has is the message you wanted to express: unity, peace, love and forgiveness – in other words mind-numbing cliché."

Jiraiya had the impression that each her word was like an anvil falling on his head. He was getting smaller and smaller and in the end felt like a chewed bubble gum under her shoe.

"First, you must clearly identify the target group to which your book is addressed. So?"

"Ehh…" The man took a deep breath pulling himself together. What someone so young could know about literature? Nothing – that's what. She just learned to read when? A month ago, at best, for god’s sake. On the other hand, that brat was a devil personification and she had already thought about some advices, rather than focusing only on a crushing criticism. Well, he always could humor her and listen. "Older children and young adults, I guess."

The reborn woman began to drum her fingers on the papers she was holding. Even in her old life the fairy tales were in truth nothing more than horror stories for babies. Because what were they teaching us exactly? Every story about princesses – nothing more than selling yourself to someone rich. Three pigs – be rich and build a big house, otherwise someone will take it away. Don't let her even start about Hansel and Gretel - you can't trust your parents and must count only on yourself; of course beside all that cannibalism and being-baked-alive-in-an-oven business. Maybe in her previous world it was the logical reaction of caring parents to condition their offspring to living in a psychopathic culture but then here, with all than ninja running around, she needed something equal to Tarantino-King mix.

"Then we need to personalize your main character. They must have more history and depth. Maybe they could be abandoned by their parents? It also needs more gore and some teenage drama."

"Teenage drama?"

"Yeah, something romantic would be the best." Shiori bit her lips. "The protagonist's love interest may be from an enemy village. Star crossed lovers and all that." She had in mind a cross between Harry Potter, Romeo and Juliet and Saw. And… she saw daylight. "I know! It has to be a girl!"

Opposite to her Jiraiya was in the dark and his brain just leaked through his ears from her shrieking.

"I beg you, quieter. And what girl?"

"The main character. If it will be a girl and not a boy - the sale is going to rise to the top! It's revolutionary idea. Not to mention that statistically females read more than males. We are going to be rich!"

"And I will have more female fans, ehh?" Jiraiya imagined crowds of young, lovely ladies reading his book with rosy cheeks and glossy eyes. He was already seeing it: tales of a gutsy kunoichi. Yes, that sounded nice... "Wait?! What we?! It's my book!"

"When I'm finished with it, it won't have anything to do with your original book. These are my ideas! I have three witnesses!"

The Toad Sannin looked around the room. Orochimaru seemed to be napping but it was given the serpent man would take the devil's side. Kakashi was an unknown and… when and from where this kid came from? The Uchiha brat was silently sitting with Shiori on one chair, observing everything with those unnerving black eyes. It seemed Jiraiya didn't have a choice.

"Two percent."
"Twenty."

"Three."

"Thirty."

"What, THIRTY?! Do you know how it works?"

"Fifty."

"Better give her that twenty and be done with it." Muttered Orochimaru, who apparently wasn't so asleep as everyone thought. "Eighty percent from something is still better than one hundred from nothing."

The light-haired Sannin groaned.

"Ok, we have a deal. Twenty." The last word barely passed through his lips. "To think I'm listening to a five-year-old brat."

"Six."

"What?"

"I'm six." Proudly explained the girl. "I had birthday the last week."

"And you didn't tell anyone?" Kakashi couldn't believe her. "Sensei and Kushina-san won't like it."

"They were busy with the wedding. It was more important. And I told Tachi-chan and Shisui-san. They gave me a book, crayons and mountains of deeeelicious sweets."

Itachi gently tugged at her sleeve.

"Senpai, I thought you did not tell anyone else so later they would feel bad and give you better gifts?"

The boy's question triggered a wave of silence that after seconds burst like a balloon. Everyone was snickering (Jiraiya was more howling than anything else), and only the two younger children remained frozen.

Itachi was sure he was correct. Senpai didn't explain her motives but it wasn't so hard to deduce. Those men were highly intelligent shinobi, they had to know it too, right? Or did he say something wrong? Was his senpai mad at him? She didn't look like it. More like a dumbfounded goldfish.

At first the reborn woman wanted to scream *et tu brute, contra me* but the reference and Latin would only fall on deaf ears. She couldn't believe Itachi can betray her in any way. He, he… He wasn't anymore recklessly following her orders. He thought about her behavior and accordingly took a stance – on his own. Maybe not only his obsession was passing into oblivion? Maybe with some luck and further nagging he would stop blindly follow orders in general…

A wide smile bloomed on her face and she pounced at the boy sitting next to her, hugging him as hard as she could.

"You're the best, Tachi-chan!"

"Child, he can't breathe."
"Yeah, and it looks like you've broken him, again." Added Kakashi.

Days were passing by. Winter in Land of Fire ended as fast and suddenly as it began. The spring washed in like a tide, proceeding confidently with warmth and blossoming life. Once more human breaths were invisible and the birds were livelier in the sky. Clouds still lingered over the village but today they weren't resembling a dense layer of grey but rather a messy collection of white puffs among the blue.

Itachi tilted his face up. Appreciating the moment was important, tomorrow wasn't guaranteed to anyone, ever. It was clear especially now, standing in the midst of the mourners in the middle of an official vigil for the fallen.

More than eighty percent of leaf shinobi was back in the village. Still active forces were stationed at the borders mostly as a warning. Most nations reached the agreeable terms of truce by now. Only Konoha and Iwa, which were the source of the conflict, still couldn't come to an agreement. Kiri wasn't even taken into account. After lost battle against Kumo on the Sea Grave Island, war for them was already over. Now, they were nothing more than conflicted groups of mercenaries.

The boy looked at the other side of the assembly. In the first row were standing clan leaders and squads that lost someone in one of the key battles. Namikaze-sama was easy to notice. His team was next to him while Shiori senpai with Kushina-san were few rows behind. In moments like these words didn't come, memories did. In shinobi village mourning comrades supposed to be something noble and stoic, but above the crowd a child's weeping could be heard. It was loud, with running snot and choking sobs but Shiori wasn't ashamed. She was doing what others couldn't and they seemed to be grateful for it. Their loved ones deserve to be mourned properly.

Itachi didn't like seeing her cry. She was his first friend, someone important. But he still didn't know how to help her. What should he do? He never spoke with Obito. He saw him two or three times in passing but that was all. Obito's life wasn't important, not for Itachi but now the boy knew that every life was important.

One of his clansmen started whispering to his father about Third's resignation and choosing a new Hokage. Some of the Uchiha were dissatisfied with status of their clan, demanding from Fugaku a hard stand regarding his own candidature. But Itachi's father was unyielding. There would be no more bloodshed, at least not on Fugaku's watch.

Itachi couldn't understand how people, his own people, might want to willingly seek more deaths. He saw life, war and death but he couldn't comprehend clear purpose for any of them.

After some time, the official part of the ceremony was over. People started to mingle. Some still stood motionless, others already departed. Itachi strolled to lone figure, standing away from others. The Snake Sannin was one of the most powerful ninja in Konoha, and one of the most probable candidates for Hokage hat. Not to mention that he was senpai's mentor – he had to be wise.

Orochimaru was focused on a tombstone. It was made of a white marble and the same as all of the others, except the label they bore. The graves were silently rising from the manicured grass, lined up perfectly with those in front and behind, a city for the dead.

"Grieving over the dead is meaningless. If there's any meaning in death, it's to take advantage of it." Whispered the man but Itachi wasn't sure if he was talking to him. His snakelike eyes didn't pry themselves off the grave even for a moment.
"What is the meaning of life?"

"There is none." Now he looked at the boy. Orochimaru gave him the simplest answer. Funny how often they proved to be right. "There's meaning in life if it's eternal."

"Why everyone insist that life must mean something?" Interrupted Shiori. When she noticed where Itachi was heading she went after him. She had enough of the extensive fussing over her person (she still had red nose from Kushina's handkerchief) so now she was discussing the purpose of life with a four-year-old child and dangerously brilliant psychopath.

"It does not?" The reborn woman could swear that formal speech pattern of his would be the end of her.

"No, it doesn't. Your life has only that meaning you're going to give it. It's act of living itself that matters. That's why it's so important to life at its fullest and always be happy and well-fed."

"In your case, it is rather unambiguous."

"I like my food like any other girl." Said Shiori. Sannin's words were too true to argue with them. "And speaking about food, Orochimaru-sama, you're going home with us. Kushina-san made so much food even I won't be able to eat it all."

"That's hard to believe and I cannot remember approving to go anywhere."

Shiori did what worked the best when her mentor insisted on being difficult. She hugged his leg.

"Please, come with us. You love Kushinas's food and I made new adjustment to our choking tag. You must see it." The moment Orochimaru's will crumbled and he sighed aloud the girl beamed at him. "Thaaaank you, you're the best. Oh, I know, Tachi-chan, why don't cha ask your parents to join us?"

The boy nodded and ran to his father. Her golden pools followed him unlit he disappeared in the black mass of mourners, then they focused on the grave that held Orochimaru's interest. According to the obituary it was made for Mitsuki and Manabu who died thirty years ago. Were those people the Sannin's kin? Parents maybe?

"You know, Orochimaru-sama, about that thing you said earlier? About eternal life?"

"Yes?"

"I think it would be very lonely."

"There's nothing wrong in being alone."

"There isn't." Agreed the girl, not even once looking away from the tombstone. "But there's nothing good about it also."

Ω

Shiori sobs broke Kakashi's heart into a million pieces. All he could hear was his heart hammering after understanding them. He felt like someone punched him in the guts. He couldn't breath and his limbs felt like dead meat as he tried to move. He quickly forced his body into submission, not wanting to get emotional in front of all those people. Most of them had lost someone close, he wasn't the only one and he refused to be the one breaking rules. Shinobi do not show their tears.
The road to sensei's house was nothing more than a haze for him. He was aware of every corner they passed, every street they walked. He heard Shiori's complain about Itachi's absence just as clearly as he felt Rin's hand in his grip. None of it mattered.

When they entered the home, he excused himself, feeling his chest tighten as the emotions threatened to overwhelm him. He ducked off and went straight for the bathroom, near slamming the door shut behind him. He went to the sink, his grip hard as he struggled to fight back the tears. He missed Obito so much! Kakashi would give anything to be the one who shoved Uchiha out of the way that day. Obito didn't deserve to end like this. He was the cheerful moron meant to finish with a happily ever after. Kakashi never said it but they had been good friends from their academy days. The silver-haired boy knew since then how Obito felt about Rin. He had never seen that idiot so happy as when he was with her. Kakashi thought it stupid but in truth his best friend deserved someone like her. Only to have it snatched away by a fucking boulder.

"Kakashi-kun" Kushina's voice broke through the walls of his mind. "Come here."

The boy didn't fight, he let her reach up and pull him into a tight embrace. He took in a few shaking breaths, willing the tears not to fall. He didn't need this tonight but hearing Shiori's cry for Obito like that, made all the emotions he kept bottled up snap. His knees gave away as he sank to the floor. Kushina went down with him, rocking him not unlike a small child.

"Sorry, I should have make her stop but I thought it may do her some good. It was a mistake." The redhead murmured into his hair, squeezing him gently. "Despite all that sass Shiori is too young to understand. She just misses him."

"I want him back too." Kakashi whispered with choked voice. "Can I have an epic tantrum too?"

"As epic as you want." Kushina laughed quietly, tightened her grip on the boy for another firm hug. "I don't mind. Just don't threaten to blow everything up like that she-devil does. Then I might get a little irritated."

Kakashi chuckled weakly, but he couldn't return her hug. It took him another few minutes to get himself under control. The woman said nothing, she sat there patiently waiting until he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Kushina-san. My behavior was unacceptable." The boy said softly, reaching up to wipe his face. His hand came away damp with tears he hadn't realized had fallen.

"You are not allowed to apologize for feeling miserable because your best friend is dead." Kushina said, her tone mostly strong and slightly pissed. However, it still wavered slightly at the end. Her voice sounded a little choked up as well. "We all miss him."

Obito had been well liked by everyone. Kakashi couldn't think of anybody he didn't get along with, well except him every now and then. That day years ago when Obito and Rin were stalking Kakashi to his home and instead of punching them, he had gotten into making them dinner, made his lips tug upwards in amusement. It had been the first and only time Kakashi was openly cordial to that idiot.

"That's better." Said Kushina noticing the small quirk of amusement and kissed him on the forehead. "What are you smiling about?"

"Obito was a goof, wasn't he?" The teen said, wiping his nose with a sleeve on his blouse.

"He was pretty funny." Kushina smiled as well. "Poor Minato often was so flabbergasted when he came home. I couldn't stop laughing when he was telling me about your antics."

"Yeah" Kakashi's little bit of amusement fell away from his face. "He was a really good guy."
"That he was." Kushina let out a small chuckle, giving the boy another delicate hug. "Come and give Shiori a cuddle. She may fuss a little at the beginning but she loves petting your hair – apparently, they're tickling her. I'll get you a tea. You're welcome to sleep here if you don't want to be alone tonight."

Kakashi nodded in agreement, wiping his face again. Even if he normally was prone to argue with Kushina about staying at their house, he knew she'd get her own way today. Besides, Shiori seemed to calm down and her cuddling tendencies appeared to have a soothing effect on him too. Staying the night wouldn't be an ill-advised idea either. His own apartment would be very cold and lonely place to be tonight.

Kushina gave Kakashi one last hug, before getting up and leaving him in peace. The young jonin sluggishly climbed off the bathroom floor, taking his time to wash his face and make sure he was unruffled enough to leave the room. He looked one last time in the mirror flashing his red eye. He had a promise to keep.

Ω

The last move of a brush and it all looked perfect but none of it helped with Shiori's mood. Yesterday Minato went with Hokage and few other shinobi to participate in negotiations with Iwa in Land of Iron. That generally neutral nation had enough of their shit and decided to play role of the arbitrator, and apparently, you cannot say *fuck off* to a country that possess an incredibly strong military, especially when you're worn out by the last few years of carnage.

"Each time it looks better. Thanks, Shiori-chan." Rin beamed at the child while admiring her own reflection.

After Kushina's and Minato's wedding the medic-nin was so in love with her new make-up that Shiori proposed to redo it with henna in every two weeks. It was enough to say that after this the two girls seemed to be on far more amicable terms and that at the end of every session Shiori received an enormous hug – just like right now.

"Rin-san. Air. Need"

"Sorry" The older girl sheepishly put the six-year-old on the floor. "I just really like those tattoos. I'm going to look as a total kick-ass on the mission."

"For sure."

It was good Rin was so absorbed with her own reflection that she never noticed Shiori's bright smile never reached her eyes. Those golden pools were flat and empty like a dessert. All life was completely gone. The reborn woman felt like she should cry but after that day on the memorial park she was unable to do it. She wasn't sure if it was her eyes that dried out or just her heart. Because her laments that day weren't caused by Obito's death, she was sure Fate was bitchy enough to not make it so simple and just kill him. She was crying for herself and things she decided to do. Things that should be hard and unacceptable but in truth were far too easy. No wonder she and Orochimaru went along so splendidly. They were more alike than she liked to admit.

"We're going to join a unit on the border with Land of Canyons. It's sad it's still plagued with rouges from Iwa and Kiri. It's only ten days so with Kakashi-kun and Guy-san it should be easy." Rin in jest flicked Shiori's nose. "When I'm back we'll go for a dango, my treat. What do you say?"

"It would be great, Rin-san." She managed to say it with considerably straight face but in truth the reborn woman wanted to say something else entirely; something more like: *I'm sorry Rin-san but*
unfortunately you aren't coming back. I made sure of it.

In memory of Chris Cornell
About playing games and being Batman

She hated board games. Rolling a dice and then, well, just rolling with whatever you got wasn't her style. Shiori scrutinized a flat box before her with a dry expression. She had to do everything in her might to be actively bored, otherwise, if she had to just sit here and wait, her head would implode for sure. Because waiting was different. It was a gray fog that pressed in around her, sucking away at her energy. Without form or weight, it thrashed her worse than Kushina's bone-crushing hugs. It reminded her how helpless she really was. How little control she had.

And that's why she took Minato's shogi set and was now lying on the floor zeroing her golden pools on the game, trying to remember its rules. When the blond jonin explained them to her some time ago, rather than listening, Shiori might have been trying to pull him into a food fight, and now she was… ok, she wasn't regretting it, not really. She hated to play games according to other people's rules and that's why now she was setting the board as if to play something akin to normal chess. Because her feelings toward a game of chess were a little more complicated than simple hatred.

The reborn woman was five in her previous life when her father took her to a kid's chess club. To put it simply - it was an awful experience. The game's rules were simple enough to learn. Every piece had clearly established moves and had only one affiliation, it could be hers or her enemy's, third option didn't exist. In other words, everything was black or white. For a slightly antisocial child with a tendency to overthinking things, the game had potential to be a pleasant escape from reality.

If not for its human factor.

She could play against computers; they were calm, collected and what's the most important - logical. While her breathing opponents were not. And so however winning was nice, it wasn't nice enough to deal with a bunch of sniffling children. She had no problems losing as long as she didn't need to listen to their shrieks. The woman was a member of the club for three years when finally, her father mercifully decided she wouldn't be the next Kasparov and let her resign. Chess had been slowly forgotten, succeeded by years of studying and climbing the ladder of success. Of course, there was also poker, but it was nothing more than a source of additional income during university.

Shiori rotated one golden general in her fingers.

"And what shit you should do, ehh?"

"I thought Minato taught you how to play?" Asked Kushina slumping at the couch with a bowl of instant ramen in her grip.

"He tried but I wasn't listening."

"Ah yes. You two ended rolling on the floor, wholly smeared in red bean ice-cream." The older redhead slurped a noodle. "He smelled really yummy after that."

"That's the part you may omit. My baby purity is at stake here."

Kushina, hearing Shiori's statement, choked up so hard that one noodle nearly came out of her nose.

