Great Lakes & Expectations (previously pull down your dreams)

by Electrasev5n

Summary

Jiraiya makes a sealing discovery! By that he means he has accidentally managed to summon a very confused, unhappy human. Obviously, everyone should focus on the positives and not give this too much thought.

She would very much like to unsubscribe from all of this.
'The drop site is compromised.'

He didn't see anyone, but they were waiting for him. Jiraiya kept an easy smile and swaggered on up the road.

'Did my contact sell me out, or is it a third party?'

Whoever it was waited until he'd stuck a key in the post box. The kunai thudded into a metal mailbox when he dodged. A postal worker inside looked up at the sound and screamed. She dropped to her knees behind the counter as the second weapon shattered through the glass that separated the boxes and the mailing area.

Jiraiya winced. “Hey, hey!” He batted a shuriken off course and clapped his hands into rat. “Be careful! It's business hours.” The illusion he'd sensed melted away, revealing a minefield of traps.

His eyebrows shot up. “Rude.”
A woman wearing the band of a Kiri traitor silently dropped off the ceiling with a jagged sword. He cursed and danced away. She rushed him with a grim look, because that was just how Kiri made their shinobi. He gripped the first kunai and wrenched it out of the mailbox with a tooth-aching screech of metal. He parried her strike almost lazily and stretched his foot out to trip her. She stabbed at it.

Movement behind.

Jiraiya leaned to the side- and the woman’s comrade speared her with another kunai. She let out an indignant shout and put a hand up, too late.

“You should get that looked at,” Jiraiya said helpfully.

He could see dirt under her blunt nails when she wrapped her hand around the handle of the weapon in her shoulder. She bared her teeth at him, because of course she did.
Jiraiya pre-emptively winced on her behalf because he could see where this was going.

The kiri woman pulled the kunai out in a spray of blood. He caught it out of his peripheral vision because two more shinobi were pincering him in. The next seconds were flashes of blood and steel—mostly their steel, because he was more interested in figuring these people out than impressing them with his repertoire.

Stranger two was male, with no headband at all. Number three declared current allegiance to Sunagakure, but that was probably not true. If Suna was accepting missions to attack Konoha, their ally, they wouldn't do it with village insignia on.

'This is a motley group. Could be what it looks like, but it is rare for missing nin from different villages to band like this.'

A lot of chakra was rising behind him. The kind of chakra that required his full attention. Jiraiya stole stranger 3’s sword and kicked him into the wall in one movement. He was cutting out stranger 2’s throat before he’d even registered the sound of bones breaking on impact.

The woman from Kiri was mid-summon, using a lot of blood. ...The blood from the wound near her heart.
“Shit,” Jiraiya said passionately. He tossed the garbage sword aside as he lunged toward the scroll she was using, reading it as quickly as possible. Something sentient, something from a great lake -

He didn't catch any more and the first thing he thought of was a mirror seal. He smeared it over the seal with the woman's own blood, covering part of her seal and corrupting the whole thing. If he was lucky, it'd create a loop, making the seal useless by calling on the user's chakra instead of the beast she wanted.

But there was smoke, even as the missing-nin gave a strangled scream. It ended on a high, sudden note.

There was a squelch.

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She couldn't sleep.

Regina dully weighed the situation yet again. Her battery was at 6% now. She could read a little while longer. Or she could lean out of bed and plug it in, but then she'd have to put the phone down and lay alone with her thoughts.
'I don't want to let my phone die,' she tried to convince herself. 'I need the alarm.'

It felt bleak as hell to even think about going to work in less than 5 hours. She needed to sleep, but she couldn't because all she could think about was things that made her miserable, so she kept her mind busy with reading, which kept her further from sleeping.

Maybe food would help.

Virtuous and bummed out about it, Regina left her phone on the floor to recover. Without turning on the light, she found her slippers on the end of her rug and stuck her feet in before she ventured out onto the hardwood.

She didn't have to step out barefoot to know that it was punishingly cold. That was all you could expect from winter here.

'I feel so weird.'

Regina rubbed at her chest, trying not to wince at just... she didn't know what, exactly. But she felt off.
Tomorrow was going to fucking suck. She should have been asleep three hours ago, but she wasn't, and she was exhausted but going to sleep was absolutely unthinkable.

She made it down the stairs with minimal creaking, which was good. But the fridge seemed utterly uninspiring.

Light caught her eye.

Regina flinched away with a frown, bringing a hand up.

'It's what, 3 in the morning? Who is up?'

She unlocked the door and pulled it open, trying to see what was going on. Someone's headlights, it had to be. But she couldn't see a car out on the road...
'It's coming from the other side of the house.'

Curious, Regina leaned out as far as she could without opening the screen door, but she couldn't see.

“I don't even think there's enough room to fit a car between the lake and the hedge.”

Did... did someone put their car in the lake or something?

...Her boots were at the front door, on the other side of the house.

She glanced down at her white slippers and the pristine glitter pompoms at the tips. She hesitated for a moment- she could shuck off her shoes and just go barefoot.

'Fuck it. It's too cold. I can replace these if I can't save them.'
Regina opened the second door and slipped out. The night wind slammed it behind her immediately, but she was already padding out to see what was going on.

The light was gone.

God. If someone was in the lake, what was she going to do? Sprint inside to grab her phone to call 911? She shuffled as fast as she could without losing her shoes. She definitely should not go in after anyone. One more person dying in Lake Superior wasn't going to help whatever drunk bastard had careened into the water.

She cleared the hedge and stopped. She could feel her brow drawing down, forming lines across her forehead and between her eyebrows.

It was eerie quiet.

Her muscles were stiff. Regina had the unsettling superstition that she needed to stay as still as possible, that if she even breathed she would draw some unwanted attention.

Ridiculous. She breathed in.
and gasped, grabbing at her chest. It was on fire! What was this, some kind of pain, a heart attack? No, it was too far up, almost to her shoulder.

She heard herself making a weird, high noise like a wounded animal. She stumbled back and fell onto the dirt. Her hand was wet. Disbelieving, she craned her neck to stare down, trying to see in the dark. But it wasn't dark anymore. The air was heavy and it stank like iron and salt and the light she'd seen before was ringing her feet, a huge spiral that dipped in and out of the water of the lake she lived too close to.

“This is some shit,” Regina said, disbelieving. The light winked out to total darkness- and then it was daylight. She bumped down onto a tile floor and suddenly had full visibility.

Regina grabbed at her shirt and pulled it away from her skin-

“Freaky.”

Her clothes were soaked with blood that had to be hers. But there was no wound in her skin. She leaned back shakily, setting her filthy palms onto the floor. And then she wondered what was under her legs. Regina leaned to the side to peer down and then would have screamed if she'd had any air. She scrambled back as fast as she could.
A dead woman grinned up at her, head lolling in a way that looked like she'd been dead when she fell and hadn't controlled her muscles at all.

Broken glass was sparkling around the floor, lit up in the sunlight and drowning in a puddle of blood. The woman was holding a big roll of paper- or her hand was on top of it, anyway.

A man was standing over both of them, and he was looking right at Regina. Her eyes went to his hands- he... he wasn't holding any weapon.

There were more bodies. Two of them.

Her mind was making an unpleasant connection between the three dead people and the very big man in the room. He did not look nonthreatening. He looked scary- he had weird clothes and wild hair and tattoos on his face.

She swallowed.
The man raised his hands, palms facing her, and he said something in a tone that was more bemused than anything else.

She felt her brow furrow. “What?”

He looked as confused as she felt, but he repeated himself. In Japanese. He was speaking Japanese, which, frankly, she wasn't that good at. She'd done one semester study abroad in undergrad. She was not prepared for this sudden test.

'I understood that he said the verb “to know” in the past tense. And he said “she.” That's it. That is not very helpful.'

She did not understand what was going on.

Well. She knew how to say that. Regina opened her mouth and let out the saddest little, “分かりません。英語でできますか?”

She never did find out if he spoke English, because his expression was suddenly furious. Regina flinched back but he was spinning around, leading with his fist. It crashed into a woman's face and straight-up reversed her momentum to send her flying through the jagged remains of what had been a glass wall.
'Where did that woman come from? Why was she attacking him? Which one of them killed these people?'

Regina couldn't breathe. She kept trying, but it wasn't working and black was flashing around her eyes.

The man straightened and gave her a worried look. “すみません。大丈夫だいよう、心配しないでね。”

She disagreed. It seemed like a really good time to worry to her. She stared over at the woman he'd hit.

She was still, laying splayed on the floor where she'd fallen. By the way that blood was spreading, it was probably a good thing that Regina couldn't see the woman's face.

'That lady is not going to walk it off. She is pining for the fjords. She is pushing up daisies. She is feeding trees. She dead. Dead dead dead what the absolute fuck.'
Her whole body shuddered. She tore her eyes away to look at the only other breathing person in the room- holy shit, was this a post office? Was she having a hallucination about a post office?

The murder-punch man gave her a smile that would have been reassuring if she wasn't terrified of him. He knelt down and carefully gathered up the bloody paper in the dead woman's hands. And then he turned away from her, took two steps towards one of the bodies- and reached up to pull open a mail box. He emptied it casually, stuffing an envelope into a bag at his hip. He closed the mail box. Turned the key. And put the key back in his pocket.

'Is this death?' Regina wondered. 'Do I deserve this?'

It seemed like some bullshit to her.

The murder-man looked up, face hardening at something in the distance. He must have heard something the way he'd heard that woman attacking him from behind, because he was suddenly urging Regina on her feet. Terrified and baffled, she let him herd her up and out and into a run past a row of quiet, dingy looking Japanese-style houses. He glanced behind them, said something that was obviously a curse, and then picked her up. Like. The way she'd pick up an empty laundry basket.
She did not protest, nor did she have time to. Suddenly, they were going really fast.

Regina watched scraggly green bushes flash away and had a sickening realization hit the bottom of her stomach.

'I'm going to be really late for work.'

Chapter 1.

She did not adjust that well.

There were some things she was proud of, in retrospect. Namely, her sense of self-preservation was pretty strong. After about a week of being tugged around by Jiraiya, Regina decided that he was no harm to her. But it had still been a good decision to deliberately not be interested at all in the papers that he'd killed those people in the post office for. He had strong feelings about his letters and she was gonna respect that.
She had continued to respect it until he had finished burning all of the papers in the fire he'd made by breathing flames at some tree limbs he'd broken with his huge, horrifyingly strong hands. Because privacy was important. No other reason.

She'd also kept a fairly even head and locked down the screaming panic to deal with at a later time. It hadn't seemed like a good idea to risk annoying Jiraiya by crying all the time.

'Now I'm pretty sure he's more likely to comfort me than get angry with me. Still not ready to try it.'

Other than that, it was a goddamn mess. Traveling with Jiraiya was disorienting as hell. It was either a monotonous trod down dirt roads or being flung over his shoulder whenever he got spooked. He was only fun when they were in a hotel or restaurant.

To be fair, he probably would have been a better travel companion if they could understand each other.

She still didn't have a straight answer about how she'd arrived. Regina had risked his annoyance by asking him twice. She understood most of the words he was using, but putting them all in context wasn't working out that great. She was, like, 70% certain that his explanation hinged on a word she could only interpret at 'the fine arts'. The fine arts. Like. Some dickhead had been inspired to paint, and that had involved her traveling...?
Her mind shied away from any way to finish that sentence.

It was *insane* to think that she had gone from Minnesota to Japan because of the fine arts. It was even worse that she had the creeping feeling that this couldn't possibly be Japan.

Evidence *for* her being in Japan was as follows:

1. People in the area speak Japanese. (convincing)
2. Some people are wearing traditional Japanese clothes (cool. Is it Kyoto?)
3. Other people are wearing clothes she can only describe as cool and weird, which could easily be a rural Japanese fashion movement that she hadn't seen while she was studying in the city.
4. A lot of things look old-style Japanese, like houses and gardens and farm plots and statues

Evidence *against* her being in Japan:
1. Social norms seemed pretty different. She probably would have noticed in Kobe if people were getting into fistfights on the daily

2. Magic: what the fuck?

3. The roads weren't paved.

Number 3 was a very strong point, actually. Japanese infrastructure was no joke. They were seriously on top of things. The priorities were sometimes frustrating and seemed backwards to a Westerner, but you could depend on even tiny winding mountaintops with no cell signal or houses to have paved roads. And a vending machine. She hadn't seen a vending machine since the post office and that was a really bad sign.

“気分悪い、”she said pleasantly.

Jiraiya gave her a concerned look. “何で何で？” He edged ever so slightly away, as if he thought she might vomit at any time.

Regina considered telling him that it was a different kind of bad feeling, but who knows? Maybe she would be ill. Better to keep her options open. She gave him a pleasant smile, feeling divorced from her body. At any moment she was going to float out of her skin, ascend this mortal plane, and she could just switch off the panic.
It was looking a little less rural, though. Gradually, the roads were becoming dotted with signs of life. People were working in fields to the left. There were occasional spots where someone had clearly planted roadside flowers, here and there she saw homes off along intersecting foot paths.

“どこにいきますか?”

Jiraiya took a moment to answer. When he did, it was pointedly slow and probably simple. “kuni’ was easy to understand, but the bit before it was a bit weird. Some kind of metal? They were going to metal country?

Regina stretched her memory, trying to figure out why she knew that word. It wasn't gold, or silver. So... the next common metals in conversation might be brass, iron, steel, copper...

Iron sounded right. Iron country.

….kind of a stupid name. That’s not even a shiny metal. If I got to name a country, it'd be, like.... something pretty or noble. Iron just makes me think of dirty old swords that someone finds in a field in England.’
She paused.

'Or Thatcher. It also brings Thatcher to mind. Or the Iron Curtain.'

Cheery in the extreme.

“おい、おい!” Jiraiya jostled her companionably. “。。。ふりをするでしょう。心配ないで。。。”

Regina hoped that the words she didn't catch weren't that important and nodded. He was going to do something. Or something was going to happen. And he wanted her to not freak out about it. That was probably the gist of it. What more would she need to know?

He grinned at her, winked, and then became a woman.

She stopped in her tracks.
'I could have used a little more information.'

Jiraiya laced an arm through her elbow and steered her onward. “僕は有名だね、” he mused. And then she didn't catch the rest. Presumably it was about the problems that he encountered because he was a famous person.

'Well.' She pushed her fried brain past denial or shock, because this place was going to continue to be impossible and yelling at it wouldn't help. 'I supposed that becoming a 25 year old woman would be a good way to avoid recognition. If he really is famous.'

...Regina risked a good, long look at Jiraiya. He was now shorter than her, but that made sense. She was fairly tall for a girl with German grandparents, so she'd be conspicuously tall for a Japanese girl. Other than that, his hair had become long, sleek, and dark brown. His odd clothes were now demure and professional, a navy dress with a white collar and shiny black shoes. His face was still slightly broad and his lips thin. Features that had been pretty attractive on him as a man made him a relatively plain-looking woman.

Jiraiya caught her looking. He fluttered his lashes and gave a giggle in his usual gravelly tone.

Hmm.
'I'd say it would be less conspicuous for me to do the talking, but I'm a 5'9” foreigner with a weak grasp of Japanese.'

Actually, Regina would bet that he had a plan for each of them. Maybe he had some magic that would convince listeners he was perfectly unremarkable. He'd probably have a disguise or good cover for her as well that would account for her unusual looks and lack of language abilities.

He was very conscious about when he wanted to make a scene or slide under a crowd's notice. She had to assume there were reasons for the really obnoxious things he sometimes did, because the equally inexplicable quiet things he did often seemed to be helpful. For one thing, he'd gotten her clothes that blended in the last village they'd crossed through. Her slippers were totally ruined, but her pajamas were in a tan canvas shoulder bag he'd scrounged up for her. That bag had come filled with cosmetics and accessories that she saw used in every town they stopped in. That was totally unnecessary. But it made her life better, and it helped the two of them draw less stares.

'If nothing else, I trust that he's competent.'

Jiraiya started chattering at that point. It was good listening practice, so Regina followed along and tried to participate. He talked about the landscape and things they passed, mostly.

She didn't catch all of it, and she definitely wouldn't remember all the new words. But she tried hard to seal away a few new ones and match words to images- apparently that was how onion looks in a field. And those yellow flowers were 'suisen'. Maybe they were daffodils. She wasn't, like, a flower expert.
It was definitely residential at this point. Maybe a kilometer or two ahead, about 5 houses were clustered relatively close. Before that, there was one small, lonely building near the left side of the road.

"それは鉄国の一番大きい岡です、" Jiraiya chirped. His voice had gone up gradually as he talked. She wasn't sure when it had changed enough, but it sounded convincingly young and female at this point. "二百年前に、一人-" he cut off with a girlish gasp.

Regina startled, moving towards him instinctively. They were looking at the same thing. Someone had suddenly exited the building they were passing. That person gave them a stern look and walked over at a slow, deliberate pace.

She wasn't sure why Jiraiya seemed nervous. Personally, she didn't like the fact that the middle-aged man coming towards them was wearing armor. He had a stick thing at his hip that was probably a sword in the holder. At least he didn't have it out. Nerves made her listening comprehension even worse as the imposing stranger flagged them down.

He stood in front of them. Regina found herself drifting just a little behind Jiraiya as the man began asking questions. Names, where they came from, do thing- what they came to do, she corrected in her head. Oh. Maybe this was a border? Jiraiya said their destination was Iron Country, which heavily implied that before they were in a different country.
'I'm like.... 98% certain that he is lying out his ass.' Something Jiraiya said caused the man to look at her. Regina gave a nervous smile and ducked her head a little. 'He didn't say either of our names. He definitely didn't say 'Minnesota' or 'America' at any point.'

Was lying to border patrol a reasonable thing for a famous person to do? It seemed like there had to be more to it than that. Maybe it had something to do with her- she didn't have any papers. But judging by the fact that Jiraiya was not infrequently ditching a town in the dead of the night at a sprint, he... he might be into something shady.

'O other than killing people,' Regina acknowledged internally. 'That seems like a byproduct of whatever he's doing and not the end goal. He isn't hunting people down. They seem to leap out at him from the rafters.'

Did that make him someone really important or valuable? Royalty or some political figure in risk from assassination? She stood a little straighter and wished she knew what was going on. Regina bowed along when Jiraiya did, murmured polite 'thank you's and 'excuse mes' on cue. And then they left the swordsman behind.

The assassination theory wasn't all bad, but it didn't feel quite right. Jiraiya seemed less like a victim running from danger and more like he was encountering danger in the course of his job. That sounded like a soldier, but they didn't do things alone for weeks at a time, wandering according to their own personal whim. Pretty sure.

'O other according to orders,' Regina realized. 'He got those secret papers at a place where people
attacked him. Is he a spy?’

….Was she helping a spy get into this place? Was he up to some shady shit?

Jiraiya seemed to catch the look she was giving him. He tilted his pretty little head as if asking 'what?'

Regina sighed and looked away. She wasn't going to get a straight answer- first off, that would be a dangerous question to ask in a public space. Secondly, she probably wouldn't understand what his answer would be.

Also, she did not know how to say 'spy'. She could say.... a person who likes secrets. Would he infer 'spy' from that?

'Ha. Probably not. Everything is bullshit, bullshit forever.'

Jiraiya traveled convincingly as a rather bubbly, bouncy woman for the next few days. He left the guise on the first night when they camped in the freaky blankets he pulled from literally nowhere. The second day they stopped in the early evening because he found an inn. She thought he might take the disguise off in the privacy of their room, but apparently he wasn't risking it.
He even kept it on when he went with her to the onsen- but to be fair, that made sense for a lot of reasons. Prudishness would be a really stupid way to blow his cover. Also, he quite probably didn't want to leave her alone for extended periods of time.

He put on a pretty cute act of girlish excitement when they dropped their towels and stepped into the hotel's bath. Regina had to tamp her smile down to reasonable levels of indulgent amusement. Japanese people did really like hot springs, as a rule. And they'd been dirty on the road for long enough that she was blissfully relieved to settle into the water and let her mind wander. There were other customers, but they didn't talk much. Jiraiya was too busy soaking in the beauty of the tree-ringed pool with wide-eyes, and she was drifting close to sleep.

'This is good,' Regina had the presence of mind to think. 'If everyday was like this, I wouldn't even care that much about the fine arts fucking me over like this.'

Jiraiya had to shake her to rouse her out of the pool. She went with sleepy compliance, mildly surprised to see that everyone else had left and the sky was dark.

The day after that, they made it to what must be the capital city. At some point when she wasn't looking Jiraiya dropped the disguise. Suddenly a bear of a man was walking at her left. Her heart jumped in the same instant that her feet skittered to the side.
He glanced down and tilted his head slightly in question. His silver hair blew in a chill wind, looking impressive and dramatic.

‘He seems even bigger now.’ Regina purposefully turned her head away, but she was hyperaware. ‘Goddamn. Jiraiya is built like an entire football team. Who needs that much muscle?’

…She did not contemplate that deeply at all. Ever. Because he was at least, like, 40. And it didn’t matter how much of a fox he was, because he murder-punched people who tried to look at his mail. That was a quality that a woman could not tolerate in anyone more important than a traveling companion.

“おい。” He cleared his throat. “仕事のために人と会う。一生に行こうか？”

Regina opened her mouth and then closed it quickly. Did she want to meet someone from his work? If he really was a spy, that seemed like an unnecessary risk. But he also seemed cautious. If it was something she shouldn’t see, he wouldn’t have asked her. He would have just left her somewhere. “行こう、” she agreed. “どこで会いますか？”

A moment later, she wondered why she bothered asking. It didn’t matter where they were going to meet, because the name wouldn’t mean anything to her. The answer ended in ‘ya’- so… probably a bar? Or casual restaurant?
His work contact turned out to be a dignified older man who was unflatteringly surprised to see her walk in with Jiraiya. His smile dropped off into an open-mouthed double-take until Jiraiya rushed over to clap his shoulders and begin talking on fast-forward speeds.

She grudgingly followed them to the back of a seated-style bar, away from the counter. The work contact introduced himself as Ando and was gracious enough to swallow his shock to try to talk with her about the weather until Jiraiya returned from ordering beer and hauled him into discussion.

Regina sulked a bit before wondering if the problem was Jiraiya and not her.

She got more than her share of second-looks, because her facial features and height were out of the normal range even in bizarro Japan where people sometimes had purple hair or nearly circle-shaped eyes. But this specific series of covert looks between her and Jiraiya seemed less 'stealing chances to gawp at a silent, weird-looking woman,' and more 'trying to figure out how these two were traveling together'.

'Maybe Jiraiya doesn't have many friends,' Regina thought dryly. 'Because he murder-punches people. Just a thought.'

Even in her head she knew she was harping on that point a lot, but it had made an impression.
As the conversation wore on, Regina switched from beer to green apple chuu-hai so that she didn't wind up dead drunk. She stared deeply into the monstrous handwritten menu and ordered a lot of things on the basis of one or two words that she could read and curiosity about what the hell a dish might be. The men were distracted, but Jiraiya still did a good job at consuming whatever she ordered until a 'salad' turned out to be an avocado cut in half with some dressing and assorted greens ringing it on a plate. He absentmindedly stole some with his chopsticks, got the oddest expression, and turned to her with wounded accusation in his big dark eyes.

Regina blinked up at him and raised an eyebrow.

He frowned, raised a finger, and then stopped. Jiraiya shook his head with a sigh and ordered a truly horrifying array of things in the genre 'mysterious bits drenched in sauce on a stick.' Some of it was offal, one was quail eggs and ew, the texture was just so weird. It was everything she didn't really like about boiled eggs, except also it was soggy. Delightful.

But the onions and pork were crazy good. She ate most of that before Jiraiya knew it was there.

'I think they might be talking about movies,' Regina decided. 'Maybe it's code.' She wouldn't have been able to read it anyway, but when Jiraiya pulled out a thick stack of papers and laid it out on the table, she leaned back in her chair and channeled as much innocent disinterest as humanly possible.
Ando-san noticed this and gave her what seemed to be a sympathetic grimace.

Ahah. Apparently she'd guessed right about what her reaction to this spy shit should be. Regina gave him a smile in return.

Ando-san nodded to her in a very dadly way, and then looked at Jiraiya reproachfully.

His next question to Jiraiya seemed to be about her. She sat up very straight, holding up her head in a way that made her neck look long and graceful. More importantly, it made her feel a little bit queenly and she needed that right now.

She.... she didn't exactly understand Jiraiya's response, but it did not involve the fine arts, her name, or her home. She had no idea if he mentioned any sneaky spy stuff, because she didn't know those words anyway. But. She was fairly certain it included the word 'model'.

There was no way to feel about that except confused and a little troubled.

The next thing that Ando-san said to Jiraiya was definitely scolding. Jiraiya tilted his head back and laughed. Patrons at the next table turned in their seats to see who was being so loud.
'Is he laughing at me? About me? Or is it totally innocent?' Regina crossed her legs under the table and tried to look like she was above the discussion. She had the distinct impression that she was the butt of the joke, or at least that she would want to say something on her behalf if she knew what had just happened.

Discomfort curled in her gut and she felt a little bit like she wanted to cry. Not knowing what was going on all the time was just too much, but there was no option for her to opt-out because a magic book or something had decided to screw over her in a specific and she couldn't understand any straight answer that she got.

“すみません。”Ando and Jiraiya sort of nodded acknowledgment when she excused herself.

Regina stood, brushed her dress down, and made a tactical retreat to the bathroom so that she could feel sorry for herself in privacy.

She only got to wallow for about 3 seconds. That was when someone dropped down from the ceiling and casually put a sharp thing at her neck. She went with it when a gloved hand pulled her back into their chest.

“I feel very compliant,” Regina said, in the most pleasant tone she could manage. She did not crane to see the person behind her, because if they wanted her to see them they would have attacked her from the front. Wait, Japanese, Japanese. She should say something in Japanese. “こんにちは。あなたのために何することが出来ますか？”
The grip might have loosened just the tiniest bit. Which was encouraging. She might not have said “Can I do anything for you?” correctly, but she'd definitely said it very politely. Manners matter.

When everyone else is a knife-wielding lunatic they matter a little bit more, even.
“Who are you?” her captor demanded.

He used the exact same wording that this one infuriating youtube commercial advertising beer did, so it took Regina a moment to straighten out her emotions in response to that confusing input. She told him her name. The grip on her shoulder became a little painful.

“Where do you come from?”

He did not like her answer. But he let her go and pushed her shoulder so that she spun around to face him.

Regina lifted her hands slowly, palms up.

Her assailant glanced at them and blinked, as thought something about her palms was surprising. She resisted the urge to glance at them because she already knew what her hands looked like.

The man looked very frustrated. He pushed back bangs that had fallen over the scuffed headband he was wearing.

“That's the same thing as what the dead lady was wearing,’ Regina realized. ‘The kanji for water.’

His was even more beat-up, but to be fair this man looked more worn and hardened than the dead woman who had been at Regina's feet when she appeared in this godawful place. He might have been in his thirties, but not in the way where he was aging gracefully. He had a few lines above his eyebrows, tired dark eyes, and pockmarked scar tissue disappearing down into his neckline.

He seemed to decide something, tilting his head slightly.

She flinched at movement, but he was putting his sharp thing away and holding up his hands in a mirror of her posture. Even aside from being in fingerless gloves, his hands were not like hers at all-

‘Oh,’ Regina realized. 'That's what he was looking at. My hands don't have any cuts or callous.'

Well. Rough, sun-tanned hands with scars and thick tissue probably came with a military career.

'That's slightly reassuring. He thought I was a fighty person, so he attacked me first. But I am not a fight person. So. He doesn't want to fight me. Good plan. Thank you, mr knife man.'

Letting her go when she seemed to be harmless was a good sign for her survival. So Regina managed the least-trembly smile she could sum up.

He dropped his voice lower, in tone and pitch. He apologized.

She told him it was okay. Actually, on reflex she said “こちらこそ” which was way too formal and made his mouth twitch.
Regina didn't normally like people thinking her linguistic fumbles were cute, but she would like for this person not to hurt her. Plus it was objectively kind of funny to say, “No, I should be saying that to you,” after someone apologized for leaping at you with a knife.

“なんでじらいやと旅行しますか？どこに行くの？”

Um. The second question was easier... Except that she didn't really know where they were going. Regina babbled something that hopefully communicated that all she knew was they were going to Iron country. But the first part-

'I don’t know why I am traveling with Jiraiya. Lack of options? He’s decided to haul me around? I definitely don’t know how to explain that.’

’一週間前ぐらい、じらいやさんと会いました、” She picked slowly. It seemed important to explain that she didn't know Jiraiya that long. A week's association wasn't worth murder-stabbing her for, right?

The stranger's eyes sharpened, but he only nodded. Clearly he was waiting for more so she stretched her brain.

'The closest I can get to explaining that I don’t know anyone.... I can say that everyone is a stranger. Then say that Jiraiya helped me.'

‘全人は知らない人なのでじらいやからてつだうもらいました。’ Shit, wrong verb. “くれました、” Regina corrected. And that wasn't exactly what she'd meant to say anyway. She had implied that Jiraiya had helped her specifically because she didn't know anyone. Probably fine. Close enough.

“そうなんですか。。。。” After that, the man leaned back a little and looked her up and down, very deliberately. His gaze seemed to catch on her obviously new shoes before dragging back up to her face. She felt like he was ...checking her face for symmetry or something. There wasn't really anything else to do when staring at a person's face that long, was there?

She was getting tired of holding her hands up. But she also wanted to live, so she didn't move them.

The next thing he said was more difficult to parse. She caught 'Jiraiya', the word 'risk', and.... that was about it, really.

A bit weakly, she asked him to repeat it slowly.

He didn't say the same thing. He pointed to his headband and asked her if she had seen it before.

Regina knew that freezing wide-eyed wasn't a good response, but it was what the universe gave her. After a moment, she nodded.

The next thing he said...

'I think he's asking if I saw Jiraiya kill the woman wearing it.'

Um. Not technically, but she nodded. The man's eyes flicked to the side, where her hands were trembling.

He seemed sympathetic. When he repeated what he'd initially said, it made more sense. He was telling her that Jiraiya was a dangerous person.
Regina forced down hysterical laughter.

“じらいやは。。。、” he said urgently. She was pretty sure the word she didn't catch was 'murderer,' from context. No argument there. “あなたにせいじゃない。僕の仕事。。。聞く。見えるき…出来るの？”

‘He’s talking about Jiraiya. And something about me not being something. Then about his work. Listen, can see…. is it possible? Is he asking me if something is possible- if I can do something?’

Her expression was probably blank. He didn't wait for a response to repeat himself once more, patient and slow.

She got a little more, probably from tone and body language than actual words.

'I think he wants me to tell him about what Jiraiya says and does,’ Regina realized. 'He wants me to be his spy friend. Er. To inform on Jiraiya, I mean.'

That made a lot of sense... it seemed like getting close enough to Jiraiya to spy on him was dangerous. But Jiraiya was keeping her close for some reason. So she might see things that someone following Jiraiya would have to risk their lives to discover. But it would be easier to get her alone- he'd already done it once.

Her options stretched out in front of her. Option one: she said yes. He would let her go back to Jiraiya. Then, she could either decide to do what this man wanted, or tell Jiraiya about the encounter. Option two: she said no.

If she said no, this man was probably going to kill her.

She could only assume, anyway. He'd clearly been willing to use force.

'But I haven't actually seen him hurt anyone,' Regina deliberated. She bit her lower lip, hoping for time.

'I know for a fact that Jiraiya kills people. He kills a lot of people. That could mean that spying on him is way too risky for me and I should tell him about this immediately. Or it could mean that being with him is too dangerous and I should make another ally so I can get away from Jiraiya. I don't know which one of them is a good guy. Maybe neither of them is, actually. But they're definitely not working for the same people.'

There weren't really any options at this juncture. She nodded, slowly. She agreed.

The man glanced at the door. He was probably concerned about the time. When he turned back to her, it was with a small smile.

She tried not to relax too much. Her hands were still up.

He told her his name was Kou. That was probably a first name. So either he wanted to be friendly, or he didn't want her to know his last name. Then he said something that included the information that he'd see her again.

Then he was just fucking gone.

Regina spun in a circle so fast that her hair smacked her neck when she stopped. The room was empty. She pulled her hands to her chest and swallowed, hard.
'He could still be here. I wouldn't know.'

She did not feel comfortable to use the facilities. So she washed her hands, smoothed down her hair, adjusted her clothes, and went back out into the bar.

Jiraiya barely glanced up when she walked past him. He was still deep in conversation with Ando. Both men were red-faced from alcohol at this point. Ando gestured broadly and nearly bumped her as she passed.

'I don't think he knows anything,' Regina thought, and she did not like the idea. 'If he wouldn't notice another person following him, and didn't know that person threatened me a couple rooms away, can I trust that he could keep me safe? If I told him, would I be in more trouble, because Kou will know I betrayed him and Jiraiya can't or won't keep me safe enough?'

She had plenty of time to contemplate just how screwed she was through the night and into the next day.

After Jiraiya had stumbled to their hotel from the meeting with Ando, he had slept like the dead until past noon the next day. Regina didn't really feel comfortable straying too far from her room next door, but hunger eventually took her to the dining room downstairs. Of course he'd made them miss the complimentary breakfast, so she had to venture outside alone.

At least Jiraiya might have thought of this. It was the first time she needed to dig into the money he'd given her. There were three identical bills.

The bad thing was that it wasn't yen and she didn't understand how it worked at all. Regina agonized over it for a while- she didn't know if what she had was enough for a meal. It could be, like, 3 bucks in value, or 300. She had no way of knowing.

Well. Into the breach. She wandered around the market, lingering inappropriately close to other people to watch transactions and money changing hands. It was hard to see the small details on the money without really making a nuisance of herself, so it took some time. But after a while she thought she'd gotten it- she'd seen a man give a bill that looked like hers for a bento, and he got other bills back.

So. If she used that same bill, it was definitely big enough for a small transaction. What were the other bills? Would one of them be enough?

Ah, hell. She didn't know. She took herself into the first place she recognized as a restaurant, but god knows how many she walked past without knowing what they were. Lucky that tonkatsu places tended to have the red split curtains and the hiragana word written out front. She didn't know most food kanji. For some reason her language course had cared more about vocabulary like 'taxes', 'elephant', and 'economics' than helpful daily things.

'I do get a lot more mileage out of 'elephant' than I expected to, in fairness to course design. But. Does tonkatsu even have a kanji name?' Regina wondered. 'I don't think so. Or if it does, it's one of the old-fashioned ones that nobody uses anymore.'

That was interesting but not the current problem. She couldn't read the menu in its entirety, but she identified a teishoku meal, chose one kind of meat over the other confidently even though she didn't know which was which, and folded her hands in her lap to wait.

The place wasn't too crowded, but it was very small in general. To her right was a large window that opened to display a little nook of a garden. The building curled around it, making the garden a
sort of private sanctuary. The owner's house was connected to the restaurant, probably.

People were staring, but not so much that she had to acknowledge it. This, at least, was normal. People stared at foreigners in Japan because they were just so unused to seeing them. And she hadn't seen anyone else who looked like a Westerner so far.

'But I've seen so many weird-looking people that actually, this doesn't make much sense.' Regina found herself frowning. 'It can't be my hair or eye-color, because I've seen much less plausible coloring here. My facial shape is still weird- my face is a little long, my eyes are atypical, but not so far out of the norm I've noticed around.'

Must be the nose. Having a high bridge wasn't a typical Japanese trait. It seemed like a weird thing that she would never notice, but her Japanese classmates had been conscious of that as a determining feature in attractiveness, along with 'head size' and how 'three-dimensional' a face was.

She really literally could not see whether or not a face check-marked those standards, but that had to be because it wasn't a beauty standard in the states. She just hadn't learned to look for it because it wasn't relevant back home.

The proprietress slid down her tray meal with a smile, "ゆっくりどうぞ", and a nod. Regina smiled back- and then Jiraiya cheerfully threw himself down into the seat across and snagged her meal.

Regina felt her expression become decidedly unfriendly.

The waitress left real fast.

She leaned forward, made eye contact with Jiraiya, and put both hands on the rim of the tray.

He stopped with chopsticks at his mouth, already having shoved a strip of tonkatsu in with an appalling lack of grace. His brow furrowed.

"Mine," Regina said firmly. She glared and pulled the tray back. She did it slowly, measuring his reaction to be sure Jiraiya didn't look to be angry. He seemed surprised, but not like he was going to be violent. So she settled the food back on her side of the table. "Chopsticks, please."

'When did he even take those? I didn't see it.'

Jiraiya glanced guiltily at his hand and then passed over the utensils. He seemed enthralled and aghast when she took them.

'Oh, right. Using someone else's chopsticks is considered an indirect kiss here. I guess it isn't hygienic.'

Well. Confiscating them still made sense. She put them down on the tray quietly. Then she called back the server and asked for more chopsticks.

The waitress nodded and then glanced to Jiraiya. He said something so fast that Regina didn't understand much, other than that he was ordering food.

'I can't tell if he's just fucking with me or if he really is a ridiculously tall child.'

Either way, he was frustrating.
It was good to see her taking some initiative and showing some spine, as prickly and tentative as her attempts were. Jiraiya kept his amusement mostly off his face.

Rejina gave him a suspicious look between prissy, delicate bites. She didn't seem to notice that her left hand was protectively clutching her tray.

'She's a weird kid, that's for sure. She can't think I'd let her go hungry, after I've taken care of her for 9 days now."

He kept the sigh in, as he'd been doing for a week and change now.

Shit. Just, shit.

He'd be traveling much faster if he wasn't suddenly weighed down by a civilian who wasn't even in good shape by those lax standards. This girl had never done physical work in her life, and had definitely never traveled more than a dozen kilometers on foot in a day. She was clearly aching and miserable after 4 hours even at just a brisk walking pace, and he hadn't dared to give her more than a couple kilograms of personal effects to store in her bag at any point. The few times he'd had to push her to run, she'd staggered and slowed after 10 minutes.

As best as he could tell, she had to be from serious money, because no working woman had hands and feet that soft. A merchant would be accustomed to long travel, a farmer or cook or housewife or pretty much anyone, really, would have strong hands with probably a callous or two.

Rejina was the kind of ridiculous little puffball that you only found wrapped in silks somewhere writing poetry or arranging flowers, slender only because eating sufficiently was unladylike.

It was damned lucky that she had half-decent language abilities. Or maybe not, because that could have been a requirement of the seal matrix that he hadn't had time to study in detail. The Kiri woman had been trying to summon some kind of lake monster to compensate for being outclassed. Presumably, she had intended for it to be one that she could control. Intelligence and language had to be written into the seal matrix.

'I don't have time for this. I need to know if those were really Orochimaru's people, or if they were from that group of mercenaries.'

The trouble with having your fingers in a lot of dishes at once meant that it was hard to know who in specific was trying to kill you or warn you off at any given point in time. He was not a safe or really very interested traveling partner for a confused young foreign girl.

The trouble was that it was his fault she was here, she had absolutely no survival skills, and she would be dead or worse in two days if he just left her somewhere. And enough people had seen her with him that she'd be in additional danger by association. It wouldn't be very gallant to leave her in a hotel with enough money for a week and wish her the best.

He had inquiries that he needed to make, and she couldn't come with. But if he was right, he'd have an adequate babysitter lined up soon. Rejina could be dumped off with someone trustworthy while he got down to business. Then when he had some actual space to breathe, he could see about sending her home.

She stood out too much to be tucked away in a quiet corner, unfortunately. After spending only a
day with her, Jiraiya had known for certain that she was an absolutely normal, baseline civilian. Unfortunately, a first glance said otherwise.

Her height could be explained away as a quirk of genetics. But anyone else would see her odd coloring and features as proof that she was from a shinobi line. Her hair was such a light brown it couldn't be much more than a generation away from fading to blonde, her eyes were green-brown, and altogether she just looked weird and gangly.

If a viewer was sympathetic, she could pass for exotically cute. Especially since she was perpetually slinking around shyly, watching everyone with big eyes. She looked about as misplaced and helpless as she was, which was unfortunate but did give something of a 'lost kitten' impression that could be leveraged in the right situation.

Her lack of fluency was another large problem preventing her from being anything approaching inconspicuous. As soon as she opened her mouth, it was clear she wasn't speaking her first language. Her hesitancy screamed 'target'.

Her obvious softness was the final, insurmountable barrier to dyeing her hair and passing her off as some nobody. Even if he set her to working as a farmer all alone in a field or something, it was fairly apparent from her too-pale skin and prissy little hands that she wasn't used to working or even being outside. He'd landed himself some confused, misplaced little noble. No one would accept her as scenery, even on the first glance. Only one person had to see her to know she was a target. And then she'd be alone, at risk, helpless. So that plan wouldn't work even temporarily.

...At least she wasn't a sobby type. Could have been worse.

The most obvious cover story was probably the best. It wouldn't do anything good for his reputation, but it would paint her in a sympathetic light and provide a reason for someone else to watch over her.

'It will, however, make the book I eventually write about this seem a little off.'

He let himself smile, because it was a ridiculously romantic storyline. A young noble girl, lost in foreign lands due to the magic of an evil witch, accompanied by a handsome and noble knight. It was a very good potential basis for a story, and he was looking for his next one now that he'd handed off the final manuscript for the movie adaptation of Icha Icha Acrobatics.

Speaking of which. He finished wolfing down his meal and tossed down some cash. Rejina glanced down at the bills for a second or two longer than was normal, but she followed him out.

He crossed his hands behind his head and sighed, stealing a look down at his companion. He should at least try to explain what he was doing today, and then find a spot nearby to leave her. Did she need some entertainment? He'd give her an Icha Icha, but she couldn't properly appreciate the beauty of the prose yet. What did young people like to do?

'She seems to want to learn the language,' Jiraiya mused. 'I would too, in her situation.'

That in mind, he breezed to the bookstore and flashed a toothy grin at a startled employee who was just finishing up unpacking the rush order from the printers. Ando was pretty efficient for an old guy.

He scoured the shelves for something age-appropriate and not too terrible to give to an impressionable youth. More than once he had to steer his young charge away from biographies and political garbage. Her tastes were clearly suspect. So he found an adventure novel for young adults
and girly romance, a dictionary, and then a couple of notebooks and pens. Rejina hovered nearby with her fingers clasped together in front, awkward and out of place. But that was normal for her so he let it slide.

He checked out, then immediately flopped down on the couch in the reading area. He didn't wait for Rejina to dare to sit. Jiraiya tore open the pen packaging with his teeth and then flipped open the adventure book. He spread it out on the table and started marking furigana above the kanji. He filled out two chapters hastily, and then did a chapter in the other book as well. She'd be able to read the kanji aloud and find them in the dictionary that way.

When he glanced at Rejina, her eyes were wide with comprehension. Good, good. Remembering something, he opened a notebook and started scrawling a list of words that he'd taught her while walking. He filled out a page before losing interest. Then he tossed it to her.

Rejina barely caught the notebook, crinkling some paper. But she smoothed it out with the side of her palm and then set the book down to have a look. A slight furrow formed between her brows, and her awkwardness fled into concentration. Tentatively, she picked up one of the pens he hadn't used and began making markings next to the words he'd written.

Curious, Jiraiya leaned over. What was she- ah, those must be the definitions in her language. She didn't seem to remember all of the words, but she worked quickly on those that she recognized. She clearly had some kind of system that involved writing something in a red pen, then black.

The next thing she did was flip the page and start writing in simple, neat hiragana and kanji. What was she- oh, she was writing example sentences.

Jiraiya felt his brows raise, reluctantly impressed by the logic and initiative. Each new word was going to get a full page of example sentences, apparently. He would bet quite a lot that she would work up the nerve to ask him to check her work later to be sure each usage was acceptable.

'Definitely well-educated. I think she can entertain herself like this for quite a while.'

On an impulse, he reached out and ruffled her hair. Rejina ducked away and gave him a wonderfully offended look. He resisted the laugh that curled up and looked out the large windows overlooking the courtyard where he would do his book-signing. She'd be able to see him, but he wouldn't be able to see her. That was a problem, since it was a lot more important that he be able to monitor her safety until the absolute earliest chance he could dump her on someone else.

With a sigh and a stretch, he got up and loped back and forth the area to make a plan. Rejina barely glanced up until he started moving bookshelves.

She made an appalled little squeak, mouth hanging open at his daring.

Jiraiya gave her a thumbs-up and dismissed her flustered attitude in favor of rearranging the store set up to his liking. A salesperson came by to peer in and frowned at him with all their might, but didn't do anything to stop him.

Rejina made to stand when he came back after having moved the shelves, but he waved her back down onto the couch while he moved the armchairs and tables. She settled in reluctant and speechless, watching him work. On some level, he liked how obviously she was impressed by his strength when he wasn't even trying to show off. It was nothing on Tsunade, but for a mere man, he was a mightily impressive specimen if he did say so himself.

He grinned and picked up the entire couch with her on it. Rejina grabbed at the cushion and said
something foreign that almost had to be rude, if he was any judge of tone.

The store manager walked by with an accusative expression and a 4 meter long banner with his face on it. She was really booking it towards the entrance, clacking past at a speed that had her little green apron flowing in the breeze of her own speed.

He would have waved if he'd had a hand free. Jiraiya settled instead for a grin and edging past her with his couch cargo. He carefully set it down at just the right angle so that Rejina could bask in the sun or scoot over into the shade, depending on how she felt as the day passed.

Hmm.

The signing wouldn't start until when he gave a speech at 6, and then he'd give autographs for 2 hours or until he got bored. There wasn't really that much time- it being 4:42 and all.

'I'll grab her some snacks and a juice box or something, so that she doesn't feel the urge to wander off and get murdered while I'm working.'

Or, wait. Even better. He snagged the next employee he found, gave them some petty cash and instructions, and pushed the bewildered young man out the door.

Rejina was looking over warily when he checked in on her. She ducked her head back down instantly, as though she still thought he was about to hurt her.

'I can't entirely blame her for being jumpy. The first thing she saw was me in a room full of corpses. She doesn't understand who I am, who I work for, why people follow and attack me...'

He sighed and turned his mind to what he could do now.

'Judging by her studying habits, she'd probably appreciate some more colors and organizational things. That'll keep her busy.'

Jiraiya put his hands on his hips, considered it, and told her to wait right there.

Her jaw tightened, but she nodded.

' Weird kid.'

But she was his weird kid for now, so he found colored pencils and markers and glitter pens and a set of stickers and little post-its in varying colors and shapes. At that point she was going to need a carrying case, so he poked around the kid's section and found one shaped like a banana. He giggled, zipping and unzipping it a couple of times. It was enormous and squishy and just plain fun, that's what it was. He tossed his haul down on the counter. Absentmindedly, he picked through the sweets at the front and started tossing chocolates into the pile while the cashier began sorting through it.

“Good afternoon,” He told the older woman cheerfully. “Ooo, bonbons, don't mind if I do.” He put 10 on the counter, then thought better of it and grabbed two more of the dark chocolate ones. Excellent.

Rejina was confused but pleased by the stash he handed over, and even cracked a smile at the bag full of snacks that the bookstore employee dropped off few minutes later. Jiraiya grabbed the employee by the shoulder and quietly ordered him to keep an eye on the girl. Then he headed
outside to stretch his legs while his adoring public noticed the signage and gathered.

He used a combination of the chameleon genjutsu and a smokeball to make a dramatic entrance and cackled through his announcement. He took a break from beaming under applause to glance in and see that Rejina was staring at him, open-mouthed and visibly very confused. The employee was reading a magazine in a nearby chair.

All good, then.

The autograph table went well—There was a satisfying number of pretty women, adoring fans, and two of his three spies in the area. One of them passed off a note that Jiraiya tucked away for later. The other asked for a written dedication to his sister who was traveling and couldn't be there in person to meet him. He kept the concern that inspired private and waved the man on without acknowledging what that meant.

His last expected guests showed up when he had only half an hour left. He merited a full three of Mifune's samurai, which was rather flattering. Jiraiya flashed their leader a rakish grin.

The man was utterly impassive, clearly determined to wait as long as it took to politely get Jiraiya's attention. He and his fellows were perfectly still, aside from the way his grey mustache tugged in the wind.

'I was starting to wonder if they would make it in time,' Jiraiya mused while the line began to dwindle. The free posters for the movie were long gone, as were the t-shirts and other sales items. 'I thought they would notice sooner that I was doing a book-signing in the capital city today, despite never checking in at the borders.'

They'd be huffy about the impropriety, but he'd done it knowing he would get their attention. If he'd come in under his name, he'd have had to produce a forged passport for Rejina or use genjutsu on the border agent. Both of those were much more serious offenses than sneaking in.

He waved away the last fan, stood with a stretch, and nodded to the three samurai. They unfolded from the wall they'd been lurking in front of, solemn and attentive.

They weren't wary enough, but they didn't know it yet.

'Hello, suckers.' Jiraiya gave them a grin, the kind that would have have Tsunade punch him on reflex. 'They're going to be babysitting so fast their heads spin. They can't possibly say no, no matter how low their opinion of me is. If I claim I've got a confused civilian daughter who I need them to look after, they'd be risking a diplomatic nightmare by letting anything happen to her.'

And then he could go in peace and quiet to find out why his agents in Iwagakure had all gone silent within two weeks of each other.

Chapter End Notes

This is so nostalgic to write. I'm loving it.

I am aiming to post 2 times monthly on this story. I'm doing a lot of original writing lately, so I have to parcel it out. I'm still finding my feet and finding a writing
schedule, but I think I can do it. If you're interested, I do post the drafts one chapter ahead on another site. By that I mean, for example, when ch 2 is up here, ch 3 (or at least a draft version) is already posted elsewhere. I can't link to it from AO3, but you can find it through my tumblr.

https://www.tumblr.com/blog/electraposts

That system is working so far to keep me moving and gets me some feedback on drafts before they're Permanent here. Comments here or there are the best way to speed chapters! Tell me what you liked, what made you laugh, who you want to see more of, whatever a chapter made you feel.

I'll be posting again within two weeks, I think. :)


Chapter Summary

Sorry for the *long* hiatus, I've been continuing this work on my main platform, I'm updating it currently to a more accurate point. None of my work is dead- but if you want monthly updates on this and other writings of mine, please find me on *super secret platform ao3 says I can't tell you about*.


The fucker just up and left her.

'There might,' Regina reflected, 'be some very good reasons that Ando-san was surprised to see me with Jiraiya. I'm going to guess that he is unreliable, uncommunicative, and inconsiderate.'

Also an incurable liar.

She didn't know much, but he had definitely told Osafune-san that she was his child. (She got娘和息子 mixed up when she just heard the syllables, but she was just gonna assume that Jiraiya had used the one that meant 'daughter' and not 'son'.)

There she'd been, minding her own damn business on the sofa, and she'd looked up to see more heavily armed men in the courtyard outside her window. Three of them confronted Jiraiya, which was becoming a theme. She couldn't hear what they said, but they seemed unimpressed while Jiraiya was clearly trying to appeal to their good natures.

Then the son of a bitch had pointed at her.

She froze. She was not prepared to be involved in whatever was happening. It did not seem good.

There had only been a minute to panic before the group of four men had come inside. Jiraiya had indicated her and talked way too fast for her to understand. The three strangers had murmured between themselves, given her polite introductions and skeptical looks, and altogether seemed way more interested in her than she felt comfortable with.

Regina was fairly certain that she was being sold into slavery and she had trusted the wrong murderer.

While she had been panicking, Jiraiya leaned against the sofa and ruffled her hair. Stock-still, she'd allowed it. Her shock allowed enough clarity for her to latch onto what he was saying.

It definitely included one of the words for child. She caught that he was claiming a mother died. Presumably hers.

'Really? And I didn't even know? That's a shame,' she thought, in the most useless waste of her limited brain power.'If I'd known that I would have marked the hour and treated myself somehow.'

Oh, wait. Jiraiya was making it up.

She was actually a little disappointed to realize it was a bald-faced lie and that she hadn't yet achieved one of her life goals of outliving that goddamn bitch.
That was a problem for another day, perhaps. Regina clenched her jaw and stared around the street for answers as the strangers took her away from the bookstore.

Jiraiya hadn't acted like he was doing something terrible to her. He'd packed up the study materials he'd bought for her, tossed them at one of the helmeted strangers, and given her a hug that she endured in silence. She felt frozen stiff- she had not anticipated that Jiraiya was going to abandon her. Clearly that had been stupid. But he'd picked her up and taken care of her the whole time she had been in this awful place and she'd just assumed- well.

The people around on the street didn't seem afraid of her escorts, Regina noticed. That might be a good sign. If anything, they got respectful body language when they were noticed. So she probably hadn't been handed over to bandits or whatever.

Actually...

'They're dressed like the man who asked us for paperwork at the border,' Regina realized. She stole a glance at the armor of the oldest man. It was maybe a little nicer, but it looked like it could be a uniform. 'Are they... some kind of authority? The police?'

Maybe Jiraiya had handed her over to the authorities for some reason. She hadn't done anything wrong except enter the county illegally, but he'd done that too, right? So he couldn't have just pinned it on her. These guys didn't seem stupid enough to believe that.

The leader had introduced himself to her, which seemed like a good indication that they were being reasonably polite. But they hadn't bothered to explain things to her or ask her any questions. If Jiraiya had claimed she had done something wrong, they probably would have at least tried to confirm that. She wasn't being tossed around, but there seemed to be a definite assumption that she had little to no agency in whatever was happening. They didn't ask her opinion or share information.

If anything, this might be... protective custody? She stole a quick second to rub at an irritation on her left calf when they paused at a street corner. Her escorts glanced at her weird movement, but they didn't seem concerned or aggressive at all.

The last piece of information she had to work with was the fact that Jiraiya had lied out of his ass about her being his kid. That strongly suggested that such an association with him was why they would take her in.

'I did think that he's constantly in danger. And that maybe he's an important person like he says he is.'

She'd already decided that he wasn't lying out of ego when he claimed to be famous. He definitely was- people had lined up for hours to hear him speak.

So. She had been traveling with someone famous, who was often followed and attacked by strangers, and he had given her over to some authority figures under the lie that she was his child.

'He's using his name to buy me protection and a place to stay. That means that he hasn't totally abandoned me, right? He'll probably be back. Or at least there's a good chance. So these people will probably be good to me. Unless they hate him more than they need to respect him.'

Regina took off her shoes in the entrance of some kind of city building, and considered feeling guilty for railing at Jiraiya in her mind. She accepted the public-use green plastic slippers and decided that, no, she had been justified. He could have talked with her. Her Japanese wasn't great
but he owed it to her to at least try. He was definitely an asshole.

'And I should definitely try to make these people like me,' she realized grimly. 'I have no leverage, no where to go, just nothing. I'm dependent on their good natures.'

That was not a good position to be in, and she didn't need to finish her International Relations degree to understand that.

Assuming that Jiraiya had some leverage and status, they would take good care of her for at least a while. But if his importance dropped, or if he left her forever? She could be in some real trouble. If a half-decent person was in charge, they'd at least make a token effort to leave her in a situation where she had a chance. But she would be far from the first diplomatic guest to be put out on the streets when they became more inconvenient or expensive than useful. And god forbid they tried to ransom her back to wherever Jiraiya was from- they'd never heard of her. They wouldn't pay a corn chip to get her back. They'd probably be pretty confused to be asked.

So. The urgent order of business was ingratiating herself and trying not to cause trouble, working to understand the local area, and looking for a way that she could be useful.

'Forget getting home. I'll be lucky to live out the year.'

Everything was bad and she felt bad. She sat when Osafune told her to. He might have given her a concerned look before he went on ahead into some kind of office. One of his friends followed him.

The other hesitated before taking off his helmet and setting it on the table. Then he sat near her.

They coexisted like that for a while. He stole a glance or two at her, square jaw unclenching once and then tightening again on whatever words he'd thought of.

This guy was younger than Osafune. Maybe he was in his forties? He had long dark hair tied back, and a few mild pockmarks more concentrated on the left side of his face than the right. His wrinkles weren't too bad. There were more of them around his forehead and eyes than his mouth. He looked like a thoughtful person.

She swallowed. "すみません。ちょっと混乱します。どこですか？なにしますか？"

He turned his face to look at her directly and made the effort to smile softly. He didn't pretend to be surprised by her confession that she didn't understand what was happening. "ここが鉄国の大市役所。心配しないで下さい。おさふねーどのはやさしい人。Regina姫のためにみふねさまに話しましょう。"

Regina felt like her spine was made of iron. "ああ、そうですか," she choked out. Her head was swaying.

The reassurance that Osafune was a kind (or gentle? Could mean either) person was good to have. It was mildly interesting to learn that this was apparently city hall. That lined up with what she'd thought and didn't really surprise her.

But it broke her brain, just a little bit, that he'd casually referred to her as "Regina-hime" when he said that Osafune was going to speak to someone on her behalf. (Who the fuck was Mifune? She should probably remember that name).

Regina-Hime.

Hime. Hime, as in princess.
Princess, as inholy shit, Jiraiya was definitely important in some way. Which was probably why he knew he could get away with brazenly walking into the country under false pretenses. He had some level of diplomatic immunity.

'From their perspective, I'm... foreign nobility?' she guessed, trying to persuade her spine to stay straight when all she wanted to do was go limp and lay on her side to die. 'Jiraiya is definitely foreign to Iron, so he can't be a really minor lord or they wouldn't even know him. So he's pretty important in whatever country he's from, and that country is important enough that Iron is at least considering taking care of me on short notice to keep good relations.'

First off, she had to conclude that Jiraiya was a goddamn madman. (Bless his cholesterol-clogged heart.)

Secondly...

Regina did not yet have brainpower to reach a second conclusion. She was still caught on the first thing. Jiraiya was crazy. Generally benevolent, apparently, but absolutely he did not operate by normal rules.

'Have I been adopted? It's going to be hard for him to ditch me at this point. Wait. Why would they even believe that story? Does Jiraiya actually have a foreign wife? Did she really die?'

A man wearing more normal clothes than the armor came out of the room where Osafune had gone. He gave her a polite smile but reserved his attention for her companion. They conferred quietly at a pace that she didn't even try to understand.

She probably could have fallen in with worse people. And now that she'd gone through the terror of thinking that she was being completely abandoned, she felt a bit more charitable in her assessment of Jiraiya's character. He'd really had no reason to help her, aside from being in the wrong place at the right time. Maybe he felt responsible for her because he knew what had happened to her, but there wasn't any power holding him to it. So, like. He was probably a generally good person.

'Fine. I forgive him for giving me no forewarning. Because I'm a princess now and that means they'll probably not leave me to die anywhere.'

But if he didn't show back up within a week, he was going right back on the shit list.

"行きます。"

She stood without really thinking and followed her companion. It was getting late, so it was a relief that the next place she was taken to was clearly meant to be a sleeping area. The building was close to city hall- was it part of Osafune's residences? The building looked like it belonged to someone important.

'Is this my room?' Regina cautiously picked her way around, but there wasn't much to see. It was a 6-mat tatami room. The only furniture was a small table with four cushions waiting quietly for company. There was a scroll with one enormous, artistically illegible kanji in the little alcove to the side. The wall furthest from the door was graced by a window that showed some hedges and a body of water in the distance.