"Baby purity my ass. Minato would pass out knowing how pure you are. You know that I remember that one time when you recorded cousin Kioshi and his fiancé while they were being intimate, and later played it in the Village's plaza. How you pulled it off I have no idea. Did you hide under their bed or something?"
"Pretty much. I put a recording machine under their bed. I barely had time to jump out the window before they paraded into the room. But to be fair he deserved it. He took my scrolls without asking and stained them all with tea. Besides, his girlfriend was stupid. She was always talking to me as if I was unable to understand proper human language."

"She was cooing. You were what then? Three?" Kushina's face balanced somewhere between a deadpan and mirth.

"Nearly four." Corrected the girl.

"I see. It really was a peak of your adulthood, wasn't it?"

The golden general would hit Kushina straight in the forehead if not for Shiori's loose aim. And so, it just fell into the woman's soup with a splash. In retrospect, it was far worse.

Shiori gulped. It looked like it was time for another game – a play of tag. The reborn soul knew that playing games could speed up people's learning curve to develop the right kind of thinking processes, but she doubted it was true while losing was associated with all-those-almighty-gods'-retribution-fucked-into-Kushina's-wrath. Shiori truly hated games. Especially when she was forced into a game of tag with her chess-player reflex against a freaking ninja. She was so dead.

Ω

Rin smacked Kakashi upside the head. Further injuring her patients wasn't acceptable but the medic thought about it more like a treatment for severe case of stupidity. Everything had its limits and her patience was no exception.

The silver-haired jonin started to mumble something under his breath but seeing his teammate scoring gaze stopped immediately. The guy witnessing the whole scene wanted to snicker but Rin's grim expression made him stop even more abruptly. The medic tent was practically vibrating with the kunoichi's displeasure.

"What were you two thinking? You were to draw them away for five minutes so I could sneak away and go for help. You weren't supposed to engage them. Those rock-nins had tenfold advantage. Five full four-people squads against you two wannabe heroes. I want to smack something just thinking about it."

Rin wasn't screaming. Her voice was even and fully controlled but it didn't change the fact that she bandaged them far too tight. The guy, resembling a mummy more than anything else, was pretty sure that if not for all those painkillers which Rin injected him earlier, he would feel like a squeezed gammon. Thanks to previous explosions he even smelled alike.

"We just wanted to make sure you made it."

"You know what, Kakashi? I'm starting to think Shiori-chan was right. You aren't simply a dummy. You're a dummy with auto-destructive tendencies." To emphasize her point the girl tied his ribs so tight Kakashi's eyes nearly popped out.

"I don't have auto-destructive tendencies."

The kunoichi just hummed and smacked him second time for a good measure. Kakashi with his big brain and marvelous instincts sometimes was nothing more than an idiot. He wasn't capable to see how much everyone worried about him. She, sensei, Kushina and even Guy with his youthful rivalry was more considerate than ever before. But surprisingly it was Shiori who was the most troubled.
That little girl tried to convince her that Hatake wasn't simply mourning, but that he had been killing himself with overwhelming guilt. Rin couldn't understand why would he blame himself. Kakashi wasn't more at fault than she was, and she just knew Obito wouldn't want them to think like that. He would want them to live. Wasn't it all about it? But apparently mister genius was too stupid to see it. Shiori made her to promise to watch over him, because one more step, one more self-inflicted blame and Kakashi would end in place with no way back. Now, seeing how the young jonin pushed himself, Rin knew that the tinny redhead was right.

"I'm sure. That's why you won't have anything against waiting here while I'll go with Arata-san and his team to evacuate wounded from the north base."

"But…!"

"You're our captain but I'm your medic. And if it's about your health, it is I who have the last word."

With every second Rin's pokes into his bandaged chest grew stronger. Kakashi could only wince.

"That's why Guy-kun is going to the main camp with Aoi-san, while you are taking chakra supplements and keeping it easy for the next twenty-four hours until I'm back. Understood?"

She didn't give him time to respond since she turned on her heel and left, leaving behind two flabbergasted youths.

"I never knew Rin-san could be so bossy." Muttered Guy, not sure if besides broken leg he also had a concussion.

"Sometimes she is like that." Kakashi fell on the bunk remembering all this time when Obito was squirming under her strict gaze. He smiled sadly, once more thankful for his mask. "At that point, it's better not to piss her off more. I'll try to catch some sleep. Night, Guy."

"Sweet dreams, my youthful rival."

Kakashi had only nightmares that night.

Ω

The stuck-out tongue wasn't the most elegant thing. Usually the person exhibiting it wanted to convey a message similar to I'll show you, you dumbass, just wait. Now however, with knitted brows it was symbol of the biggest focus. Shiori took a deep breath and carefully put down the last piece. She let the air out only when she was certain her domino toppling wouldn't fall. She had been building it for the last six hours and now it was covering a sizable section of the kitchen floor, two chairs and table. To build this impressive design the girl used eight sets of domino, Minato's shogi and tiles from a few other board games.

The reborn woman looked at her work with satisfaction that left her golden pools in less than a second. Pretending excitement before Kushina was tiring enough. She didn't need to lie to herself. The girl huffed. She tried to convince herself that what she did was simple pragmatism. All that for the greater good shit. Funny how she always hated characters in stories who were working on that principle and yet now here she was. Some freaking supervillain. And because she more resembled a tiny gremlin than anything else she couldn't even get a drink to drown her sorrows. It was just no fair!

It wasn't even that she felt bad. She didn't, well maybe a little but still not enough – that was her problem. She knew she should feel guilty but she decided she couldn't afford it. So, at the mourning ceremony she bid her humanity farewell, put it into a safe and after tying it with chains of stubbornness, put it six feet under and was done with it. But… it shouldn't work that way! Her
emotions had no sense. She was the lamest motherfucker villain ever.

"Tadaima, shrimp!" Roared the older Uzumaki from the entrance. Thank goodness for small graces – now at least Shiori would have something sweet to bury her distresses.

"Okaeri." Mumbled the child, preparing herself for arrival of the red tornado. "I've just finished so enter the kitchen carefully."

"Don't worry, kiddo. Wow, this is something." Commented the woman coming into the room with hands full of groceries. "To think you worked so hard just so you may destroy it."

"Well, destruction is always the most fun." Said the girl diving into the bags.

"I've bought chocolate chips to bake cookies later. But I couldn't find any dorayaki so I took a bag of arare. Oh, and there is also a surprise for you. I left it in the corridor."

Shiori suspiciously eyed her older cousin but nonetheless strolled to the hallway. Looking into a pair of exhausted black eyes belonging to even more exhausted looking man, she decided that it was a bad idea. The girl felt so numb that even Kushina's hand messing her hair was almost unnoticed.

"Yesterday you spoke about shogi so here you go. I can't imagine better person to teach you how to play than Shikaku-san."

Shikaku groaned as he straightened. Thanks to all these all-nighters at the desk, not only Yoshino was mad at him but also a simple act of removing his shoes was a true pain in the ass. His poor back was dying. At least Kushina found him and offered a warm meal in exchange for a small favor. Shikaku focused on the younger redhead. He heard that the brat was a devious piece of work but standing here gaping, she looked like normal if not slightly dumbfounded kid. Maybe she was shy?

"Yo," he greeted and then blinked. The girl vanished and judging by the noises, ran to the kitchen evoking general chaos and destruction.

Kushina stood there, motionless like a glacier at first glance unshaken. Only small vain on her forehead spoke otherwise.

"Excuse me for a moment. I need to murder someone." She explained and marched after the kid.

Curious Shikaku followed them. Children mostly liked him. He wasn't any kind of kid-whisperer but no child before ran away from him like that. Apparently, this toddler disliked him quite a bit, since she climbed into the cupboard under the sink and using a pan shielded herself from Kushina's advances. Was it just him, or did that kid really have a pot on her head?

"What the heck, shrimp? Come out, right nowaahh!" Kushina shrieked when Shiori hit her hand with the pan. "That hurts. Seriously, what's wrong with you?"

The reborn woman opened her mouth but no sound came out. Truth be told she had no idea what she had been doing. Seeing Shikaku she panicked and now was in even bigger mess than at the beginning. She needed a believable excuse why she behaved like a total moron, otherwise Kushina would never stop nagging her, or what's worse, she would pique interest of that particular Nara.

The six-year-old adjusted a pot helmet on her head and puffed her cheeks so they would look red from anger and not from utter mortification and shame.

"I refuse."
Kushina sighed and rubbed her temples. She feared where the upcoming answer would take their conversation but she had to ask.

"You refuse to do what, exactly?"

"Accept another man in this household. Mini-nii is gone for few days and you already want to replace him. I refuse. Besides, Mini-nii is far prettier and nicer than this slowpoke. Once again, I refuse to be cuddled or hugged by that dude. Mini-nii is the strongest. He is as strong as Orochimaru-sama. He won't die and will come back. You just need to wait. He... he will be back, right?"

Kushina blinked.

"You're afraid Minato won't be back and that I'll find someone else?"

She was answered by one hesitant nod.

"Shiori-chan..." When Kushina cooed and caught the girl in a bone-crushing hug, Shiori knew that playing the sentimental card wasn't her brightest idea. But now she had to play her hand to the end. "You don't need to worry. Shikaku is our good friend. He's here only to teach you how to play shogi. He won't replace Minato. Our blond wonder-boy will be back in no time."

"Obi-nii didn't come back."

That heart-wrenching statement gained her one more hug and dessert before dinner. The reborn woman knew she was being a manipulative bitch but on her road to being a villain it was nothing more than one small step.

Ω

Protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin, protect Rin... it was like mantra, like his own heartbeat or sound of his breath. Kakashi repeated it in his head in every waking hour since Kanabi. It was his most important mission and he failed it. He failed Obito, again.

When he heard about the attack on the northern camp, he was running before he even understood that his legs started to move. His destination wasn't too far away. For determined shinobi it was no more than four-hour run. He made it in two. However, what he found there somehow made him regret his haste. Dead bodies lay everywhere. They were leaking, recoloring the dried grass and earth from shades of brown and yellow to a deep, dark crimson. Some were stabbed, others strangled, crushed, burned or simply lacking at least one essential body-part, for example a head.

The teenager's eyes frantically perused the sea of faces in hopes of finding the one with big, doe eyes and gentle smile. But none even remotely resembled Rin. When he entered the medic tent, or rather what was left of it, he couldn't have been gladder for it. The wounded konoha-nins were lying in their coats with open eyes and throats. They would look peaceful if not for the lips opened in their last cry. But it was nothing compared to the three dead medics piled on one another. Their bodies had numerous stab wounds in different places, and based on diverse shapes of the injuries and their angles – they were inflicted by several attackers.

It wasn't normal for so numerous forces to be focused on recovery wards. Two or three shinobi would have been more than enough, but he saw sings for at least seven. Why they needed so many people here? Not for killing, that's for sure. That and the fact Kakashi still couldn't find Rin, triggered an ill feeling in his guts. Feeling that words of one of the survivors changed into a pure dread.

*Nohara Rin has been taken.*
Those words were his undoing. The last ounce of his self-control disappeared and in place of the ideal jonin appeared a wild hound tracking his victim.

And that's how thanks to his pack's noses he was here and nowhere else.

Kakashi ran his hands over the grey rocks, feeling their bulges and nooks. The stone walls, firm and cold, were coming loose like the paint that flaked from the side of his family house under the still soft skin of his hands. A few more years of this life and drill would take care of that; a few more years of hardship and death and there would be nothing soft in him anymore. He pushed harder. The earth cracked and parted before him like a water, only to be lost in the surrounding him darkness.

When the boy and his dogs emerged from the wall, they saw a large cave full of Mist's black ops. But for Kakashi only one figure mattered, all the rest were just an obstacle. Pakkun offered to distract the mist-nins together with his brothers. It was brave, bold and stupid move, nonetheless the best they had. The pug's voice had recently completely lost the childishness, sounding mature and deep. Combined with his wrinkled muzzle it made an impression that you looked at veteran ninken and not at barely grown puppy. Pakkun put on a brave front but those curled up paws were a clear give away.

Kakashi thanked them and anxiously watched as the hostile units moved, pursuing sound of escaping steps. Everything went according to plan. The teenager could even tell it was easy. If he wasn't so focused on his teammate he might call it too easy.

He raced to the girl and released her from genjutsu. When she looked at him with recognition Kakashi let happiness soak right into his bones. He closed his eyes and savored the moment, but never stopped tugging her bonds. The moment the rope loosened and he had Rin in his arms, he made another promise.

"I'm here now. You're safe. Everything'll be alright."

This one he intended to keep.

Ω

Planning a murder never should be easy, and yet some could say it wasn't hard enough.

First, you had to decide if it truly was what you wanted. Reborn woman could answer it, it was obvious. No, she didn't want it. The second question you needed to response was: is it necessary? This one was harder.

She already found out that the almighty plot was a bitch. It had odd skill of counterbalancing her every move and precaution. Shiori had to be pragmatic. She wouldn't be anywhere near the upcoming clusterf**k so she wouldn't be able to change anything in real-time. She could only plan and operate beforehand. And there was only one thing the destiny couldn't undone - dying. Rin had to be practically dead the moment she put foot outside Konoha. There was no other way if the reborn woman wanted to spare Obito the view of dying Rin and prevent him from going completely nuts. Half-nuts should be easier to handle.

However, making it happen also wasn't easy.

For start, the thorough research had to be done.

Kushina and Minato were sweet and loving people. They also weren't stupid (even her cousin, not that she would ever tell it aloud), but more times than not, they tended to be blind regarding her actions. Luckily for her, they weren't too careful with their fuinjutsu scrolls. For an outsider, the
biggest problem would be entering the house, which probably had better wards than Hokage building, but the scrolls themselves were protected by a simple blood seal. It was enough to say that sharing a bathroom with them had given her enough opportunities to gather necessary samples.

When she had the knowledge, the reborn soul realized that she knew too much and at the same time too little. There was an infinite number of combinations of techniques that could be used to seal a Tailed Beast. And without knowing precisely which one was going to be used, reversing it was impossible. It was a big problem that she managed to resolve only thanks to Orochimaru's help.

The snake Sannin reminded her that seals were seals; no matter if they exploded, made barriers, contained a kunai or something akin to an atomic King Kong. They all had one thing in common – chakra. It had to flow in strictly defined pattern from which their application depended. If something disrupted the pattern everything went to Hell. Sometimes in spectacular and highly explosive way. And that destruction was Shiori's answer.

She needed a seal that would stay dormant if not disturbed by foreign flow of chakra. Then it should destroy any chakra network to which it was connected. In this case Rin's, and if all would go well, also her abductor's.

After few months of hard work Shiori managed to achieve it. At least on paper since the reborn woman had no chance to try it on any human being. Although her lab-rats were burning from inside, their chakra network was practically nonexistent compared to the one belonging to a medic-nin. Unfortunately, she tried it only three times. The stench was too intense and almost impossible to remove from her clothes and hair. And those squeaking rodents were making her involuntarily rethink her decision. Imagining Rin in such state wasn't pleasant. However not as much as vision of the world if Shiori failed.

Putting the supposed-to-work seal on the Nohara girl was a different matter. Shiori used the inner need of every woman to be beautiful, and offered to do the older girl's make-up. She couldn't put the whole seal at once or Rin would notice, so with every redoing she was infusing chakra in other part of the pattern making it passively active when finished. Later she just made sure to always deactivate one loop. She closed it only when she hugged the older girl as a good-bye before missions. She also set a minimum level of alien chakra needed to discord the seal as relatively high, otherwise any medical treatment would end with boiling organs. It should go down the same second the biju's transfer would start - no sooner or later.

In other words, Shiori did everything she could. She prepared for every possibility she could think of. And now she waited, sitting in her room and looking at the embodiment of laziness eyeing her over Minato's shogi board.

With a two-day stubble, greasy hair, rumpled clothes and breath slightly smelling of sake the man wasn't looking too threatening. But Shiori knew better. She made the most intimidating face she could and declared with the whole resolve she could muster.

"No funny business with Kushina-san. I have an eye on you, Slowpoke-san, remember it."

"Troublesome brat." Mumbled Shukaku and pushed his rook. "Your move."

Ω

Kunais and shurikens whizzed over Kakashi's head as he ran away from the cave with Rin in his arms. Adrenaline coursed through his body as a fight or flight instinct. In this case it was run away with your tail between your legs. But it didn't matter to him, he had to get her away. After five minutes of pursuit the boy knew he could never out run them, especially with the additional weight.
The girl had a fever and could barely stand up, not to mention escape from an angry ANBU squadron.

He looked back. They were closing in. He had to make it to the border. Kakashi saw out of his corner of his eyes as one of them was almost close enough to make a grab for him. He turned around with the last exploding tag he had. It was the odd one Shiori had given him months ago. The masked shinobi fell over trying to dodge but to no avail. The explosion was so powerful, it sends a large fireball into the sky. The teenager turned almost too late to see a wall of fire racing towards him and the girl. He jumped into a nearby chasm closing it with an earth jutsu and listened.

Hearing nothing for a while, Kakashi put Rin down and tried to control his breath, which was short and shallow. His ribs weren't properly healed and his chakra levels were swiftly going down. He even had to dismiss all his ninkens to better maintain it. The fear travelled in Kakashi's veins but never made it to his muscles or skin. His visible complexion remained pale, his dark eyes as steady as if he was buying socks. The boy let out an understated sigh and turned to his teammate.

"We're almost there." He uncorked a canteen and leaned it to Rin's mouth. "After we reach the border we'll be home in no time."

However, the girl shook her head and weakly protested.

"Kakashi, please. I cannot go to Konoha."

"What?" the young jonin felt numb. His heart still beat, but against his chest it felt kinda hollow. "What do you mean?"

"When they took me, they put some kind of seal on me. I heard, I heard it's a Tree-Tail's seal. Kiri intends to release it when I'm back in the Leaf."

No, that one word accelerated inside Kakshi's head. He wanted his thoughts to slow so he could breathe but they wouldn't. His breaths came in gasps while he hesitantly started to rise Rin's shirt, revealing on her abdomen rough, red swirls. The boy gulped. It was nothing he understood. Where the heck was sensei or Kushina when they were needed? Hell, even that pintsize devil would be welcome now.