'Maybe I should ask for... I don't know. A shelf? For my one bag.'

She checked the closet. It was huge, but pretty much the only thing inside was the futon set.

An older woman with a pleasant but firm mien emerged after a short time. She introduced herself
as "Fujita" and then wrestled Regina into a kimono and pinned up her hair. Regina tried to make small talk, but it became clear that Fujita wasn't interested.

Regina had the sinking suspicion that her kimono was meant for a man— it was a very plain blue and white stripe design. And most Japanese ladies' clothes weren't meant for her height. The shoes she was given were definitely ladies', because they were way too small. Half her heel hung off the back and her feet were definitely going to blister and bleed where the thong cut between her toes.

She winced her way to a dining area a two minute walk away where she was told to take off the shoes again and put them in a cubby. There, Fujita-san indicated a certain cushion and then left.

Fujita-san returned only a minute later, carrying a tray full of dishes. A younger girl was silently following with another try.

Regina began to stand. "手伝うしましょうか?"

The looks she got told her that no, absolutely not, she should not be helping. The younger woman looked appalled at the suggestion and refused to make any kind of eye contact as she laid out an array of dishes.

Regina sat back down.

The first dish was a small square about as long as her thumb. It looked like cold, raw octopus with some seaweed, probably in a citrus or vinegar solution. That one would be good. The second plate was small and round— a trio of tsukemono samples. She recognized daikon and carrot and something purple that might be dyed ginger. Tsukemono was hard to predict. Sometimes she loved it, sometimes she tried hiding it under the decorative shiso leaves that other foods sometimes came on.

Next, Regina and two other placements got covered bowls that would be miso soup, and an oblong dish with three whole fish. She tried not to make eye contact, which was kind of easy on the technicality that the fish's eyes had all burnt away and were black holes in their sad little crispy faces. They all had the telltale large bellies that meant they were full of bitter eggs.

'I hate shishamo. Shishamo is my greatest enemy, probably.'

She should probably have kept a neutral face, but Regina honestly didn't try that hard. Shishamo was almost every trait she didn't like in Japanese food. She didn't like to be served entire animals with bones and faces and crunchy fins that she was supposed to eat.

'I really should be polite. Most Japanese people like shishamo, so this might mean they're trying to serve me a nice meal. At least it's not the really tiny fish that still have their eyes,' she consoled herself.

'But... it probably will be tomorrow. Chirimen are a fall food too, I think.'

Well, that attempt to soothe herself backfired.

Cold tofu with green onion slices on top— that was good. There was absolutely nothing problematic about that dish. She felt a bit better when that was set down. Next came a small glass at each placement of cold barley tea.

The door rolled open. Osafune gave her a nod and then took the spot at the head of the table. On his heels was an elderly woman who was absolutely tiny. She shook and shuffled her way to the place directly across from Regina.
"母、こちらはじらいやの伝説の三人の娘です、" He sounded pretty formal, so Regina gave a bow on instinct to the introduction. She didn't understand Jiraiya's title, but it sounded like a big deal.

"初めまして。Reginaと言います。どうぞよろしくお願いいたします," Regina murmured. This at least was easy. She could introduce herself in her sleep. She was super proficient at sharing her name and saying the cultural equivalent of "it's nice to meet you." What a champion. She bowed again as she finished.

It must have been the correct response, because Osafune's mother gave her a gummy smile. "初めまして," she said in the tiniest, wibbly-wobbliest little old lady voice. And then... she was a lot harder to understand. But her name might have been "Kumiko." Other than that... Regina just had no idea what the hell had been said. It might have been in a regional dialect she didn't know. It might also just have been kind of formal. Regina didn't really know.

Japanese is hard, okay?

'Am I supposed to use her first name? Probably not. 99 times out of 100 that is hella rude. But she probably has the same last name as her son. So am I meant to use her first name for clarity's sake?'

Regina smiled and hoped the despair wasn't showing in her eyes. "すみません、日本語があまり。。。" she trailed off politely, because the only way she knew how to say that she wasn't skilled at Japanese was actually kind of a rude word. This seemed like a very bad time to knowingly say something with a rude nuance.

Luckily, she seemed to get it. She nodded a few times, smile strained but not offended or anything. Her attention waned and Regina relaxed a bit as Osafune and his mother spoke quickly.

Rice was brought in, steaming hot. That was the signal for the meal to start. She copied her companions in clasping her hands in front of her chin like she was about to pretend to pray. Osafune gave the "いただきます、" and was moving to pick up his chopsticks by the time Regina and Kumiko echoed it.

She stumbled and suffered her way through some basic conversation- Kumiko was hard to understand, but after a while started to get the hang of keeping her vocabulary more accessible. Osafune was largely silent, except to ask her basic questions that made her kind of nervous.

How old was she?

Should she lie? What if the truth (24 years) didn't match Jiraiya's story?

How was her family?

She mostly winced and felt distressed until Kumiko said something chiding.

What were her interests?

That one was easy, at least. She liked to read and study and relax.

Where was she from?

This turned out to be the impassible question. Osafune had never heard of Minnesota. His follow-up question was how the name was written. His brows furrowed at the English, he seemed distressed about the katakana version. He eventually conveyed that it must have a kanji name because they were going to see Mifune-sama in the near future.
She did not exactly see how those two things might connect. Did Mifune-sama really hate katakana?

'To be fair, I hate katakana. Too many of the syllables look the same and it gives me a headache. Plus I guess it's basically used as the Japanese version of allcaps. Maybe Osafune thinks a kanji version would be more dignified?'

There just wasn't a kanji name for Minnesota, though. It was always written in katakana. It must have been important, because after the plates were carried out he'd called for paper and clearly meant to stay until Minnesota had an adequate name.

'But America has both types,' Regina remembered. 'The kanji one is just assigned based on the sounds, I guess. I could do that for Minnesota- just think of some kanji that match the sounds and claim that's what it is.'

'Mi' was easy. 美, beauty, she saw that all the time in names and stuff. 'Ne'? It'd have to just be 'ne' because she couldn't think of any kanji read as 'neso'. Um... sleep? 寝. 'ta' was easiest, that would be field. 田 was used in, like, everything, it would fit as the last kanji for a place name.

But 'so' stumped her for a bit. Like... She struggled for a while with the blank space in the name. She was not going to use the kanji for 'clean' because that was actually 'sou' and it was too hard to write out all the time. But she couldn't think of anything else. Oh. Ancestor? 祖? She vaguely remembered that kanji existed.

She didn't write it correctly the first time, but she got close enough for Osafune to understand what she was trying to do and correct it. He wrote the full name out on a clean paper and added "country" to it. Then he leaned back to look at the name as whole.

Regina twisted her hands and hoped she was done with this, because it was weirdly stressful and she felt guilty about trying to name something that already had a name.

美寝祖田国

Osafune's mustache twitched when he gave one barking laugh. The look he gave her was assessing, then it turned amused.

"何？"She said, just a little closer to snapping than she'd like. But she didn't see what was funny and that had been so troublesome that she would hate having to start again because the combination didn't work or said something stupid.

Luckily, Osafune didn't take her tone personally. He managed to communicate that the combination actually had a nuance close to 'the field of beautiful wives', which was a little hard to see. Was sleep + ancestor an older word that could be used for wife? It wasn't modern Japanese, she was pretty sure. But it would kind of make sense...

He didn't protest when she said that was fine. Whatever, it was just the name of her home state, which she would have to convey to nearly every new person she met. This definitely wasn't a permanent decision that would come back to haunt her later. Totes fine.

Why did Mifune's opinion matter so much, anyway? Regina felt her brow tensing. Osafune seemed like he was pretty important. Who would be his boss? She stumbled through trying to ask the question more than a time or two and kept getting back frustrated answers to things she didn't really need to know.
Apparently, Mifune was a samurai. He was wise and kind. He was the leader of the city, maybe? That didn't really make sense, weren't samurai bound in service to a lord?

'There was that time with samurai made their own really conservative government and overthrew the Emperor,' Regina remembered.'That is definitely something that happened in Japanese history. Did that happen here too? Is Mifune functionally the Emperor?'

Wait. That time, she understood the verb 'decide.' Regina tried asking what Mifune would decide.

Osafune gave her a strange look, as though this hopeless little foreigner was making him sad. "みふねさまもしRegina姫が鉄国で泊めてことが出来るを決めます。"

Wait, shit, what? Regina felt her face turn green.

Mifune was going to decide if she could stay in Iron country. Okay. That did seem important. Did he, like, need anymore kanji written up?
"おはようございます。"

She roused at the sternest “good morning” call she could remember and reflexively mumbled something similar back. Ugh. Regina felt stiff and unhappy to sit up, but it was hard to sneak five more minutes of sleep when someone had come into your room and actually opened the windows to let in freezing cold air. And then waited around for you to get out of bed.

'This is cruel and unusual. Why do I have to be woken up? I'm not going anywhere, am I?'

A maid she hadn't spoken to started folding up the bedding as soon as Regina crawled out of it. The strict-faced maid was holding a much fancier-looking kimono than yesterday's clothing.

Regina allowed herself to be wrapped up and arranged, bemused by the mysterious reason behind the process but more than willing to wear pretty clothes.

'This isn't daily wear,' she guessed. 'Osafune and his mother dress nicely, but I think this is a step above? So either I'm being assumed to have higher status than my host- unlikely- or there is something special going on today.'

She was leaning pretty heavily towards the special events theory throughout breakfast of miso soup, okayu, and tsukemono paired with hot barley tea. Regina recalled this was the exact menu she had eaten at a Buddhist temple on an English-language tour and found it a little comforting.

'Maybe they do zazen for the public here too. I should ask. I actually enjoyed looking at a wall for an hour to meditate and then having a priest walk around telling a story and hitting people with a stick. Maybe if I do it again, this time I'll understand if getting hit is a good sign or a bad sign. It can't be worse than spending my mornings here. I'm up anyways.'

They went out after that. She tottered as gracefully as she could in the beautiful shoes, and did her best not to think of them as tall, fancy flip-flops. Even though they had an open top and were only held on by a v of fabric that met between her toes. Definitely not flip-flops. Fli-flops just weren't dignified.

Kumiko and a ….a guard, maybe? - took her to a very nice traditional home where a maid greeted them and had them seated before the woman she could only assume was her hostess came in.

'She looks like an absolute boss. I cannot help but feel that she is firing me, right now, at this current moment. I am being let go from my job.'

Regina tried to look attentive, pleasant, and inoffensive.

The older woman was very short and had just a bit of the roundness that almost everyone gets after turning 50 or so. Her hair was still black even at the roots and she carried her age well, but didn't read as particularly friendly. She said something in an incongruously high voice that caused everyone else to leave the room. And then she fixed her dark, heavy-lidded eyes on Regina.

“Good morning,” she said.

Regina stared a moment before she remembered to respond. “Good morning!” She said it a little more enthusiastically than was completely necessary, but she was feeling surprised in the best way. English. She was hearing English for the first time in weeks.
Her hostess bowed. “I am Shirogawa Tomiko,” she said. It came out rote and practiced. “It is nice to meet you.”

Where the fuck did this woman learn English? It really did not seem like there was a lot of linguistic diversity around, so… it definitely implied an outsider, right? That either someone had come in or that Shirogawa-san had gone out?

‘Australia is closest to Japan, right? Is there a rogue Australian on the loose? Can I run away with them?’

Regina bowed back, feeling the smile split her face. “I am Regina. It is nice to meet you, too.” She swallowed, wondering how to ask. Well. When in Japan, do as the Japanese do…. “Your English is very good,” she complimented.

...She didn't actually know yet if it was any good or not, but it would be too rude to ask 'why the hell do you speak my language and are you any good at it?'

Maybe the compliment would lead the conversation to the topic of where Tomiko's English had been learned and if Regina could go there and cry.

Tomiko waved off the compliment. “No, no.” She did smile a little, showing that she had all her teeth and that they were only a little crooked. “My English is very poor. Many years ago I studied in England.”

“Ah, is that so,” Regina said. She felt her mood go down, just a bit. England. Made sense, in a hallucination dimension where Japan was full of punch-wizards and hodge-podge Western influences. England would have been the first English-speaking country Japan had significant contact with. “That's interesting.”

“Have you ever been to England?” Tomiko put her hands on her lap.

Ha, no. Regina had to shake her head. “No, I haven't. I'm from America.”

Tomiko made a polite sound of comprehension. “I see.” She seemed to be working her way around to a question, mouth moving silently for a moment. “Are you… You are the daughter of Jiraiya-sama?”

Ah yikes, somehow the lie tasted worse in her native tongue. “I am,” Regina said, feeling all kinds of weird.

“But you have not lived in the Elemental Nations,” Tomiko observed. “Why do you come here now?”

'Her English is solid enough,' Regina judged. 'She might still have a relatively small knowledge base, but she's really good at what she knows.'

On the outside, she put on a smile. If it came out queasy, well, that was situationally appropriate for all kinds of reasons. “I lived with my mother,” she said. The tone came out stiffly enough that Tomiko might guess it was not a happy cohabitation. “She has passed away, so I came to live with my father.”

Tomiko paused a moment before nodding along.

'Crap. She might not know 'passed away'. That's an Americanism. Did she guess? I think she's too dignified to ask me for clarification, but would I insult her by repeating myself?"
“How fortunate, for your father,” Tomiko hedged.

She was prepared for the possibility of something awkward, so she didn’t even have to force down a laugh.

‘She almost definitely did not know that euphemism. Maybe I should have corrected myself after all.’

But the moment had passed. It was too late to say anything. So she smiled and nodded. “I am interested to see his home and experience Japanese life,” Regina said. It was the blander possible response she could think of, but it wasn’t going to contradict Jiraiya’s story.

She was already feeling uncomfortable in seiza. Her legs itched to move but she really didn’t want to.

“As I told you, I studied abroad, years ago.”

Regina focused on the older woman. There was a purpose to that statement that sounded like the conversation might actually be going somewhere.

“In these days, only one European Country has the habit of trade with the Elemental Nations, and that country has only agreed to trade only with the Land of Cloud. But many years ago, it was thought that trade from the Western countries was desirable, and so some young people were sent to build relationships.”

‘The Dutch? The Dutch trade with Cloud Country? That’s gotta be them, if the historical parallels follow that this really is an alternate version of old Japan.’

Whooa. On some level, she really had accepted that she was in the past of some alternate world. The realization dropped like a marble into a swimming pool. The thought was an interesting bit that Regina would have to dig out later to examine.

“From the Land of Iron, ten young people were sent to London.”

The words had the feeling of being well-worn, falling in a gentle pattern. It sounded like she was repeating something she’d heard or said many times. Regina stared, fascinated.

‘I read about this kind of thing in history class, but that was so long ago. No way could you hear a living person talk about this experience. But I’m listening to her now. She said young people— but she means girls, I bet. The first Japanese people sent to learn abroad were all girls. From important families, hedging their bets about remaining influential in the changing times.’

...Tomiko was some kind of noble or samurai.

Badass.

“I was a member of that program.” Tomiko’s hard exterior cracked just enough to show what might have been wistfulness, or just plain sadness. Maybe she missed living overseas, being special, doing something potentially important for her country? Obviously the program had fallen though, but she couldn't have known that at the time. Maybe it had been a great time.

Or maybe the experience had been awful and isolating. The world was small and stifling and miserable when you were suddenly incapable of basic errands or communicating any thoughts.

Whichever way it was, she wasn't about to tell some foreign girl half her age.
“That must have been interesting,” Regina hedged blandly, because it was obviously her turn to speak but she didn't want to risk changing whatever mood Tomiko was in.

It was no use. Tomiko nodded slightly, and then she was unapproachable again. “Just so,” she said crisply. “I would like to ask your opinion. There was an unlucky occurrence some weeks ago, in the waters. I have made my opinion, and we have asked the opinion of a visiting trader who was luckily able to visit from the Land of Clouds.” Tomiko's lips twisted ever so slightly as she paused over her next words. “As our opinions do not agree, Mifune-sama is withholding judgment. However, it is possible that you, a foreign person who speaks their language, may be able to lend weight to the thinking of either myself, or that of a foreign person who does not speak their language.”

“That language?” Regina asked, just a little lost. “Who are you talking about, exactly?”

Tomiko gave her a look that implied she had missed something implied earlier. “The ship from England that sunk in our waters,” she said, very patiently. “There are seven men who are not dead.”

“Oh,” Regina breathed. That- that made sense, then. If Iron just had a spare native speaker of English laying around when such an awkward incident came up, it made sense to utilize her.

“What kind of ship is it? What were they doing here?”

‘I could ask them about – well. Not about home. But someplace closer to home.’

Tomiko rose. “As that is what Smit-san and I cannot agree upon, I think it is best to allow you to come to your thinking without hearing our thinking.” Her chin went up.

‘I think it would be better for my stay here if I agreed with Tomiko. Here’s hoping that works out.’

Regina stood, because Tomiko was too. “I understand.” She bowed, because long experience in Japanese body language was telling her it was an appropriate time. “I'll do my best. When shall I go?”

Iwagakure was as cheery as it ever was. Jiraiya entered with a family of merchants and tradespeople, winning their support with a combination of a sob story and bribery. He'd deliberately picked a cheerful bunch, but even their attitudes dimmed under the oppressive weight of stone stretching into the sky to blot out the clouds. It was just unnatural, was what it was.

The height of the buildings might have looked better if it had been built against a cliff face, or some other natural feature. As it was, the stone towers lorded over an enormous rocky plain of wildflowers and scrub-brush. They were unmistakable as a boast about Iwagakure's might, their ability to shape the world around them.

‘Or maybe the Tsuchikage just likes to feel tall sometimes,’ Jiraiya chided himself. 'There's no need to get myself worked up.'

He didn't dare to leave his companions the first day, or even the second. It was very rare, but sometimes, while unloading carpets or hauling furniture in for repairs, he distinctly felt eyes on him. That was Iwagakure all over, suspicious to a fault. Honestly, that kind of paranoia was no way to live. Poor bastards.

He slipped away the third day when his extensive tour of the bathrooms of Iwagakure's cheap restaurants finally paid off with one that had a window in it. He sent a clone back out to work and attached himself to the ceiling. After a good thirty men had demonstrated their absolute
incompetence in aiming, he slipped out under the chameleon genjutsu and moved to investigate his newer agent. She was a plant in a city office. Nothing that crossed her desk was classified, but it was very useful to him to know details about the administration of another shinobi village.

The first obvious thing to check were the two dropsites. They were long-abandoned. Clearly no one had visited them recently. Was she avoiding him? Was she trying to quit espionage simply by going dark on him? That wouldn't be the worst outcome, to be honest.

She also couldn't be found at her work, which meant that either she wasn't just avoiding him or that she was very committed to it. That was a shame.

He didn't know what he was going to do with the proof of residence copy he got a city clerk to make for some poor bastard he pick-pocketed for identification, a bankbook, and his personal seal. Jiraiya ended up stuffing them in his pocket along with the ID to return later. Or maybe not, maybe that was just his identity now.

His next stop was her home. She didn't know that he knew where it was, but he wouldn't have trusted information from someone he couldn't track down.

"Huh." He hadn't meant to make any sound at all, but this called for a reaction. Safely wearing the guise of a real Iwagakure citizen, with ID to match, Jiraiya felt secure enough to cross his arms and just look for a moment.

The apartment complex was gone. It had been completely torn down. The place that had once served as residences for 6 families was currently a flat lot covered in scraggly weeds.

'It's safe to say that she's dead, or captured. My last contact from her was four weeks ago. Either that was fake information from someone else, or this happened very quickly.'

He caught sight of something in the grass, waving like paper in the wind. Frowning, Jiraiya crouched for a closer look.

Skin. It was discarded skin.

From his extensive experience, it looked like it was from something small and local. It didn't necessarily mean anything.

Or it could be a message.

He chewed his cheek and the options as he stood. Regular, coincidental snakeskin? Or psychological warfare, a calling mark from his old teammate?

'I don't like this.'

An Iwagakure chuunin was watching him from the street, her square face disapproving.

He ducked his head and hurried on his way, because he was just a fat office worker on a lunch break.

She disappeared for a while, then walked past once under a henge to check on him. By that point he'd settled in at a teishoku place and was putting away a truly unpleasant amount of fried food to validate his cover identity. The chuunin took a seat nearby and didn't really bother to hide her disgust as he ate so much food that he could not possibly be planning any athletic shenanigans. She left, and this time it was for real.
He excused himself to the bathroom to vomit enough that his stomach wouldn't interfere with his ability to run if he needed to. There was more that he wanted to do, but he only had a slim window of time to switch back with his clone at the pre-planned rendezvous point.

He returned to working with the merchants and learned about repairing wooden furniture, which was apparently so valuable in Iwagakure that people would bring heirloom chairs to be cleaned and taken care of by wandering woodworkers. Bizarre. The world was truly full of diversity.

Also, Iwagakure's soil was mostly too dry and loose to support decent-sized trees which meant wood was imported and expensive. That was probably a factor.

The workers' visa was set to expire in a week, but he couldn't hurry too much. His impersonation must have been discovered. Or something else had happened, that was possible. Either way, the military was taking a much more active role in supervising civilian activities. Jiraiya didn't test his luck, settling in to be the best woodworker he could possibly be.

It was only two nights before the departure date when he had a chance to check in on his second agent. That man was a career genin who thought he was passing information to the Tsuchikage's political rivals, a ruse helped by Jiraiya occasionally making sure they got that information to act on.

The weird thing was that this man appeared to be living as normal. Jiraiya tailed him at work, on break, to his home. As far as he could tell, the guy was just... doing his thing.

'If I'd gone to him first...' Jiraiya considered it. 'I would have just assumed that he had decided to stop reporting to me. And someone would assume I would go to my longest-held contact, wouldn't they? But the new girl was completely burned. I don't trust that this guy changed his mind in the same time frame.'

He kept his post all night and was rewarded with the faint exhalation of chakra from a henge being dismissed and reapplied.

He slunk back to his post without attempting to make contact, mind whirring. Was this an expert or a juvenile operation? Successfully integrating an impostor into Iwagakure was a hell of a feat. But it seemed just plain sloppy to have him suddenly stop passing information to Jiraiya. Why not have him pass on false or useless information so that no one knew about the switch? What would a person gain from that?

Jiraiya completely dismissed the possibility that his man just happened to have been targeted for someone else's spy operation. He didn't believe in those kinds of coincidences.

If it really was Orochimaru, the obvious answer was the he was just fucking with Jiraiya. If it was another party, the answer was that it had been a trap to draw him in. The jaws would snap shut on him when he approached.

'Could be Iwagakure themselves,' Jiraiya realized belatedly. 'Might not be a third party at all. They could have discovered the spies and set up a sting operation to catch out whoever tried to make contact. That would explain why someone at that old apartment complex would stir up the nest for days.'

But again, why treat the spies so differently? Why impersonate one and erase the other?

He bitterly regretted that he was out of time to check on his third man, but he couldn't risk it on this disguise. Jiraiya left with his newfound family, made a great many promises to stay in contact, and
slunk to a nearby village to scope out his next ticket into Iwagakure.

It was apparently a common vacation destination, he discovered. The village was almost a city, really, but it was more like three or four small towns had grown together. He did the tourist thing-walked through the gardens of a local lord, bought some local pottery, and went to a small zoo to gawk at the oldest goat in the country. It had featured heavily in the advertisements for the city and he was the slightest bit curious to see the damn thing.

In person… It did look pretty old. While other animals paced or nudged the fence, Ajiisan the ojisan goat laid on his side in the dirt. His fur was patchy, his hooves obviously worn. The sad thing opened one gummy eye when the tour group came through, and then decided they weren't worth moving for.

'That goat has given up on life. They should let him relax somewhere dark for two minutes and it'll shuffle off this mortal plane.'

Jiraiya didn't keep the revulsion off his face. “It looks sick,” he commented. “Maybe it's dying. You're going to need a new advertising campaign maybe next week.”

The tour guide looked at him sharply, but her wide grin didn't falter for an instant. “How amusing!” she chirped. Her smallish eyes bored into his face with uncomfortable intensity.

'I get the feeling that she's imagining feeding my corpse to the goats. I think she's capable of it. Maybe she's done it before.'

“Eh, heh heh…” He rubbed at the back of his neck and then discovered a placard that he really had to read, right now. By coincidence. He stared at it until the guide moved on and started talking again.

The group he was keeping an eye on passed him. Their conversation had turned to their two-day plans in Iwagakure. They were arguing about having reserved the wrong hotel.

Jiraiya smiled at the animal he was in front of. Some kind of bird, he registered belatedly. Yikes. He glanced back at the name card and then at the beast again. “You're one ugly son of a bitch,” he mused.

The ostrich stared back, deeply resentful. It might have been thinking the same thing about him.

God, this zoo was just plain creepy.

He beat feet to the gift shop, because everyone needed to go there to leave the zoo anyway. He perused the postcards until he found the single most hideous one possible and bought it. The salesclerk waited patiently for him to compose the perfect message and then hand it back to be put with the outgoing mail.

Jiraiya stuck his brush back in his hair for safekeeping, still a little damp with ink. “Perfect.” He held the postcard out at arm's length, checking his handwriting and brilliance. “She'll love it.” He blew on it to dry it.

“I'm sure that she will,” the salesclerk agreed. She looked like the kind of absolutely wonderful woman who had three children and a fluffy yellow dog. Probably wore gloves when she did the dishes, put her kids' drawings on the fridge.

On impulse, he showed her his message. “Yagi-san, what do you think?”
She leaned in to read it and blinked rapidly, then back at him. “It's... Ah, you have a daughter?”
Ms. Yagi laughed. “I like it,” she said, but was clearly not willing to give more direct feedback. “

'Probably isn't sure if it's a joke or not.'

He hummed and let her put it in the box for mail.

Yagi-san was wrong, actually. She was going to hate it. It was going to be fantastic. That was the point.

He leaned against the wall outside while he waited to tail his target group, mind idly turning over how his life had changed. He was committed to it now. Rejina might as well actually be his kid, because he couldn't just get rid of her now that he had claimed her.

Jiraiya found that he didn't mind.

Aside from all the entertainment value this possessed, it was really the only thing he could have done. Aside from leaving her to an undoubtedly grim fate, that was.

It wasn't his fault that she had wound up being dragged across dimensions, caught in the middle of a shinobi fight. That hadn't been on purpose anyway, but it was still shitty. It was low to involve civilians in shinobi business. It was just vicious and unnecessary.

He still could have walked away. If he'd been a different man, anyway. Or maybe if he'd been a younger man. Like he said, it hadn't been his fault. It wasn't really even his responsibility, except that she had gotten caught up by someone looking for an edge on him, and the fact that now she had been associated with him.

Lots of things weren't Jiraiya's fault.

It wasn't his damn fault that those kids in Ame had ended up orphaned and caught up in shit beyond their abilities. It wasn't his fault that Minato had died, that Minato's kid was an orphan.

But at some point, he had to admit that walking away was the reason that all four of his students were dead. He had left Konan and Nagato and Yahiko without protection and they had all gotten themselves killed within a year. He had walked away from Minato to train them, too. It was a fucking miracle that Minato hadn't gotten killed in that period when his jounin teacher fucked off to Ame.

Jiraiya was starting to see the long string of failures in his life as a pattern. He was too trusting, too flip, too fast to walk off, too careless with other peoples' welfare.

For the moment, he needed to leave Rejina in capable hands. But he'd get her to a safe, permanent place. And it wouldn't hurt him to have someone living in his empty house in Konoha. He wasn't going to have any other heir, anyway. He was never going to get married and have his own kid.

Plus, as said before, it was going to be deeply funny.

Ah, finally. He kicked off the wall under genjutsu and followed the family he was going to go with.

They weren't as friendly and fun as the other group. There was definitely not going to be a chance of convincing them to lie about having always had him in their group and letting him copy paperwork off of theirs.
It was better to change methods anyway, keep it fresh and unpredictable.

He scoped them out, watched the way that they interacted, and picked his impersonation target. Now all he had to do was get them out of the way, maybe send them under a genjutsu walking backwards for a day.

'Quick in and out this time,' Jiraiya decided. 'A more brute force approach. Bust through to actually approach the last agent, and then get out of Iwagakure before the alarm is up.'
Osafune was the chief of police samurai, or something like that. On her third morning in Iron Country she followed him along his morning routine. It involved inspecting some kind of training going on. Regina squinted, trying to decide if mustaches were a sign of authority here or something. None of the young men suffering through athletics had facial hair, but all of the men supervising had at least a short beard.

'What if you can't grow facial hair?' She wondered. 'Are you just ineligible for promotion? Maybe you have to transfer to a public relations department? Do you borrow some hair and glue it on?'

She looked at Osafune and considered asking.

He was standing with a straight back and hard expression, hands at his side. Osafune impassively watched shouting supervisors pacing up and down the rows of trainees. They all seemed very conscious of being supervised.

'Maybe I'll ask later. I think we are being dignified right now.'

They continued being dignified into a place that had a lot more mustached people, assisted by some people without any, and ended up in what had to be Osafune's office. He had her sit in a chair and drink tea while he did some kind of paperwork. She considered asking for a coloring book, because it was clearly 'bring someone's child to work day'.

After less than an hour, someone came in with two separate letters. He handed one to Osafune and then one to her. Regina took it, giving the messenger a confused but pleased look. He gave her a quick smile and then stood like he was waiting for orders.

The letter was from Tomiko- maybe both of them were?

'I'm going to do the first three interviews this morning. Huh.'

She considered it. 3 interviews before lunch, and 3 more the next day.