"It's nothing. We'll just wait outside the Village and then sensei…"

"Kill me."

"WHAT?!"

"Kakashi, you have to kill me."

He couldn't scream his objection because the world around them exploded, engulfed in an inferno of orange flames. In the last moment, the silver-haired teen grabbed Rin and using substitution reappeared outside the directly damaged area. Where they had been surrounded by small army of mist-nins.

"Stay behind." Kakashi ordered making hand seals.

A sound of thousand chirping birds filled the air.

Ω

Both poker and scheming were games of partial information. You had a certain set of details and
were looking for situations where you might have an edge, whatever the edge was emotional or simply statistical.

Sadly, it wasn't poker.

Shiori zeroed her gaze on the board before her.

"Can I already give up?"

"No."

"But why?"

Shikaku didn't stop starring outside the window.

"What kind of shinobi would you be if you're always going to give up?"

"Give up and run away. Then, I suppose, I would be a living one." The tiny redhead moved her knight forward without thinking. "Besides, I'm not going to be a ninja. Mini-nii would have kittens if he has to send me on a mission. Further, I could get dirty and I don't like it."

The man just smirked languidly. Shiori doubted he could do anything that wasn't even remotely lazy or sluggish. The reborn soul liked her laziness, even very much so, but the man had been taking it to completely other level and it infuriated her. One more lazy thing and she was going to do something illegal with a spoon and he wouldn't like it, at all.

"You're an oddball, little one."

"Speaks the pot."

The man smirked again at her instant comeback and moved his pawn.

"A clever oddball. You should think more about your moves. Otherwise I'm going to win in the next six moves."

"That's the point." The girl once more pushed one of hers knights without thinking. "Then I can be done with it and with you, Slowpoke-san."

Shiori reasoned that showing anger and dislike was safer than showing fear. However, the strategist before her could care less. He was simply amused by her defiance.

"Show more respect for the game. Shogi can be pretty useful."

"Right." Doubt in her voice was even more evident than the sneer on her face.

"It helps to develop strategic thinking not only in games. Also in life. Humans, just like shogi pieces, have their unique skillsets, and clever use of them can…"

"Bull."

His silence was a question in itself.

"That's a total bullshit." She clarified. "The world isn't some game you can play. It doesn't have rules. People don't have to behave in clearly defined ways. Sometimes, they do things unexpected or simply stupid. It's a chaos where a mere accident can change everything. There is far too many possibilities to foreseen the right outcome. Not to say that people aren't game pieces. They're alive."
And yet she did it. Everything she told him to be wrong and amoral was on her conscience. However sometimes…

"Sometimes there is no other choice." Shikaku's voice echoed her thoughts. "There're situations, when we have to reduce this world to a game and people to nothing more than empty numbers which purpose is decided by our choices. Those choices won't always be good and we have to live with their consequences. Shinobi are the ones who suffer so others don't have to. That's the responsibility we bear for our loved ones. It isn't good nor bad. It's necessary." He moved another pawn. "I believe I just won."

"You told me that you need six more moves." The girl hissed, unable to stop overflowing her waves of irritation.

"I lied. Shinobi also do it. And I thought you wanted to lose."

Angry flames in those golden pools could incinerate the universe.

"I don't like you, Slowpoke-san. At all." Mostly because he made her feel foolish and little more human.

Ω

Everything was moving slow just as if the world hold breath between its heartbeats. Kakashi was seeing, hearing and processing everything normally, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't make his muscles move or even better stop moving. With lighting in hand, he was flying towards a kiri-nin, in the same place Rin was running to.

At first, he didn't know what she was doing. Rin's limbs moved as if some newbie was controlling them; and her eyes were wide, looking right at him, but not really. There was sadness in her eyes, the brown too glossy. Then it kicked him. As soon as he understood her intentions his mind jumped over the disbelief part straight to the why. However, the why wasn't important, nothing was. His momentum was too fast. He couldn't stop.

And then miracle happened. The girl went motionless.

Kakashi was so focused on Rin, he had completely forgotten about their enemies. His eyes didn't catch the step aside his attacker made. Or the second kiri ANBU, who emerged from the ground under his feet. The teen barely managed to see menacing gleam of steel coming his way.

Ω

"Fucking ducklings!"

"Language, shrimp!" Kushina's tone was more bored than angry but still the older woman had been bothered enough to go and see what made the little Uzumaki curse.

The six-year-old sullenly sat on the floor next to a knocked glass and completely soaked book.

"Sorry, I destroyed fairy tales from Mini-nii."

"I see that." Kushina crouched down and reached for the book. "I'm sure we can do somethi…" Yeap, it was a blueberry juice. No saving this one. "We'll buy you a new book."

"Really?"
"Yes, really. Or maybe even better? Maybe Orochimaru-sama will give you one of his? I know you like them more than those kid books." Seeing the child beaming at that, Kushina also smiled and took the girl into her arms. "Great. Now, to the bathroom. You're all sticky. We'll take a bath together and later I'm going to show you a new barrier seal I'm working on. Sounds good?"

Shiori smirked. Her grin became genuine when the book landed in the trash. There went the last evidence of her involvement into Rin's death. All her notes and research went to hell, courtesy to Kushina. Now, the only thing that was left to worry about was success of her machinations.

Shikaku helped her understood one thing. She still couldn't care less about shogi but she knew she wasn't some rational good guy. Also, she wasn't a supervillain. The reborn woman was fuckin Batman.
Colors of tears

White

Kakashi both liked and despised the color. It had no place in the shinobi world, where everything was immersed in shadows. The color of purity, hope and goodness should be completely foreign to him and his brethren. And yet thanks to the light mop on his head the boy couldn't think about anything else of this color but his father's shiny tresses. If not for that ridiculous tradition of Hatake clan, even his name could mean exactly that. His mother didn't want to call him Kakashi or anything else what related to fields or farming. She much more adored the silver hair he and Sakumo shared, but tradition was sacred and so the only son of the White Fang was named as a scarecrow, and Kakashi's mom's whishes became nothing more than an anecdote about the dead woman.

Now, some white object was the only thing he could see, and something that seemed to save his life. It had an odd, somehow wooden texture which surface so pale it felt like a ghostly echo of the lustrous wood it once should be, freshly felled with the scent of the forest. Kakashi blinked and moved away to better see the object that now resembled an arm disappearing under a black, tattered cloak. It belonged to a… person? The boy didn't know if this humanoid shape could be called that, while looking at it a word monster involuntarily came to mind – especially when you regarded its head. It looked as if formed with old twisted tree branches, centered around a single hole where normally an eye should be located. In short, it was truly ominous figure.

"Are you alright, Kakashi?"

That apparently knew his name.

"Whaaa, what the…?" The young jonin couldn't finish his sentence because the mysterious creature screamed Rin's name and kicking away their attackers ran to the lying girl. Flabbergasted, Kakashi followed it only to find how much pain his last teammate was feeling.

Rin lay on the ground with her face in a grimace and skin pale and clammy. Every few seconds she would scream. It had a raw quality, the genuineness of a person consumed by a pain that knew no end or limit. Then she would get quiet, just panting. Kakashi knew he should have been there at her side, but instead he stayed a few steps back, unable to bear it, leaving the creature to kneel by her side and stroke her hair at the same time trying to locate the cause of Rin's suffering. There was unexpected gentleness and concern in its movements as if the mysterious being cared deeply for the girl. It was clearly visible just like the additional panic.

"Kakashi, the heck happened to her?"

"I…" He could have sworn he knew that voice. It was deeper now, more rough and mature but some part of Kakashi's brain that wasn't going into shock right now, was screaming at him that he should recognize it. "Who are you?"

This clearly agitated the creature.

"What the hell you mean by who are you? It's me, you jack ass!" During excessive gesticulation aimed at showing its growing frustration, Kakashi's rescuer seemed to notice its own hand for the first time and facepalmed. "Right, I'm in Guruguru. Just wait a moment."

And saying that, the creature proceeded to open its… face? The young jonin understood it had to be something more like a mask than actual face but nothing prepared him for the sight of what was
hidden under it.

It was Obito.

Since Kanabi on some days, Kakashi felt everything at once. Other days, in his heart there was nothing at all. The teenager didn't know what's worse; drowning beneath the waves or dying from the thirst. Now he was feeling both these things, no matter how impossible it appeared. His normal as well as his gifted eyes were still seeing, yet the world that was so close around him seemed far away. His mind began to shut down, unwilling to think anymore. Perhaps this was the beginning of a panic attack? Kakashi really wasn't sure. All he knew was that he kept hoping for the day he would earn redemption for his crimes, based on nothing but wrong opinions. He never ever hoped that his biggest crime would turn out to be untrue.

The boy's mind was reeling, unable to comprehend or process the images that were sent by his eyes. He looked away, then looked back to see if his supposedly dead friend was still there. He was. Then his shinobi training kicked in. Kakashi was trained to deal with this kind of emergency… well, at least sort of. No one trained him in case of a zombie uprising, or whatever it was, but they were still surrounded by the enemy forces, and with that he could work.

However, all kiri-nins were somehow reluctant to attack. Sure, seeing how their comrades were just beheaded and sent flying over sixty feet by single kick could make an impression, but Kakashi had a feeling that their indecision was deeper. It was as if their brains crashed. Their eyes were vacant, not unlike Rin's.

"Please," the soft, barely audible voice brought him back to reality. His, their, teammate was trembling, squeezing Obito's hand as if to ground herself to reality. "Please, kill me. You must. Please, Kakashi."

"What are you talking about, Rin?!" Screamed the young Uchiha. "No one is going to harm you! Everything will be alright, I prom... OW!"

The boy let go of her hand, which seemed to sting him.

"Rin!"

Kakashi managed to pull him away in the last moment. The girl screamed while her body curled into something fetal, something primeval what seemed to burn. And then she really started to radiate heat or was it just chakra? Apart from being red it also made all his body scream wrong. His instinct told him to run but for now he was trying to subdue the struggling teenager.

"Let go of me, you moron! We have to help her!"

Obito elbowed Kakashi's stomach and kicked his leg sending the fair-haired boy to the ground, freeing himself. He made no more than three steps before he abruptly stopped.

"Something is wrong with the seals." A new voice boomed across the sky. It came from Uchiha's direction, but there was no one who could have said it. At least Kakashi thought so until the white branches making Obito's mask unbend and formed another head-shaped mask away from the brunet's face.

"Guruguru, what are you talking about? You know how to help Rin?" Obito's voice was full of hope. Kakashi could swear that the creepy thing hearing it, despite the lack of mouth, grinned ominously.

"I'm afraid the plan just changed. Pity, Madara won't be happy. But tough times call for tough
Obito's arm shot in the air in a triumphant gesture.

The dark-haired teen began to demand answers but his whole wooden body shook and melted away from him, leaving him kneeling on the ground, while it molded back into a humanoid shape. The monster grabbed Obito's neck and raised him over the ground.

"What are you doing?! Let me go!"

"Sadly, no can do. I've got to like you however you turned out to be a waste of time. Now, we have to go back to our original plan but firstly…” Kakashi attacked the thing but it effortlessly ducked his kick and managed to immobilize him with branches shooting out of earth.

"Stupid Kakashi is a feisty one - cute. I'll take care of you in a moment but now I'm taking it." The creature mirth didn't diminish, even when it drowned its fingers in Obito's eye socket and squeezed, extracting the sharingan and a painful scream.

Obito dropped to the ground with a loud thud, still clenching his vacant eye. His tongue was soaked in the taste of blood, his head was pounding, and he couldn't do anything to stop Madara's monster from inflicting the same pain on Kakashi. The boy had no strength left in him, only agony. But he had to try.

Using his hearing, Obito started to crawl to the place where Guruguru stood in front of Kakashi, caressing his face.

"Such a handsome boy. Pity I have to brake you so fast but I really don't have a choice. At least you'll have one eye left! That's great, no?" The creature stopped trying to cheer the teenager up. It hummed and seemed to think hard about something. "On the other hand, you won't live too long so I suppose it doesn't matter."

Kakashi stopped breathing when the white hand neared his red eye; he heard Obito had been screaming something, probably threats and curses, but at once everything stopped. The world held its breath when it was flooded with an ominous intent. With all this commotion not only surrounding them Kiri forces were forgotten. During the few seconds, when the current horror took place, Rin's screams subsided only to now return with vengeance. That's if those roars had anything in common with the sweet medic beside the fact they came from her throat. The girl was burning – literally. Her skin melted under the heat of crimson chakra radiating from her body. Obito saw none of it but he felt - just like everyone in a few miles radius had to feel - power surging from her petite form.

The last roar created a sonic wave, so powerful it threw everyone back as it they were nothing more than rag-dolls. Branches binding Kakashi broke like twigs, but they gave the boy enough maneuver to catch his friend so they wouldn't end separated by the surging air. Before they were totally caught by the wave, the teen managed to see how the wooden creature sank into the ground. He hoped it fled. Honestly, he would have been more than happy to never in his life see it again. How long this life would last another matter.

Kakashi was left with one practically immobile, blind and immersed in anguish teammate (who should be dead for a long time); and the second, which brain was almost certainly already gone, while her body was boiling, transforming into a rock with spikes, two tails and single worryingly glowing eye. Oh, and it was still growing. As if it was not enough, he just succeeded in protecting Obito from a hard landing, hitting his own head in the process. And he wasn't being cynical because of it, not at all. He was just slowly slipping into unconsciousness and couldn't stop hopping that at least this time he wasn't going to be the one left behind.
Blue

In her old life blue was just blue. It was the color of a train she rode to work every day, her jeans jacket or, at best, a little cunning flower next to her apartment, growing where the sidewalk slabs had become uneven enough to trap mud. There was of course a sky over her head or some sea outside a car window, but the reborn woman never before her death was one to contemplate such trivial things. Here blue was different - more deep and diverse. Or maybe she just looked at it, contrary to before?

In the big shame of things, it didn't really matter. What mattered was the fact that out of the fucking blue, Shiori stood before a masked man that shunsined exactly in front of her. It wouldn't have been so bad if he didn't land on the table when she was eating breakfast, stomping into her carrels, and hence, staining her pajamas.

Maybe another six-year-old would be afraid of an Anbu black ops, but Shiori was the certified adopted daughter of one of the most serious candidates for Hokage; and the well-known cute and precious sidekick of the second candidate, so she felt rather secure. That's why she took a spoon and stabbed him in the foot with all her strength. Not that it had too much effect. The masked shinobi looked at her with what Shiori guessed was a stupefaction.

"What are you doing?"

"It's me who should be asking it, gods dammit! What the fuck are you doing in my carrels, fish-face?"

"I..." The Anbu apparently remembered his duties and straightened. "I have a message for Uzumaki-san."

"And delivering it requires tramping my breakfast and making a mess?" Shiori swung the spoon again but the ninja caught her hand.

"Don't."

"Bite me."

"What's going on here, dettabane?" Asked Kushina, more for the sake of keeping appearances than because of curiosity. Shiori was in a truly nasty mood the last couple of days and the older Uzumaki didn't want to even muse what the little devil did to irritate an Anbu.

The masked man saluted and with one hand swiftly started a barrage of signs the reborn woman couldn't properly see, not to mention understand. That pissed her off, royally. Obviously, her shaming had finally born fruits, but she needed to know if those fruits were some rotten apples or delicious, juicy oranges.

Judging Kushina's distressed face it was the first. But why the heck no one was saying anything?! The girl was mad and so she generously shared the aggravation with her surrounding, biting the Anbu's fingers.

"Enough, Shiori! It's not the time." Kushina's tone was adamant. The older redhead was pensive. It couldn't mean anything good.

Shiori loosened her jaw and freed the frustrated man.

"What's going on, Kushina-san?"
"I don't know any details but we need to go. Pack yourself."

The girl did as she was told without further protests. Wherever they were heading their destination held answers, and right now the reborn woman wanted nothing more.

It turned out that wherever Kushina was going wasn't the same place where she took Shiori. The small hellion was nonchalantly pushed into Shisui's arms and without any explanation left on Uchiha's porch.

The curly haired boy, who was rather surprised by all the haste, blinked a few times and asked, echoing Shiori's main problem.

"What's up?"

Shiori's eyes gained intensity and fervor of a pit of boiling lava.

"I have no fucking idea. For now."

Shisui loudly gulped. He knew that whatever was going on wasn't good and somehow, he would end in the middle of it. Most likely because of those golden pools.

Not even two hours later he knew he was right. Unfortunately.

"Can anyone explain me once more what we are doing here, exactly?" Asked the older boy, rolling his eyes.

"We are investigating a distress situation which requires Uzumaki-sama's attendance. Senpai believes that most probably it has something to do with the wellbeing of Namikaze-sama's students. That's why we are here." Explained Itachi with a straight face. Shisui wasn't sure if he should hit the smaller boy or himself. Maybe that would help them see reason once again.

The three of them were sitting on the hospital roof because Shiori insisted that the suspense was killing her, and not even his reasoning that eventually she would be told everything, seemed to convince her.

"And how we are going to investigate? The whole building is crawling with Anbu."

"You're going to find the room where Kushina is and put a bug there, so we can hear what they say."

Shiori's plan was so simple and straightforward Shisui wanted to cry or tear out his hair. Probably both.

"Why I have to find her? It's your plan. And where are we going to find the bug? I have to let you know that surveillance equipment is quite hard to get."

"You're far less recognizable than Tachi-chan or I. He's the Uchiha heir and I look like my cousin, while you're just one more dark-haired brat who is looking for his mommy. Totally unsuspicious. As for the bug..." Shiori opened her bag and presented him a notebook. On the page she shoved into his face was a seal. There was something about wave transmission and concealing. It was way too complicated for him to understand but he knew a S-class seal when he saw one.

"Where did you get this?" He hissed, making sure no ninja was observing them.