That raised one more question that didn't get answered until she talked to Osafune. He told her, unprompted, that one of the men had been taken to the hospital. That made sense. Being shipwrecked was probably bad for your health.

The man who had brought the letters was apparently her babysitter for the day. While Osafune was there, at least, he was far too professional to chat with her. He led her out of the Important Mustache Man center and to what appeared to be a police station.

Regina followed her escort into the police station and decided that she probably needed to thank Jiraiya. The first group of fellow outsiders she'd met in this place were crowded into two jail cells, skinny and tired. There were three men in each cell.

'I'm glad that no one put me in a jail cell. I like not being there. I really hope that Mr. Mifune does not want to put me there. I feel like I'm going to be sick. When am I going to see him, anyway?'

One man was leaning on the bars facing the door, watching them come in. His eyebrows shot up. He was definitely staring at her.

She nodded at him and then pretended to be very absorbed in listening to the mustached samurai
talk with the two police men in the room. Most of it went over her head and she didn’t try to focus on it. Tomiko-san had already given her detailed instructions and passed on directions for the escort to convey on her behalf, so there wasn’t any need.

A police officer drew her aside and indicated for her to take a seat in a room behind the desk. She let him pull out her chair and put the over-cape she’d worn off to the side.

He left.

Regina folded her hands, looked at the table, and wondered about what she was doing.

This isn’t just about me, is it? They are clearly on edge about foreigners here and at the very least suspicious of motives. I knew that they were taking care of me because Jiraiya claimed me, but… His vouching for me is probably the only reason they’re considering trusting my judgment on this. Jiraiya must have a fairly solid reputation. He seems like a ridiculous person, but he isn’t a joke, and he must meet baseline standards for honesty and respectability if his name is buying me so much trust.’

Well. So that needed to be separated out into the topics of evidence of Jiraiya being a good dude, and evidence that being a cultural outsider was a Problem. That level of negative sentiment did explain why the exchange program had failed, or maybe it had resulted from it.

‘Now I’m curious why this group came here. Were they just hoping to start trade anyway? Did they get lost?’

The police officer brought her hot tea and paper for notes on each interview. She thanked him and drank the tea hastily. She was just setting it to the side when the door opened and a prisoner was led in.

“Good morning,” Regina offered.

The sailor offered her an uncertain nod as he was guided to sit down. “The same to you, ma’am.”

‘He has one of those accents, too. England? They were the ones sailing all over.’

He glanced at her clothes and then back up at her face with a small frown.

He was pretty young-looking, honestly. She might guess late twenties, early thirties. Maybe he was around her age, if she subtracted a couple years from an ‘at-face value’ assessment. Doing a physical job outside with hard sun and winds would age you a bit faster, right?

“My name is Regina, and I will be asking you some questions today on behalf of the local authorities.” She tried to look official but approachable, channeling how she’d acted when teaching to undergrads. “Name, age, and place of birth, please?”

He shifted in his seat. “Richard Aldrich. 26 years of age, from Lancaster, originally. Ma’am.”

“Occupation?” She took notes, assuming she was spelling his name right. Right enough, anyway.

“Able Seaman,” he answered. “Foreign Merchantile.”

‘Is that a job title, or is he claiming to be a particularly proficient seaman? Maybe the next guy is a mediocre seaman, or a fantastic seaman.’

Regina pretended that all those words made perfect sense to her. “What port did you leave from,
and what have you been trading?"

His answers meant pretty much nothing to her, although she documented them meticulously. His crew had come from the United Kingdom, sailed... under Africa, she thought? And traded away cloth, metal goods, and –

“herbals,” Richard said evasively,

—uh, probably opium. In China? They had picked up spices, ceramics, and 3 cannons (!?!). The cannons were to be traded at a port en route, the spices and ceramics to travel all the way to England.

She leaned back in her seat a bit and considered the man across the table. He was sunburnt, far too thin, and had dark circles under his eyes. His mousy brown hair had been fingercombed at best, and probably needed a cut.

“Mr. Aldrich, I am afraid to say that you are not in Great Britain,” Regina said blandly. “Very sorry.”

He let out a laugh. The policeman watching flinched, eyes darting between the two of them.

Aldrich glanced at their watcher and his amusement faded. “That’s so,” he agreed. “We have gone rather off course. Five days out of port we were set on by pirates, who took our food and water. We attempted to return to the closest port, were blown off course by a storm. We began to take on water. We decided to try to head for the closest land, trusting to hope that the locals here would be more forgiving than the seas.” He looked wry.

“Well, these men aren’t dead. So there’s that. But clearly the local authorities are not throwing open the doors for a feast, so it could have gone better.’

"All of that sounds really unfortunate,” Regina said, more to herself than anything. She took notes on the details of days and events and considered what to say. “You left with a crew of 7 for that journey?” That seemed really low to her.

Aldrich swallowed, looking sick. He shook his head. "No.” He cleared his throat. “From England to Shanghai, we were 11. Including the captain, we lost 4 from injury and thirst. We had rations-cook had hid away some things the pirates didn't find, and we caught a fish or two. Wasn't enough. Made us weak. Maybe we'd have done better otherwise.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” she said quietly. But she had to ask.

Aldrich looked at the table more and more, recounting the sad circumstances within Able Seaman Benjamin Cheyne had died first, of infection after a struggle with the pirates. Able Seaman Thomas Neville had been second, of sickness (diarrhea, to be unfortunate and exact.) Captain Clark Bland had been weakened also by injuries and died of weakness the day after the storm. The last casualty, the ship’s purser James Finessey, had gotten a head injury during the storm and succumbed in his sleep some days later, about 2 days before the ship had seen land.

“This is all incredibly depressing. I know that people can die from diarrhea, but goddamn, what a way to go. And Finessey almost made it. That really sucks.’

“We buried them all at sea.” Aldrich cleared his throat. He was looking through her now. He seemed a lot less upset. Numb, probably.

'They were all together for so long that the crew probably knew each other very well.’
She was stuck on the fact that Finessey’s body was floating a maximum of 2 days travel from the port. Was that close enough that he might wash up on the shores? That seemed like the kind of thing to warn the authorities about, so they didn’t go investigating a murder or something.

‘Seems like something to tell Tomiko-san about.’

“I don’t know how burial at sea works,” Regina admitted. “Is there a service? Is it done right away?”

“Yes, usually the Captain speaks.” With effort, Aldrich dragged his focus to her. “The First Mate spoke for the Captain and Finessey.” He blinked rapidly. “And it's best practice to put the bodies overboard as fast as possible, so sickness doesn’t spread.” His throat twitched and he made a really unsettling weird sound, like he was halfway to crying. He cleared his throat twice. “Within a couple hours is best. Usually wrapped up in their blankets.”

Regina leaned back cautiously. Aldrich looked nauseous.

‘Fair enough. Seeing someone go from friend to disease vector would be horrifying.’

She thanked him for his time, shook his hand, and answered the few questions she was allowed to before sending him away. The police officer stood when she looked at him. 「ありがとう。次の人来てくれて、お願い、」 she requested quietly.

Aldrich gave her a long-suffering look on his way out, body language docile and clearly respectful to the police officer urging him to stand up. “You’ve been here a while, Miss,” he observed.

It was the first personal comment he had dared to make. She chose not to respond to it.

Regina took a moment to just breathe while she was alone. She needed to think.

Nothing in what Aldrich had said had seemed off to her. He certainly looked like a man who had been living off of rainwater and the occasional fish for two weeks. He had claimed that the group who had rescued them had salvaged the ship’s cargo, which would be pretty good proof that the sailors were just merchants.

‘So what’s the problem?’ Regina ran her hands through her hair and frowned. ‘They’re not in prison for no reason. It could be just that local sentiments are strongly negative towards foreigners, but I haven’t really seen that in the way people treat me. And I think that Tomiko-san would argue for international trade, if she trusted them.’

Either Tomiko-san or the Dutch person they’d asked had come to a conclusion that made them hostile to the sailors. Something about them being dangerous, or at least bad people.

‘I guess that means either that this guy lied, or that for some reason someone thought the sailors lied. What would be bad reasons for them to be here?’

Regina strained her intensely minimal knowledge of historical maritime activities and Japanese isolationism and tried to think of theories. Someone could be afraid that the sailors were actually pirates, or spies?

‘They couldn't integrate into Iron Country, obviously, but they might have been watching from the sea to monitor activities or something.’

But that seemed kind of stupid. It couldn’t have been spying on behalf of the British military. They wouldn’t even think of entering a campaign into a country so far away, would-
No, Regina reflected. Any argument predicated on the British Empire avoiding difficult conflict didn’t work. In fact, if they were in their Empirical heyday now, she needed to make sure Iron knew about that. Letting the British into your country had almost never worked out well for anyone. Hm.

Still, it didn’t seem like a good plan. One ship, with just a few people on it? It would take a very long time to report any information back. And why look to the Elemental Nations, and not China, which they already knew was absolutely full of things that British people found very valuable? And why wouldn’t they be dressed like military types? That seemed like the kind of thing the British navy would be strict about. The plan seemed even stupider when you factored in that there were people who could suddenly change faces here, but then, the British wouldn’t know about that.

She interviewed one more man- the First Mate, Mr. Hall. He was 34 and handsome, with broad shoulders and one of those voices that should probably be voicing over movies. His testimony lined up with that of his crew member, in every detail except one, and it included information about why the plan had changed.

“Captain Bland, God rest his soul, thought to take a loan from an old business partner remaining at port. We were to resupply, then make our way on our original path.” Mr. Hall paused to clear his throat.

Regina noticed that she had leaned in at some point to listen. She rubbed her thumb along the pen in her hand and nodded for him to go on.

“We had made it back 2 days toward the port when a sudden squall rose and took us off course.” Mr. Hall was perfectly steady and poised reporting this.

He was, Regina thought, probably a very reassuring boss to have in times of trouble.

He gave her a small smile. “We had left at the very end of the season, barely before the autumn storms begin. I’m afraid we got caught up in the first one.”

“Bad luck,” Regina observed.

Mr. Hall nodded as though she had said something clever. “It was a rush to take down the sails so that we didn’t get blown over, and our purser, Mr. Finessey, got quite a good hit to the head in the thick of things. He never did recover.”

His expression didn’t really change as he said that. But Regina thought his dark eyes might have looked just a bit sad.

‘Is he really well composed, or just not that shaken up?’

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Regina said. She worked not to break eye contact. “He passed away, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Hall said, and yes, he definitely looked sad in his eyes. “It’s awful, isn’t it? Just four days before we were rescued.”

She was already concentrating so much on looking sympathetic that it was easy not to react to that. Regina thanked him for his time, sent him away, and asked the policeman to give her a few minutes before bringing the next person in.

Once she was alone, she put her head in her hands for a moment to think.
‘Confused, or lying?’ Regina wondered, checking her notes once more to be sure that she hadn’t misremembered something. ‘One of them either made a weird mistake, or is lying. Why? That’s such a fact. There is no ambiguity, there is no box for the cat. There can’t be confusion. Either Finessey died 2 days before they were rescued, or 4 days before.’

It didn’t seem like the type of detail you’d forget. Why had Hall and Aldrich given different dates of Finessey’s death? All the other events had matched up.

‘Could be that one of them just made a mistake,’ she told herself, feeling a little guilty for deeply examining the word choices of men who had obviously had a really terrible experience.

She didn't know either one of them well enough to say who was more likely to lie. But Aldrich seemed more likely to make a mistake. He had barely seemed to remember where he was at some points when she had talked to him.

‘Aldrich could have been dissociating or something. Or lost track of time. When nothing happens for day on end, it could happen. I forget the day mid-week all the time and nothing is even wrong with me, aside from my personality and work habits.’

But given that she knew someone had already decided these sailors were untrustworthy, it just didn't seem like a good sign to have already run into an inconsistency.

Feeling curious, she crept out of the room as quietly as possible to watch the men interacting.

One person, particularly small, was sitting in the corner of his cell looking down at his hands. He seemed to draw into himself even further as the door was opened and Mr. Hall was escorted inside.

‘Does Mr. Hall creep him out?’ she wondered. ‘Or is something else going on?’

It didn't prove anything was going on, but the body language was the first hint she'd noticed. May as well pursue that angle first.

「Regina姫様？」 Her escort asked quietly, a frown turning his strong face serious.

She didn't like that much- he seemed like he liked to be friendly. Actually- Regina sidled a couple of steps closer and asked his name under her breath.

He blinked and ducked his chin just a bit. “坂本と言います。”

Right. Sakamoto. That was common and easy to remember. Regina mentally named him 'Mr. Hill Base', because that way she would never forget his actual name. She thanked him, keeping it just a little casual so it didn't come across as weird. She turned her head just a bit to indicate the young-looking man in Mr. Hall's cell. 次、あの人と話したい, “ she said.

Sakamoto followed her gesture and nodded. He said something back that included the word 'yes,' so she assumed that all was well.

Sailor # 3 was George Brown, the youngest man on the ship at 19. He was also the cabin boy.

Regina considered it. “You seem a little old to be a boy,” she pointed out.

George Brown looked a little irritated by that, with his nose pink from either sunburn or cold. His thin shoulders hitched up. “Cabin boys can be adults, or even women,” he said. “It’s just the job title. I didn't pick it.” It sounded like he'd said that a lot.
“Oh.” She blinked. “Is that common? Lady cabin boys?”

“Women, not ladies,” George corrected. His voice went sharp. “Ma'am.” He eyed her as though he wasn't quite certain that she had two brain cells to rub together. “It's not strange. More common on local ships, though. Working in the waters around England, usually only as far as Europe.” His nose twitched.

“How about you?” she asked, a little curious. “Is this your first trip far from home?”

George perked up a bit. “No, when I was fourteen I went to the colonies.”

Regina tilted her head to the side. England colonized pretty much every where they could get their grubby little lands on. “Which ones?” she asked, voice dry.

He gave her another scathing look. “The American colonies, of course.”

She sat up straight, a little offended. “There are no colonies there. We won that war,” Regina shot back. And then… uh. Had they won that war yet?

“Oh,” George said, leaning away from her. His nose wrinkled. “You're one of them.” He huffed. “That was France. Your people are traitors, and would still belong to England if it weren't for France. You have nothing to be smug about.”

A few ugly thoughts ran through her mind- but no. Regina forced herself to take a deep breath, and not even consider pointing out that his welfare depended on her assessment. Even if she was cold enough to give a bad report on someone just because he was a snot about her country, she was not cold enough to let that damn all his companions.

“Mr. Brown,” she said, picking her pen back up. “Please relate the events that led to the day you and your companions were found by the authorities here.”

His account was somewhere in between that of Mr. Hall and Aldrich in how much focus he'd paid to the interpersonal ship politics. He was very carefully respectful, more obviously sad about the captain's death, and he gave the same date of death for Finessey that Hall had.

After he finished her standard questions, Regina pursed her lips and thought it over. If anything… his body language had implied that he didn't like Mr. Hall. So his testimony agreeing with Mr. Hall's was a good indication of honesty.

“Please give me your personal impression of the characters of each member of the crew,” Regina decided. “Starting with Captain Bland.” She tried not to put any special emphasis on Hall or Aldrich when she got to them.

“Captain Bland was a good man,” George said immediately. “I worked under him two years. He had friends at every port.”

On Aldrich-

“Reliable,” George decided. “Strong, good worker.”

On Hall-

“A very practical man,” George said. He was choosing his words carefully. “He was ready to take command. Things might have gone differently if he had been Captain from the start.”
Regina frowned, feeling her eyebrows pull down just a bit. “Do you think he would have done a better job than Captain Bland?”

George inhaled loudly. He seemed pained by the question. “Different,” he decided. “Who can say if things would have been better or worse? But he would have made different decisions.” He pressed his thin lips together and it was almost a smile. He seemed to be thinking, leaning back in his chair. “He certainly changed the plan quickly after Captain Bland passed.”

“Right,” Regina agreed, remembering this part. “Mr. Hall decided to try for the nearest land, rather than making it to a friendly port. Do you think that was a good decision?”

George gave her an annoyed look. “I really couldn't say. But clearly we ain't all dead, so.” His jaw muscles worked. It took him a long moment to finish. “So Mr. Hall's choices can't be all wrong, then.” George crossed his arms and looked away.

She pressed her lips together. It was reckless, but… The men were all together. They might talk anyway. “Mr. Brown, this morning I talked with Misters Hall and Aldrich. Their accounts of events differed, specifically the death of Mr. Finessey.”

George went completely stiff. He looked at her, mouth tense and eyes hard. ‘Well, that's not a bad sign at all.’

“Why is that?” Regina pushed. She put down her pen and put both of her hands on the table. She leaned forward a bit, trying to be a bit intimidating. “Can you tell me why they would tell me different stories?”

George swallowed. He shook his head. “I can't say, ma'am.” He was back to sounding respectful. But he had closed-off. 'I'm not going to get a good answer from him.'

She nodded and stood up. “I see.” George stiffened, but she had turned her attention to the policeman observing things. “前で話すと人ともう一同しゃべたいです,” she decided.

His brow wrinkled a bit, but he nodded. "その三人と話せないで," she tried. These three people can't talk to each other? Is that how to say that?

The older man was perfectly impassive, except for a faint line of concern pressing his lips down. He did not look like he understood what she was asking for him to do. Apparently not. She used her hands to illustrate separation. “も一つ質問を聞きたいのです。その三人と分けて下さい。”

'I have one more question I want to ask. Please separate these three people.' She ran her mind over what she had said. 'There's no way to misunderstand that, right?'

The policeman nodded, confusion clearing up into decisiveness. “はい、出来ます。” He gestured to George, who was watching them with wide eyes from his chair. “プロウンさんはここで待ってます。Regina姫は一緒に行って下さい。”

She nodded and then turned her attention back to George. “Please wait here,” Regina translated. He wasn't going to have a choice, but it still seemed a little nicer to let him know what was going on.
He was already pale.

Regina and the officer went out into the main room. The officer said something fast to the young man sitting at the main desk and retrieved keys. The younger man bowed and hurried to open up two more rooms.

Sakamot sidled over, expression questioning. Regina explained the basics quietly.

At this point, the men watching from the cell had realized that something had changed. A man who Regina had not interviewed yet stood up and prowled the four feet to the closest wall of his cell. He wrapped long, hairy fingers around the bars and scowled at them. “What's going on?” he called. He seemed not to expect an answer.

She considered it, but… “There is no cause for concern,” Regina said, voice only raised a little. “There's one more question that I need to ask Misters Aldrich and Hall.”

Those two looked up, with expressions that both varied on wariness. Hall glanced at Aldrich, frowning slightly.

She got the men separated and then asked them the one question- why had their testimony differed?

Aldrich-

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said, sounding genuinely confused. “Finessey? Mr. Hall said something different about Finessey? What did he say?”

Hall-


“Mr. Hall?” Regina asked, knowing that her voice was hard.

He sighed and wiped at his face. “We lied,” Hall said bluntly. He looked her in the eyes now. “We were hoping to keep up morale. James took a bad blow to the head. It's true that he never woke up. None of us are any kind of doctor, and--” He cleared his throat. “Well. We had him convalescing in the captain's quarters for privacy. Thought the quiet might do him good, and Captain Bland didn't need them anymore, rest his soul. When Ja-- Mr. Finessey passed away, I couldn't bear to tell the crew right away.” His eyes seemed to be pleading with her to understand. “They were in a bad way,” he justified. “Hearing another death-- so soon after the good captain-- I feared that it would have turned to despair.”

“So you lied,” Regina said. She shuddered. “For two days.”

“Yes,” Mr. Hall admitted. “I did.”

“Who is we?” she asked. “Obviously the group does not include Mr. Aldrich.”

“None of the able seamen knew,” Hall admitted. “We kept them out of the sickroom. But the duties of Mr. Large, Mr. Brown and I kept us near the captain's quarters. We agreed to keep it quiet.” His brown eyes bored into her. “You understand, don't you?”

'No,' Regina thought. 'Not really. You couldn't keep the secret forever. You had to know that you were buying a couple of days at best. Did that really help the crew?'
But in a way, she was lying to herself. Who wouldn't want to put off telling bad news? Who wouldn't want to spare someone else fear and grief?

'I've never been in that position. I really can't say.'

It took her a long moment to respond. “No, Mr. Hall,” Regina said quietly. “I don't think I understand. I have never been in a position to have to make such a decision. But I can empathize. That must have been terrible. I am sorry.”

She had Hall, Brown, and Aldrich sent back. She didn't have to tell them not to talk- Hall and Brown had clearly already decided to keep a secret. Regina felt heavy and sad as she gathered her things and left for the day.

None of it sat right. It was disturbing and sad and she didn't like any of it.

'One thing that I really don't like,' Regina decided, 'is that I can't tell if I'm being too paranoid or not.'

George Brown, a person who presumably knew Mr. Hall quite well, had unprompted decided to describe the first mate as very practical. He'd listed off situations that supported that assessment, but she didn't know enough about sailing to really assess his judgment. The one judgment call that she could imagine trying to make herself was what had happened with Mr. Finessey.

That wasn't practical. It wasn't decisive. Buying yourself only two days to avoid giving bad news was an emotionally-driven decision. It was a decision that probably a lot of people would make, and obviously people were complicated, but it just didn't seem to fit with the one character assessment she had of the man who had made it.

'Maybe I just have a really sick imagination,' Regina thought.

Shizune scowled at the collections letter and put it to the back of the pile. The next item was a postcard. She wrinkled her nose at the weird naked, wrinkly animal on the front and flipped it over to read it. There was no signature… “Tsunade-sama, I think that this is for you.” She put the card by her mentor's elbow and took a prudent step backwards.

Tsunade-sama snatched the card up and held it close to her face. She was already red-faced from drinking to keep away the cold. “What the hell?” she said, more conversational than mad. She squinted at the bold, beautiful handwriting.

Shizune waited.

“I'm writing from a metallic land to tell you that congratulations to me are in order,” Tsunade read aloud. Her left hand curled into a fist on the table. “For the birth of my daughter in the year of the-” she choked on outrage. “In the year of the dog? Shizune, what year is it?”

“The year of the rooster,” she said promptly. She'd anticipated this question and already done the math.

Tsunade's voice went up in furious pitch. “So he's telling me- he has a kid who is 8 years old, or 20 years old?”
“Or possibly 32,” Shizune added in the interest of fairness. “Jiraiya-sama is old enough to have a child of that age.”

“I am going to kill him,” Tsunade-sama said calmly. She crumbled the postcard and stood up. She was flushing the alcohol from her system, so that her porcelain skin returned to its usual beauty. “I am going to go to Iron Country and I am going to kill him.”

The bartender had prudently fled at some point.

Shizune sighed. “As you say.” She thought that Jiraiya had probably done things this way for a reason- he was long-gone, or maybe… Well. He was probably perfectly willing to get beat up one side and down the other, as long as it meant that Lady Tsunade was paying attention to him. “I'll get the bags from our rooms,” she said, resigned to it.
Osafune came into the room at a high clip, openly stressed.

Regina lowered her pen from her notes and eyed him cautiously. This was new, and she did not like it.

He gestured for her to get up and follow him, not even bothering to speak. He went back the way that he had come.

It seemed important, so she moved quickly to follow him into the receiving room. Two women were waiting there. One looked absolutely pleasant and demure, in a dark yukata.

She had a sweet face and unassuming posture. In other words, she was not the one who had Samurai Dad shook. So Regina turned her attention to the person on the other cushion, behind the tiny brunette.

Regina's heart missed a beat. The other woman had apparently bleached her hair blonde and gotten the best push-up bra the world had yet known. She was sprawled back indolently, but the stare she leveled on Osafune was seriously intense.

‘Oh, my god. Oh. God.’

It was 100% clear that this was the person who had ruffled the unruffleable Osafune. And no wonder. She looked like she had just gotten off her personal plane from a working business trip to someplace with a beach and was annoyed that she had to come here personally to fire them all. And Regina would be totally fine with that, she was honestly just flattered that this woman was looking at her.

“Oh no,” Regina said. “I'm really gay.”

Everyone turned to look at her. She froze. And then took a moment to be very, very grateful that no one here spoke any English.

‘Please god, don’t let either of them know any English.’

「こちらですか？」 The blonde woman fixed her stare on Regina. 「自来也の娘? 本当だ？」

Oh, god. She did not want to lie to anyone that intimidating. But she also really did not want to get kicked out of Osafune's house. So she nodded. 「はい。」 Her voice came out very small.

「恥ずかしい子供、ですね。何考えますか?」 the woman drawled.

「きれい。」 Regina answered honestly. Then she corrected- 「かわいい。本当にかわいい。」

The dark-haired woman choked. The blonde's face went flat. Osafune looked relieved.

...It was not usually that inflammatory to tell a Japanese woman that she was pretty. Something else was going on.

She did not know what she had missed, but apparently that had not been the right thing to say. Regina felt her face turn red.
the blonde woman snarled. She nearly put a fist to the floor, but stopped right before impact. 「クソ。あのバカがみったら、殺します。」

...Regina tried to be really, really still, because maybe that would make her invisible. She was 90% certain that the pretty woman had just said that she would kill Jiraiya if she found him. Jiraiya would take one look at her and allow it. He might even thank her. Or maybe Regina was projecting a little bit.

“Kiite,” the woman barked. She was already standing up. She fired something off to Samurai Dad that Regina could not parse. Regina was still trying to decide if she should obey the woman or go hide.

Osafune stepped forward and obviously disagreed, saying something fast and conciliatory. Regina caught words, but most of them were fractured bits of grammar that didn't tell her much of anything -however, and so, many people, Jiraiya - the woman snarled- and… Regina blinked. Movie? Had he been talking about a movie?

The blonde woman clearly caught something that sparked interested. She repeated it back, low and… rather sexily evil, Regina thought. It reminded her of her childhood crush on Shego. And then that made her think of the green and black catsuit, and then she was thinking about this amazingly terrifying woman in a green and black-

Osafune agreed, but added a conditional that really sounded a lot like “only if (something something) movie.”

The dark-haired woman spoke up for the first time. 「つなでさま、」 she begged. 「。。。行きます。自来也差に連絡します。」

Regina mentally logged the name. Tsunade. Got it. It was Tsunade who she wanted to follow around and worship. She was bad at names but this one mattered.

「いいえ、しずね。」 Tsunade cracked her hands. Impossibly, it seemed that a dark cloud was forming around her eyes. 「他草自来也バカのお金は私を待っています。」

...Jiraiya knew this woman, and going to give her a lot of money, Regina guessed. Or else she was going to take it. And that was why she would stay?

She felt better about her crush. Murder-Punch-Dad had obviously planned for her to meet Tsunade. So he approved of her. That boded well, based off of how reasonable Samurai Dad had turned out to be. She was tentatively leaning towards deciding that Jiraiya was a better option than the man who had attacked her in the bathroom.

Tsunade and Shizune disappeared not long after, and Tsunade deigned to let Regina stay with a protectively hovering Osafune.

Which was probably for the best, because she had three more interviews the next day.

The problem, or not so much a problem as it was the most awkward thing that had ever happened in Regina’s life, was that she now had to travel most places with at least Shizune on top of her samurai escort.

Where Tsunade went was everybody’s guess but hers- she hadn’t found anything more interesting than a traditional sweets shop on her monitored forays into the city.

The trip to the cells where the sailors were held went much the same, but now she had multiple
shadows past the training grounds and offices.

With Shizune calmly standing two feet behind Regina’s left shoulder as well as the samurai policeman by the door, she felt actually vaguely important. Was this what having an entourage was like? And would they consent to coordinated accessories?

A quick glance at the samurai’s purposefully blank expression and the accompanying outfit told her no. But Shizune, maybe. She seemed nice.

The grinding sound of metal on metal made her aware that the next sailor was being brought to the interrogation room, so she opened her notebook to a fresh page and prepared her pen.

She was going to solve this puzzle, today.

The next man was freckled with fiery red hair, thinning from stress or age. Maybe both. His shoulders were well-set, but somewhat stooped.

He also wasn’t looking up at her at all.

“Good morning.” Regina offered, and gestured to the seat across the table. “Please, be seated.” She was feeling fancy today.

He went quickly to attention, and took his seat. Only then did he dare to look up. His eyes were sallow. He was obviously suffering from something more than grief, but it was likely malnutrition.

“Good morning, ma’am” he said carefully.

Regina smiled, willing it to reach her eyes. She needed to be read as authentically friendly if she wanted to get the answers she needed.

“Could I please have your name and occupation?”

“William Smythe, ma’am, I am an Able Seaman.” His knee jiggled under the table.

Regina couldn’t tell whether he was suspicious, traumatized, or just naturally anxious. Traumatized was a good bet, the first mate was the only one who hadn’t seemed somewhat manic so far.

“Could you tell me what happened from the time you sailed from China?” She asked, putting the tip of her pen onto her notebook paper.

Throughout the interview, Regina took notes. Though perhaps this didn’t entirely require that kind of thoroughness. His account matched up perfectly with Aldritch’s, down to the two days.

His voice was cracking by the end. The stress and the trauma were visibly compounding.

Regina steeled herself. The impulse to withdraw was strong, but she needed to finish this. Her situation was still incredibly precarious. She needed to be useful.

Especially with Shizune watching. It wasn’t just Iron that knew about her, now. Even though it still wasn’t clear where the hell she, Tsunade, and Jiraiya were from.

“Thank you, sir.” She leaned forward just a little. “I’m sure this has been a difficult ordeal for you. I’m only here to help.”

His sunken eyes were shiny, probably tears. She didn’t cringe. She was socialized to comfort someone like this- but that was inappropriate, by both Japanese and probably English social norms.
Plus she was working.

He cleared his throat, clearly also trying to be as appropriate as possible. “Thank you, ma’am. Any other questions you might have for me?”