"From Orochimaru-sama." The girl answered with a shrug. "I saw it in his notes, thought it can be
useful and copied it."

"He didn't saw you, right?"

"I doubt it."

All the air came out of Shisui like from an inner tube.

"One of the legendary Sannins saw you stealing an Anbu seal?!"

Itachi blinked. He never heard anyone scream so loudly while whispering. Watching these two resembled watching a Ping-Pong match, but he knew his senpai would win. She always did.

"Take it easy, Shisui-san, or your vein will pop or something." As the younger boy knew, Shiori kept cool. "Even if he saw me, Orochimaru-sama knows I would never spy on him so he doesn't care. Now, you only need to apply it to a flat, vertical surface leading to the room – door or wall, it doesn't matter – and we'll hear everything. Meanwhile I'm gonna make a receiving seal so it would look like a hopscotch grid."

Shisui knew he had lost. He lost in the moment, when Shiori was involved in the matter, because she had always been an extremely effective siege machine against his fortified walls. Itachi's blind adoration for the girl wasn't helping. It was two against one.

"Shiori-san, do you even know what kind of stunt we are trying to pull off?"

"Magnificent one?"

Ω

Yellow

Minato's blond locks were widely regarded as one of Konoha's greatest wonders. They were reflecting the color of happiness. The color of the sun. The feeling of hope, bubbling under your skin. The sound of merriment and the feeling of joy. For Kakashi they were all that and so much more.

The moment he woke up in the hospital bed with the golden mop hovering over him he started to cry. With every tear, he was losing the… heavi-ness was the only way he could define it. Since Kanabi or maybe even before, Kakashi had to carry it around, even though he never wanted to. It was always over him, casting its shadow on his life. It was hung by a thin cord, too breakable to hold something so heavy. It crushed his ribs, made it hard to breathe. The boy tried to scream but a cry for help was of no use. No one else could see it - the weight that had been slowly crushing him to death.

And now it was gone.

It could come back. Probably it was going to the moment Minato would tell him about fate of his friends however for now Kakashi knew only about a mop of golden locks that made everything right.

Somewhere between his sobs a glint of red covered his vision, shortly followed by warm hugs, light kisses and words of encouragement. The river of tears slowly dried out and Kakashi was eased in the present situation.

Apparently, the large demonic chakra coming from Rin alarmed every shinobi in twenty-mile radius. Among them was Yuhi Shinku, commander of nearby stationed forces, who decided to intervene.
His team managed to rescue the two boys before they would have been trampled or burn alive by the raging monster. They were evacuated back to the Leaf, while the tailed beast being too unstable to fully form dissolved in a cloud of chakra that spread in the air. The special summit in Land of Iron was informed about everything and the Third sent Minato and Orochimaru back to the village.

Kakshi wanted to be angry or devastated as he should, nonetheless he felt mostly numb. Maybe thanks to IV with sedatives, maybe because of excess of recent excitement, but the young jonin took exchange of his living teammate for a dead one and vice versa with easy.

"Kakashi-kun", began Minato putting his arm on the boy's shoulder. "I know it's hard but could you tell us what exactly happened?"

Kakashi clenched the bed sheets but nodded. He wasn't a wining child, he couldn't be. He was a ninja and it was time for a mission's report.

Ω

Black

After Guruguru put its slim fingers into his skull there was a flash of the whitest light Obito had ever seen. The light seared into his eye like a flare, but after the heat and light had gone, he was left in the most complete blackness he had ever known. And after months in that damned cave Obito knew a few things about lack of light.

Now, he could feel the soft cotton of bed clothes shifting under him, he could still hear Orochimaru bustling around the room and the beeps of heart monitor, he could still smell the cleanness of the hospital floor. But he could see nothing at all.

Obito was home, true, but price he had to pay for it was way too high. If he could cry, the boy's tears wouldn't be even half way done but he already was empty. Obito couldn't have cried even if it wasn't for the bandages wrapped around his head. He hadn't experienced this feeling before. The sorrow was still there, but not raw anymore – now it was an empty unhappiness - the kind he didn't think would easily lift.

"May I get some water?" He asked.

Only silence answered him. Ah yes, he recalled that Orochimaru said something before his breathing went completely silent. He had to leave to do more of his science/crazy stuff. Uchiha shuddered remembering how the Sannin couldn't control his excitement seeing Obito's wooden body. The serpent man helped him recover much faster, but the teen wasn't too eager to become his next guinea pig.

The boy slowly sat and found with his hand a cupboard standing next to his bed. He nearly knocked over a vase of flowers before he came across a water bottle. Obito inhaled a smell of the flowers. Kushina brought them to lift his spirit but they only reminded him Rin. Whole this hospital remained him about her. He needed to leave, if only for a moment.

He wobbly stood up and leaning against the walls moved forward.

Obito spent hours in this building, doing everything to earn some time with Rin. He cleaned the floor, changed the linen and hung the laundry; he had been doing everything to see that brilliant smile. Thinking about her kindness and doe eyes Obito's legs took him up, the way he knew as the back of his hand, even when his brain was smothered in a grey haze.

No one stopped him until he reached the roof. There between lines of drying sheet, it was possible to
hear whispering children voices. Obito focused on his hearing but his mind pushed to the fore the smell of detergent and starch. With difficulty, he dragged his attention to surrounding him sounds. He couldn't believe it at first but after a moment he was sure one of the voices belonged to Shiori. How, in the name of love, did she get here? Kushina-san was going to be so... In the end it didn't matter. The boy wanted to do nothing more than hug the little pipsqueak.

One foot after the other he marched forward with a snail pace. After a while he started to comprehend what he was hearing. It seemed Shi-chan was pissed at her new friend's lack of faith in her deducting skills.

"I still don't believe it, Shiori-san."

"Oh, come on, Shisui-san. You heard it yourself. Hatake-san clearly told Mini-nii about seals, as plural. That white monster had to mean more than one seal and you have my word that sealing a tailed beast required only one. More would make it unstable and impossible to control."

"And that second seal was to..."

"Control her! Before they took off on that mission I told Rin Kakashi was being more gloomy than usual. I was afraid he had self-destructing tendencies and that he could do something stupid. She promised me she will have an eye on him. There's no way knowing that she would tell him to kill her."

"Senpai thinks the second seal controlled Nohara-san's mind," concluded the third voice.

"Precisely, Tachi-chan. She was programmed to do it."

"So that Madara fellow wanted Hatake-san to kill Nohara-san so his sharingan would evolve? But why?" Inquired Shisui.

"Think! He had Obi-nii. He rescued and nursed him. Why?"

"I have no idea."

"They know each other and are teammates," mused the boy Shiori called Tachi. "But maybe it's about their eyes? They share one set of sharing..."

The boy clamped his mouth shut when a loud kiss sound was heard.

"I love you, kid. You're the best." Declared the girl and turned to the other boy. "Tachi-chan is right. I think Madara assumed that the both eyes are still connected even if they are in different skulls. That's why they took Obi-nii there. So he could saw on his own eyes how his best friend kills the girl he loves. Then Madara would have in his grasp a distraught Uchiha full of hate and others raging emotions, with a freshly developed Mangekyou."

Obito stood on the brink of something he couldn't describe. The weight of everything he heard seemed to press down on his shoulders and he struggled to take even a single breath. He promised himself he would always believe Shiori and so he knew it was true. But it was too much. All of it. Somehow, he kept moving even if every step cost him part of his soul. The darkness grew darker; the pain grew sharper; all of it seemed to only grow in strength and he began to wonder if things could ever get better.

He moved away a sheet and walked into a clearing triggering a wave of tense silence.

"O, Obi-nii?"
The boy fell forward, dropping on hard concrete and bowed his head, shoulders shaking. A sense of deja vu swept over him, as Madara's ghostly words danced around and within him. A devious reminder of all days and nights he had spent there instead of escaping. Struggling to keep breathing his entire body seemed to sag with exhaustion and numbed agony.

"I… It's me… It's my fault!"

His cries weren't even as half frightening as crazy chakra that erupted from him. It was sickening. He was in so much pain. Pain no one could understand not counting one young jonin a few floors down who suddenly writhed in the same agony.

Shisui shielded his friends, ready to use even his despised red eyes and everything else he had. Itachi stood right behind him prepared to grab the shocked girl and flee if it was necessary. Fortunately, it wasn't. A five-masked shinobi materialized around them as Obito went completely limp. Orochimaru stood over him with a grim face.

"Child, what did you do?"

"Ehhh… nothing?"

The reborn woman had a feeling he didn't believe her. She needed to fix it somehow. And so she started to cry.

Itachi awkwardly hugged her and glared at the Snake Sannin. Senpai called situations like this one a clusterfuck. He didn't know what it meant but he felt it was designed for times exactly like this one.

It was one big clusterfuck.
ATTENTION! I want to put here a WARNING. As a result of a wager (and prospect of free booze) this chapter's Omake contains M rated things. If you are uncomfortable with this -- sorry; just please, don't give up to your curiosity and scroll down to it right now because you won't understand the setting.

Sex, drugs, alcohol or even skydiving - the reborn soul always thought it was strange that the things people did for a thrill, in order to make themselves feel alive, were the same things that might kill them. She wasn't one of those nutcases who couldn't live without adrenaline kicks. She liked her boring and easy existence. That's why now she was squirming under the strict scrutiny of a pair of hard, violet eyes. Shiori longingly looked at Minato and Orochimaru who both avoided her gaze.

After the disaster on the roof the Snake Sannin took all kids to Kakashi's room, where Minato and Kushina were already tending one traumatized teenager. Kakashi's breath was whizzing as if the boy just ran a marathon; Shiori, however, was more concerned with the odd burn marks on the ceiling. Her brain bombarded her with many explanations for those markings but no single one of them was easing her growing apprehension. Minato instructed the three small children to sit down on one of the free beds, while Orochimaru laid an unconscious Obito on the other. And then the blond man started his relentless barrage of questions - at least as relentless as any word that Minato squeezed out of his throat could be, seeing those golden pools simmering with tears. His voice changed from scolding to soothing within a minute and that didn't sit well with the older Uzumaki. Kushina knew that both men were wrapped around her cousin's little finger. One thing that wouldn't do, especially in this situation and so, being the only one immune to Shiori's tears, she took over the interrogation.

"Shrimp, I won't even ask why you are here, because I know you're being your usual nosy self, but where did you got that Black Ops' seal?"

Shiori didn't look at Orochimaru but she knew he was as cool as a cucumber, despite his involvement. The girl doubted he would be in any trouble even if she told the truth but she refused to rat him out. She puffed her cheeks and made the most offended face she could.

"I made it."

"Stop bullshitting me, Shrimp-chan, please."

"There is only so many ways people think. It also includes fuinjutsu users. Apparently, I unknowingly copied an already existing formula and you cannot prove otherwise. You know I'm clever enough that it's possible."

Kushina tried to maintain a stiff smile on her face that threatened to transform into a scowl.

"More like devious." She whispered.

Now, Shiori's offense couldn't be truer.

"Clever." she hissed, kneading her blue dress in her clenched fists.

"Devious."
"Clever."

"Devious."

Kushina leaned forward while Shiori almost got up, placing their noses far too close to each other for anyone else's comfort. Minato pulled Kushina back, while Shisui and Itachi did the same with the younger redhead.

"Ne, ne that's enough, Kushina, Shiori-chan." Begged the blond.

"More importantly," started the Sannin. "What did you do, child, to bring Obito-kun to such state?"

The girl flinched zeroing her gaze at the still unconscious teenager and his distraught teammate. With her typical torrent of words, she shared her suspicions about Madara's plans. When she finished, the adults looked as if on a verge of a synchronized nervous breakdown - in Orochimaru's case combined with open fascination, what made Kakashi even paler.

The boy couldn't believe any of it. It sounded like some stupid, farfetched plot from Jiraiya-sama's book, rather that something that truly happened (especially to him).

"So, this whole Madara is the same guy who fought the First Hokage and died but apparently not quite; and now he wanted me to kill Rin so I'd feel responsible and develop sharingan's next stage…"

"Mangekyou." Shiori interrupted.

"Mangekyou," repeated Kakashi with shaky voice that far more resembled a pathetic whine than his usual professional tone. "And… and because I have Obito's eye, the second one, the one Obito has, would also evolve, and then he could use Obito against Konoha?"

"Apparently Obito-kun's eyes still developed, just the other way around." Minato mused. "If the sharingan you have evolved, the one that monster took also changed. That may be a serious problem."

The young jonin warily touched his dressed eye, at the same time glancing at his teammate's bandage, which hid a gaping hole. Kakashi's muscles tensed even more, making him look more like a mannequin than a boy of flesh and bone. He wanted so much to melt onto the soft bed, forget everything and drift into the world of dreams. Yet his brain was nothing more than a violent whirl of futility, trying to organize the chaos in his life.

"Those black flames, was it the mangekyou?" He asked, making Shiori close her eyes. Her fears proved to be true.

She had sought to discover a way to control the capriciousness of fate, to predict and sort out everything, so the future would be happier, less tragic. Of course, the task was pointless; life was far too random for a human brain to take the billions of factors that come together to form just one day for one person. Although her subconscious knew all this, her conscious brain remained stubborn in its attempts to ensure her survival. The reborn woman managed to change the history alright, but for sure she failed to spare anyone the pain. Was all this one big mistake? Maybe when she awoke in Uzu she should have run away at the first occasion, and leave history to its own course, instead of meddling in it? In truth, the urge to run, escape and hide was there, along with the fear of being alone. The reincarnated soul had been too scared to turn around and walk away. Her brain hadn't understood the crossed signals nor the passage of time, hadn't known how old her trauma was, or even how old she was. In her youth in the previous world she thought adults had to be more sorted
out in the head than kids, but it wasn't true at all - especially when the adult in question was locked in the body of a six-year-old child.

The girl's panic grew stronger as her mental faculties gave way to emotions and memories. She wanted to jump right out of her skin to join the sky. In that moment, she just felt like a kid, shaking, terrified. The constricted feelings grew, as if she was strangled by the air around her. That's when she felt a small hand soothingly drawing circles on her back. In all this commotion, she completely forgot about the two boys sitting on both her sides. Feeling her anguish not only Itachi tried to calm her down; despite his own distress Shisui also attempted to reassure her holding her hand.

Shiori gulped audibly as if to swallow and quash her concern. She wasn't some child needing them to "kiss" it better with kindness; even if they did, every time, endlessly patient. She had to get a grip.

"Heck, before today I never ever heard about Madara, dattebane," Lamented Kushina unaware of the storm in her cousin's heart.

"It's understandable," Orochimaru's brows furrowed as his mouth turned grim. "He's one of the things the Village would rather erase from history. Senju, Uchiha and their supporters always were and going to be enemies. For many of them founding Konoha was mere accident at work. They accept things as they are because it's comfortable, nevertheless the distrust dwells under the surface. The Elders attempting to subdue it, withheld most of the references to Madara's betrayal and his existence. And that presents another mystery." His yellowish gaze focused on the miniature redhead. "How do you know so much about him, child?"

"Yori-oba-sama," Shiori answered without hesitation managed to calm down a little.

"What that old crone has to do with anything?" Kushina wanted to smack herself. From all those ancient ninjas, she started to get dizzy.

"She used him as a boogeyman."

"What?" Picture of the imposing man, Minato saw in old pictures, wearing a white sheet over his head somehow stuck to the blue-eyed jonin's imagination.

"You know, Mini-nii, Grandma was saying things like: eat your broccolis or Madara'll snatch you away; if you don't get up right now Madara'll eat your breakfast or touch this dango one more time and that damn Uchiha'll make himself a new pair of gloves from your guts. Things like that."

Orochimaru groaned inwardly. A few times he met Uzumaki Yori, the woman seemed to be more than a little cracked and completely wicked. He didn't have too much experience with parenting, being orphaned so young and having no children on his own, but even he knew this wasn't things you should tell children. No wonder that Shiori was so abnormal.

Besides that, one more thing baffled the serpent man.

"Why with your clan everything is always about food?"

Shiori and Kushina exchanged glances and just shrugged.

"But what should we do now?" Asked Kakashi, unable to think about anything else.

Minato put comforting hand on his shoulder.

"After I'll report it to the Third, we need to…"
"No!" Shiori jumped to her feet. "You cannot say it to anyone!"

"Shiori-chan, I need to…"

"No, no, no. You don't understand. If you let the Elders know, they'll treat Hatake-san like nothing more than a weapon or maybe even kill him, fearing his new power. They'll blame everything on Uchiha. Please, Mini-nii," she gripped his trousers like a lifeline. "I beg you, don't say a thing to Hokage. When he'll return from the congress, you're going to be announced his successor so it's not necessary; at least not right now."

Those golden pools refused to let go of his blue ones, as Shiori's lips trembled and her shoulders heaved with emotion, unwilling to back down. Her dark lashes brimmed heavy with tears; her hands clenched into shaking fists, in a desperate battle against the fear.

A lone tear traced down her cheek.

"I…" Minato ashamed looked away. He knew Shiori had a point but he couldn't withhold information from his superiors, especially when they were so crucial. He needed to remember the things that were personal often weren't the most important. The man braced himself to refuse Shiori's pleas when the Sannin cut in.

"The child is right. Sharing the information about Kakashi-kun's new ocular powers is unbeneficial. It would only raise uproar in Uchiha and their opposing fractions. Sarutobi sensei is going to be back no long after the message would reach him. We cannot needlessly scatter our forces in the light of such threat, nonetheless we have to be swift. Prepare the defenses in case of anything. I'm going to get Jiraiya from the border and check the area where Obito-kun pointed Madara's lair."

The second the last word fell from Orochimaru's lips the man made a small awkward bow and retreated; his pace stretched out wider than looked comfortable. Shiori had the impression that the serpent man seemed to be sort of grumpy but she had no time to think about it because Minato took her in his arms. From so close she was able to see dark circles under his eyes. The last days couldn't have been easy for him.

"It seems that once again you'll have your way, Shiori-chan." His mouth stretches into something that could never pass as a happy smile as he let out a huffy sigh. "This leaves us with one pore problem." He anchored his attention on two young Uchiha boys. "What should we do with you two?"

Ω

After Shisui and Itachi promised not to tell a soul about Kakashi's new eye, everything slowed down. At least in theory.

Fact that Kakashi and Obito needed a constant care, combined with Kushina's brilliant idea of moving them into a friendlier environment, away from prying eyes; and recent stay of Obito's grandmother in hospital since she had become more sick; resulted in takeover of Shiori's room. Not only was she forced to share bedroom with Kushina and Minato, but also guess who happened to be obliged to take care of the two teenagers when everyone else was busy preparing for a possible attack?

Exactly.

And she didn't like it, at all.
Minato's protégés weren't too demanding, no the less they emanated so much depression and overwhelming gloom that Shiori could feel their foul mood soaking into her like an ink stain into paper. So, it shouldn't surprise anyone that at every opportunity she escaped outside. Now she trailed behind Itachi, constantly wondering what unimaginable stupidity had inspired her to agree to go to the top that fucking mountain.

Hokage Rock towered over the Village, being visible from its every angle. Presumably, the faces of present and former Hokages were carved in the stone to watch over the Leaf people. The reborn woman felt rather intimidated by them. Seriously, who could want to be nonstop observed by some old, mostly already dead, geezers? Pondering over it overtook her attention so much, she failed to notice how unholy high was the top.

Unlike the little Uzumaki, Itachi didn't have any trouble climbing the stairs. The boy offered even to carry her but Shiori refused muttering something about her pride, his height and far too quick return to her recent slavery.

Itachi stopped for a moment and looked back at his struggling friend. Unfortunately, the girl struggled with more than just her aching muscles. Itachi stood by her side in times of heartbreak, easing their pain, just like she always saw him for the simple child that he was. If bearing witness to her losses and grief was all he could offer, then he was going to do it, forgetting about his own discomfort. Those days weren't as hard for him as they were for senpai or even Shisui. Itachi didn't know why, but the older boy was overstressed even if he tried to ridicule it.

The young Uchiha wanted to ask Shiori senpai about it but she already had enough on her plate. She was hiding so many secrets while he felt bad withholding just one from his family. He knew it was necessary because even if Itachi's father wouldn't be a big problem, his other clansmen were bloodthirsty. The boy reached the top and assessed the Village below. So many lives were at stake here. He still couldn't understand meaning of life and death. Why some people were more special than the others? Why he felt his parents' and friends' lives were more precious than any of this unnamed people below? Why some people could decide who should live and who may die? All those questions without answers had caused him to feel so small and insignificant, that he'd been fascinated, awestruck, and humbled, all at once. Such was the majesty of the mystery that had overwhelmed him that he wanted to be a little closer to the border between life and death. Maybe then he would be able to understand.

"Is there no meaning in life?" He whispered and took one more step. All at once his legs didn't have anything under them as the scenery blurred like a poorly shot photo. The colors swirled and blended while his head tilted toward the forest floor. Time seemed to slow down when he was falling; it was like a dream from which a heartbreaking scream woke him up.

The reborn woman always knew that child's vocal cords and lungs should be registered as a weapon of mass destruction. Many times shrieks of her little cousin's left her almost deaf. After being reborn, she also had them in her arsenal and sometimes even used. However never before, no matter in which life, she had been screaming like she was doing it right now. When she managed to scramble to the top of that aberration of landscape, she seriously thought she left her lungs somewhere in the middle but seeing Itachi falling down, somehow teleported them back into their place. She didn't know how she crawled to the edge of the cliff or why she couldn't hear her own scream even if her throat was already sore because of it, nonetheless Shiori knew that if the Uchiha survive it, she was going to kill that little motherfucker.

Her scream woke up not only the falling boy but also a flock of crows sitting on the ridge. They scattered in the air, frightened by the sound of metal kunai crashing into stone when Itachi tried to slow down his fall.
Shiori didn't wait to see if he succeeded. She gathered all her strength and madly dashed down the stone steps. Once she ran to the riverside where Itachi should have landed, her guts clenched like an abused bagpipe. He stood there motionless, looking as if hypnotized at a single raven at his feet. The bird flew away only when staying in place threatened to be trampled by one hysterical redhead.

Itachi heard Shiori from afar and yet he wasn't prepared when the rushing body hit him with a full force. She threw her arms around his neck with a strangled sob, burying his face into the crook of her neck. They stood there like that for a while, the girl wracked with the force of unvoiced tears while Itachi was being held. The boy's heart aching for his crying best friend, but at the same time it funnily flipped in his chest, the same way it did the last time when senpai pecked him on the forehead. He slowly wrapped his arms around her back and squeezed a fraction tighter. When Shiori's breath slowed down, she pulled away from him slightly, to carefully touch his cheek and study him with piercing scrutiny, wanting to make sure he truly was alright.

Then it all ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Golden pools dried, changing into ice desert.

"The fuck were you thinking?" She hissed through clenched teeth, clutching collar of his shirt and shaking him like some ragdoll while her anger grew stronger. "You wanted to kill yourself, you idiot, or just give me a heart attack?! How screwed up have you to be to jump from a fucking cliff, fucking ninety feet from a fucking ground?! FRICKIN FLAMING COCKWAD!"

She let go of him and bolt away before Itachi's world stopped shaking. When his synapses started to get in touch again with rest of his body, Shiori was already on the other side of the clearing.

"Senpai!"

"You come close – I'm getting a restraining order!"

Itachi wanted to run after her but his legs refused to obey his orders. It felt as if his world was spinning, and he just wanted to sit down. But maybe it was better? Shiori was mad like a rhino with a hernia, talking to her now was pointless.

His brain was in such uproar he didn't notice a conclusion to which his brain came to when the boy was falling.

No one wanted to die.

Ω

Maybe it was unusual for him but Orochimaru couldn't care less. He wanted to do nothing more than smack his head on the table.

When Jiraiya and he arrived at the location, where Madara's hideout presumably was, they found it within an hour thanks to their summons. The cavern wormed its way half a mile under the ground. Its general shape was ovoid; the walls below the narrow tunnel they used to enter effortlessly curved to the floor while the walls above arched another fifty feet up to giant stalactites. It was dank. The only sound apart from their breathing had been the dripping water. But more importantly – the cave was empty. No trace of the ancient Uchiha, his monsters or gargantuan sculpture that Obito mentioned.

The Snake Sannin was disappointed and relieved at the same time. Finding Madara or even one of the things the Uchiha boy talked about, promised amazing possibilities - from dozens of new techniques to knowledge of the unique substance from which Obito's prosthesis had been made.
Orochimaru was giddy just thinking about it. And yet fighting the most terrifying ninja in history wasn't the nicest perspective, no matter if the guy was nearly ninety, he still was one of the shinobi gods.

Fortunately, or not, now he was left just with some old scrolls about the legendary Uchiha, that despite making a tall heap of paper on his kitchen table, were far too few for his liking. At least Jiraiya had already passed out from drinking on his couch, thank gods for small miracles.

Apparently, the black-haired man thought it too quickly, because the door to his kitchen just swung open. Expecting to see his idiotic teammate Orochimaru had to adjust and bring his gaze lower to meet a new intruder.

Shiori marched straight to a cabin where her not so secret stash of sweets was hidden, took out a bag of chips and with a loud pouf sat on a chair. Angrily she tore the bag open and with fervor started to devour the poor potato snack.

"Boys are stupid."

A short glance flickered to her for a moment, only to once again linger over the open scroll.

"Most representatives of human race are - how you called it, ah yes - stupid. No matter which gender they represent."

"Yeah?" One more handful of chips landed in her mouth. "But boys are stupid in their own special way, only they are capable of. Bunch of fuckstick fart-knockers."

Shiori's ire abated when she noticed the obvious lack of usual reprimand. Orochimaru not only failed to comment her foul language, he wasn't even looking in her direction. Was he angry? No, it was worse. Anger burned out fast, bitterness lasted much longer.

The redhead slipped from her sit and trotted to her mentor, hugging his leg.

"Orochimaru-sama, what's wrong?"

"I have no idea what are you rambling about, child." He said, not taking his attention from the scroll even for a second.

"You're unhappy, why?"

Silence was her only answer and it irritated the already agitated girl. She scowled.

"Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, whyyyyy?" A glowering look made her stop. "I won't stop until you spill it."

"You believe Minato-kun is going to get the hat."

His admission surprised her, mainly since it was so childish. Seriously, did this people live to exaggerate or create petty problems? Somewhere there Madara was on the loose, and she had no fuckin idea what he planned to do next. That was a problem!

"With all due respect, Orochimaru-sama, I hope Mini-nii is going to get the hat. You would be great Hokage but the job would make you go bonkers within a week. You love the science stuff, not dealing with those morons. And there is also Danzo. Guys like him don't like to share power." The reborn woman wanted to go on but she ran short on air. She loudly breathed in and stormed out of the room, completely ignoring her mentor's dumbstruck expression.
In the living room, her scowl only grew seeing unconscious bulk of the toad summoner. At least until she noticed a thing he was clutching to his chest. It was exactly what she needed.

Ω

Obito was empty. He struggled to feel any anemic emotion but none of them had any substance; they were flat and drained, like a used tea bag. He constantly held his head bent, averting his nonexistent eyes to the floor, not wanting to look distressed. He aimed to be invisible, to blend and be forgotten. Obito could count on the fingers of one hand words Kakashi and he shared after being moved to Shiori's room. But it was good. Any social interaction would be nothing more than annoying, and he didn't want to lose another friend over his foul mood.

The boy heard a sound of cracking door and short, approaching steps. It had to be Shi-chan. She was the only pint-size person permitted to see them. His assumptions proved to be correct when the mattress slightly bent under her weigh. The only problem was the scent.

"Shi-chan, is it you?"

"Duh."

"Is everything ok?" After his question Obito could literally feel her gaze anchored on his person.

Kakashi also started to pay attention. He was further from her than Obito but he also could smell sake of her. Contrary to the Uchiha, he could also see the girl, struggling to keep her balance and sit straight.

For the reborn woman, it was like some sort of outer body experience. She was accustomed to drinking, only not in this body. Her legs didn't work as she told them. Neither did her hands; or her fingers for the matter. Somewhere, deep inside she knew her brain was sending signals telling her what to do. Whether or not her body was listening was a different story. She could feel it moving and doing what it wanted. Could she stop it?

Nope.

When she found the rest of sake in Jiraiya bottle she took and drank it without thinking. It wasn't much and being accustomed to far stronger liquor than sake, normally she wouldn't even notice it. But once again she had forgotten that nothing in her life was normal. She tried to walk down the street, but her legs were telling her otherwise. They were swaying – left and right - no matter how many steps she took. Then all went dark only so she suddenly could be back home. She had no idea how she get there, but somehow she was there and taking this opportunity she wanted to say Obito what she truly thought about it all. She had had enough of his sullen mood. It had to end, even if it meant being Timon to his miserable Simba.

"Obi-nii, stop be gloomy."

"Eeee?"

"Orochimaru-sama said he can implant for you a new set of eyes whenever he will come across some would-be corps."

Obito hardly could understand her slurred words, but it didn't make them any less gruesome. But overall it was good news – only not for him (and the future corpse).

"Thanks, Shi-chan, but I don't want new eyes."
"Whaaaa?"

"I…"

The tiny body sat astride on his midsection and started to pull his cheeks.

"Don't tell me it's some stupid self-inflicted punishment coz all this is your fault." With each word, she stretched his skin wider not caring about his injuries. "It is not your fault! Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Apparently, she didn't believe him since she pulled harder.

"Do you?"

"YES, YES, YES!"

"Good." She let him go and continued as if nothing ever happened. "Rin-san is going to be soooo pissed at you, you know? I don't know if there is heaven, hell or anything else after death but I don't believe in nothing. I'm a scientist, and cynic. There's always something, even if this something is totally ridiculous, at least so long as you try to find it. When Nohara-san kicked the bucket, all her life worth of memories disappeared. People, places, loved ones and enemies, all gone in swwuush. Every memory of me, you or Hatake-san. I don't know what her final thoughts were. Fear, anger – or happiness for seeing you. For the dead, all ends. But they aren't lost because we remember them. It's the same with my previous life. About few people I think of fondly, others less so. Among the dead some people are remembered by many, some by only a few."

Obito opened his mouth, wanting to say something but two fingers hit him square in the forehead.

"Shush, now I'm talking. You will never forget Rin-san. Some memories are pre, pre, precious like that and you need to hang on to them. But some buffoon once said that forever is composed of nows, and that's right. If you root yourselves too deeply in the past, you'll miss what's right in front of you. So Haluna Malata."

The blind boy could almost see that rose-haired demonic pipsqueak straddling him with a smug expression. She had to be really drunk if she forgot to at least try pretending she was a kid. Obito's brain cogs couldn't turn fast enough to take in her torrents of words but one phrase surfaced above the rest.

"What's Haluna Tatata?"

"Hamuna Marata." She tried to say it clearly but with little success. Alcohol was clouding her thoughts with every passing minute. "Halu, Hanuuu, Hakuna Matata. That's it – Hakuna Matata. It's from a song and means no worries."

"From a song?" He had a devious idea. "Will you sing for me, Shi-chan?"

"Whaaa? Are you daft?"

"Otherwise I'll tell sensei that you're drank." Kakashi caught on; any kind of emotion in Obito, different that misery, was worth nourishing.

"You woooon't." Shiori wobbled. Her world was spinning. She lay down on Obito's chest, which vibrated from his next words.
"Of course, he will. Kakashi's a bastard, remember?"

The six-year-old growled but quietly sang.

"Haluna katata. What a wonderful phrase - Hakuna Tatata, ain't no passing claze, it means no worries for the rest of your days. It's our problem-free philosophopy. Hauna Mamata, Hauna Matata, Hakuna Matata, Hakuna Matata, Hakuuuuua. It means no wories for the rest of your days. It's our problem-free philosophopy - Hakuna MamaAAAA..."

At the end, her mumbling transformed into a yawn. A few more munching sounds and the girl was out cold.

The boys started chuckling. It was silent and first but quickly changed into an open laugh. Maybe they were going to be okay? It could take some time but the possibility was there. Obito caught Shiori so she wouldn't slide off him, because he couldn't stop laughing. How the brat called it? Ah yes: Hakuna Mamata or something like that. Wait, what the…

"Hey, Kakashi, take her from me. She is leaking."

"It's called droll, dope."

Yes, they were going to be okay.

**OMAKE**

**{One more warning : M-things ahead. There is * where it begins and end being spicy if you don't want to read it}**

(Namikaze household, few hours later)

Kushina ducked into the fridge. Maybe it was a middle of the night but she was hungry like a pack of wolfs.

Minato shared a part of the information about possible danger with few of his friends, the same making their lives a freaking hell. Kushina couldn't remember the last time she was so tired. After she get back from a meeting with Barrier Corp she was so drowsy, she only took already sleeping Shiori from the boy's room and went straight to bed. Now, lack of dinner caught to her with a vengeance. The woman pulled out a cup of instant ramen and wanted to turn on the kettle but a pair of strong arms swiftly stopped her. They wrapped around her from behind sending a wave of pleasure up to her spine.

"Minato?"

"Hm?" The blond hummed curiously, snuggling closer to her.

"We can't. What about kids. We can…” Kushina fell silent, mainly because the blond-man bit her in the neck.

"They're asleep and I put silencing seal around the room. No one will hear." He said, sliding his hand inside her nightgown, along her slender belly.

"But…"

Suddenly Minato turned her to him, catching her lips. One of his hands traveled to her backside while the other tangled in her red tresses so he could easier control the kiss.
"Minato," she muttered again, managed to withdraw from him to take the air.

It was only a moment, because in the next, in some magical way the blond pressed her against the fridge and slipped his leg between her knees bringing them even closer; trapping her between his body and the cold metal. He took her chin and reunited their mouths, biting her lower lip.

Her murmurs and quiet sighs made the man's heart set on fire. He was kissing her as if he couldn't stop even if he wanted. All what mattered was making it up to her for their lost time. Finally, he bent his head towards her breasts and undoing a few buttons revealed their shape from the green cloth. He kissed one, gently stroking it with his tongue, then took it into his lips and began to suck.

Kushina instinctively curved into a bow as her breath get much faster. Just as he, the woman wove her fingers in his hair to keep it in place. Minato attacked the other breast; first gently but with every second his caresses took on strength and intensity. At one point, he even bit her and growled, feeling like the young, vulnerable body of his wife shivered.

Still sucking and biting, he slipped hand between her legs. Nimble fingers ran to the inside of her thighs, caressing the smooth muscles, before they began tenderly ran back and forth on her most sensitive spot.

Kushina's body trembled. She rocked her hips forward to better feel his touch. The invitation to further caress didn't escape Minato's attention. He slipped his finger into her body, searching for the bundle of nerves responsible for her delight. Another slender, slim finger joined the first. The longer he subjected her to his ministrations, it was clearer than nothing else but a pair of shallow breaths, murmurs of pleasure, and the sound of stroked wet body; could be heard in the small room. The echoes of pleasure coming out of the woman's mouth weren't to be considered in terms of sounds, but in shades of sensuality, eroticism, pleasure and desires, neediness and despair. They all melted into one when Minato slumped down.

Kushina hadn't even noticed when her leg appeared on a shoulder of the man kneeling before her; and she certainly couldn't remember whether she put it there or did he help her. The woman's body shook from head to the ends of her toes, touching the core of her soul as soon as the skilled tongue of her lover began to operate on her inner thigh. Her hips automatically rocked forward and her head leaned back. When her beloved bit her, Kushina shut her eyelids; the lips spread wide open in deep and breathless moan. Somewhere in this sigh was Minato's name. Her left hand tangled in his bright hair so tight that if he tried to move away he would lose a substantial portion of them.

With every bite Minato's mouth traveled higher. Nothing else mattered. His own need and aching muscles weren't more important than sweat running down his forehead or those golden pools. Only Kushina's… wait… golden WHAT?