She checked her notes, scanning them for anything that stuck out. Something about all of this was wrong. It wasn’t just that part of the crew had been lied to regarding Finessey’s death.

“So Captain Bland died the day after the storm.” She said, mulling the words over in her mouth. “He must have been injured pretty severely earlier.”

He nodded.

“Due to his injuries, was he able to do everything he normally would have?”

Smythe looked down at his rough, red hands. “Yes, ma’am. The day o’ the storm, he was mostly the same as usual. ‘e must have took ill during the storm, though. That cold and seawater in’t good for an injury. The next day, ‘e was gone.”

That was new. Or was it? It was hardly surprising, either. Regina didn’t doubt that the seawater and storm could have have further ill effects on an injured, nutritionally deficient man.

In any case, those were details she hadn’t possessed before.

“Not having much food couldn’t have helped,” she mused out loud. “The food that was not taken could not have been enough to keep all of you adequately nourished.”

He shook his head slowly, absorbed in his own thoughts. “No. Not much left after that. The biskets were mostly stolen, as was our salt pork and beef. But Cook had hidden some beer and some kind of pork away somewhere that the pirates didn’t steal.”

“That’s very lucky,” Regina observed. “You can’t drink seawater, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’ll dry you up faster than the sun.” Smythe half-chuckled. “Too much salt.”

“But pork and beer probably isn’t enough to help a man with significant injuries, is it?” She asked, genuinely curious. She knew that their diets were limited, but absolutely no mention of vegetables sounded odd to someone who was raised on potato-based casseroles.

He laughed, and in it she caught a glimpse of the person behind the trauma. It was nice. “We make do all the time, ma’am.”

“Where did you last see the Captain, then?- before his burial at sea.” She amended.

He considered it for a moment. “B’fore the storm really hit.” Smythe asserted. “‘e gave us orders to prepare for it. I din’t see him after that, ‘ed gone to ‘is cabin.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smythe.” Regina turned to the samurai by the door. ‘Please return him, and bring the next person.’

The samurai nodded, and Mr. Smythe went limply along with him back to the cells.

The next two interviews went much the same way. Misters Langley and Sutton agreed with every point of both Mr. Smythe’s and Mr. Aldritch’s accounts of events. They had all thought that Finessey had died only two days from port, and none of them had seen Captain Bland alive during or after the storm.
But things weren’t really adding up. Regina couldn’t get the first mate out of her mind. It wasn’t just that he’d lied to his crew. But there was something there- and the cabin boy’s reaction confirmed it for her.

A sick feeling rose in her stomach after she dismissed Mr. Sutton. But there was a major piece of this puzzle missing, and she aimed to find it.

When the samurai returned, she asked to see the cook, Mr. Large.

The hospital in Iron was luckily not as cold as the rest of it, being insulated somewhat and definitely heated.

Regina and Shizune followed Osafune-san to a nondescript hospital room in a mostly deserted ward.

‘Probably to keep this quiet.’

Having a crew from a potentially unfriendly country within their borders could cause a panic. And would make it more difficult to do away with them if it was decided that they were more trouble than they were worth.

Mr. Large was ill-suited to his name. His emaciated frame and ill color were actually startling under bright hospital lights.

Shizune, who was the reason they were ever allowed to speak to him in the first place, rushed forward.

Regina assumed that she was checking vitals up until a green glow emanated from Shizune’s hands.

‘Why was I even surprised by that. This is obviously Bizarro World, and I’m just living in it.’

A few minutes later, Mr. Large started to shift. His eyes opened. When he tried to speak, his voice was very hoarse and dry. He coughed and hacked.

Regina watched as a hospital person (doctor? Nurse? Just some friendly dude from the hallway?) brought in a glass of water and Shizune continued to glow like a goddamn plastic star nightlight.

Eventually, she could decipher that he was asking where he was.

“Hello, Mr. Large.” She walked forward, closer to the bed. “You are in a hospital. Your other six crewmembers are alive and well.”

“Alive and well,” he whispered, and looked like he was about to retch.

“Oh, yes.” She felt a bit out of balance. He should have known about the four deaths beforehand, so that number wasn’t impolite, was it? “I am truly sorry for the traumatic events you have suffered, Mr. Large. We are doing our best to make sure that you are provided good medical treatment.”

He nodded, but he looked a little distant.

“The reason that I am here, Mr. Large, is that I need to ask you some questions about what happened before your arrival here.”

He coughed, and nodded again. “Of course.”
“I merely want to clear up some inconsistencies. Mr. Hall has stated, for instance, that Mr. Finesey had died four days before your arrival to port, whereas the other crew members state that it was only two.”

“He would say that.” Mr. Large’s eyes were wide and mournful, staring at his bedsheets.

“To your recollection, which would be more accurate?” Regina attempted.

“He actually died only two days before.” Mr. Large said, almost in a whisper. “Was awful.”

A ping went off in the farthest reaches of Regina’s mind. It would fit.

“Mr. Large, the other men who arrived here were not hospitalized. It is true that they were undernourished, but they were not starving. However, you, the cook, were hospitalized for severe malnutrition.”

He coughed again, and swallowed.

“Multiple sailors stated that you had had food hidden away that was not stolen.” She continued, keeping an eye on his reaction. “That was not entirely true, was it?”

Mr. Large shuddered. She took that as a yes.

“Mr. Large, I implore you to tell me the truth about what happened.” She took a deep breath. “There’s also the matter regarding your Captain.”

He actually made a keening cry at that point. Shizune hurriedly rushed her glowing hands over his body, ostensibly to check for further health problems.

“To put it delicately, Mr. Hall’s testimony of events left me with questions I believe only you can answer.”

He looked up to meet her eyes then- and Regina had to keep herself from lurching back. They were bloodshot and wild, and somehow filled with sadness. He was desperate.

“Mr. Large,” she swallowed the rising saliva and bile in her mouth, “was it only Mr. Finesey that was eaten?”
Regina finished writing her report in English and hoped that Tomiko-san would be able to read it. She would definitely answer questions, but…. Her understanding of Japanese wasn’t really suited to this kind of situation.

Obviously, that meant she needed to study more. But it was unlikely that she was going to run into more situations involving mutiny and cannibalism. Or maybe not? This place was hella weird. And it wasn’t like this kind of situation never happened in human history. That wasn’t even the weirdest thing that she’d seen today.

When she was finished, she handed the papers to Osafune in the scroll case that had been provided for protection. He took them solemnly, and vanished out of sight.

Only Shizune remained with her. She’d been so quiet all day that Regina had nearly forgotten she was there.

「大丈夫ですか？」 Shizune asked, sounding more friendly than she had the night before.

Regina just turned to stare at her. No? She wasn’t ok. That situation was highly disturbing and her life was a constant nightmare. She wasn’t even sure she’d done a good job. Would her assessment disagree with Tomiko’s? If it did, was she safe? She didn’t even know where she could go if Iron had somehow found her offensive.

Jiraiya was the only one in the world who knew what had happened to her, and only god knew where his ass was. Tsunade was gone, her life here was a lie-

She wanted to fall down into a hole and die.

Unfortunately, that was the only path she could take that would definitely harm her chances of getting home. Maybe she could cry, instead?

Shizune asked again, looking a little more concerned. Or perhaps unsure if Regina understood basic Japanese.

「はい、大丈夫。」 She said quietly instead. 「今日の予約。。。ありがとうございましたします。お疲れ様です。」 Regina stood, and stared out the window into the snowy streets of Iron. 「あのう、私は疲れました。おやすみなさい、しずねさん。」

Shizune nodded. 「おやすみなさい、レジナさん。明日は帰ります。」

Regina bowed, and Shizune bowed back, lower.

When Shizune left, Regina felt somehow lonelier than before. She watched the snow fall outside for far too long, then went to cry beneath her futon.

The next morning, Regina rose with the sun. Mostly because Fujita-san had again opened the window to the outside and whooshed the futon off her body like a magician.

Fujita-san had also prepared one of the most expensive kimono she’d been given, which was a
good indication that she would be meeting with either Tomiko or Mifune today. Or that they were taking this “hime” thing and running with it. Hard to say, because she would likely never understand the explanation even if one was provided.

Regina stood and then sat obediently as Fujita-san yanked her into good social standing from head to toe.

Afterwards, she followed her into the dining room, where other people were busily arranging the table with tamagoyaki, tsukemono, miso, tofu, and a whole seared fish. Doubtless the rice would arrive soon.

Regina stared into the fish’s baked eyes and waited for her hosts to arrive. At least this looked like one of the seared miso seasoned ones. Even if she was expected to eat everything but the bones. To be honest, the bones were the only part that she actually had a problem with, other than the fact that denucleating a fish felt almost unnecessarily violent at 6 am.

Osafune and Kumiko arrived not long after, looking impeccable and without emotion. They were also wearing even nicer garments than usual.

Regina then noted that the place settings were for a party of five.

They waited.

A few scant minutes of silence later, the main doors slid open. Tsunade and Shizune appeared, looking slightly pink-cheeked from the cold. They took their places at the table gracefully.

Immediately after, the rice was served. Regina watched the tendrils of steam rise into the cold air while her four companions talked at a clip she was far too tired to comprehend. She was reserving her brain power for when she was addressed directly- all her other effort went to seeming amiable and polite so as not to offend any of the people that had her life in their hands.

Oh god, wait. Eating.

Regina glanced at her dining companions. Osafune and Kumiko had seen her eat before and she hadn’t managed to be overly laughable or to mortally offend. But eating with supervision was weird. Any misstep she made was noted, even if dropping things with chopsticks was fairly average for anyone.

This was why she’d hated eating with other people on her study abroad.

Luckily, no one seemed to be caring whatsoever about her at the moment. Though the conversation she did catch was at least partly concerning her, it didn’t seem to include any queries as to her ability to feed herself.

She took advantage of the moment, downing her miso as delicately as possible before moving on to the tofu and tsukemono. The fish was going to be the hard work- taking meat off fish bones with chopsticks was no joke. She prided herself on doing it cleanly, because wasting was basically a mortal sin.

At least that was the same in Japan as it was in the American Midwest.

The tea was particularly excellent this morning. It wasn’t standard to give your thanks to the chef, but Regina sent out a good feeling to whomever had bestowed tasty caffeine upon her sorry soul today.
Though she wasn’t trying to, she caught some words in their conversation. They were talking lowly, but it was probably more that servants didn’t need to know business than anything concerning her. She caught the words ‘useful’, ‘special’—although what or whom was special was unknown—and something about an obligation.

Overall, it kind of seemed like the same things she’d heard before. She was probably the obligation, but whose? That seemed up for debate. Jiraiya’s? As he’d claimed her as his daughter, that was likely. But he hadn’t come back or seemed to have mentioned returning to anyone else that she’d heard. Iron was taking care of her for now, but that couldn’t last. And whatever country Jiraiya was from still had no responsibility for her. Also she didn’t even know where that was.

Tsunade, the newest love of her life, wasn’t even necessarily from the same country. And they’d just met yesterday.

And Tsunade was going to murder her hairy not-father, apparently. So that closed several avenues of rescue.

Regina looked at Shizune and found that she was looking back. She smiled, and Shizune did, too.

Maybe that was good.

Tsunade left after breakfast, but Shizune stayed by her side as Osafune guided her again on the short walk to what was apparently the central government building she’d been taken to on her first day.

This time, they were sent to wait in a large room with a long dining table. Osafune and Shizune sat to either side of the very end, and indicated that she was to take the cushion at the end.

She sat in seiza and waited. Truly, this was the authentic Japanese life experience. You sat uncomfortably and quietly with heavy clothes and hair and waited for someone with far more social capital than yourself to arrive, speak, and determine exactly what would happen with the rest of your life.

They had not come to Tomiko’s home, but Regina was not surprised to see her arrive. And the intimidatingly serious man she was accompanying must be the infamous Mifune-sama.

Admittedly, he was less tall and terrifying than the spectre Regina’s anxiety had produced. But his demeanor and the mood in the room left no doubt that he was the real deal.

She only hoped that she was somehow important and useful enough that this would go well.

There were no guards posted in the room this time. Was that because she wasn’t dangerous, or they were trying not to intimidate her?

Obviously, they weren’t needed. But the fact remained that Mifune was a samurai (emperor, maybe), Osafune was one of his samurai, and Regina had the combat skills of a dried fig. Sure, Shizune had glowy hands, but Regina wasn’t sure that Shizune was really there to keep her safe, either.

Not being able to read the air straight-up sucked.

She was probably puzzling over something obvious. This was an in-house confidential discussion, with Shizune for some reason.

Mifune seated himself and Tomiko did as well.
There were greetings that Regina didn’t understand (it was definitely all Keigo), but she bowed when everyone else did and tried her very best not to make an ass of herself.

After a long speech by Mifune-sama, Tomiko looked to Regina directly to translate. “Mifune-sama and the Land of Iron would like to welcome you, Jiraiya no Rejina-hime, and Katou Shizune-hime, to our land. We hope that you have found the Land of Iron welcoming.”

‘Is that my last name now? Jiraiya?’

Regina turned that over in her head. Well, it could be worse. She could be any number of rice fields. Mountain field, Middle field, hill field….

After the formal parts were concluded, Mifune-sama gestured to the papers on his side of the table and asked something.

Was he asking her? Probably? No one else was answering. She knew she was getting wide-eyed and looked like a baby nitwit.

Tomiko rescued her, but probably because that was one of her roles in this meeting.

“Mifune-sama would like to thank you for your help.”

That wasn’t a question, so Regina just bowed deeply in his direction because it seemed like a good time to do so.

That was obviously the right move, because Osafune visibly relaxed his jaw in the corner of her eye.

“Your report has been read.” Tomiko continued in her careful English, “And Mifune-sama would like to ask you some questions regarding this situation.” She paused.

Regina bowed again.

“In your opinion, what was the purpose for their arrival here?” Tomiko asked.

Regina bowed her head. So much bowing. Her neck and back were gonna be so fit.

“Mifune-sama. After talking to all of the alive sailors,” she said slowly, “I believe that they arrived in the Land of Iron by accident. They seem to have been trying to return to their port and were waylaid by a storm, as well as a change in leadership.”

She waited while Tomiko contemplated and then translated her assessment for Mifune-sama. He listened impassively. After Tomiko was concluded, he asked yet another question.

Tomiko again turned to face Regina. “Mifune-sama would like to know if you believe they are a danger here.”

Regina bowed her head again. This was the question she’d wrestled with so much the night before. She felt like an agent of doom.

“I do not believe the majority of these sailors present a threat to the Land of Iron.” She struggled to keep in a sigh, and succeeded. “However, the First Mate may be considered dangerous and would be considered a criminal by the laws of his land for mutinous actions.” There, she took a pause. She felt uncomfortable saying this, but it was important. “The country they are from is well known for invading and occupying other countries. While I believe that this crew is not dangerous, the
prospect of the English military becoming interested in the Land of Iron would most assuredly be.”

Awkward. She knew Tomiko had studied in England. But it was the truth. Hopefully she hadn’t enjoyed her time there so much that she was willing to hang Regina out to dry over an honest assessment.

She strained to listen carefully to Tomiko’s translation, but wasn’t sure of the nuance. It seemed like she understood the gist of what Regina had said, but it was hard to tell whether she agreed. Her face betrayed none of what she was thinking.

Regina tried to think about puppies, for hope.

Shizune and Osafune also looked as placid as lakes. Everyone here could be a poker champion.

Mifune-sama said something long that sounded very intelligent.

“Rejina-hime,” Tomiko began. “Thank you for your assessment. What do you believe we should do with these sailors, in light of these circumstances? Do you believe that any crimes should be punished in the Land of Iron?”

She nodded. She felt like a chicken. “I believe that their crimes should be left to their country. Any punishment by the Land of Iron could be seen as provocation, unless the Land of Iron has any previous agreements with the British Empire. However, merely returning these sailors to their home may spark interest in the Land of Iron and surrounding areas, leading to invasion for resources and tradeable goods.”

Regina shifted minutely on her cushion. It wasn’t elegant to do so, but it hurt. “They are mostly concerned with trade and valuable items. If they can meet this need without violent means, I believe they will. In my opinion, there are two possible options: either to keep these men indefinitely, in prison or by killing them, and pretending they never came here whatsoever, or to engage in the trade they seek on your own terms. The former suggestion has obvious drawbacks- it may cause worse problems later on if it is ever discovered, for example.”

“My recommendation is for the Land of Iron, or some other interested country, to begin peaceful and monitored trade with the British Empire. By sending back their remaining sailors in good health with goods as potentially valuable as those that were lost, with escorts from the Land of Iron, they may be willing to enter a trading agreement that would benefit both parties. Limiting their entry ports would minimize their intimate knowledge of the Land of Iron for a potential invasion.”

Thinking carefully over everything, she found something she had missed. “I would recommend keeping the cannons that foundered here and maintaining that they were lost at sea, as well as sending a letter detailing the circumstances of these sailors’ arrival to ensure goodwill.”

It took quite a while for Tomiko to translate all that. When she was finished, Mifune-sama hummed, which seemed like a large reaction for him. His face still didn’t move.

Regina studied that and committed herself to emulating it. He was a boss.

At least she was finding very good leadership role models in Hell Japan.

Mifune-sama was obviously considering something because he wasn’t talking, but didn’t show any particular emotion.

They all sat in serious silence. Honestly, it all made Regina feel rather important, like she was briefing the President in the Situation Room.
After a minute or so of silence, he spoke.

Regina waited.

“Regina-hime, Mifune-sama thanks you for your considered opinion and solutions.” Tomiko started off, voice a little hoarse from all the talking. “The Land of Iron thanks you and the Land of Fire for assisting us in this situation. We feel that we can reach a good solution, thanks to your expertise. Thank you for your hard work. We hope that you will continue to enjoy your time here in the Land of Iron, and our good relationship in the future.”

Regina bowed, as did Shizune.

Then Mifune stood, and they all stood.

He and Tomiko bowed. Honestly, it looked like Mifune-sama bowed lower than he should have. Regina didn’t have an eye for these things, but it seemed lower to her mind than his earlier one. Plus, a guy running a whole damn country didn’t owe much of anyone more than a nod or slight tilt. That was the way power distances worked.

But reminding herself that she didn’t know anything was probably best. Regina bowed low, as Osafune and Shizune did the same.

Then they left. After Mifune-sama and Tomiko were gone, Osafune guided them out of the building and back to his home.

It seemed he had business to do in the bearded man center, because he left after his mother bestowed tea upon them.

Kumiko-san had left the room for more snacks (why were there so many snacks. They’d had breakfast like, an hour or two ago), and Shizune turned to Regina.

「いいですね、」 she said, companionably. 「たくさん教育を受けていますか？」

Regina parsed through that. She’d definitely caught ‘lots of’ and ‘education’. The verb form was unknown. But at least she had a good guess.

「あのう、」 she hedged 「すごい勉強をしました、でも私は賢くない。」

It would be rude to be anything less than self-effacing. Regina wasn’t sure that if she was actually amazing like she longed to be, that she would be able to cut off her own nose like that.

Actually, that was why Jiraiya was weird here. Telling someone you’re famous and other things would be incredibly rude by typical standards for manners here.

In that moment, she felt closer to him than in any of the time they’d spent together as he’d carted her ass across the countryside.

「そう、ですね。」 Shizune politely sipped at her tea. 「自来也さまはいいお父さんですか？」

Regina pondered that for a moment. 「穴太、私は二週間前に初めてお父さんにあった。。意見で、いいお父さんです。でも、全部が新しい。」

At least that probably wasn’t going to get her killed. She hadn’t even met him before two weeks ago. And he was a good dad, by the metric that she had not yet died in the face of so much
possibility of dying.

「お父さんは火の国教えてくれましたか？」 Shizune asked. These constant interrogations were making Regina tired.

「いいえ。」 she replied simply. 「全然を分かりません。」

Thankfully, Shizune left it at that. Regina was sure there would be more questions in the future, but hopefully they would give her more time to study before they asked them. Her Japanese skill level was just not high enough for this shit. Her head hurt from trying to digest what everyone was saying all the time.

「大丈夫です。」 Shizune breathed in the matcha aroma. Regina wanted to offer her hers because it was really bitter and she’d already had three. But that was also weird and rude.

She was tired of being polite so she didn’t die. But she drank her matcha anyway and smiled when Kumiko made her more.

「ああ！」 Shizune exclaimed pleasantly, which made Regina look up. 「レジナさんは甘いものが好きですか？」

Why, yes. She did sometimes like sweet things.
Chapter 8

It took two days for her to understand why Tsunade had agreed to stay. The women returned and grimly waited for a delivery, which turned out to be formal wear, various accessories, and boxes of papers.

The first dress on top of the pile was...alarming. It was a red slip of a thing with a low neckline and about 2 inches of skirt. But Tsunade made a disgusted sound and reached out. She held up the dress and casually ripped it in half. So clearly it was not going to be a problem.

Also, wow. Regina shifted in her seat. She swallowed. Tsunade was, like... really strong. She could pick Regina up, no problem.

Shizune looked over at Regina. Whatever she saw made her sigh and shake her head.

Jiraiya had probably sent the first dress as a joke, because the next three were much more appropriate and actually coordinated in the same cut, with different colors that went together well-enough.

Regina was once again impressed by his taste. He liked to act like a total trash can, but he'd matched Tsunade's green dress to the sage jacket she habitually wore, Shizune's deep purple highlighted the sheen to her hair, and Regina would look pretty good in the dark blue she'd apparently been assigned.

It was awkward to wait while Shizune watched her get prettied up by Fujita-san, pinning a large white camellia as well as at least one of her other assigned hair decorations in. She pulled rather mercilessly, and Regina tried her best not to grimace as her hair felt like it was being ripped from her head into what was possibly either the most painful buns in the world, or those loops, or whatever else Fujita-san had deemed appropriate and fashionable.

Shizune, of course, had more autonomy over her presentation. Regina was essentially acting as a tall ‘dress me up Sally’. Meanwhile, Shizune had elected to put on her dress, and pinned the camellia into her otherwise normal hair.

Must be nice.

Shizune waited patiently as Regina was pinned, spritzed, and pulled. After Fujita-san had thoroughly destroyed her will to live and probably pulled all the hair out by the root, Shizune led Regina out the door, saying polite things.

They met Tsunade near some bar, which seemed kind of odd. Tsunade was obviously at least tipsy if not downright plastered.

Regina felt out of place as Shizune stepped into close distance with Tsunade and made some chiding sounds. She heard Tsunade sigh.

Then Tsunade put her hands together like she was clapping, or making double finger guns at the sky. Then another weird thing that looked like a five legged turtle.

Regina thought she was witnessing the weirdest daylight version of hand shadows when suddenly the redness in Tsunade’s face cleared up, making it look bright and relaxed.

‘Oh, no, I just saw crazy magic again.’
But it wasn’t aimed at her and nobody looked in danger of dying, so frankly Regina was inclined to ignore it. She just could only take so much shit at once. She needed to save her energy for the next time some weirdo accosted her on the toilet.

That “red cape” demon story was starting to make more sense to her now, anyway.

The snow had all been shovelled off the street, so they walked along in silence past storefront after storefront, bright and happy and more importantly warm. Regina wanted to just dive in and collapse at the nearest yakitori stand, and Jiraiya would have let her.

But they were on a divine quest, or something, for a movie and lots of money. The details weren’t clear, as was Regina’s incentive to do this at all.

Tsunade stopped walking and made a sound of pure fury. Regina followed her murderous glare upwards, over the door.

...The banner outside the venue had three cartoon women who were clearly intended to represent the three of them, in their current outfits. They looked deceptively friendly and cheerful. They seemed to be offering papers. Regina sort of appreciated it, this was the best information she had gotten so far about what they were meant to be doing today.

Whatever else he was, Jiraiya was slick.

Tsunade seemed absolutely pissed off by the banner, probably because it meant that Jiraiya had been absolutely correct that she would agree to go to the movie event. She clearly considered tearing it down before she eventually stomped in. Shizune gave a distressed little sigh and hurried after Tsunade.

But Regina was honestly kind of impressed. Jiraiya had his life on lock, in the weirdest of ways. When had he had time to do that? Had he given his agent the instructions in that bar, weeks ago? Amazing. Murder-Dad was pretty cool.

She took her warm cloak off and spent the next 20 minutes being coached with a couple of phrases and gestures. It kind of reminded her of being in Rainbow. Yeah, sure, fine, she could smile at someone and ask for their name.

People were starting to gather outside. Regina saw them through the glass doors and gave a confused frown. She looked at the papers again, confirming that the movie reception was not meant to start for another hour. They were early. Who came to a movie that early?

It took a couple of minutes for her to realize that everyone she could see outside was apparently a man.

Slowly, Regina looked down at her dress, and then at the two women to her left. She was beginning to have a bad feeling about all of this.

「しずねさん、」 she said. The other woman turned a grim stare at her. 「どんな種類映画ですか？」

Shizune looked shocked and horrified. She put a hand to her mouth.

Oh, no. That did not bode well. Why did Shizune not want to answer that question? “What kind of movie is this” is a perfectly normal question. Please answer the question.

Tsunade was the one who answered. Her lip was curled up in a sneer, her gimlet stare fixed at the
visitors. Regina mentally contrasted her visage with the cutely beaming cartoon representation dotted around the room. 「変な映画」 she said ominously.

Wait, what.

「父は。。。」 Regina let her voice trail off helplessly.

She received a nod in response and sympathetic look from Shizune.

「大きなへんたい。」 Tsunade said it flat. No sugar-coating that one. A big pervert. Fantastic.

Alright, then. So. Murder-Dad had recruited her to hand papers and greet people who came to the premiere of his pornographic movie. She and Shizune and Tsunade were… like, meant to be eye candy. The beautiful assistants.

「つなでさま、」 she said, calmly. This needed to be said. 「自来也を殺し手頃、私は手伝うましょうか？」

She heard Tsunade's laugh for the first time.

The event opened early, not long after that. Men flooded inside. Armed with knowledge that they were enthusiastic perverts, Regina eyed them cautiously. She had no idea what the posters might have implied about her role today. Or how socially adept this group might be. Shizune had protested a lot about coming here today, and Regina was now really anxious about what those objections might have been.

There was staring. Of course there was. But as the line churned on and no one tried to pull anything worse than touching her hands as she handed them a card, Regina began to relax into the monotony. Asking for names, re-affixing her hair flower, and handing out cards. Until she met her first real weirdo.

Regina handed the flyer to the next person on autopilot. He shied back and took the paper with the very tips of his gloved fingers. She ignored that, because a lot of Jiraiya's fans were unique individuals. She braved eye contact to start her spiel- or tried to, at least. He had cleverly made that difficult by combing his light-colored hair to entirely cover one eye, and barely allow the other to peek out.

This man, she thought, might take the prize for the day's most unusual pervert.

He looked like some sad variety of sheepdog in an oversized sweater, fuzzy scarf, and bizarrely tactical looking leather gloves with metal plating on the back of the hands. His steel-tipped boots were definitely too big for him. It was not a good look, man. He looked like he was hiding from the world in his mom's old clothes. His mom had liked dogs, apparently. There were ratty pomeranians falling apart on the sweater. Some of them had hints of fluff where puffball tails had once been attached.

...she was kind of digging it, as long as he did not think it was Fashion. Wearing something that aggressively ugly could be a power move. But if he thought it was normal or good, she had to judge him a lot.

The customer looked down the aisle and saw Tsunade, apparently for the first time. His weirdly pale eyebrow shot up. He probably didn't see people like that on the knitting farm in Hokkaido where he obviously did heavy labor and punched hungry wolves.

That was the first time she saw a glimpse of something she could understand in his thought
process. She could sympathize. Tsunade was wow.

“お名前は”， she prompted. She held her pen at the ready to take the note. She was fully aware that she would probably take it incorrectly if it had any long vowels, but did not really care.

He looked back at her, somehow looking startled and unhappy with about 2 square centimeters of skin showing. That expressiveness implied that this ensemble was not new for him.

Her smile was beginning to feel strained. And that camellia was starting to come loose again. She could feel it.

'Please, answer the question. Say your name,' she mentally coached. 'You know this one, buddy.'

It was not a hard question. She set her jaw and waited for him to tell her his name. Any name, if he couldn't remember his. There were an awful lot of “Tanakas” and “Sakamotos” in the room tonight, aka Smiths and Johnsons. She just had to have a name for the stupid statistics so that he could take the stamp card.

He seemed stuck on his name. He had not prepared for this test. He had never considered that he might be asked for his name when he got in a line to be signed up for some kind of loyalty rewards program.

“It is okay to lie,” Regina said, and then she tried to say that in Japanese. 「嘘して嘘して。」 She might have said 'please lie.' That was close enough.

The scarf he was wearing over his face moved slightly. Oh no. He was mouthing names to himself, trying to come up with a good one. The first thing he said was, 「ぼくは。。私。」

She stared at him like he was the dumbest person she had ever met. He might be. 'I am myself?' What kind of bullshit stalling tactic was that? She had asked for his name, not what passed for philosophy in middle school. “I didn't say it was alright to lie badly,” she said. She didn't bother to translate that into Japanese. If he couldn't get it from her tone, he hadn't even earned her disapproval.

「私佐竹。」 he elaborated. He sounded a little hopeful at this point. He stole a glance at where Tsunade was glowering at some poor fool. His head ducked a little further and he turned his face away from the area where Tsunade and Shizune were taking turns answering questions, or giving directions, or whatever it was that they were doing.

Either he was answering her in broken Japanese that “I Satake,” or he wanted her to believe that his first name was actually “Me.” That was his name, for sure. Me, Bamboo Son. Plausible.