Time seemed to stop for Minato when he stopped his ministrations and looked at familiar pair of sleepy eyes located on the same level as his own. Shiori stood there, no more than two steps away from him, in her sunny pajama and with Orochi-cchii snuggled to her side. They were suspended in the moment, not understanding yet what was going on.

Shiori blinked and rubbed her face, trying to restart her brain. She woke up with a slight hangover and throat drier than a desert. Her body trotted to the kitchen while her brain was still half asleep. Her dreamlike state ended with Kushina's unbelieving voice.

"Shrimp-chan?"

The girl blinked one more time before she understood what exactly she was seeing. Her mouth formed a perfect o to which closing she needed to use her hand. The sound of clapping teeth broke
rest of the spell. Minato jumped to his feet nearly sending Kushina to the ground. He grabbed her in
the last second just to be used as a shield, when the woman tried to fasten buttons of her nightshirt.

Both adults were redder than a beet while Shiori went white. How in the name of double espresso
she missed it?! She knew from where children came from, so it was obvious that to Naruto be born,
first one other vital thing had to take place!

Wait, a moment…

Had she just interrupted the conception of the chosen one?! Oh, my goodness, because of her
meddling they shared bedroom with a kid. They couldn't have sex; with no sex - no Naruto. And
what if other seed first fertilized Kushina? Someone completely different might be born! Of course,
Fate seemed to go back to its original track with maddening stubbornness, but knowing her luck the
reborn woman killed the main protagonist before he was even born.

"Both of you. Don't. Dare. To. Fucking. Move."

It wasn't clear if the newlyweds listened to the little devil because of the dangerous tone in her voice
or if they simply were too shocked to do anything else. A moment later Shiori reappeared in the
entrance carrying a tower of pillows and a blanket.

"From now on I'll sleep with Obi-nii. Now, you may proceed." And with a nod of approval she was
gone.

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Ok, let me know what you think. Personally I don't get Itachi's little dilemma with life and
death but I'm not an idealist nor genius. It was in the original story and I want to stuck to its
facts as close as possible. I hope it was good.

As usually, thanks for all comments and favs; also I guess I have to share this booze with my
lovely beta (there's nothing better than polish vodka, well maybe rum…)

Thanks for reading and to the next time :3
Lessons to be learn

Kakashi's mouth watered the moment he left Shiori's room. The boy took his mask off and inhaled deeply. The rich aroma of the breakfast awaiting him wafted down and beckoned him. He couldn't resist the delightful sensations that whipped up inside his memory at the mere thought of delving his teeth deep and fast into Kushina's culinary marvels. That woman could cook, no one could say otherwise.

When he entered the kitchen Kakashi had to halt and made a double take. The amount of food on the table was too much even if all of them shared Shiori's appetite. There was literally everything. Including Kushina's scream.

The woman grasped her chest trying to calm down her galloping heart. The older Uzumaki was so focused making a pot of tea she didn't hear his steps, although he hadn't been spectacularly quiet.

"Oh my, you scared me, Kakashi-kun. I thought you were…" Kushina stopped talking and went completely red and then laughed stiffly. "No matter, no matter. Sit and help yourself."

Kakashi sat, wisely deciding to leave the woman's odd behavior without a comment. He had had enough traumatic experiences the last few days; he wasn't in need of more - especially when the pocket-sized embodiment of trouble could have been heard from the corridor.

"Stop pulling my hair!"

"Sorry, Shi-chan, but your braids are the only thing I can easily hold. You're too short."

"Too short? I'll let you know my height is perfectly normal for someone my age. It's not my fault those creeps fed you with Chernobyl waste."

"With what?"

"It's sort of a mutagen. Boys your age can often display a growth spurt but no way that your hair could grow so much just in few months. " Shiori explained, grumpily marching into the room with Obito trotting two steps behind her, holding her red braids like some reins. "I won't be surprised if you end up strong, stupid and green."

The blind boy frowned.

"Why green? I prefer orange."

Shiori face-palmed.

"I give up. Why am I even trying?"

"Because I'm your favorite nii-san." Obito answered cheekily.

"I'll walk you into a wall." Promised the girl and for the first time noticed all the food. "What's that?"

"It's breakfast, what else?" Kushina hurried on, while her face gained the color of bad sunburn and under her famous ginger hair it had the effect of making her head look like it was on fire.

"You made dango for breakfast?" Shiori couldn't become more deadpanned.
"Yeah, dattebane, I wanted to celebrate our boy's return to health; you have a problem with that?"

The reborn woman sat down at the table and dubiously glanced at the mountain of the delicacies. She had a mild hangover and not so mild lack of tolerance to any kind of bullshit.

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I wanna have my cereals."

"I made tons of sweets. Even your favorite. And you want your ordinary cereals?" Kushina's eyelid began to tremble in uncontrolled spasms. "You don't even like them, dattebane!"

"They're healthy and good for my tummy. I eat them every morning when I'm with Orochimaru-sama. So summarizing: I don't care about your bribe, I wanna my cereals."

Obito carefully sat down next to his teammate, who judging by the sounds didn't stop eating for a moment. All those delightful smells attacking Uchiha's nostrils made his head spin. But he didn't want to put his hands right into some food and look helpless so he talked to the other boy.

"Is she still fascinated with that man?" He whispered.

"Yhmm," Kakashi confirmed, chewing a piece of tofu. "I believe now it's even worse. It's more like worshiping than anything else."

"You two are aware I'm able to hear you, right?" Despite her previous protests Shiori put a large portion of natto on her plate.

"C'mon, Shi-chan. Even you have to admit you two are an odd pair. Where you're devious but cute, Orochimaru-sama is just creepy." Obito didn't need his eyes to know he had just said something what should remain unsaid. He gulped feeling the girl's evil intent.

"Orochimaru-sama isn't creepy. He's misunderstood but cool." Shiori's growl promised the infinite world of pain to anyone who dared to disagree.

"Yeap, yeap, of course," Obito laughed embarrassed ruffling his hair. He wisely decided to change the subject. "Did you say something about bribe?"

"She said nothing!" The older Uzumaki's reaction clearly showed that Shiori's comment was more than accurate.

"Last night I nabbed them in a R-rated situation."

"R-rated?" Both boys were confused, for what Kushina couldn't be more grateful. She gagged Shiori with a dango stick and sternly glared at the teenagers. "It doesn't matter, understood?"

"Yes, Kushina-san!" They responded in unison, practically saluting.

"Great, so what are your plans for today?"

"I'm feeling pretty well so I probably should report to Minato-sensei," said Kakashi, questioningly glancing at the other boy. "If Obit...?"

"Sure, go." Encouraged Uchiha, not liking how everyone had to include him in their plans. He wasn't a charity case. "I'll be great on my own."

"Maybe you should visit your grandma?" Kushina suggested. "I'm busy today but I'm sure Shrimp-chan and Itachi-kun will take you."
"I'll take him alone. I don't need an escort, especially from him." Shiori mumbled irritably, violently unloading her frustrations on her food.

Every head in the room turned to her.

"Are you two arguing?" Kushina couldn't believe it. Itachi's unconditional adoration for her little cousin was unwavering. There was no way he would intentionally upset her.

"Arguing? No, of course not; he is just stupid. Stupid, stupid stupid…" Thanks to Shiori's muttering and her vicious assault on the food, no one questioned the girl further. They all knew that all irritated spawns of Satan were better left in peace, especially if they were miniature and cute like a button.

Ω

Konoha's park was full of bushes; but none of them should be sneezing. However Shisui had to give it to his little clansman, Itachi was quite good at tailing him, better than many adults would have been. However, he still had many things to learn; for example how to not sneeze in the middle of a pursuit.

"May I help you, Tachi-chan?"

The smaller Uchiha emerged from the bush with a quiet hello. Shisui assessed him carefully. Itachi always was rather enigmatic and hard to read but right now the boy seemed to be even more withdrawn than usually. He was troubled and there was only one thing capable to upset the young heir.

"Aren't you a little too young for a woman trouble? Most of us have them only when we start attending academy. Then the hell starts."

Itachi uncomfortably looked away.

"Is it so obvious?" he asked.

"Well…" Shisui parked himself at the nearby bench and patted the free seat next to him. Itachi sat down obediently only to delve deeper into his apathy. Now, Shisui was curious. "You and Shiori-san are practically joined by the hip. She isn't here and you're down ridden so obviously you've done something wrong. And don't even try to deny it. First lesson, Tachi-chan – with women everything always is your fault. You have to learn to live with that."

Itachi solemnly nodded. His father once said something similar when his mom had her silent days. Shisui truly was a wise man.

"So what have you done?"

"I… I do not know? Everything was alright. Senpai even hugged me." The boy's face fell as if someone just kicked his dog. "And the she started to yell, shake and threaten me with a restraining order. What's a restraining order?"

Shisui thought a few seconds but then just shrugged.

"I have no idea. But what were you doing before she hugged you?"

"I jumped."

"From where?" inquired the older boy.
"From Hokage's mountain," Itachi answered respectfully despite not seeing any sense in this line of questions. Apparently his cousin did because he just smirked knowingly and patted Itachi's head.

"Tachi-chan, how would you describe Shiori-san's thinking process?"

"Senpai is really smart and eccentric." The answer came without hesitation. "She is a genius."

"Yeah, but she's different genius than you or me; right?"

Itachi blinked owlishly.

"We both are prodigy ninjas while senpai is a sealing expert."

"Listen, sealing may be one of shinobi arts but Uzumaki-san isn't kunoichi."

"She never treated me like a ninja." Itachi's eyes shone with understanding. "For her I have always been just a…"

"Kid?" Shisui was glad his little friend finally understood. "For Shiori you're a child, her friend. And no civilian kid would jump in an abyss. She believed you are going to die."

"She was worried."

"And thought you're a complete moron. She probably still thinks so."

Itachi snapped inside, shattered like brittle glass and felt the shards tearing at his guts. He couldn't speak until the last drop of blood left his face.

"I have hurt her. I need to apologize. How do I apologize? It must be awful; father hates doing it."

Shisui chewed his lip and looked at slowly mowing white clouds. Why couldn't life be so light and fluffy?

"For sure it isn't easy, especially since we're talking about Uzumaki-san… Ok, firstly what do we know about her? What does she like?"

"Food, fuinjutsu and Orochimaru-sama," listed Itachi. "I do not think even dango will help me now. She was really upset."

"Sealing is also out of picture. None of us know enough to impress her and I don't think Namikaze-sama or Orochimaru-sama would be pleased if they knew you troubled her. They won't help. Well, I guess there always is Kushina-san." They both imagined the older extremely spirited redhead and shuddered. "But maybe Kushina-san is too… you know."

"I know." Itachi frowned. "And if I kidnap Orochimaru-sama senpai will only get angrier."

Shisui doubted both of them would be able to ever snatch the Sannin. But if Itachi - always sensible and level-headed Itachi - wanted to kidnap legendary snake summoner then the kid cared for the odd girl far deeper than he thought. Shisui reassuringly clapped Itachi's back.

"In that case we need more intel before we start planning. We need to observe her for a while."

"I suppose." Itachi's mouth formed a perfect o when he realized something. "Wait, Shisui-san. Are you going to help me?"

"Of course, that's what friends are for, right?" At Shisui's question a small but happy smile slowly
bloomed on Itachi's face.

"Right."

"Great." The older boy wrapped his arms around his cousin. "You know what else friends are for?"

"Not really," Itachi admitted sheepishly.

"For shearing their experiences, so…” Shisui bent toward the smaller brunet. "How was it?"

Itachi blinked questioningly.

"How was what?"

"Hugging a girl. What else?"

Itachi hadn't meant to do it, but he couldn't stop the look of mild shock on his face or his cheeks flushing pink. He didn't want to speak about it with anyone, even Shisui. He just hoped the older boy's help and advices where worth of all those weird and uncomfortable feelings stirring inside him.

"It was nice, I guess?"

"You guess? Shiori-san is right. You are a moron."

Apparently Itachi had yet many things to learn about friendship and women.

Ω

The reborn woman wasn't good with feelings, any feelings if she had to be sincere. It was even worse when they weren't her feelings but other people's. Witnessing too emotional and tearful moments wasn't only making her itchy. Then her level of cynicism increased at least three times, making the woman badmouth even Mufasa's last minutes in her favorite Disney movie (she still couldn't understand, how on Earth, Scar knew where exactly he had to wait for his brother. It was a whole freaking canyon for goodness sake).

That's why after taking Obito to his grandma in the hospital she waited in the corridor with Pakkun and Bull. Kushina refused to send her and the blind Uchiha alone so Kakashi offered some of his ninkens as a reassurance. Now, Shiori had quite good relation with the pack; even with the gigantic mastiff – as long as the dog held its tongue to itself.

Currently, the girl and her two four-legged guardians were walking with Obito in one of Konoha's biggest parks. For Shiori it resembled a wild forest far more than any urban greenery she had ever seen. After visiting his granny Obito seemed sadder and happier at the same time. The redhead very carefully didn't get anywhere near subject of their reunion. She was agitated enough without it.

Why, the hell, it was she who had to serve as a guide dog when they had two actual mutts in their midst? If it was to last longer, Obito was going to pull out all her hair before dinner! Her poor braids!

But getting her bald apparently wasn't enough.

"Soooo, Shi-chan…”

"No" she interrupted him before the teenager had chance to finish.

"No what?"
"No to whatever you wanted to ask," groaned the girl, trying to stop the overwhelming desire to walk him straight into a tree.

"Oh someone is grumpy today. You still have a hangover?"

Shiori imagined twisting Obito's nuts until he relapsed to being a whimpering child. How dared he to remind her about her moment of weakness?

"Shut up."

"Why? You're quiet a singer." Obito snickered. Until his face met a tree. "Ouch."

To Shiori's dismay Obito was one of those dunderheads that were unable to learn, ever. He hadn't stopped asking her about her bad humor and absence of two peculiar Uchihas Kakashi told him about. Even threatening him with Bull's slobber did nothing.

The group stopped at the small bridge over a river. Obito leaned against the railing and listened to the sound of running water. Then he heard something else. Someone was observing them.

"Hey, Pakkun."

"It's Shiori's pack." The pug barked.

"Her pack?" He glanced in the direction where the girl stood on the other end of the bridge and stubbornly wasn't paying attention to any of them.

"Two Uchiha pups; she's their alpha."

Obito wanted to snicker but he didn't. Something here wasn't right. What he overheard didn't sound like two kids. The footsteps he heard were too heavy and the breathing too deep. Someone else was tailing them. Was it Madara or one of his monsters? No, it wasn't possible. Maybe Minato sensei had given them some Anbu escort? Yes, it had to be it.

As it turned out it wasn't the case.

Ω

The last few days Itachi felt sad for Obito. His older cousin suffered a lot the past few months. He was severely wounded, lost his teammate and his precious eyes. It had to be heart wrenching. However now, the young heir felt only irritation toward the older boy.

"Stop it or they will sense your chakra." Shisui whispered. "I believe those ninkens already know we're here. Imagine what Shiori-san will do if she finds out we're following her."

Itachi gulped seeing in his mind Shiori's angry face and shaking fist. It was better to calm himself.

"I just do not like how he is making fun of her. Senpai deserves respect."

"They're friends. Friends make fun of each other. That's why I call you Tachi-chan and ruffle your hair." The older boy explained. "Now she's irritated at Obito-san; before she was sad. That's better, no?"

Itachi had to agree. How was it that Shisui always knew what to say? He was really good with people. The younger boy wished he could be like that too.

In the next fraction of a second Itachi forgot all his wishes and insecurities. A dark shape jumped out
of the water and caught Shiori. It was over instantly. One minute the girl was there looking at her nails, leaning against the railing and then she was gone. They barely saw a thing. No-one expected any danger in the middle of the Village. They didn't even hear her muffled screams but in no way they did nothing afterwards.

"Pakkun, run to sensei and Kakashi!" Obito ordered as he followed already running Bull. In seconds he was joined by two pairs of short steps. "Have you seen who took her?"

"He had a dark cloak and an Anbu mask." Shisui responded.

It was good they had a tracker nin-dog since they soon lost sight of the kidnapper.

Meanwhile, the reborn woman was biting a hand that gagged her mouth with all her might. She was freaked out but above all else she was fucking furious. She managed to get back Obito, socialize Orochimaru and befriend many future S-rank ninjas only to be kidnapped? Hell no!

Despite her efforts her captor didn't react. He was quickly gaining speed, overcoming considerable distance with each leap. Not only was he apparently very strong but also hailed from Konoha. In Shiori's mind no one else could jump like a fucking squirrel on overdue crack. Summing; she was kidnapped by one of Danzo's minions. And that made her even angrier.

If she couldn't bit him, then maybe different approach could succeed? She kicked backward as hard as she could hoping to strike something vital. Lady Luck for once was on her side. Although she didn't hit anything vital, her kick reached something none the less painful.

The cloaked man clutched his family jewels, letting go of his cargo, which figured out that attacking someone who carried her, while being twenty six foot over the ground, wasn't her best idea. With a scream and pile of vomit rising in her throat, the girl hit a branch and then second and third one; on which she hung upside down.

The man's large hand nearly got her again but a barrage of shurikens prevented it.

The kidnapper cursed. Snatching small children was simple. Just pick up and go, or at least that's what his superior promised him. This girl was tiny too, like a little doll. When his hand clasped over her mouth she opened up and bit him hard. Later as they left the ground she kicked him. How he wanted to repay her, preferably double, but orders were orders. Shame they didn't mention other brats. Well, now he had to remove the obstacle.

The curly haired kid attacked him with surprising speed and force. He was good. The boy charged with a flying kick straight to the adult's face only to twist and elbow him in the sternum, sending him into nearby tree. Or so it looked like until the masked man changed into smoke.

Shiori didn't see any of it; just like she missed when her captor reappeared and kicked Shisui's stomach only to also meet nothing more than a cloud of smoke. Her full attention was focused on her bleeding nose and Itachi who grabbed her and started to run.