Fuck this guy and the clown car he hitchhiked in with. It was absurd and intolerable. She kind of wished Jiraiya was here to wave his murder fist around and get a better answer, or at least mock Mr. Satake fluently.

Regina considered her options- she might pass over the paper and have him write the kanji he would use for that, to see if he really was claiming that his name was “Me, Satake.” Satake was a real name- the kanji for son, and then the kanji for bamboo. But Watashi was definitely not a name. He was making that shit up. He was a crap liar and he looked like a mop. He owed her a better lie, at least. That was just insulting.
She nodded and plastered a customer service smile on her face as she scribbled on his card. Regina handed him his card to get rid of him. It wasn't registered to any name that he would ever be able to read. That was fine. She would tell Jiraiya to find the worst-dressed man on the continent to accredit the points. He needed to do this personally, so that they could judge him as a family. It would be good for bonding.

Mr. Me took the card and tucked it away… she didn't know where. His hands were very fast.

Like horrible spiders. She didn't trust anything about this person. Who said it was even a person underneath all of that knitwear? Maybe this was a real Kumo nin and that's why the disguise was so bad. She took a step backward and pushed the flower back into her hair nest.

In English, she brightly said, “Your fake name is very bad. I hate it. Go away!” She pointed at Shizune with her whole hand, demonstrating which route he could take directly to hell.

I, Satake, gave her a grateful nod and shuffled away. She bent over to write “Mr. Me. A bad liar,” on the line for his name, matching his card.

Then she turned to the next man nervously avoiding her eye contact. He looked like a Sakamoto. “Flyer?” she said, holding it out.

This particular weirdo got a bit too close when he took the paper. She caught a hint of...nervous sweat, probably. Fantastic. What the fuck was Jiraiya doing with his life? Why did so many incredibly suspicious people come to see Jiraiya's movie? Why had he exposed her to them?

She glanced over to her left and blinked in surprise. Shizune's line was still empty. The man who had dared to talk to Tsunade was now fully sobbing while she laughed. Watashi Satake, the man with a singularly stupid alias, was gone.

Maybe he went home to think about what he'd said. She hoped he did better next time.

The line was interminable, the weirdos kept queuing up outside. Mr. Me was still out of sight, but the Pomeranian shirt had been burned onto the back of Regina’s corneas. No one else was dressed so interestingly though.

「こんにちは！お名前はなんですか？」

The next weirdo (number 76, by her count) just stopped in his tracks. And stared into her eyes.

「急げ、よ。」 A tall man a couple people behind weirdo #76 grumbled.

Number 76 looked around the room like a paranoid groundhog, and went back to the terrified eye contact.

「名前は？ 何でもいい。」 Regina suggested. How was she at a pervert film, having to coach multiple perverts on providing a name? This was not how her life was supposed to work. 76 opened his mouth slightly, but nothing came out.

The next man in line- a very muscular man in working clothes- reached out and held her hand.

「かわいい、ですね？」

She forced down the full-body shudder, and glanced over to where Tsunade and Shizune were.

Tsunade was glaring down a duo of hopeful looking admirers, who seemed to just now be realizing that there was nothing good there to be hoped for.
Shizune was politely directing a group of men about something. She seemed nervous, in the way that she always did- apologetic and mildly frantic. But Regina couldn’t catch her eye, and she wasn’t sure what to do about the man now grabbing her hand. People here really were terrifying.

And rude. First, lying in a puddle of blood and entrails in front of a Murder Dad, then attacks in the sanctity of the bathroom. Now this, the most recent assault on her personage that this awful magic Japan had to offer.

「出て行く。」 Someone said, in a tone that brooked no argument. Regina looked up to see a tall man (even by American standards) grab her newest assailant by the shoulder and physically lift him up and back into the crowd.

He stepped up, made eye contact with Regina, and grimaced a bit. Then he stepped to her side and swiveled around.

「田中みたい。」 He said to number 76, who seemed to be gasping for air. 「田中さんです。」 He informed Regina, leaning down.

She wrote the kanji down quickly, and held the card out. 76 took it and sped off to Shizune’s line.

「この失礼な人はアホさんみたい。」 The large man said mildly, gesturing to the weirdo that had grabbed her earlier.

She did not, in fact, know how to write “Mr. Dumbass”. Was there kanji for that? Should she use hiragana?

Regina handed her new coworker the stack of cards. She also tried to hand him her special pen, but he waved it away, and produced one from seemingly nowhere.

He wrote quickly, and handed her the card to copy. She copied his strokes as best she could, and was about to hand it back to the man when her new friend swiped it out of her fingers and deposited it into the man’s shirt pocket.

「人に触れないで、バカ。」 He said gruffly.

The man walked away stiffly, probably sensing that her new friend could probably eat him alive. Regina evaluated her companion.

Tall, yes. With spiky hair. Bad fashion sense, maybe? Here it was hard to tell. He was obviously built like an ox. And both scared the other perverts and had some awareness.

He was, by far, her favorite pervert.

They worked together well- if the perverts weren’t immediately forthcoming with a name, any name, he would assign them one. He would hand her their card to copy what he’d written, and she’d send them on their way into the next line.

After pervert #146, the line cleared temporarily. Regina took advantage of the moment to ask her new bestie (she’d upgraded him, he hadn’t threatened her or anyone else so far and so was not on the default Shit List) some burning questions.

「あなたは。。。」 The words were a bit jumbled in her head. 「あのう。私に問題を助けてくれありがとうございます。」 She bowed pretty low, figuring that the politeness couldn’t hurt.
He turned and looked down at her, obviously evaluating.

「問題ない、姫さん。」He said, after a long moment. 「怖いのか？」

Was she scared? Regina sat on that for a moment. Yes? But probably not of him.

Yeah, he could crush her with his big hands, and yes, he’d lifted that other muscular dude like he was a bunch of grapes.

But honestly, this whole world was terrifying. And even where she was from, she didn’t like her chances against a hungry raccoon. She could die anywhere at any time.

So, she didn’t feel particularly scared at the moment.

「怖くない。あなた？」 She was feeling feisty. He seemed like he was calmer, on the whole, than her beloved Tsunade.

But to be honest, terrifying women were attractive. Terrifying men were the status quo.

He blinked, slow and deliberate. He turned it over for a second, and looked up to glance at Shizune and Tsunade, who were doubtless being polite and organ-rendingly terrifying in that order. Then he looked back down at her.

「怖くない。でも、私はカコイイね？」 He telegraphed as he stood up straight, and flashed sharpened teeth in a movie-star grin. Of course, he gave a thumbs up.

「ちょっと。」 Being able to banter even a little felt so much better. 「でも、あなたの服はちょっと。。。ああ。色がない。」

He laughed, a little. 「ああ、姫さん。助けてください、あなたは私のただ一つの希望だ。」

Regina took a look around, and the sudden jerking of her head made the big camellia flop right out of her hair again. She caught it, and looked at Large Man Friend.

「ああ。」 She commanded, holding the flower up for his examination.

「ああああ。」

Friend bent down significantly, and Regina took the opportunity to push the flower stem first into his spiky hair. It was surprisingly thick, so maybe the flower would even stay in it.

Regina checked her little bag- there should have been a stash of bobby pins in there, she’d seen them among whatever else Murder Dad had decided a young lady would need for a night of fending off weirdoes. Notably, there were no weapons.

She found the package and popped it open, sticking the pins through his hair in crosses. He was going to have to live with this on his head now. Regina meant to make it immovable.

He grunted- probably she was pulling his hair a bit too violently. 「すみません。」 She said, only meaning that she was sorry about the discomfort. The flower had this coming. 「おいしい。。」

Having completed her Great Work, Regina stepped back. Tall Friend straightened back up, and she had to admit that he looked nice in florals. Not a lot of people could pull that off.
Also, she really needed to get better at asking for people’s names. “Tall Friend” probably wasn’t going to be helpful enough later.

「あのう、」 she started, and tried to go through the Japanese Cute Girl motions. Looking down, clasping her hands together, and looking up through her insufficient eyelashes. She really needed mascara.

「お名前はなんですか？私はレジナです。」
Chapter 9

The lobby cleared as the movie was about to start, and Regina felt exhausted.

But also, kind of curious?

[regina hime.] momo said. (eigo wo miyou ka)

[hen na eiga desu ka?] she asked, fearing his response.

He laughed. [chotto? Romansueigadesu.]

She narrowed her eyes. That sounded harmless.

Hontou ni, he promised. Tabun kissu ga aru. zennin ha fuku wo kiru.

...Unless she was missing something, that seemed really tame. Oh no, she'd see kissing on screen! She could probably survive that. Was that all that amounted to perversion here? Or was the version of romance here really messed up?

It could be something like that, where the romantic script was really weird and coercive.

On the other hand, Japan was socially conservative. PDA just was not a thing. It could be that Tsunade felt that it was indecent to watch people's private lives, even those of fictional people.

[hai] Regina said, somewhat hesitantly. If this was a romcom, she was going to feel so confused. This country was very conservative.

Was it weird? She wasn’t a child. And she was curious why this was so popular. And could somehow be perverted, but also hundreds of people (and not all of them men, actually) could be willing to be seen watching it? Hundreds of people also came to have Jiraiya sign their books. She could only assume those were related to the movie.

She considered it.

{Regina-chan, ikimashou.} Tsunade clipped, holding the door open.

Regina hesitated.

{anou…} she stuttered. How did she say “I love you and I worship you but also I kinda want to see the sex movie? I’m really curious? Please love me anyway.”

Alas, that didn’t translate. Or if it did, she didn’t know how to convey it.

Momo rescued her.

{Tsunade-sama, kono eiga Rejina-hime tanoshimi desu.} then more things she definitely didn’t understand.

Tsunade said nothing, but stared back at him. Regina could feel some tension in the air- it was cold and stifling. She could barely breathe. Her mouth felt dry, and her heart was doing its best to beat its way out of her ribcage.

She started to see stars.
Then it suddenly stopped. Tsunade brought her thumb up to her nostril, and traced it along its length, pulling it out into two fingers, pointed at Momo’s eyes.

Then she gripped it into a fist, while still making eye contact, and slowly popped every one of her knuckles.

Nobody moved.

[Kyotsukete, Rejina-chan, Shizune-chan. Mata ashita.] She said tersely, then sped out the door and into the night.

Like a shot she was out of the theater, on the street, and heading into the nearest bar.

Shizune tensed, looking between Tsunade's back and Regina. Her shoulders slumped. She sighed. [Regina-san… ikimasuka?] she asked. She sounded like her soul was weary.

She almost felt a little guilty. It wasn't Shizune's fault, and she didn't want Shizune to have to follow her around.

But, like, exactly how guilty did she feel? She was really bored. She'd been sitting around doing almost nothing for weeks. She could barely communicate with anyone, her literacy was poor, and the joint was not jumping. There was very little she'd had access to, entertainment-wise, in at least a month. Regina looked deep into her own soul and found no mercy to spare for Shizune's next two hours.

"Ikou!" she chirped, as if she had not been able to read the plaintive tone of that question.

Momo had disappeared during this exchange. She turned away from the risk of contact with Shizune's big sad eyes, and found him leaning ominously into the personal space of the man serving refreshments. As she watched, she saw the worker duck away from the counter and stand at the popcorn machine to work some esoteric magic.

Oh. I want popcorn, Regina said. She marched off without translating for Shizune. She assumed that her meaning would be obvious from context.

Momo somehow sensed her approach. He glanced back, saw her, and then barked something to the worker.

The worker obediently withdrew a second paper popcorn container.

As she got close, Regina felt her eyebrows move up. The machine had prepared popcorn in the bin, but the worker was clearly in the process of popping more. As soon as it was done, the worker hurriedly began scooping the popcorn.

Momo said something sharp. The worker stopped while container was half full, and poured butter onto the popcorn. He made tentative eye contact with Momo, as if checking that it was correct. Momo made a hand gesture.

The worker ended up putting butter into both popcorn boxes both on the top and midway, which was swanky.

They received two containers of very hot, buttery popcorn. Shizune took one stiffly and stepped slightly away. It was amazing, Regina reflected. She didn't know it was possible to communicate disapproval through popcorn-holding body language.
The movie started off as a story about a young man who seemed remarkably like Jiraiya. He was loud and brave, she could tell he was brave because he rescued a beautiful woman (who had some of Tsunade’s mannerisms she had discerned during their brief time together. The way she flipped her hair before answering a question, how she positioned her hands, the way her lips and nose twitched slightly when she seemed irritated. Maybe she really was related to this nerd. They were obviously cut from the same cloth.)

There were hijinks. She hated that word, but that’s what they were. Comics of misunderstandings and incredible fake sexual tension. Eventually, their mutual respect in the field of (banditry? Contract killing?) led to them falling in love with other.

Other than an accidental ass grab played for laughs, it wasn’t even that scandalous.

Regina looked around the theater. Every single person was enraptured during the very traditional kiss on the mouth. Shizune’s grip had loosened somewhat, and she was obviously emotionally invested in the current obvious misunderstanding that was keeping the two lovers separated.

Pervert number 248 was openly weeping.

Regina leaned back into her seat and stared at the screen with purpose.

The movie ended with a real confession under Sakura trees (was it even a real love confession if it wasn’t done with the impermanent pink blossoms falling and swirling in the background?). Now multiple people were crying.

The main characters were weird. The audience was clearly supposed to like them, but they definitely spied and stole and killed just astons of people who were unimportant to the plot.

Overall, she didn’t feel scandalized. A quick glance at Shizune indicated that she wasn’t, either. She had a somewhat vacant, dreamy look on her face.

Momo was implacable. But he was the only one of their group that paid to be here, so she could only assume he had enjoyed the experience.

Regina finished her snacks and waited for the credits to roll.

The movie ended (everyone stayed after all the credits, but there was no bonus footage) and all the weirdos dispersed at once into the streets in a weeping plague.

Momo and Shizune hung back, keeping Regina at the back of the theater. She saw the man Momo had lifted see their group and skitter away like a raccoon under a flashlight. Oh, and hey, there was the pomeranian sweater dude.

She went to point him out to Shizune, but she was intently studying Regina’s hand. Apparently it was important work. She wasn’t even looking at her palm.

After the theater cleared out, Regina followed her companions out into the street.

{tsukaretaka?} shizune asked Regina, rolling her calloused thumb over the back of Regina’s hand. It felt nice.
Regina mostly just felt amenable. Wherever was good. Nothing horrible was happening and it was obvious that they knew more than she did. And were not going to let people accost her, so that was another good point. Shizune watched her like a hawk.

Shizune obviously wanted to say something- her hand was a little tense around Regina’s, she kept watching Momo and Regina out of the corner of her eye, and her lips intermittently parted and then closed again. Whatever it was, it at least probably wasn’t dangerous.

Regina yawned, and both her companions paused.

“Excuse me.” She said in English. Then they just kept walking, steering her in the direction of her housing. Probably. Maybe she lived with Shizune now. Who knew, really. The content of Tsunade’s and Osafune’s discussion had gone almost entirely over her head. Now that the movie premiere was over, she had no idea what the plan was.

Or if there was any plan regarding her at all.

She tried not to think about it, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other in her geta without tripping.

A gentle nudge to her right arm made her look up. Momo blinked, and then looked somewhere off to her left.

Regina followed his gaze, catching a glimpse of someone drunkenly sauntering into an izakaya.

Shizune deftly moved to cut her line of vision, but was a second too late. Tsunade’s blonde pigtails caught the moonlight and shone like gold.

Also, was that a pig in her arms?

She had so many questions about these people. Such as, why? And really, why?

But Shizune had obviously decided that she hadn’t seen her new crush bar-hopping with a farm animal, and took them across the street.

Oh. They were at Osafune’s house. It all looked very different in the dark.

[Ah. Koukou desu. Rejina-hime, Shizune-hime.] Momo bowed stiffly, and she and Shizune returned it. [matane. Kyotsukete, ne?]  

Then he sauntered off into the night, and disappeared into the mist.

Shizune sighed again.

Either that was just a thing with her, or Regina was a particular pain in the ass.

Regina decided not to worry about it at the moment. She was tired, and had just learned that this continent was so repressed the some light touching was considered straight-up porn. Everything about this place was a lot to process.

Surprisingly, Shizune didn’t leave this time.

She said something to Fujita-san and she came back with more bedding, and some extra sets of Regina’s bedclothes.
Shizune set up camp next to Regina, talking lightly under her breath the entire time.

[Shizune-san?] Regina asked, above and below her fluffy futons. [zenbuwadaijoubudesuka?]

Shizune paused, mid-fluffing a pillow. She dropped it to the ground and sat next to Regina on the floor.

[daijoubudesu,ne. Demo, suguni watashitachiwatetsunokuninitsumoridemasu.]

Yeah, but she was being a weirdly bad liar. Regina hoped lying wasn’t part of her job. And that they had a way to carry all the shit her Punch Dad had gotten her. There were enough silk furisode to outfit an army of princesses.

[watakushi wa chigau shimashita ka?] She asked. [sugoi ganbarimashita.]

[Iie, daijoubu.] Shizune huffed a small laugh. [Tsunade-sama wa chotto....omoshiroidesu. Kanojo wa sugi ni shuppatsu shitai.]

Some of that might have been the truth. Tsunade obviously did not want to buy a summer home here. She’d been trying to leave from the instant they’d met.

Regina took a moment to crack her back- it seemed rude or weird to do in front of Shizune, but she’d been holding off for hours. And Shizune obviously wasn’t leaving. Didn’t she need to go to the bathroom? Had she somehow evolved beyond that?

Shizune gave her a look that she didn’t understand. But she didn’t say anything and it didn’t look like she was offended, so Regina snuggled under her futon and closed her eyes. Shizune would turn off the lights whenever she was ready, probably.

The next morning, she and Shizune were brought to the fancy old man building again. Mifune was waiting this time in the meeting room, but Tsunade was too. And at the seat Regina had taken last time.

She hesitated.

Tsunade’s eyes flicked over her and rested on the seat immediately to her right. Regina tried not to look undignified as she went to it, even though she was definitely scrambling.

Other people were in the room. On the whole, this seemed like a bigger deal. Last time had obviously been closer to an informal meeting.

The room was quiet but almost offensively bright with sunlight. She wondered if Tsunade had a hangover. Regina couldn’t tell at all.

The meeting began with most keigo- first there was some sort of announcement, they were welcomed as honored guests (she was guessing because she just bowed when Shizune made eye contact), and some long speech. Then Tsunade said something, their hosts bowed, they bowed.

More than an hour later, Mifune said something, and several samurai came forward holding objects.

First they presented an envelope of some kind and a scroll to Tsunade. Then they came to Regina. She followed Tsunade’s earlier example and bowed slightly as she held out both hands. She received four scrolls and an envelope.
She tried to look grateful and tried to replicate Tsunade’s earlier example as best she could.

After that, the meeting began to end. More speeches were made, none of which Regina understood. She bowed as necessary, and stared at the neatly placed pile of things she’d received. She wanted to open them really badly. But also she’d probably have no idea what the hell they were even if she did. It was also probably in keigo.

Her legs had long since stopped hurting from seiza and had dulled to total numbness. She hoped that everyone else would leave the room before she had to do her best impression of a baby goat in flip flops.

Unfortunately, they did not. Mifune stood, and so did Tsunade, holding her scroll and envelope. Regina followed suit, and held up her legs through sheer force of will. Falling down and hitting her head on the low table would probably undermine all the poise she’d tried so hard to pretend she had.

He bowed again. They bowed in return. Then he guided them to the door, where they had some sort of final goodbye.

Tsunade walked through the building like she owned the place. She navigated the corridors and once they were outside, she directed them to a nearby restaurant. They sat (and Regina did not attempt seiza this time because No).

Tsunade held her perfectly manicured hand out to Regina.

She blinked.

[kore?] she asked, holding up her prizes.

{soudesu.} Tsunade replied, looking a little bored. Regina complied quickly.

One after one, Tsunade opened the scrolls carefully and read them all. Shizune was obviously reading off to the side, but was a pro about it. Regina studied the grain of the paper from the back. It was really nice paper.

After she was done reading, Tsunade pulled out a book from her pocket and removed a sheet of paper. From somewhere else, she produced a paintbrush and an inkstone.

Regina watched with interest as Tsunade made some beautiful marks- what was that kanji?- and then dried it with her breath.

Then she smacked it lightly and made it glow.

The fuck.

Tsunade delicately put the scrolls into? The paper. They just disappeared.

Then she opened the envelope. A single eyebrow went high. Shizune looked mildly ill.

Tsunade tapped the paper again, and it stopped glowing. She placed that and the envelope back in front of Regina.

[juuyo desu.] Tsunade said sternly. [nakusushinaide].

Okay. She would not lose her fancy magic paper or her envelope filled with-. Regina poked the top and noted the tip of a paper bill poking out. Okay yes money. She would never ever lose money.
Money was important.

[Tsunade-sama?] Shizune asked.

[mitsu no kyuujin ga arimasu. Kumo, iron, to… orochimaru, to omoimasu.] Tsunade said stiffly.

[douseite?] Shizune asked, sounding alarmed now. Regina had no idea what Iron and spiders wanted to do with her, but it seemed important. She made a mental note of that.

Tsunade sneered a bit. Her gaze fell over Regina. Obviously something about her posture or facial expression warranted concern. [Rejina. Daijoubudesu.] She said forcefully.

Man, people kept telling her that. It didn’t bode well at all.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Hi, all! There's more on (REDACTED), but this is a big set of updates for now. Enjoy!

Traveling with Shizune and Tsunade was both excruciatingly painful and boring. She walked for hours and hours behind them in the hot sun. Tsunade inevitably vanished the instant they got to a town large enough to have a bar, and she and Shizune did errands- delivering suspect packages, providing medical care (Regina was like, really good at holding Shizune’s bag), and fabricating tracks so that debt collectors didn’t find Tsunade. At night, Shizune would take Regina to a ryokan, one of many that were initially beautiful and scenic and became a blur of bland white paper doors and unremarkable onsen.

Sometimes Shizune would leave Regina at the ryokan earlier in the day, probably for more exciting crimes, for which she couldn’t pull the assassin equivalent of ‘bring your daughter to work day’. Regina wasn’t sure that she wanted to be more in on the crime aspect of their lives, but she was interested in being included in general. After wrestling with that dilemma, she concluded that the human instinct to be part of a herd was remarkably stupid.

She still kind of wanted more involvement than letting Shizune lift her over her head to make tracks leading in misleading directions. She was basically a human foot stamp, which was… less than flattering.

With nothing else to do, Regina studied. She walked and she studied and she held things for Shizune and was obediently still as Shizune pressed her feet into the ground just so to make it look like they were running into the heart of Tea Country.

Luckily, her Japanese level was responding. And it was getting easier to keep up with Tsunade and Shizune on their power walks from justice.

She knew they were only doing that for her benefit, because Shizune fucking *flew* her back to their tracks later, but it was still gratifying to see her self-improvement.

It was yet another hot and disgustingly humid day in… The Land of Hot Water? The names were all so literal.

Regina lay on the tatami facefirst, fully sick of even the idea of studying. The heat had taken her will to live.

She missed frigid Michigan, shitty as that was. At least she didn’t constantly feel like she was dying on the floor.

This ryokan’s ojiisan was trimming the bushes in the garden, which was definitely beautiful but looked remarkably like the last million gardens with perfectly trimmed trees and moss-covered ground.

Shizune had dropped her off, given her a hug, and did that magic disappearing thing again. That was… Regina squinted at the sun, realized it was bright and she didn’t know shit about telling time
by where the sun was, and immediately gave up.

The ojiisan clipped at the bushes. The cicadas screamed. The sun felt like it was beginning to burn her skin.

Regina rolled over and out of the sunshine, which was much cooler. Maybe she could take a bath, get dressed, and go find Tsunade. It was too hot to study.

The onsen was empty this time of day, which made it the best time. Regina scrubbed up and washed her hair, before tying it up on the top of her head and wandering out to the actual hot spring.

It was odd to remember that being naked in public used to feel weird. The baths at these places weren’t mixed (but oddly, some did have a sign that had Murder Dad’s face on them with a NO line over them), and Regina had no idea how many people had seen her boobs by now. No one cared. It was hard to put all that effort into caring when no one else saw a problem and no one ever touched you or stared at you. It was just about being in hot water or occasionally a sauna room, talking shit.

She had finally reached the point where Shizune could provide her with gossip and they could talk smack about people Regina had never met. Sure, it was limited. But at least she had something resembling a real friendship with someone her age.

There was no one to talk shit with, so she only spent about half an hour between the onsen and the sauna room. She dressed in the fancy version of what Tsunade had apparently deemed to be her uniform- a fashionable-looking asymmetrical blue top in what was definitely silk, and high-waisted, wide-legged silk pants. The others were cotton or something, which were definitely better for their morning speedwalking. Tsunade had deemed most of what Jiraiya had bought her ridiculously impractical, and only seemed to pull it out when she needed Regina to pretend to be a pretty, mute chair ornament. Incidentally, what Tsunade did see as practical was eerily similar to her own personal style. Suggestions were not welcome.

She found Tsunade pretty easily, in the most smoke-filled izakaya she could find. She was gambling in the back and was obviously shitfaced. Her face was bright red, and she was happily yelling at a room of muscled, older men.

Regina wondered if the men knew that Tsunade genuinely enjoyed this- win or lose. Mostly lose. Even drunk in a ditch, Tsunade-hime could lay every single one of them out with a finger flick. She was confrontational and competitive, and gambling allowed her to be all of those things without murdering anybody or being in a stuffy kimono.

It was kind of admirable. Tsunade evidently had a massive code of ethics that they had to obey. Yeah, they did crimes, but they were crimes like defrauding mob bosses, light smuggling (Regina assumed), and not returning hotel towels. To date, she had not seen or heard of Tsunade or Shizune even seriously injuring anyone- as opposed to how she had met her ersatz father figure.

Tsunade saw her immediately. She shoved some drunk old man lightly away, and patted the zabuton next to her.

“This is my daughter!” She announced proudly and erroneously, presenting her like a prize on a game show. “Reji-chan… this is…” she gestured vaguely around the room “a room of nice gamblers.”

Regina doubted the ‘nice’ part very much, but it didn’t matter. Tsunade was mostly going to use
her as a distraction to either 1) win a round and take all their money or 2) steal all their money using her sneaky sneaky fingers.

“Want sake?” Tsunade asked, drunkenly brushing her fingers through Regina’s long, brown hair. She scratched her scalp lightly with her nails, and ended at her neck, giving it a very short squeeze massage.

Regina would do anything for Tsunade in general, and in specific, for hair petting.

But sake tasted like gasoline to her, so not that.

“Umeshuu?” She suggested, “on the rocks?”

Tsunade grinned, feral and beguiling. “That’s my girl.” Regina noted that all the men in the room were very much staring at her.

She was really helping to bring the money in today.

“Want to try to play a round?” Tsunade cooed. She did this so often that Regina was actually starting to be not bad at gambling. “I’m sure that we can all teach you how to play.”

Several men basically tripped over themselves trying to be ‘helpful’.

Tsunade took advantage of their attention by making sure Regina won the first round. After they’d all had a good laugh about that, Tsunade made a big display of putting all of Regina’s winnings in a bag on Regina’s lap.

Then, she ordered another round of drinks.

Regina was drunk, for sure, by the time they stumbled out of the bed. Tsunade purposefully made her lose a small part of her winnings, which made the other gamblers sympathetic enough that Tsunade easily walked off with all their coin purses before they even passed out on the street outside the bar.

“I can’t believe people don’t just go home.” Regina slurred, somehow aware that her grammar was somehow less shit than when she was sober. Why was that?

“Too far.” Tsunade grunted. “And then they wake up late, hungover.”

Regina looked Tsunade up and down. Her jacket reeked of smoke and sake spills, her hair was in disarray. Her lipstick was horrendously smeared.

“Don’t you?”

Tsunade guffawed. It was so loud that Regina was actually startled. She jumped almost out of her skin and her chest suddenly hurt. She noticed that it was a bit hard to breathe, suddenly.

Why was it so hard to breathe?

The night got darker. Her head felt fuzzy.

A warm hand landed on her back. “It’s okay,” a voice soothed, before stroking her hair. “There’s no danger. You’re safe.”

Regina took a second, and registered that it was Tsunade. Of course. Of course it was. They had been walking together and talking. Everything was fine. There were no problems.
‘Until those guys wake up and try to kill us, forcing us to run out of town.’

She shuddered, but Tsunade just kept stroking her hair.

The world was slowly becoming a bit easier to navigate. It wasn’t as dark as she’d thought. The stars were lighting the dirt road, and occasional lights in houses provided ambient light.

“Feeling better?” Tsunade asked, quietly. Her voice was low and surprisingly maternal.

Regina nodded, then remembered that that didn’t seem to mean anything here. “Yes.” She whispered. She still felt a little breathless. The tightness in her chest hadn’t quite gone.

Tsunade looked suddenly less drunk. There was a tightness in her eyes and a straightness to her spine that hadn’t been there earlier. She was looking at Regina.

No, that was inaccurate. She was examining and assessing Regina. Regina felt a little uncomfortable.

Tsunade seemed to sense that, and relaxed. Regina noted that the tenseness in Tsunade’s body language had disappeared.

The thumping and tightness in her chest eased. Regina took a deep breath.

Tsunade seemed to comprehend something, quietly huffing out air the way she did when she solved sudoku.

“Let’s go home.” Tsunade said, meaning the current unmemorable ryokan where Shizune was doubtlessly waiting to shove them both into the shower.

They walked home, Tsunade keeping her comforting hand on Regina’s back.

They could have only slept for a few hours when Shizune very gently woke Regina. She pointed to Regina’s traveling clothes, and indicated that it was time to leave.

By the time Regina had switched clothing and deposited her pajamas into the magic paper, Shizune was counting out money for their stay. She pointed to the bag that Regina had helped win last night, as a way of asking.

Regina nodded once. Shizune took that for the yes it was, and waited for her by the doorway.

Regina checked the room once for anything she might have left, which was easy because it was an empty room when the futon were put away. There was nothing, so she followed Shizune out.

They left the coin pouch for the ryokan lady on the counter and left.

The air was a bit humid still, but it was much cooler before the sun really came out. It was preferable to traveling during the heat of the day, when every step was basically death.

They walked for hours, stopping to eat breakfast in a cafe in a small town on the road. Regina noted that this one also boiled their eggs, but ate the disgusting thing dutifully. She knew that she needed the protein.

The coffee was fairly good, at least. They even used real cream, which was almost luxe in these circumstances.

She and Shizune talked for a bit about their plans for the day while Tsunade went outside. When she came back in, she had a sour look on her face.
Regina was immediately alert.

Shizune looked at Tsunade quizzically.

“Sensei.” Tsunade spat.

Shizune was evidently a little surprised. “Again?”

“Jiraiya-idiot reported to him.” Tsunade sat down and ate her cold boiled egg.

Shizune looked at Regina. She chewed on her lower lip.

That was a bad sign. Shizune was a champion worrier. It didn’t usually manifest itself in physical tics.

“Is this… for me?” Regina asked, a bit clumsily. Grammar is really fucking hard.

Tsunade chugged the coffee, then gave her dead-on eye contact. “Yes.”

“Is it trouble?” Regina didn’t really like the idea of people talking about her. She was already in deep enough shit. She didn’t need whatever monster taught Tsunade butting in on her life. Also-Jiraiya-dad reported to him? That was a whole level of shit she didn’t need. Her time with her fake dad had been brief, but had made her keenly aware that he gave no fucks about who thought they were in charge.

Tsunade huffed, delicately tearing into her breakfast. Sometimes she reminded Regina of a lioness, using incomprehensibly sharpened teeth and claws with precision and oddly ladylike grace.

She understood why her fake dad was scare-roused, in those moments. If Tsunade ever decided to stop being a gambling drunk and take over the world, the world had better hold onto its ass. Regina recommended immediate and total surrender.

“Not trouble.” Tsunade reassured her, primly cleaning her hands again. She dropped some coins onto the table and stood up. They left the cafe and walked in the direction of the sun.

A few more hours later, they arrived at their apparent destination. Shizune cleared out as usual, but Tsunade stayed behind.

It made Regina feel nervous. Of course she felt along and wanted attention. But this was a change of pace. And Tsunade’s attention might not be a good thing.

“We need to talk about your education.” Tsunade said, after a long moment.

It took Regina a second to puzzle that out, but then she obediently got out her fancy paper and made her study materials appear. Apparently she’d shoved them in last night in her drunken haze, because they tumbled out all over.

It was less than impressive. Regina winced.

Tsunade leaned down and picked up some of the books from her pile. She checked the covers and flipped through the pages, evidently reading Regina’s notes.

“You like politics.” Tsunade said. It wasn’t a question.

Regina nodded. “Before I came here, I was studying international relations at school.” She’d learned some of those terms before this shitstorm had happened, so at least she could learn
something useful. Jiraiya’s romance books mostly gave her really weird dialogue about how to tell people that their skin looked like the moon. Which she had to assume meant luminescent, and not full of craters.

“What school?” Tsunade asked, looking at another book. She flipped through it, and upon discovering it was Jiraiya’s Icha Icha series, immediately tossed it into the trash can.

‘I mean it’s stupid, but I still kind of need that for my notes.’

Regina resolved to recover it later, so that at least she didn’t have to duplicate her work.

“Special school, after high school. The name… do you know Michigan?”

Tsunade looked confused.

“High school.” She repeated. “How many years of school have you had?”

Regina had to kind of think about that. Thirteen years in public school, four years in college, and about a year and a half in her Master’s. Goddammit, she had been so close. She’d even been taking classes during the summer. She was about to start her last term when she’d ended up here.

The injustice.

Tsunade was waiting.

“About nineteen.” Regina spurted out, realizing that she’d taken too long. Tsunade probably thought she was stupid.

“How much of your education is in politics, then?” Tsunade asked, sounded surprisingly interested.

“Five or six years, all together.” Regina replied. “And I have been studying Japanese for about four years. But…” she trailed off, realizing how bad that sounded, “I am not very good at Japanese.’

Tsunade didn’t comment. She leafed through another book.

“What do you know about here?”

“The country we are in now?” Regina asked, head cocked. “The Land of Hot Water is famous for its onsen, and has a local lord, but little power.”

“Iron?” Tsunade asked, pressing the subject.

“A country ruled by a council of samurai. Shinobi activity is prohibited. They are conservative in nature, but considered influential and as fair decision makers. They are the only country that trades with far away countries.” Regina was kind of wondering where this was going.

“What do you know about the Land of Fire?” Tsunade asked. Regina could see that her calm was false. There was a tense muscle in her neck. She was avoiding direct eye contact.

“Uhhh… it’s very hot.” Regina blustered. “There is a Daimyo with considerable power. There is also mention of Konoha and shinobi from there. Like you and…” She hesitated. ”My father.”

Regina then stared at the floor.

“Not too bad.” Tsunade said, in a way that made Regina acutely aware of how much she was being judged. “How long have you been in Japan?”
“I arrived about two months before you met me.” Regina said, not sure of how much time had passed since then. It was all a massive blur of mild heatstroke and mountains.

“Not long at all.” Tsunade said, to herself. Regina did not comment. “Were you taught manners?”

“Uh.” That felt pointed and weird. “I know manners for the land I came from, but not here. I have been…” she felt around for the appropriate words, “watching others.”

Tsunade pursed her lips. That felt like a devastating critique.

“Jiraiya is an idiot.” She announced to no one in particular.

Regina felt like maybe she was supposed to agree with that, but also like that would have been rude. So she just tried to be a piece of furniture.

“Do you want to go to Konoha?” Tsunade asked, tapping her long fingers against the spine of one of Regina’s books. She noted that it was another Icha Icha.

“I don’t know.” Regina was being honest. Not being a petty criminal might be better for her anxiety, but it was something about the devil she knew. Konoha was an unknown. Plus, if Tsunade and Jiraiya obviously crimed real hard, wherever they came from was probably just as bad or worse.

“Your father believes you should be in Konoha.” Tsunade said, mildly.

That was kind of insulting. “I’m an adult.” Regina said defensively. Okay, she was a useless, skillless adult, but shit. She should be making her own decisions.

“You are.” Tsunade agreed. “If you want to stay with me, you can. But maybe you should try going to Konoha.”

“Why?”

“You might like it.” Tsunade lied.

At the skeptical look Regina gave her, she relented a bit. “Sensei will stop sending me sad letters.” Tsunade clarified. Then she looked down at the piles of books. “But you need more… training.”

“That sounds bad.” Regina said, blankly. “I don’t want to train.”

“Me either. But it’s either that or you die somewhere.” Tsunade blandly stacked Regina’s study materials. “I have to bring you back to Konoha. But you don’t have to stay.”

Regina rather thought that Tsunade had kind of buried the real news in there. The idea that she was likely to DIE was kind of more important to her than being the item in Tsunade’s fetch quest.

“I understand,” she half-lied.

“Come outside.” Tsunade was already walking out the door as she said that.

Regina scrambled to her feet.

Later, in retrospect, she would say that was the start of the long Hell Month.

Every morning, instead of walking, now she was jogging- then full-on running, for hours behind Tsunade and Shizune. Upon arriving at their new destination, she would be given the chance to
clean up. Then studying began. Shizune or Tsunade would lecture and quiz her on facts, her Japanese, and any other subject they found interesting that day. She studied every person of note in Konoha and the Land of Fire.

She had to learn about the clans—Tsunade’s in particular. The founding of Konoha. The proper way to behave as the daughter of a famous shinobi. There were lessons on sitting, on ladies’ grammar, and what Regina considered to be an overemphasis on shodo.

Tsunade had her produce ikebana every night while she was gone, and brutally graded her compositions according to the strict and numerous rules.

After lunch and another study session, she was taken out to the woods. She had to do pushups and pullups and so so many crunches while tied to a tree branch. Later, they got creative with kata and throwing large (soft) things at her. Then less soft things. Then small things.

She wanted to die. Just a little bit. But frankly, she was too tired to even try.

After that workout, she was expected to meditate while Tsunade barked at her to find her chakra better. She evidently could use enough to use the paper, but frankly, her reserves were bad. Bad bad bad. Tsunade wasn’t super concerned about that, though. “They’ll grow.” Tsunade reassured her, after making a flame the size of a match wiped her reserves and knocked her on her ass. “You’re Jiraiya’s daughter, he’s got loads of chakra.”

Regina was fairly sure they wouldn’t, really. Partly because she doubted that chakra reserves are genetic, and also that she was not related to that dude any more than she was related to TonTon. Lucky-ass TonTon, who never had to do pushups. Regina eyed him from beneath sweat-drenched bangs.

‘I hope that in my next life I am a stupid, very cute, pet pig.’

She dropped to the dirt. She felt it sticking to her sweat and sticking her to the ground.

‘Oh good. I hope the nice cool ground takes me.’

“Time to bathe.” Shizune said gently, next to Regina’s right ear.

She groaned, but crawled back up.

“I think dying might be better.” She informed Shizune, in a conversational tone.

Shizune hummed in assent. “Training is awful.”

“Did you have to do this?” Regina asked, “How did you survive?”

“I’ve done this, and more, every day, since I was six years old.” Shizune opened the door to the ryokan and beckoned her inside so she could clean up and Shizune would do her weird magic medicine on her, so they could do the whole thing again.

“Ew.”

By the time they reached Konoha, Regina felt a little less like death. She could lift more, she could run for what felt like forever. Her chakra was… still bad. She could concentrate it, though. And sit on water for about five whole seconds before plunging ass-first into the onsen water.

Evidently Tsunade was pleased enough with her progress. Mostly her actual knowledge-base,
though. Politically, she said Regina was going to be ok. She did emphasize that Regina was never
going to be a passable shinobi, which Regina was more than ok with. The retirement plan was
basically a kunai to the head and (apparently) getting your name carved in the same rock with
everyone else.

Hard pass.

She noted during the course of her thorough education that there were very very few older shinobi
still kicking, but that there were elderly civilians of import everywhere. The closer they got to Fire
Country in general, the more she noted obviously-armed young people with ugly vests of varying
colors. Apparently they were traveling through non-shinobi countries, where any shinobi could be.
She noted more Kumo headbands, some Rock ones, but very few Fire headbands.

Subterfuge appeared to be fairly easy here. You just put on a different ugly hair accessory.
Doubtless there was more to it than that (probably the ugly vestwear?), but unsurprisingly, nothing
Regina had read had given out state secrets like that.

They took up residence in a ryokan outside of Fire Country, where Tsunade didn’t gamble or steal
the whole time.

Regina noted the apparent seriousness and acted accordingly. She kept to herself, studying and
doing her required exercises alone in the tatami room. She didn’t really want to meet that many
more shinobi. Her experiences with them so far had been a bit hit or miss, a phrase that seemed a
little too appropriate for her situation.

Tsunade tersely exchanged letters via a fucking bird (?? why birds) and eventually asked Regina
and Shizune to go out to buy drinks.

They came back less than an hour later with a whole drum of sake and two torso-sized bottles of
umeshuu.

Tsunade greeted them with a mien of seriousness from her desk on the floor. A couple of severe-
looking young men were in the room. At least, they were probably men? Their faces were covered
by the creepiest masks Regina had ever seen. Evidently they were meant to be animals? If she
squinted, she kind of thought one of them might have been a dog. Or a fox. It was definitely…
something with ears.

She was guessing they were men merely by body type. They wore all black, and were bulky with
both muscle and probably hidden sharp things. Their body language was blank and their spines
were ramrod straight.

‘Actually, women can obviously be sexy, stacked murderers too. Hashtag feminism.’ She looked at
Shizune and Tsunade and wished for a better, less sex-riddled brain.

Tsunade bade the masked weirdos to leave the room, and they jumped a little bit to vanish,
reappearing just outside the door.

‘Why. It was a whole fucking ten feet.’

Regina decided this line of enquiry began and ended with “We all do it, because it looks cool.” She
popped open the umeshuu and the sake and poured Tsunade a glass. She looked at Tsunade, back
at Shizune, and then poured a second glass for Tsunade.

She and Shizune poured for each other, drinking the umeshuu straight. It was sweet and tangy and
lightly cool.
Tsunade cackled after one of the stage hands (that was what they reminded her of, she remembered) brought her another sealed letter.

Tsunade showed it to Shizune, who swallowed a snort. Barely.

Tsunade made eye contact with Regina and her eyes were twinkling. She barked at the stage hands to hike it (not a direct translation. After four cups, Regina’s accuracy in word recall was disappearing at a rapid rate). They left, again jumping up. Tsunade opened the screen door slightly, so that all three of them could watch the men walk away down the path. It was very anticlimactic.

Tsunade then shut the door, and looked back at them.

“‘We’re out of sake.’” Tsunade said, which was a lie. But Regina didn’t care. “Rejina, would you go get some more?”

Well, Regina surveyed the room, it wasn’t quite a lie. Most of Tsunade’s sake was gone. One bottle of umeshuu was gone. Sooooo…. This was obviously a vital mission.

She saluted, in a drunken and mocking imitation of the stagehands. Where that came from, she didn’t know.

Tsunade choked on her drink and started cackling. Shizune was definitely giggling.

“It seems so disrespectful when you do it.” Tsunade said, not without admiration.

“Is a talent.” Regina slurred slightly. “I take my responsibility real serious.”

Tsunade nodded, faking the seriousness of authority.

Regina got up and walked out the door back towards the liquor store.

Her feet hurt, but she had enough money and there was only like, one street. It would be hard to fail.

But there was an immediate obstacle. In the form of a massive person directly in front of her.

‘Wha.’

She looked up.

“Momo!”

It was hard to tell how Momo-san felt. Most of his face was covered with those weird bandages. His cowprint arm warmers were just as stupid as ever.

“Remember me?” She asked. Was this not her friend?

“You are drunk.” Momo said, gently clapping a massive hand on her shoulder. “Very drunk. And you forgot your shoes.”

“Oh… shoes.” That was why her feet hurt. Life was hard. And it was unreasonable to expect drunk people to keep putting on and taking off their shoes.

“I’m supposed to get more drinks.” She informed him, using his arm to steady herself. “... But I think I need help.”
“Un.” He grunted. Then he picked her up in a princess carry.

“To the saketen?” She asked, hopefully.

“Do you have money?”

She patted her traveling coin pouch. Then, thinking it over, she just handed it to him.

“Why give me your money?” He asked, sounding amused.

“I can’t be trusted.” She yawned, into his shoulder. He smelled like fresh rain. “Plus apparently people pay shinobi for things.”

“But you said we were friends.” He said, walking down the street.

“We are!” She insisted. “But isn’t rescuing me from myself work? Doesn’t it count? You can pay friends for their work.”

She corrected herself. “You should pay friends for their work. And pay them even better than people who aren’t your friends.”

He seemed confused. “Why is that?”

“Because if you care about people, you should make sure they have enough money to live?” Regina muttered. “Where I am from, it’s really important.”

“Aaaah.” He said.

Apparently he thought they needed two drums of sake and some shochu. Regina held the shochu on her stomach while Momo tied the drum’s ropes together and over his shoulder. They (he) walked back to the ryokan in silence.

“Come in?” She asked, when they reached the door. “Tsunade-hime and Shizune-san are here.”

He hesitated.

“It’ll be fun!” She tugged lightly at his arm warmer. “Also, I can’t carry all of this.”

That did it. He put her down and removed his own shoes, placing them neatly in a slot. She found him some hotel slippers, and they trudged down the hallway.

Tsunade and Shizune were laughing about something when they came in.

“I found my friend.” Regina gestured back to Momo, who was lingering in the doorway. “Lucky, right?”

“That is lucky.” Tsunade laughed. “Zabuza-san, I see you brought her back.”

“She tried to pay me.” He said, dangling the coin pouch. “For carrying her to and from the liquor store.”

“Was she a good client?” Tsunade asked, gesturing to one of the zabuton.

“She didn’t even throw up on me and she paid up front.” Momo sat down.

Regina was just thrilled this was going well. Last time was awkward.
Shizune seemed less awkward than before, but had still gone a bit rigid. Still, it was progress. Regina crawled next to Shizune and plonked herself down on the zabuton. She put the shochu out in front of her.

Tsunade and Momo poured each other glasses. They looked back at her and Shizune and poured them both half-glasses. Regina appreciated being included.

Tsunade passed back their glasses. Regina held hers in front of her face. She was about to drink but Tsunade shook her head no.

“Wait.”

Then she addressed the room. Regrettably, Regina only understood the words “Rejina-chan”, “job”, and “cheers”. She drank at the appropriate time and wondered what about her they were cheering for.

Momo asked a question, in words Regina couldn’t catch. Something about….words? Important words?

Tsunade held up two documents. One she’d obviously been writing. There was her handwriting- at first all precision, devolving into messy strokes. She had apparently spilled a glass on it, because it was damp.

The other one was written by someone sober with a big-ass inkan.

Momo read through them both carefully. He asked questions, and Tsunade answered.

He took the second one and pulled fresh paper from the pile. Then they evidently began collaborating- talking with and over each other, writing, laughing.

At one point, they asked questions.

What was important to her? Naps. Free time.

How much money did she think her expertise was worth? Lots and lots of money.

Did she like hats? No. They never look good on anyone.

She had no idea what, if anything, that had to do with their little writing project. Shizune interjected from time to time, which usually made them think for a bit and then start over again.

Four hours later, even Momo was at least tipsy. And whatever it was, was finished. Tsunade walked outside and Shizune put her hands over Regina’s ears.

There was a really, really loud whistle. And the stagehands came out of the darkness, where they had evidently just been chilling up in the trees for hours.

‘Was that supposed to be cool? Or did Tsunade really tell them to jump up a tree and they followed it to the letter?’ Mysterious.

Tsunade gave them what Regina assumed to be orders. They took the rolled up and sealed paper from her, and disappeared into the night.

Then she and Momo and Shizune just started laughing. They laughed and laughed until they all passed out.
Just for kicks, Regina laughed a bit, too. But mostly she went to lie down on the floor on her side. The next morning, Tsunade sent Momo out. Then she started fussing. She got out all of Regina’s clothes, agonizing over decisions. She put all the study materials away, and sent some clothes out to be laundered by the ryokan staff. She held up kimono after kimono in front of Regina’s face, evaluating every decision.

This process was baffling, but Regina tried to take it in stride. Apparently today was important.

“Why am I wearing kimono?” She asked, after two hours of being used as a dress-up doll.

“Today, you are going to Konoha. You have to look like a princess.” Tsunade said absentmindedly, evaluating a handful of kanzashi.

“So, like in Iron. But every day.” Regina was disappointed. She couldn’t even tie the damn obi by herself. That wasn’t going to be workable.

“No…” Tsunade looked up. “Not every day. But some days. And first impressions are important. Your father talks himself up so much, you have to live up to it.” The last part was wry.

“Shit.” Regina said, passionately. “And if I hate it?”

“You flee Konoha and find me, we go back to what we were doing before.” Tsunade shrugged. “And we tried, so no one will bother us.”

“They will definitely continue to bother us.” Shizune said, under her breath. Tsunade didn’t react. Regina noted that.

“I won’t be coming with you, but Shizune and Zabuza-san will be accompanying you to the gates of Konoha.” Tsunade said, with undisguised glee. She evidently had plans.

“Where will I find you if I don’t want to stay?” Regina asked. She hadn’t considered that she couldn’t walk in, say ‘nope, don’t like this’ and make a u turn to freedom.

Tsunade gave her a big, dramatic forehead kiss. “Don’t worry about it. They would bring you to me.” She then selected a bright red camellia kanzashi. It was… ornate. It went next to the kimono Tsunade had determined most appropriate.

They wrapped her in layers of silks, which would have felt fancy if Regina wasn’t sure she was about to die of heatstroke. The socks were thick, the proposed geta looked uncomfortable.

“You won’t be doing much walking in this anyway.” Tsunade waved Regina’s obvious concerns away. “Purely ceremony.”

Shizune dressed in fancy kimono and Momo showed up with a massive princess box. It was covered in brass and jewelled detail.

“See if that idiot thinks I don’t know how to make an entrance.” Tsunade muttered from behind Regina.

Then she looked around. “Where are the ANBU I asked for?”

Anbu?

A few minutes later, a four person team of stagehand weirdos appeared in front of the building.
They were carefully posing, in the way that they were trying very hard to not be posing. They sucked at nonchalance.

‘Yeah, yeah, you can do that kawarimi thing real good.’ Regina thought, feeling somewhat burnt on its charm. Also, now she knew they were called anbu, whatever the hell that meant.

You learn something new every day.

Shizune delicately walked into the box, taking a seat. Regina now realized what about this had been so hilarious last night.

She kept a straight face, though, and imitated Shizune’s movements.

A moment later, Momo sat on her other side, ugly-ass arm warmers and all. He had not dressed up in any way whatsoever.

The anbu evidently picked up the box and started valiantly walking towards Konoha. The blinds were open, and Regina blew a kiss goodbye to Tsunade, who looked startled.

Then she returned it, waving, as Momo closed the curtain.

“There’s dirt I don’t want to get in my eye,” he said, being that he was full of shit.

The three of them tried very hard not to audibly laugh for the hour it took to reach the border. There, apparently other shinobi approached their shinobi, asked for paperwork, and generally gossiped.

They could hear some of it.

Well, Momo could.

“They were wondering what they were importing.” He reported.

“Meat.” Regina joked.

They joked quietly for some time, and became silent again as the shinobi walked back to their box.

After another hour, maybe? Regina had lost countless hands of cards. They hadn’t placed bets, but if they had she would have been destitute by the time they reached Konoha.

“Maybe you’re the princess here,” she said to Momo, who was either incredibly lucky or so good at cheating that Shizune couldn’t catch it.

“What are you, then?” He asked, dealing another hand.

“The human equivalent of a gold-plated lamp?” She guessed.

Shizune laughed quietly. “No, a teddy bear in a dress.”

Regina pretended to be offended. “This is rude, a crime, I cannot stand for this kind of treatment. No one has ever been so cruel to another human being, ever.”

After another hour or so, the box was again lowered to the ground.

“Say hello to the peasantry for me.” Momo whispered. Shizune checked and adjusted both of their kimono.
Regina lightly pushed his arm. “Do it yourself.”

Then, the door opened. The anbu flitted away and she could see a large number of people waiting outside. In front of them was an older man in a robe and the ugliest hat she had ever seen.

Something… tickled at the back of her memory.

‘Oh no, is the hat part of my new, mandatory office uniform?’
Momo the Zabuza-san, who had, she had to emphasize, had not dressed up whatsoever, was definitely still wearing the sake-and-shochu-stained clothes and face bandages of indeterminate purpose, ambled out of the princess box with the grace one would expect from a toddler trying to take off their own one-piece jumpsuit. It was clumsy, and horrible, and took a looong time.

He was enjoying it. When he finally ‘unstuck’ himself from the door, he stood to the side and cracked his neck like a barbarian.

Regina appreciated that he was single-handedly lowering the level of decorum to somewhere she could live in.

She got out fairly gracefully- she did not tangle her hair or kanzashi on the brass decorations, fall on her ass, or accidentally part her robes and flash what was obviously a diplomatic retinue.

Her hair thankfully stayed an immovable mass of painful pins.

The man in the hideous hat bowed.

Deep.

Too deep.

Tsunade had told her this would happen. She panicked anyway.

Shizune had come up from behind her, and slipped her hand under her obi. She pushed- not hard, but enough that Regina could take the cue.

She went down as far as Shizune pushed. After a moment, she felt a light tug on the back of her kimono, and she straightened. As she rose, she realized that Tsunade had told her her Sensei, the Hokage, would be doing that part.

‘Look at you, Regina, makin’ inferences. Getting the facts.’

To her left, Zabuza was making hard assumed eye contact with one of the masked (anbu?). He was also making the motion of picking his nose.

He wasn’t going to be in the official pictures of this moment, Regina was sure.

But she really hoped he would be. She wanted it framed.

The Hatkage said something in keigo, which Regina did not understand and did not care to study. It was obviously a speech not for her benefit, anyway. It was the equivalent of an introduction, only instead of fun facts about herself it probably contained her historied lineage (Jiraiya….. His unknown parents….. Her fabricated mother?)

‘Where the hell do they think I came from, anyway?’
Probably the story she told Osafune-san and his mother, only with ridiculous embellishments. She was probably born from a flower in “the land of beautiful women”, and Jiraiya picked it and gave it to her mother, who was not, as in Regina’s reality, a deeply troubled woman with narcissistic sociopathic issues and a short temper, but a beautiful and kind princess with big tits.

Just a guess. He had a type.

Then the crowd bowed, as Tsunade had said they would.

Regina bowed again, without Shizune’s expert help. It wasn’t nearly as low this time, anyway.

She noted that behind Hatkage were several other old people, dressed in expensive but practical clothing. To his right was a retinue of people in finery like hers- golden silks and palanquins.

So, those would be the Council of shinobi, and the Daimyo’s court.

It would have been intimidating if Regina had grown up here. Or if Tsunade had had any respect whatsoever for the people Regina was now meeting, and had not referred to them as “a herd of degenerate criminals”.

So that was nice.

Regina controlled the urge to yeet herself back into the palanquin or onto Momo’s back. Surely he’d be out of here in seconds. This place sucked.

People in dour clothes were taking pictures. She carefully did not smile.

After the speech was finally fucking concluded, a man in fancy silks she identified as the Daimyo began to speak. She probably could have picked him out earlier- he was the only one who also merited a box.

Apparently whether or not you had to look at the peasants outside was a significant class marker here.

The sun was hot. She could feel rivulets of sweat dripping down her back.

Luckily she was allowed- and expected- to keep her eyes downcast because big men in hideous clothing were talking.

Ugh. She was going to need a million showers after this. And her kimono layers would need to be washed. Or sent to the equivalent of a hazmat disposal. She was pretty sure she couldn’t pee in this thing.

The Daimyo talked for more than ten minutes. He bowed, she bowed deeply again. This time she had to stay down for almost twenty seconds.

Power distance politics were such a bitch. This was why she’d wanted to study it from very far away.

Then the Hatkage spoke again. He bowed, she bowed. This was quicker. They were wrapping up. Any minute now she’d only be expected to gracefully half-smile at every person that tried to get close to her, then meet a million other people that thought they were important (Tsunade’s words), then she could retire to an air-conditioned room to die.

This was basically a marathon in fifty layers of silk and unwalkable shoes.
Christ, the sun was bright here.

The Daimyo said something else that was blessedly short, and his court bundled his box off into the distance.

The crowd dispersed slowly. A line of people bowed at her, she lightly bowed in return, and then they would fuck off to parts unknown.

After what had been two hours in the sun during the hottest part of the day (dicks), the Hatkage gestured for her to follow him. A troupe of 6 anbu flanked her, Momo, and Shizune as they walked to a building that resembled a bad sketch Shizune had made of the “Hokage Tower”.


They walked up an agonizing flight of stairs and into a beautiful room. Regina noted that the desk was literally carved out of the floor. Apparently this was mokuton.

The Hokage dismissed the anbu and they disappeared. Regina valiantly resisted the urge to turn around to see if they’d just gone behind her.

Seriously, no one ever seemed to use that properly. If she could do that, she would put it to good use. Not magically displacing herself into an equally boring location less than fifty feet away.

The doors closed behind her. The Sandaime gestured to a seat that was obviously meant for someone in a pile of fabric- no arms, nothing inconvenient. It was basically a loveseat for one.

She placed herself in it, noting that Shizune and Momo had walked up with her and were at her sides.

The Sandaime seated himself.

It was a long and awkward minute. He stared at her. She stared at him.
Momo rifled through his pockets, jingling some loose change.

They continued to wait.

Evidently the Hokage was expecting something. But Regina didn’t know what it was. And she didn’t feel comfortable enough or inclined to ask.

It was a very stupid game of chicken, she supposed.

“Jiraiya-hime.” The Hokage said, at last. “It is good to meet you.”

She returned the greeting, bowing lightly from her seat as he did.

“Did you… travel well?” He asked. She noticed that he was fiddling with a pen on his desk. Not a lot. But he kept wanting to reach for it, nearly touching it, then pulling back. He was nervous? Or expecting something, and it wasn’t happening.

“It was pleasant. Thank you for your kindness.” She said automatically, just as Tsunade had drilled her to do whenever someone did something even remotely kind in her vicinity.

He hesitated.

The air was a little stuffy, like the air conditioner was lagging.
Regina was already miserable, and didn’t particularly care. At least there wasn’t a hot sun to beat down on her and compound the suffering.

“We received communications from the Land of Iron regarding your work there.” the Hokage said. It was a bit rushed. Maybe that was what he’d been holding in. Commentary on her work performance? A diplomatic snafu?

She blinked, slowly.

His fingers twitched for the pen, again. That must be a comfort mechanism. He restrained himself, though.

“Lord Mifune was very pleased with your contributions.” He said, watching her carefully. He watched like Tsunade did. A predator, with all the time in the world, waiting for you to make Just The Wrong Move.

She didn’t know what he was evaluating her on, though. She could only hope she was passing enough that no one killed her and dumped her sweaty corpse in a ditch. That would be a fucking bummer.