Masked man cursed once more. He wanted to spare those brats but when one of them took his target his generosity ran out. He spat a large surge of water flooding the woodland. The sudden ninjutsu and lack of defense sent the kids reeling across the forest floor, crashing onto their backs half-away across the clearing.

Itachi slowly sat back up before he rose to his feet still holding the trembling girl in his arms. Before him appeared Shisui with blazing red eyes. It wasn't time for games. Their opponent crouched on the upper branch, unfazed by the previous attacks.
"He will not let me take her away from here." Itachi muttered frustrated.

"He won't." Shisui agreed.

Both boys evaded as the kidnapper charged and swung out a thick-fisted punch. Shisui instantly counterattacked with a kunai. With activated sharingan not only was he able to see his opponent movement but also seemed to be in three places at once. And yet it still wasn't enough. The older shinobi repeatedly slashed him. The wounds weren't deep but it was quickly becoming clear the boy had lost whatever surprise advantage he held. Each time Shisui was knocked down; he rose back up again to continue now one-sided fight.

Shiori couldn't look at it. She buried her head in Itachi's shirt and bit her lips. The boy holding her was also shaking. Itachi's brain was struggling to comprehend the situation; that this wasn't one of his father's training scenarios, that it was real. He couldn't formulate a thought, at least not one based in any language. If he wouldn't do something soon his body was going to tear itself apart. When he let go of Shiori and how the ground between him and Shisui was erased, he would never recall, but one moment they were apart and the next Itachi's own kunai was connecting with the man's back. Everything seemed clearer as if the world slowed down. He saw everything.

Sadly his body wasn't fast enough to keep up.

If not for Shisui Itachi would lose his head. The shorter boy was pushed backward to made place for black flames coming to engulf their enemy. Itachi had never seen anything like it. What technique was it?

Meanwhile Shisui fell to one knee. Amaterasu took most of his chakra but he hoped it was worth it. Black flames grew, consuming… the boy couldn't believe it! It was a branch; big, old branch. The masked ninja used substitution jutsu!

"Let me go, you jackass!" Shiori's screams left no doubt where the masked man went.

Shisui completely fell on the ground seeing the girl snatched once again. His despair was like concrete in his veins. He hung his head and furiously banged his fist into the ground. There was no hope anymore.

Itachi thought otherwise. When his life felt like a cage Shiori unlocked it with words. She opened a door he didn't know was there. She took out the pain and loneliness making it bearable by seeing the person he truly was. No matter what, she stood firm, not always kind but reassuring. And for that reason alone he couldn't give up.

In despair he threw shurikens and kunais forcing the man to dodge. Although what seemed to be anguish turned out to be a well thought strategy. The weapons were attached to ninja wire, making possible to change their trajectory. They wrapped around kidnapper's legs at the same time when something gigantic shoot from the bushes. The mastiff's teeth bit in the man's shoulder immobilizing him further and lessening his hold on Shiori.

Two young Uchihas took the chance and leaped to snatch their friend from enemy's clutches. The moment they had her someone else's fingers gripped the man's cloak. Obito's white arm took powerful swing and connected with the masked face sending the kidnapper flying far into the forest.

All kids and the dog gathered together, watching for the returning enemy.

"Shi-chan, are you ok?" Obito asked making the girl even angrier. She didn't like pain, physical exercise, stupid questions or being kidnapped, and she experienced it all in the last five minutes.
"Yeah, I'm fucking great." She hissed venomously. "Could you two put me down? Thanks."

When her foot touched the ground the reborn woman crouched and started to write something on it with her bloodied hands.

"Senpai?" Itachi was worried. Was she in shock?

"It's the most basic and unpolished draft but it should do." Mumbled the tiny redhead just before bluish bubble of chakra surrounded them.

"Barrier," Obito sighed and worn-out slumped on the grass next to Shiori. "You wanna hug?"

The girl silently climbed onto his laps and nestled into his arms.

Itachi, Shisui and Bull encircled them, looking for the upcoming attack but the only thing that came (or rather materialized from nowhere) was Minato.

"Shiori-chan!"

The kids sighed with relief, all beside the girl. Her golden pools glimmered with distrust. How could she know the blond wasn't some imposter?

"In what position I caught you last night?"

"WHAT?!" Minato's pale face became crimson. He understood his little girl as usually was being smart but why she had to ask him about THAT to be sure it was truly him? "I, I was… kneeling?"

Apparently it was the right answer because the next second the barrier was down he had hands full of trembling, crying tiny body. He swore to himself that whoever hurt her was going to pay. No one touched his daughter and lived to tell the tale – he would teach them that.

Ω

Shiori was traumatized. But more than anything she was becoming pissed. No long after Minato also Pakkun, Kakashi and Kushina rushed into the clearing, unleashing madness compared to which even world war two looked puny and insignificant.

The girl had been taken home, washed, dressed in her pajama, given her Orochi-cchi and fed; all that without leaving Kushina'a arms. She managed to get free only thanks to a crisis meeting Minato set in their kitchen. Now, instead of her cousin safe hold Shiori was surrounded by three Uchiha youngsters, one teenage jonin and his whole pack of mutts. How they all fit in her room the girl had no idea.

Itachi not ever for once left her side; holding her hand whenever it was possible. Pakkun behaved in the same way, constantly being under her feet (literally); at least he didn't lick them. Kakashi limited himself to sitting at the windowsill and glaring at the bad world outside. Obito and Shisui whispered something to each other and every now and the glanced at her with worry. All their concern was nice but the reborn woman couldn't appreciate it at the moment. She was too scared. All she wanted was to stop thinking about her abduction and forget everything she knew about Danzo's organization.

She knew she'd shown too much knowledge, too much everything. She'd felt so secure with Minato and Orochimaru, she underestimated both Danzo's drive and capabilities. The reborn soul knew she needed to make a new plan, to disappear from the Root's radar but for now all she wanted was to forget.

And how could she do it with all those idiots?!
"For the fuck sake!" Shiori's sudden outburst gathered everyone attention.

"Senpai?"

"I've enough of it!"

"Shi-chan, easy there." Obito slowly walked in her direction and hugged her. "Everything's going to be alright."

"The heck it will. Life isn't a fairy tale. If you lose your shoe at midnight, you aren't fucking Cinderella, you're drunk. But I don't care! I want to play!" And with loud *hmph* she crossed her arms and in anticipation looked at the others.

"You want to play?" Kakashi couldn't believe it. "With us?"

"Yup. I'm a kid, you're kids, kids play. Ergo – we shall play."

All the boys hesitantly glanced at each other but no one said a word only increasing Shiori's wrath.

"Oh c'mon, you have to know how to play, right?" The girl's temper subsided seeing that only Obito raised his hand.

"Me, me, I know how to play!" He stopped waving. "Shi-chan, don't tell me I'm the only one with *yes* as an answer."

"So it seems." Those golden pools sparkled promising trouble. The boys gulped. "You poor sods just wait – I'll show you how to be bunch of normal kids."

Somehow it sounded far scarier than any of her previous threats. Obito saluted.

"Your assistant awaits orders, Shi-chan."

"Hatake-san, bring me curtains and chairs from the living-room. Shisui-san and Tachi-chan, you're in charge of nourishments. Doggies, fetch every pillow and blanket you can find and Obi-nii… think what we can actually do what will be fun and won't make Hatake-san want to throttle you. Now, to work my precious padawans*, we have a sleepover to prepare!"

She met only blank stares.

"Senpai, what's a padawan?"

Itachi's question made her gasp. The reborn woman was speechless. They didn't know about padawans, jedi or the Force! Itachi with those beautiful, innocent coal-like eyes; Obito, sweet good-natured Obito; they were depraved from one of the greatest story in multiverse! She had to repair it.

"You truly are bunch of poor sods but speak no more. I'll illuminate you with mysteries of the Force. I just need a flashlight."

An hour later Shiori's room looked as if was an atrium of war but with the lights off and the approaching darkness it could've been barely seen. From books and scrolls were created barricades. Between bed and chairs Kushina's beloved curtains were spread like a roof under which one reborn, not very nice soul, four boys and a pack of ninkens were sprawled on countless cushions and blankets.

With a click single beam of light illuminated Shiori's face.
"Now hear me. Believe me; you're going to love it." She cleared her throat. "A long time ago in a
galaxy far, far away…"

Ω

At the same time, in the same galaxy and not so far away one masked man limped into a secret
laboratory. This place always unnerved him. All those tubes and creatures locked in them – it was
unnatural. But his captain expected the report - even if the mission failed.

It should have been easy; simple snatching a child from the forest, the same routine as many times
before. But from the beginning he knew there was something off. This child's memo was vague at
beast, not the usual trough background check. Nothing about family or known associates. Not to
mention it was his first such mission carried in daylight. Maybe the target was in middle of a forest
but probability of being caught was higher than normally. Not to mention presence of those other
brats. Those kids weren't normal.

The ninja knocked to his superior's private office. Given the premonition to enter he bowed
immediately after walking in.

"Agent Zen; mission report number 33CH59F. Mission status: failed. Since 4a.m. the target was
under constant surveillance…"

"Cut it short, Zen-san."

"Resistance was encountered; two ninkens and three… children with more than average skills. They
were…"

"A Root operative was bested by few children and weak summons. Danzo-sama won't be happy."

Zen clenched his teeth. He knew that the man was his commander and that a failure in the
Organization was unacceptable but it was unfair.

"Intel was incomplete. From the beginning chance of success was…” He stopped speaking. He
couldn't breathe, his legs trembled and the whole world around him started to spin just like his
thoughts. They were unreal. He even imagined a small, white snake slipping from his sandal.

"You don't need to worry. The mission is complete." The tall man sang as Zen stared silently glaring
at his captain from the ground. "But I guess now it doesn't matter. Not for you."

He paused, giving the masked man a knowing look. The Root agent exhaled through the nose in
frustration. He had been stared at silently, as if the standing man debated whether to kill him or do
something worse. Zen nodded to himself, already knowing his fate. It was the last thing he did.

Orochimaru stepped over the body and walked into the laboratory as if nothing happened. Some
could think that face of someone that just murdered his comrade with cold blood should look sinister
and be accompanied by similarly sinister laugh. However the Sannin's expression was stern with a
pinch of melancholy as any other day. It was the same long-boned face, narrowing to a pointed chin;
the same widely spaced, yellow eyes, and the same steady but slightly ironic gaze.

Orochimaru maybe looked the same but inside he was smiling, honestly smiling. Maybe now he
would be able to sleep soundly because after Shiori's last remark he was more than a little shaken.
She'd become sloppy; mentioning the Organization right and left with no care at all. Maybe now she
would be more careful. In the end fear was the best teacher.

OMAKE
Kidnapping of Uzumaki girl was kept in secret. Not many people in the Village knew about it. Those who knew, often panicked caring about the odd redhead and her friends. Now, Fugaku wife furiously whispered with Kushina, probably planning imminent and probably terrible demise of the abductor. The Uchiha clan head, his brother and few other most trusted Uchiha policemen investigated the case, but Fugaku (however never would tell it openly) mostly worried about the mental state of the children.

Finding them listening to Shiori's tale with eyes full of wonder eased his mind. He'd never before seen his son so childlike and free. He knew the attempted abduction shook him more than the battle he witnessed. But now Itachi was happy. They all were. Obito begged Shiori for another story making everyone else aid him in more and more amusing efforts to convince the girl.

And then the two women entered the room.

Five minutes later Fugaku, Minato and the boys sat silently, looking at the door and listening to Obito cries coming from the bathroom. After cuddling Shiori Mikoto noticed Obito. She also hugged him and then her gaze cruised his face stopping at his hair. She took out a kunai. Then the hell broke.

"Maybe we should trim his fringe first?"

"Leave it, Kushina. I will do it later, although those bangs suit him quite nicely."

"We should ask Orochimaru-sama. He's true hair-expert."

"Hmm, maybe Shrimp-chan is right? He for sure has nice hair." Kushina's musing was followed by more Obito's cries of anguish.

Itachi whimpered and forgetting about looking brave grabbed his father's hand.

"Women are scary."

"Indeed."

* Padawan- Jedi apprentice in Star Wars universe.

Hello again my lovely readers; at the beginning I just want to thank you for all those favs – more than 500 OMG – I've never thought I'll reach it. For me writing FPC is nothing more than pure fun and I'm truly excited so many of you like it ^^

OK, my fabulous beta has just sent back the chapter to me, now it's posted and I can go back to carving pumpkins and baking my outstanding pumpkin cupcakes and apple-pie (yeah I know, I'm very humble person :3). Happy Halloween, All Saint's Day or any other holiday you have. To the next time!
Everyone had moments in their life when they thought what if? Mikoto had one of those moments right now, but all her what ifs circled around one, particularly bratty redhead. Whatever the alternative was, the Uchiha matron was sure that without the girl her son wouldn't be impatiently devouring his breakfast or glancing at a clock every ten seconds. He was a true Uchiha prodigy, at least before he discovered he was also a child. Mikoto was grateful that fate put the odd girl into their life; because of her Mikoto had a son.

The woman looked at her husband who deliberately ate breakfast at a rate comparable to a snail feeding on lettuce. Fugaku enjoyed tormenting Itachi and his new found impatience. The head of the Uchiha clan planned to lead the boy to the Namikaze household on his way to work – after their morning meal. To prolong his son's suffering the man started an offhand conversation.

"Today the Third is going to call all villagers for a meeting at the central plaza."

"Do you think he will officially announce the end of the war?" Mikoto asked.

"And most likely his successor."

"It will be Minato-sama." The small boy stated, hoping his parents would stop their musing and actually start moving. He was already late.

"Namikaze is one of the top candidates but nothing is sure yet, Itachi," Fugaku reprimanded his son. "No matter what Shiori-san says. You should not take her every word as granted."

"It was not senpai. Namikaze-sama said so yesterday."

Fugaku almost spat out his tea.

"What?!"

And so Itachi told his parents about yesterday afternoon.

Ω

"You at least should try to win. Otherwise what's the point in playing?"

Two golden pools lazily blinked at the shogi board and at the curly haired Uchiha.

"To make time fly faster? This home arrest is simply ridiculous. I can't even go to visit Orochimaru-sama. And why should I try to win, when Tachi-chan is so good at it? If I tried and lost I would feel stupid. I don't like to feel stupid."

Itachi was more than pleased that Shiori praised him but he couldn't believe he would win if she actually tried. He wanted to say so but a loud squeal from the living room interrupted him. Children glanced at each other and curiously trotted out of Shiori's room.

The source of the noise turned out to be no one else than Kushina, who Minato happily spun around in his arms while laughing like a maniac. It was hard not to crack a smile seeing them. Only Shiori managed it, becoming grouchier than before. Shisui noticed it and questioningly raised his brow.

"What? You think they actually cracked?"
"If only," the girl theatrically sighed. "Kushina –san is pregnant or Mini-nii got the hat. One option indicates sleepless nights and stinky diapers while other means Mini-nii will be so busy I'm going to see his face only on Hokage Mountain. In other words, both options suck, royally."

"I'm not pregnant!" The older redhead shrieked.

"So sensei has the hat?" interrupted Kakashi who silently entered the room with Obito.

"You know it, dettabane!" Kushina was more than proud of her husband but her mood flattened seeing all those tiny unimpressed faces. "What's wrong with you lot? You should be proud, ecstatic and everything; especially you Obito, you wanted to be Hokage once, no?"

The teenager awkwardly rubbed his neck.

"Well yes, but…"

"But what?" Minato was worried. Was it possible that the Kanabi event changed his pupils that they lost the will of fire?

"Devil-chan here explained to us what the job is truly about." Kakashi clarified pointing at the tiny redhead, who in retaliation kicked his leg.

"Yeah," admitted the blind Uchiha. "Now I'm not sure that all this paperwork is for me. I barely could make notes in Academy. Not to mention all those numbers and economy."

"And moody clan-leaders." Shisui added.

"Foreign dignitaries." Itachi thought the same.

"Not to mention all those morons in the Village." Before Kakashi's mind flashed an image of his self-proclaimed rival with horrid fashion sense.

Minato needed to sit down. Shiori had just successfully managed to draw away the most promising candidates for the next generation's Hokage.

"Shiori-chan, what have you done?"

"I told them the truth?" those golden pools blinked innocently, disarming all his grudges; only to harden into sharp blades the next second. "That will of fire or whatever is nothing more than a rather ingenious method of indoctrination. I won't allow any of my friends to be brainwashed." She added with a huff as if challenging both adults to say anything.

Kushina sat on the knees of her dumbfounded husband with a long-suffering sigh.

"Our shrimp-chan is the head of future political opposition. I feel sorry for you, Minato."

"I feel sorry for myself."

Ω

Itachi wrinkled his nose. He had seen mirth cross his father's features from time to time but he had never openly laughed, until now. There was nothing funny in what he said. The higher-ups manipulated all villagers, changing them in a flock of mindless sheep. It wasn't funny – it was awful. The boy didn't understand adults.

Mikoto snickered and patted Itachi's hair instead of trying to calm down her husband.
"She is precious. I really can't wait to have grandchildren."

After his mother's comment Itachi understood even less. What grandchildren?

Ω

The next day Konoha had a new Hokage. Namikaze Minato standing on the top of Hokage's Tower, before all the souls he was responsible now, took the title of Fourth Hokage. People were cheering, laughing and crying. Not only was the Third Shinobi War officially over, a new reign heralded new times and chances. And if Minato's gold locks and shiny smile were any indication, those times were equally bright.

Itachi stood with his mother, uncle and Shisui at the head of the crowd thanks to Shiori and her rigid clinging to Orochimaru's arm. Kushina was on the roof next to her husband but Obito's shouts were a worthy replacement of the loud Uzumaki. The presence of the Snake Sannin and Minato's team gave them a wide breath from the rest of the mob, making the gathering far more comfortable for the withdrawn boy.

Today the whole Village was talking about the ceremony and their new leader. Kushina and Shiori were invited to every clan's household (excluding Uchiha – Fugaku apparently thought that Uchiha heir constantly glued to Shiori's side sufficiently demonstrated their friendship and devotion). Both Uzumaki were too busy to spend time with their usual crowd and so Itachi feeling somehow abandoned, went to meet his second best friend. He found Shisui in a secluded part of park, surrounded by his classmates; however it was quiet obvious that for the curly-haired boy it wasn't a pleasant get-together.

"Shisui-san?" Itachi entered the clearing ready to interfere if it was necessary. All other teenagers were visibly older and taller than the two Uchihas, but the boys fought against a true, dangerous enemy before now; a bunch of children – older or not - was hardly threatening.

"Look, another almighty Uchiha." Sneered one boy who looked like an Inuzuka.

"Yeah, and he probably also knows Fourth's favorite dish and color," joked another.

"Don't forget about his favorite flowers. Maybe he even slept in his house?" Everyone burst with laughter upon hearing that.

Itachi's eyes were unyielding but mostly thanks to overwhelming his confusion. The more time he spent with other people the more he understood that his senpai as always was right. People were stupid.

Shisui's peers left them alone but parting one boy remembered something and shouted.

"Mr. Special, don't forget about your promise! Maybe this brat will help you, eh?"

When Itachi was sure they were alone he slowly walked to his disgruntled friend.

"What was that about?"

Shisui wanting to change the subject pulled Itachi's hair.

"Nothing important, Tachi-chan. How's your training?" However the younger boy only crossed his arms and waited for an explanation. Shisui groaned. "It's nothing, seriously. They were talking about Namikaze-sama and I told them I know him. They didn't believe me and dared me to… to bring them his hat tomorrow." He finished embarrassed by his own stupidity. However he wasn't even in
half as embarrassed as he became hearing Itachi's next question.

"Why do you let them bully you?"

"They don't bully me; they're just... somehow rude."

"Once at the playground other kids also were somehow rude to me." The tiny boy's voice was flat and nearly mechanic but Shisui could swear somewhere there, under layers of indifference instilled over the years, were hidden unlimited lodes of sorrow. "Senpai went all red and scared them, threatening to pour honey over them and bury them in a termite mound, after which she described with great detail how insects devour their victims. One girl puked."

"So she cares," Shisui joked, "In her own psychotic way but it's always something. However I'm sure you didn't need her help just like I don't need yours."

"I did not need it." The younger Uchiha admitted. "But senpai said that people can be very cruel. They can hate you for being too smart or too pretty; too popular with the opposite sex.; for looking different, being fat, or just because they want to pick on someone to feel better. I have people who love me and nothing last forever. That in a moment those idiots will be out of my life and she will not. That one day I can have mature relationships, ones who are not involving nitwits full of bullocks. That, I needed to hear. It felt good. Are you feeling good?"

"That kid is odd even when she isn't here." Shisui mumbled. His words were quiet enough for Itachi not to hear them. "I don't feel bad, if that's what you're asking."

Itachi blinked. It wasn't clear if he believed him but the little heir decided to let it go, for now.

"How do you want to get Hokage's hat?"

"I have no idea, yet."

Itachi thought that Shisui, for someone who so frequently complained about Shiori's attitude, acted like her more often than he would like to admit. He wasn't so snarky or rude, but he hid behind a mask. Shiori used indifference, Shisui empty pleasantries, but they were both hiding. They were his friends and friends helped each other.

And that's why an hour later two Uchiha were lurking in a bushes, observing Hokage's Tower. They already tried to get inside two times and two times they were caught before they managed to climb to the second floor.

"Shouldn't we be happy?" asked the younger boy. "It means Namikaze-sama is well protected."

Shisui's eyelid twitched. Maybe Itachi was right (it was one of his more infuriating qualities) but Shisui was too pissed to admit it. Most times he was calm and collected individual but pressure of his peers was just too much sometimes. And this was one of those rare occasions. Was it so bad that he wanted to fit in, not completely because he knew it was impossible; but maybe just for a short while they could stop mock him and be civil?

"We need another plan."

"Plan of what?"

Both Uchiha jumped out of their skin hearing an unexpected whisper next to their ears. It was followed by a noise of fist connecting with a skull. Kakashi rammed his knuckles into Obito's hair a few more times for a good measure.
"You can't just go away from me whenever you hear something interesting. You can get hurt, idiot."

"You were writing stupid reports the whole day, while I was bored out of my mind." The blind teenager whined, trying to get rid of Kakashi's hand from his head. "They were whispering in the bushes, I was just curious what they're up to. You're just angry I managed to slip away from you unnoticed. In no time I'll be a super spy and you'll be as lame as ever."

"In no time you'll walk into a wall, you imbecile."

"I will not! And I discovered something. They're planning some kind of mischief – without Shiori. I'm so proud of you guys!" Obito hugged both boys, who were too dumbfounded to evade it. "So what can we do to help?"

Kakashi's fist once again bumped into his teammate skull.

"What we? Could you - just for once - don't drag me into another mess?"

"How can't I? You love it and you know it."

Kakashi massaged the bridge of his nose. Why, exactly, did he miss that idiot?

Ω

It was hell. Not even all those delicious sweets could change it. The reborn woman was never a rebel or anarchist. She liked peace and quiet. She couldn't care less about the poor and oppressed or their rich oppressors. But now, spending hours with a bunch of pompous bastards she herself felt pretty much oppressed. She glanced at an ancient Hyuga matron that resembled a concerned chicken. Shiori was impressed. She had met many buffoons in both of her lifetimes but Hyuga Kazumi was so elegant it was impossible to understand her. The old crone used not so much speech but rather modulated yawning. Both her sons, who continued the family trend, looked like two snobbish roosters. The only serene presence in that loony-henhouse was Hiyashi's wife. Unfortunately, the gentle woman was almost completely overwhelmed by Daymio's wife. Madam Shijimi was... well, Shiori could describe her only with two words: fat and abhorrent. Even her cat was allergic to her plump fingers, trying to run away every two minutes.

The little Uzumaki cringed inwardly when those fingers started to pull her cheeks again. Apparently Madam Horrible loved everything what was sweet, cute and shiny. To the girl's charging in her new, golden kimono Shiori met all mentioned criteria. She looked pleasingly at Kushina but the older redhead just grimaced. Both Uzumaki knew they had to suffer it for Minato. They were Hokage's family now. They had responsibilities; even if both redheads hated them with passion. Kushina's only consolation was the fact that Shiori had it worse. Even the fat cat saw it – not only that – the nasty furry ball was visibly grateful for it. Nasty, spiteful, bag of... The six-year-old took a deep breath. She shouldn't be thinking about this situation as if it was one, big, fucking bucket full of snakes. She should think of one snake at once and try to unravel them somehow. But then again which one to do first? All. Okay, she had to try another way and she had to try it fast. Little more mollycoddling and political talk and she was going to combust.

In spite of Shiori's usual bad luck, opportunity presented itself in the next minute. Tora, the cat, taking advantage of its mistress distraction, managed to slip from her clutches and run away.

"I'll catch the kitty!" Shiori shouted with her childish, sickly sweet voice and ran after the cat. She had no idea in which way the pet escaped, it wasn't important. The only important thing was the growing distance between her and Madam Shijimi. The reborn woman ran as far as her short legs allowed. Sadly, it wasn't too far, so to be sure she wasn't discovered too fast she hid in a store room.
The girl shut the door and slid down to the floor.

Golden pools blinked. On the other side of the room sat the cat. The pet froze seeing the child. It would be completely normal if not for the bottle of sake in its paws.

"Meow."

Shiori scowled. How could she be so stupid?

"Nin-cat! You're a freaking nin-cat!"

"Shut up!" the cat growled with a voice harsh like fragmented rock in a hessian sack. Somehow it complimented his brown fur and head shaped more like a squashed pumpkin than proper feline skull.

The pet-ninja fixed the red bow on its ear; crunched its mashed nose and took a large gulp of alcohol.

"What are you looking at?"

Shiori had many questions but one surfaced above all others.

"Are you male or female?"

The cat switched its tail left to right as if to rid itself of the gathering tension.

"And what do you care, human cub? I'm the best Konoha nin-beast. You should be in awe of my sharp talons, puffy tail and graceful form."

"And that's why you're drinking instead of guarding daimyo's wife?"

The cat's paws curled tightly around the bottle, the animal could see the girl's small neck snapping in its mind and it felt good. Unfortunately, no matter how irritating this human cub was, she belonged to his new boss and was practically untouchable.

"I need to report tomorrow. It means later some stupid genins will chase me across the whole Village. As if my life doesn't suck enough."

The reborn woman blinked like an owl. She vaguely remembered something from a manga about a running cat, but could it be the same animal?

"Why are they chasing you?" She asked seeing how miserable the creature was. She walked to it and sat down hoping for a drink.

"Supposedly that's practice of their tracking and hunting skills, or something." The cat mumbled drinking from the bottle, but not sharing.

Forgetting about the alcohol, Shiori scrunched her nose. Looking at the nin-cat she felt something she hadn't experienced for a long time – compassion. It was never something she felt on a daily basis. You either had it or you didn't, and the reborn soul was unbelievably happy that she was rather lacking in that department, because having it wasn't an advantage. Since the day of her rebirth she didn't connect with the pain she saw everywhere in this world, it was easier for her. Her skin grew a little thicker every day, her empathy shrinking to something you could more accurately compare to some kind of manipulation tool. Even Hatake, Obito and the rest of her minions stirred in her more pity than compassion. She cared for them all, she wasn't so blind to deny it, but it still wasn't the same.
Her melancholy was disturbed by the younger of the Hyuga twins, who just opened the door.

"Uzumaki-sama?"

Maybe Shiori was compassionate towards the drunk pet, but hardly enough to suffer for it; so she caught the feline, squeezing it so tightly that its whole last gulp was spitted.

"Look, Hizashi-san, I've caught the kitty."

The man smiled stiffly. This sweet kid with dimples in the cheeks was completely different than the gloomy cloud of silent anger that cumulated earlier during the meeting. He and Hiashi even had a little wager when exactly the girl was going to break and bite Daymio's wife.

"I see it, princess, but..." the man sniffed. "Why do you smell of sake?"

Shiori tightened her grip on the wriggling feline at the same time biting her lips. Hizashi could swear that those eyes glossed with unshed tears would be able to stop any marching army.

"It was the kitty's fault. Bad kitty!"

She squeezed harder.

Ω

Obito put his hand softly on the shoulder of his curly haired cousin as a token of his sympathy.

"Sorry, Shisui-kun, but I'm afraid you need to forget about the hat. Sensei is guarded harder than Kushina's soba secret recipe. Even my super-extra-hyper-plan failed."

Itachi had no idea how anyone could believe that Obito was some random lost blind guy. Not only no one could just walk around Hokage's Tower, everyone knew Obito and Kakashi-san's dogs.

"I don't understand Obito-san's strategy." He admitted.

Kakashi simply sighed. The young jonin slumped on the bench he shared with the Uchiha heir.

"There is nothing to understand, Itachi-san. Obito is an idiot, that's all."

Itachi nodded. They tried to get to Minato's office three times and three times they spectacularly failed. There was no sneaking around Anbu Black Ops; especially, when Obito was prone to bumping into the nearest wall every five minutes. Shisui would have to deal with his classmates without the hat.

The four of them weren't hiding anymore. They sat in front of the entrance to the Tower bathing in the sun and waiting for nothing in particular. In his life Kakashi had passed those stairs so often, his black shoes practically made a gentle pitter patter on the stone-flecked grey. However, today as he sat there they were anything but; the wind stirred dried leaves to pile up against them. They sang with hundreds of footfalls in a single hour, and stole a fraction of heat from every one of them. Waiting could do this, he guessed. It gave one time to examine the ordinary and ask questions of things they simply take for granted. For a moment he wondered if it was like that with those people, if they had become a part of his life Kakashi took for granted and viewed as something unchanging. And unchanged it would stay, if he had anything to say in that matter. Obito was back. He had sensei, Kushina and the devil's spawn. Shiori even dragged two more brats into his life. He also lost someone important. Rin's absence was clearly visible but the teen tried not to think about it. Everything changed as had he. Wasn't change the only constant they were all guaranteed?
"What are you all doing here?"

Kakashi smirked seeing how Itachi perked up hearing Shiori's voice. The boy drank her presence like a strong vine and enjoyed feeling tipsy. He watched her as if she had the stars in her hands and soft petals at her feet. Kakashi bit his lips to stop an upcoming snort. To think that from all girls in Konoha Itachi was infatuated with her… poor sod.

Before any of them could answer Obito jumped on her and with his usual blabber explaining what they were doing.

Shiori's eyelid twitched.

"Please, Shisui-san, tell me you don't want that hat for its esthetic advantages. That thing is horrid and whoever designed it should sizzle in Hell."

"It's Hokage's hat. It's a symbol, it has a purpose. It doesn't need to be pretty." Kakashi deadpanned.

Shiori's face fell faster than a corpse in cement boots.

"It doesn't mean it shouldn't. I know that beauty is an unquantifiable characteristic. The criteria are impossible to establish objectively. But some things are pretty and others aren't. That hat is hideous – it's a simple fact. Just like a fact that over ninety percent of the Uchiha clan is pleasing to the eye. That's genetic. And you," her accusing golden pools focused on the silver-haired teenager. "You, Hatake-san, are so unnaturally pretty it's freakish."

The girl stopped her rant, with verve she turned on her heel and marched to the Tower.

"Are you coming or what?"

The four boys strolled after her. Obito poked his apparently too handsome friend for fun while Itachi silently sulked in the back. His senpai thought that Hatake-san was pretty and even if she also used the word freakish, it still worried him. Shisui looking at all this madness started to believe that no hat was worth so much insanity.

Surpassingly no one questioned them when they were overcoming subsequent floors. Their unusual group was stopped by a young man only before they could enter Minato's office. A few years older than Kakashi, with weal-like scar on his face that ran across the bridge of his nose and down across the left side of his face.

"Shiori-san"

"Hey, Namiashi-san. I'm here to see Mini-nii."

"Mini-nii is busy…" The young bodyguard realized what he said and paled. "Hokage-sama! I've meant Hokage-sama. He's very busy and…"

In his fright Namiashi Raido overlooked when and how the little Uzumaki passed him and with childish glee and complete lack of concern for any consequences ran into the office.

Minato stumbled in the middle of the speech when his little ray of sunshine burst into the room. He, Inoichi and Shikaku were just talking about relocating their forces in the Land of Rain but now every detail of its topography flew away from his head.

"Shiori-chan what are you…?"
The girl glued herself to his leg and bounced, threatening to take his pants off, so he quickly took her into his arms. Then she glued herself to his neck.

"I missed you sooooo much, Mini-nii."

"I also missed you."

"But you're never home now. Don't cha love me anymore?"

Hearing it Minato's executive functioning was down to staring around with his mouth wide open, looking for help. The only support he got were looks of pity (Inoichi) and amusement (Shikaku); his students and Shiori's minions wore a suitable mix of the two.

"Of course not!" He soothed her stroking her red locks. "I could never stop loving you."

"So can we have dango for dinner?" Her distress disappeared as fast as it started. That Machiavellian smile was the blond man's undoing. Minato knew what Shiori was doing from the beginning. It was her favorite method of manipulation and he gave in every time. However it was before; now he had an image to maintain (especially when others were looking).

"We can grab some tomorrow. You shouldn't have sweets just before going to bed." Damn, why did her eyes turn glossy once more? Why she was sniffing? Minato was being reasonable and Shiori was all in for reason. Sadly, this reason not always concerned her.

"I… sniff, I understand sniff… but then maybe can I have Hokage's hat? Sniff Pretty please?"

"Yes, yes, of course." He agreed hurriedly.

"Great, thanks Mini-nii!"

The blond man stood flabbergasted when Shiori gave him a loud peck in the nose and broke free of his embrace. Somewhere in the next second Obito grabbed the hat from his desk and they were gone. Shikaku reassuringly patted Minato's arm.

"Women are a drag; even the pintsize one."

Ω

Itachi was happy looking how Shisui was going away with the ugly hat safely sealed in a scroll. They all observed as the curly haired boy disappeared around the corner.

"It won't do him anything good." Kakashi muttered.

"No, it won't." Shiori agreed. Her voice was flat and dispassionate again and that's why Itachi knew she was worried and when his senpai was worried she tried to make things better. Then everything was alright.

Ω

The air was so brittle it could snap, and if it didn't, I might. No-one spoke, what was there to say? False hopes wouldn't cut it right now. Yesterday they were all he could think of, anything to ease the terrible burden of anxiety. But now here he was - in the same clearing, surrounded by his classmates. And every single one of them was wearing the same stupid hat. They bought them in a gift shop. A few ryo and his place to belong was gone.

Maybe Itachi was right. Maybe it was as Shiori said. He shouldn't care. Those people weren't
important. But then why did his fist clutch? Why did his lips tremble? Why did his eyes burn? Why did everyone go completely silent all of a sudden and why did he feel a big hand on his head?

Shisui's eyes went up where they met a pair of bright blue ones and a second shining like gold.

"Kushina-san is making delicious dinner. You must try pizza, I've made it and it's even better. Later we're having dango," Shiori beamed at him.

"Your cousin and my team are waiting for us. Are you done here?" Minato asked extending his hand.

The young lonely boy glanced at his peers and somehow in the middle of this clearing they stopped being important. Shisui took Minato's hand. He wasn't so lonely anymore.

I'm alive! I know it looked otherwise but I'm still here. Sorry for the delay. I have a new job and it's very time consuming. Designing apps and counting all those pixels isn't good for my eyes (pixel perfection is evil!).

No omake this time. I had no idea what to write about. Next chapter will have 2 – at least I hope so. If any of you have any idea I'll gladly hear it. Hmm… maybe about Inoichi's thoughts about Shiori and her manipulation techniques?

Thanks for reading and sticking with my story. Of course big thanks to my beta mrsmiawallace88.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!