“I was pleased to be able to offer them assistance.” She knew she wasn’t giving him much to go off of, but this wasn’t a date. This man was a practiced assassin who Tsunade hate/loved enough that she’d evidently fucked right out of Konoha to spend her life yelling at drunks. She didn’t particularly care to get to know him.

“They sent a payment to Konoha, as well as their thanks.” He said, sounding like he’d given up on getting anything interesting.

She didn’t buy it for a second. She said nothing.

Tsunade had told her that was common practice for shinobi contracts. They didn’t get paid. The village did, then allotted them a portion of what the fee had been, depending on variables.

She wasn’t a shinobi. And Iron had also paid her in person.

The options had different implications. If Iron had paid her in person, and then also sent a fee and a letter to the Hokage, it might indicate that they were following protocol. Or trying to invent protocol where there was none. Tsunade had indicated that it was rare to impossible for a shinobi to have civilian offspring. It might also mean that the Hokage had demanded it later. Whether it came before or after the Hokage had learned of her existence would be relevant. Jiraiya had left weeks before she concluded the matter in Iron and left. He’d left before she’d even started it.

But the Hokage could also be lying. Perhaps Iron hadn’t paid Konoha at all. There was maybe a letter. The Hokage had mentioned no specifics that would indicate he knew what Iron had paid her for, and might be expecting her to volunteer that information, as well as a portion of her income from that work.

Basically, he was playing a game and he could kiss her slick, sweaty butt.

“They are very gracious.” She said.

He was irritated. A vein flexed in his neck.

Regina was glad she had a naturally stupid face. At one point, that had been a major point of insecurity. She remembered her high school band teacher had been genuinely surprised when she
said something intelligent, because apparently her natural face looked so stupid he was under the impression she could barely form sentences.

It wasn’t a bitch face, but it was good in its own way.

She glanced up at Shizune, vaguely curious how she felt about it.

Shizune’s body posture was all business. Her face was carefully blank. But behind her bangs, Regina could see amusement burning in her eyes.

Amusement at who, though, was hard to say. Maybe them both. The situation was, on its face, ridiculous.

She and Tsunade had crammed an adult from another dimension into a kiloton of fabric, roped in a missing nin (and that had taken forever to understand), and put them all into a fucking box, where trained professional killers had to haul them like precious fragile cargo to meet two assholes who had likely sat in the sun even longer than Regina had. And this was all because… Jiraiya supposedly had a daughter he’d never met from the land they’d never heard of before.

And the Hokage was attempting to play mind games with a woman who wasn’t fluent in Japanese.

The look on his face was stern. He was exuding an air of power and authority.

But if you didn’t grow up here, the authority was a bit laughable. He got where he was (running a whole fucking country) by being Real Good at Killin’. What kind of qualification for economic or political ability was that?

And yes, he could kill her. But frankly, she had been intimately aware since the moment she came here that anyone could do that. None of them had been particularly special.

Plus, she doubted Jiraiya-dad-man would be thrilled if she was murdered. Either she was important and the liability of hurting her was too high, or she wasn’t so important that they’d had to strong-arm Tsunade into bringing her here for some pomp and circumstance.

Regina realized that she didn’t particularly enjoy being used as a prop for a nationalistic feel-good moment. She was actually kind of angry about it.

That gave her the rage to do the thing she knew she should never do. The thing that was so hard for her heckin’ spirit to avoid.

She made direct and unimpressed eye contact with the ‘God of Shinobi’.

She held it for a moment, trying to understand what she saw there. He was surprised, but he didn’t look angry about it. He just stared back.

Slowly, deliberately, she let her eyes linger on his stupid hat—fine fabric and structure. It looked ceremonial and old. It was probably meant to be handed down with the job.

The robe was a different story. The fabric was sturdy, completely utilitarian. It probably hid weapons, even if he had a ceremonial job. She couldn’t imagine he’d stopped carrying them.

Liver spots on his face, hands, and neck indicated that he was older than she’d thought. And perhaps not in the best of health.

His hands were still, but tensed. He was holding them even though he wanted to grab that pen on
the desk. Which she now noted was shaped like a kunai.

That made a significant amount of sense, as a comfort item.

He looked tired. That made sense. He’d been Hokage most of his life. And on the odd occasion someone else tried to step into the role, they had a nasty habit of dying horribly. Only Namikaze Minato had made it to actually being confirmed, and ate dirt within about a year.

Tsunade hadn’t given her even the slightest impression that she thought her teacher was responsible. Tsunade was smart.

But she might be blinded by association. If it wasn’t the actual Hokage, someone else was doing it.

Regina was inclined to believe it wasn’t the Hokage due to how often he tried to get someone else in the job, but she didn’t know him well enough to be sure. People were weird sometimes. He could just be another military dictator, identifying and eliminating potential opposition.

In any case, she wasn’t buying the responsible, all-powerful father figure act he seemed to be doing.

The silence was probably stifling for some people by this point, she realized.

She didn’t really care. She’d batted the ball into his court. He could return it when he wanted. They both couldn’t stay in this meeting forever, her escape was all but assured.

She just had to last him out.

She’d looked at the Hokage about as much as she wanted to. So she examined the desk. It wasn’t carved out of the floor, as she’d initially thought. It was grown.

‘My understanding of mokuton was pretty bad. Lol.’

His desk was cleared of all papers but one- a large scroll, bearing a striking resemblance to the one Tsunade and Momo had written up last night. For instance, when the aircon’s breeze wafted through it, she could distinctly smell sake.

‘In the business, that is what we call a hint.’

Doubtless, her companions had noted it far earlier. Regina didn’t pay it much mind. It probably wasn’t full of snakes or something. That rigamarole earlier had taken time and people to arrange- there likely wasn’t somebody with the free time and access to put a scorpion into what she now knew was a work contract.

Tsunade hadn’t bothered to tell her what the proposed job was, however. She supposed little things like that were beneath a woman that could level a building with her pinky.

The room was otherwise fairly bare. The fancy red carpeting over parts of the wood looked immaculate.

There was a calligraphy scroll behind the Hokage. It basically just said “Fire”.

‘Well, you could never forget where you are. That’s handy.’

There was also a massive scroll on a pedestal in the room. That… was about it.

Not much for conversation pieces, this guy. She blinked, lazily, then returned her attention to the
Hokage.

He hadn’t stopped looking at her the whole time, which was unsurprising.

It was another few awkward seconds of silence before he just. Blinked. And then handed her the scroll from her desk.

“I am pleased to accept your work contract.” He said, with an air of formality. “Konoha is pleased to welcome you home, into the will of fire.”

She may have misunderstood the last part because it was weird. But Regina felt that this wasn’t the time to ask for clarifications.

“You will be working directly in the office of the Hokage as the Hokage’s personal assistant.” the Hokage said, which… why was he talking about himself in the third person? He paused. “After some time training in the rest of the office, and adjustment to life in Konoha.”

Apparently, she worked for whoever wore the hat, whenever that changed. She wasn’t going out in his box of personal desk decorations when he quit. So… that was probably good?

But all of this did make it sound like she couldn’t actually leave with Shizune.

The mood in the room had shifted. Momo was looking down at her. Shizune was staring forward, but seemed tense.

So this had probably not gone as anticipated. Well, shitsticks.

“Thank you for your generous offer.” Regina stood, and bowed deeply. “I will consider it and contact you in the morning.”

The Hokage stood, and bowed. Then he gestured to the doors behind her, which she heard open.

“Our ANBU will escort you and your companions to your accommodations.” he said.

Regina could swear she saw amusement in his eyes. What about this was amusing? Did she massively fail?

The anbu masked weirdoes led/followed them in a block formation to a lovely mansion-like home. Once they were inside, the anbu disappeared to apparently guard the doors.

Shizune stepped farther into the house, making her way in. Evidently she was familiar with the place.

Regina followed her lead, with Momo behind her. They came to an inner room, and sat on the zabuton as Shizune indicated.

Then Shizune walked around, doing something to the doors and ceiling and floor, which made them light up for just a moment.

She looked at Momo.

“The fine arts,” he grunted, which was just as unhelpful as it had been the first time Jiraiya had said it.

“Privacy.” Shizune supplied, correcting him slightly. “Their purpose is to give us some privacy.” “Oh. That makes sense.”
“So am I crazy… or did that go a bit badly?” Regina asked, hoping that she hadn’t fucked everything up somehow.

Shizune shook her head. “It’s fine. Hokage-sama just called Tsunade’s bluff, is all.”

“She was literally gambling with my life?” Regina felt horrified and betrayed. Worst of all, it was totally in Tsunade’s character and Regina reallyyyyy should have seen that coming.

Momo huffed. “Not your life, exactly.”

“Konoha was demanding that we bring you here, because you are a citizen of Fire Nation and your father is directly accountable to the Hokage.” Shizune clarified. “Tsunade-sama did not want you to live here, so she and….” she looked at Momo “Zabuza-san devised a working contract that they thought he wouldn’t- couldn’t- accept. After the meeting, if you wanted to stay, real negotiations would have taken place. If you wanted to leave, they had no right to keep you.”

“But now that he accepted this contract…” Regina inserted.

Shizune nodded. “It is a delicate matter. You did not sign the contract, and are not technically bound by it. But breaking it outright, as the offer was made on your behalf, would make things very tense.”

“What is in this contract, exactly?” Regina asked, slightly afraid of the answer.

Momo laughed.

“An incredibly overpaid job as the highest civilian official in Konoha, in a newly created position, with some…. Interesting stipulations.” Shizune said, obviously trying not to grimace. “Tsunade-sama was attempting to use your education and talents as a justification for asking for such extraordinary accommodations, which would have been unthinkable for Hokage-sama to accept.”

“What other extraordinary accommodations are those?” Regina asked. A highly paid job and more authority than she knew what to do with didn’t sound bad.

“You would be outside of the normal power structure, answering only to the Hokage and able to function as his assistant and proxy when unavailable, except in military matters.” Shizune said tightly. She looked, again, at Momo. She sighed.

“And also, Zabuza-san is to be considered your personal retainer, and not allowed to be attacked by Konoha shinobi without provocation.”

“Nice.” Regina said, passionately.

“There’s also some perks in there you should really look at.” Momo said. She could feel him grinning under the bandages.

Shizune gave him a look.

He didn’t say anything again, but was obviously still having an incredible time.

“So, I can’t really leave here.” Regina said. “It would be a massive insult.”

“It would be considered bad form to turn down such a …prestigious position.” Shizune said delicately. “But it could be done, if we were to be very careful.”

“If I decide to stay, can I quit and leave later?” Regina asked. “Is there a time limit on this
contract?"

“You could decide to abdicate, yes, but it is a lifetime appointment.” Shizune took one of the many pins out of her hair and began to fiddle with it. “Typically, in shinobi culture, that means that you die on the job.”

“I don’t like that.” Regina said, leaning back and away from Shizune.

“We could also run out of here and escape.” Momo suggested lightly. “Technically, they’re not allowed to attack us.”

“Then why run?” Regina asked, cocking her head. “We could go out for dinner and then just keep walking right out of here.”

“It’s not as fun.” He pointed out. “I like to watch them panic.”

“This is a test, isn’t it.” Regina not-asked Shizune. “He just wants to see what we do.”

“Hokage-sama is known for his unconventional approach to learning.” Shizune said indifferently. “It is likely that he would like to determine your character before actually employing you in the most secure place in Konoha.”

“It would be stupid if he didn’t.” Regina’s voice came out flat and critical. “And they would be providing me with training? Is that in my contract?”

“A purported accommodation due to your lack of experience in Konoha, shinobi culture, and language skills.” Shizune put on a mask of kindness there at the end.

Hey, Japanese was really fucking hard. Regina knew she wasn’t great at it, and it was totally reasonable to stay she needed to learn much more to be useful.

But it still kind of smarted. She liked to be good at things. No, not good.

She liked to be great at things.

“Y’all are a bag of dicks,” she grumbled to herself in English, not really meaning anything by it.

“You evidently gave yourself until tomorrow to decide.” Shizune said lightly, as if now unburdened by the information that Regina was pretty well fucked into an unfriendly office job full of pointy maniacs.

Regina grimaced. Then she stood up, trying to peel herself out of the layers of sweat-drenched silk.

She felt like a soggy butterfly emerging from a cocoon. When she emerged in her tank top and shorts, Shizune handed her one of the magic papers with her clothes in it.

Momo looked at the pile.

“Dinner?” He asked. “Apparently they have great ramen here.”
Chapter 12

Regina changed and sponged herself to a reasonable level of cleanliness. She scrubbed off the makeup, but left the hairdo. She was sure it was going to take hours to get all the pins and hairspray out.

And she was too hungry to wait that long, to be honest.

She dressed in one of her silk outfits and low heels, because Tsunade would probably be appalled if they’d gone to all the effort of polishing her up to a princess and she’d immediately attempted to look like a pile of wrinkled laundry in public.

Shizune had changed, and surprisingly Momo had, too. He had changed into a clean outfit.

Regina supposed the filthy one had been for the Sandaime Hokage’s sake. Shinobi stuff seemed to be pageantry of a different kind. The anbu were obviously following them when they left. Regina caught glimpses of mask details in the darkness.

Two of them were wearing the same or similar masks to the ones that had been Tsunade’s messenger pigeons.

Were they assigned to a particular person? Or was there just a big bucket somewhere full of creepypasta masks?

If there was a bucket, Regina wanted to find it. Some of the masks obviously needed more details, and she wanted to bless them with really big painted mustaches.

The ramen shop wasn’t really a shop- it was one of those booths with a curtain separating the patrons from the outside.

Momo held up the curtain for Regina and Shizune to pass through. They flanked her on both sides.

The booth was too small for all the anbu to join them.

Regina followed Momo’s gaze to the bottom of the curtain, where she could see four pairs of toeless-shoed feet pacing. It was hard to tell from feet, but they seemed unhappy.

Shizune just ordered for the two of them, Momo ordered what amounted to “and keep ‘em coming.”

Regina looked around, curiously. It was a really small place, which was typical for this kind of business. It only had four seats and seemed to be staffed by a man and his daughter.

The other seat in the ramen stand was occupied by a child.

That was confusing.

Was it ramen man’s other kid? Probably not. The small (and filthy, Regina noted) child had blond hair. The man and his daughter had brown.

It wasn’t impossible, but it also wasn’t the most likely thing. Blond hair genes were pretty recessive.
The little boy was working his way through a massive bowl of ramen, slurping and getting broth everywhere.

He had also picked out all the vegetables and put them into his napkin.

‘Sounds right.’

Regina and her companions were served not long after. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the boy was now staring.

He was not particularly discreet, even for a kid. He ogled Momo for a while, because he was nearest. Also, he was basically a brick house of a man with cowprint arm warmers.

Then he thought Regina merited some observation- probably because she was foreign-looking?

He passed over Shizune with barely a glance.

‘Mistake. She’s the most terrifying person here.’ Regina thought, not uncharitably. She ate her ramen dutifully. Frankly, she didn’t care for the genre much. Pork belly and soft-boiled eggs? Good. But ramen was just so damned salty.

She finished as quickly as was polite, and turned to examine her gawker in detail.

Her initial assessment of ‘filthy, small’ hadn’t been off. He was covered in dirt and minor scrapes. His clothes didn’t look well-cared for- they had some exceptional wear in places that would have merited patching or replacement. His eyes had little hollows under them- she wasn’t sure that was healthy. It was compacted by his underlying skin tone.

It reminded her of her own miserable childhood. She wanted to look away.

Then he made eye contact.

His eyes were blue- so blue. And had a fire in them that she had to respect.

‘But you’re about as ‘Japanese’ as I am, I’ll bet.’

Momo continued to slurp down what was becoming a troubling amount of soup.

‘Shinobi must have to eat like crazy to keep that muscle mass, they seem to do a lot of weird shit.’

Ten bowls later, he was satisfied.

Regina paid, because that seemed like the thing to do when they were escorting her through a place she didn’t want to be.

There was a tiny shriek off to her right, and a lot of frantic patting.

She turned to see the kid full-on panicking. He was turning out his little pockets, which mostly seemed to be full of dirt.

And one live toad that hopped out of the stand. An anbu poked their creepy little head in.

But he wasn’t stopping. He took off his jacket and shook it out, shoving his hands into pockets.

‘He can’t find his coin purse,’ she realized, feeling panic start to set in, even though it wasn’t happening to her.
He stood there in shock. The jacket slid to the ground.

“Teuchi-san, I-” he started, looking about ready to cry. He noticed the anbu and that Regina and her companions were staring. His face turned red.

Regina immediately turned and smacked another bill on the table. This was horrible to watch. She couldn’t handle the secondhand embarrassment, or the reminder of how horrid it was to not have enough money for something. In public.

“For him.” She clarified, gesturing to the boy that was obviously about to have a breakdown.

The man who was evidently Teuchi-san took it and nodded, smiling slightly.

She stared at the boy, who looked back at her, confused. A little line of snot was rolling down his chin. He’d evidently managed to keep from actually crying, though.

Poor thing was obviously holding it in, hard. Regina could sympathize.

“Let’s go home.” Shizune said, sounding gentle.

Regina stood, still locked in eye contact with the little boy. His lip wavered.

Then he ran outside.

He had left his jacket on the ground. Regina bent down to pick it up.

It was whisper-thin. If she wasn’t careful, she could tear the seams apart. She winced.

“Anou, anbu-san.” She called lightly. The anbu turned its face to her directly. It was a… fox? Cat? Dog? Who knew. One of the masks with ears from before.

“Could you return this to that boy?” She asked, holding out the jacket. It nodded.

God, it was hard to remember there was a person under there. It was just so creepy to keep addressing an emotionless mask.

They took the jacket from her gently and disappeared.

They walked back to the diplomatic residence. On the way, Shizune pointed out things. A nice dango shop, a good place to eat lunch, a blacksmith.

‘I’m not going to need a blacksmith, but I appreciate the sentiment.’ Regina oohed and aahed appropriately, letting Shizune tell her about her favorite places here from childhood.

Shizune was a talker when she was comfortable. And apparently she was very comfortable here. She walked them out of the way just to show them an onsen that she described as ‘the best in Konoha’ and through an older street. Everything was closed- except for izakaya, which Regina could occasionally see dotting the streets.

There were several fine goods stores- kimono and kanzashi, imported foods. There was a bookstore, which was also closed. Regina stared longingly at it and sighed as they meandered past.

‘There’s probably no English books in there, though. Everything is work and suffering.’

At some point, her fetch quest anbu had returned, or been replaced by a lookalike.
‘I hope to god that not everyone here wears masks. My charm and memory only work when i see and remember faces. Names are hard.’

She kept that bit of whining in. She could ask Shizune later, anyway.

They entered the residence and prepared for bed. Momo apparently was going to sleep in the first room, by the genkan. Which was probably for security reasons, but reminded Regina of her homestay’s dog. She wisely did not comment.

Shizune started taking down the futons for sleeping, so Regina followed her lead. The ones here were really fluffy and nice.

After the beds were prepared, Shizune carefully pulled the hundreds of pins out from Regina’s long hair. The pile was actually kind of intimidating.

‘You could hide so many weapons in here.” Shizune mused. “We could get you sheathed pins.”

Sometimes, Shizune was scary as shit.

“I’d probably injure myself.” Regina rebutted, hoping to hell that it would never be necessary for her to hide murder weapons on her head.

Shizune just hummed in a noncommittal way. “You’ll learn not to do that.”

Regina resigned herself to owning terrifying hair ornaments and imminent finger injuries. They’d probably arrive in the mail next week. Shizune was as stubborn and terrifying as Tsunade, you just tended not to notice because Shizune tended to just do the thing without consultation or warning.

Shizune gave her back a little pat. “All done. We should go bathe now.”

“Fair. I’ve been waiting for this all day.” Regina stood and stretched. Outside the paper screen, she could see an anbu lurking.

“Uh. They are not going to watch us bathe, right?” She asked, trying to sound as unbothered as possible. This was not a problem. She was cool as ice.

Shizune laughed. “No. Why would they? You’re not a head of a foreign state.”

“That implies that they watch foreign heads of state in the nude.” Regina grumbled.

Shizune shook her head. “No, oddly enough, dignitaries don’t tend to want to stay that long.”

“You don’t say.” Regina picked up her pajamas and padded to the bathroom. It was evidently as ritzy as the rest of the house- there was a small hot spring attached.

Real shame that most people weren’t able to use it. A shame for them.

Regina used it with abandon. After bathing, she went to sit in the onsen for two hours. She brought one of her books- one of a few English books that she’d been given in Iron. It was a set of classics- Beowulf, the Odyssey, the Iliad. The typeface wasn’t super easy to read, but it was still better than melting her brain on Japanese in her leisure time.

That reminded her. She should really send a nice letter to Iron, and a request to someone to find her more books in her own language. She’d read fucking Dickens at this point. Or Thoreau, much as she hated his whiny, labor-stealing ass. But Thoreau was definitely too contemporary. She was in a hellscap version of 18th century. Maybe. This place was weird as shit. She knew she’d seen a
coffee machine in the Hokage’s office. And generally, much more stable electricity than she had anticipated.

She didn’t know what that meant for her literary options, though. It wasn’t likely she’d be allowed to leave the Elemental Nations to find out.

But, good side, it meant she had coffee access and the possibility of a quality of life she’d never have been able to have otherwise.

She stopped reading for a moment, struck by thought.

Where the hell were they going to expect her to live? Not here, this was obviously meant to be temporary. Otherwise she’d be consistently booted out for some daimyo’s cousin.

‘Guess that’s a problem for tomorrow Regina,’ she thought, putting her book on a dry rock and sinking low into the water. ‘Today Regina is carefree with no muscle pain.’

Unfortunately, tomorrow Regina became today Regina fairly quickly. She woke up with the distinct sense of dread that always accompanied the prospect of participating in capitalism.

She got dressed anyway, aware that Shizune was fully capable and willing to haul her ass to the Hokage in pajamas if Regina decided to be difficult. That wouldn’t convey the strength and capability that Regina needed to do her fake job.

She signed over her life in the Hokage’s office, in front of about ten stuffy-looking people she hadn’t seen before.

They introduced themselves as clan heads, and the village Council- which consisted of two old men and one old woman.

Evidently they were the same age group as the Sandaime, and “weighed in on affairs of government”.

‘Welcome to the new government, looks like the old government.’ She thought to herself, remembering how many potential successor Hokages were currently pushing daisies. She wondered why Tsunade hadn’t really briefed her on the Council, outside of generalities.

The introductions took approximately one eon- every single person in the room seemed to have a life story prepared. The Hyuuga clan head kept looking at her vaguely like she was an overly expensive statement piece, the Inuzuka lady was kind of boss but obviously wanted to be anywhere else. The Akimichi clan head was actually nice.

Regina made note of that. She would not be delaying his paperwork due to ‘quality concerns’.

It was particularly notable as a meeting for a few reasons. One, despite the fact that Tsunade had briefed her on the Uchiha clan, there was no representative. There was a corresponding awkward gap in introductions.

The other notable thing was that a lot of these people were real dicks.

“This is obviously inappropriate.” One of the council members said, disregarding her entirely. “Jiraiya-san is an important shinobi, but why is she useful? She can’t even understand us when we’re talking.”

Regina also made note of that, and wished this particular octogenarian all the worst things in the
world. She might personally fill their witch cottage with bees and legos.

The others were less outright demeaning about her apparent lack of skills (which evidently, they had not checked?) but were mostly angling to leave. Hyuuga Hiyashi made a comment that implied that he thought this was pure nepotism, but stopped just short.

She caught the one eyed one, Shimura, eyeing her. It was evaluative and penetrating. And she didn’t care for it. She looked at him, they were obviously weighing each other up.

She may have glowered.

And her new job involved being in contact with him and all the rest of these people, all the time.

At least she was obviously way too visible to disappear, and not a shinobi. It would be awfully hard for them to plausibly kill her off without outside comment. It was so easy when they were a shinobi- “he died on a mission, how were we supposed to know we sent him into the enemy’s house when they were all home?”

Also, even then they were suspicious af. Regina had to wonder why no one asked. Weird shit apparently happened all the time in Konoha for no real reason, and didn’t happen anywhere else.

It stank.

She bowed politely at the introductions, and introduced herself as blandly and respectably as possible. She resolutely did not glare at anyone else, even when the Aburame clan head asked quietly if she understood how to use chopsticks or the bathroom.

After about an hour, they all filed out. Important people with important things to do.

That left her and the Sandaime Hokage in the office, alone. Momo and Shizune were still waiting outside.

“What did you think?” The Hokage asked, getting out a pipe.

She turned only her face to him. “Of what, Hokage-sama?”

He blinked slowly, like a cat, either satisfied or amused. “Of them.” He put tobacco in and packed it with his thumb. She watched it, kind of interested. She’d never seen anyone smoke a pipe before.

“All of them?” She asked, trying to leave any judgement out of her tone. “They were very.. polite.”

He hummed and lit the pipe with fire from his finger. Chakra. Then he took a long drag out of it, and held it in his mouth. It looked leisurely.

She wondered if he was any good at smoke rings.

He released it through his nose like a dragon, smoke billowing out over the desk and her contract.

“I have a copy already.” He said. “You should take this one. Keep it safe.”

Regina took the few steps towards the desk and slipped the scroll into her pocket. She watched him continue to smoke his pipe.

After a minute, he was still smoking his pipe and hadn’t said anything else.
“Is there… anything you would like for me to do, Hokage-sama?” She asked, feeling slightly bored. It’s not like she had a desk or anywhere to go to.

He thought about that a little.

“Not today…” he trailed off. “I believe your father will be here today to take you home. Please come into the office next Monday for your first day of work.”

It was Tuesday, by her count.

“Yes, sir.” she said, and bowed lightly. She left the room at a leisurely pace and closed the door behind her.
**Chapter 13**

Chapter Summary

New stuff is coming out this week on our platform secret, but it begins with a P and ends with an N and you can probably figure that out, right?

So if you like our writing, please come see us there- just don't subscribe and then leave. We block people who do that. It's not cool to steal people's work.

Love you, byeefeee!

Regina sent Shizune and Momo off to terrify the general populace, noting that a gaggle of anbu immediately appeared to shadow them.

‘Where were they hiding, the vases?’

Regina eyed the water suspiciously, but nothing moved.

She found Jiraiya just outside, suspiciously not-lurking by the flower beds. He was supposedly inspecting a daisy, but she’d bet her right tit that he knew jack all about botany. He kept making ‘hmm’ noises, and gently turning leaves.

‘Hmm. This is a leaf. Oh wow, hmm, this is still the same leaf. It has a distinct leafiness to it. Yes, a high quality green leaf, shaped like a leaf.’

“Reji-chan?” he turned around, obviously feigning surprise.

Why. why was he like this.

“Reji-chan! My dearest daughter!” he wrapped her in a hug that felt surprisingly like a boa constrictor’s grasp.

She just went limp.

If it went on too long, she could always bite him.

He swung her around lightly in a circle before finally putting her down.

“So… how did the job interview go?” he asked, reminding her of her great-aunt Mabel.

‘How was school? Have you met any nice men? When will you be getting married?’

She just… looked at him. He had to have known how it went. Ten jerks in fancy clothes just left the building moaning about nepotism.

Well, nine. Akamichi-san wasn’t a dick.

He grinned wolfishly.

‘Yeah, he knew.’
“That good, eh?” He clapped her on the back- too hard. She stumbled forward a few steps.

His eyes went a bit wide and immediately helped her steady herself.

“You’re not very sturdy.”

“It’s a very bad family resemblance, I’m told.” Regina said dryly, before yanking her coin pouch back from his hand.

He lifted his hands up to his head, still grinning. She could understand why Tsunade wanted to murder him constantly. He just stole…

Actually, she was still a little fuzzy on money amounts here, but it was a lot. Wads of bills, anyway.

And he didn’t care- he just took it for the fuck of it, and probably to see if she’d notice or take it back.

“I thought daughters were only supposed to support their family when they were retired and dying.” She dropped the small purse down her bra. He wasn’t stupid enough to feel her up, probably. He had an overdeveloped sense of ethics and chivalry where breasts were concerned.

“Are you dying?” She asked, pretending to look sad and concerned.

He was affronted. His hair poofed up.

‘Incredible. Like a cat.’

He was evidently about to go into a speech. Probably something long and dramatic with posing involved. His chest was puffing up with bravado, and he inhaled.

But also, it was lunchtime.

Regina started walking away. To be honest, she was still pretty keyed up from that meeting and didn’t have the energy to deal with Jiraiya’s dramatics right now.

“The karaage place Shizune talked about was this way, right?” She tried to remember from the night before. Yes, it was. It was kitty corner from the bookstore she wanted to see, down this little street on the right, after a quick left at the sketchiest-looking izakaya she’d ever seen.

It evidently took him a moment to switch gears and catch up with her.

“Which place are we going? I like the one up by the memorial, but the one off to the left…” he pointed in the direction she had been intending on, “has really good korokke as well.”

Ugh. That sounded like so much fried stuff. How did he live like that.

“Whichever one you prefer, then.” She said, stopping and turning to him. “I don’t know where anything is.”

“And you were just gonna go and try to find lunch and leave your father alone by the Hokage building?” He was mostly amused now.

“I thought the anbu would keep you safe.” She said innocently. “And you obviously followed very quickly. Should I have worried?”
He narrowed his eyes for a moment, then receded into his normal veneer of confident bravado.

On the way to the karaage restaurant, he elaborately re-introduced himself to no less than twenty people.

Regina kept walking. At one point she ducked into a conbini to buy herself the nasty nasty green drinks Tsunade had informed her she had to drink.

Ugh. Oversteeped green tea and vegetable medley. She chugged them dutifully in the shade of the awning before disposing of the bottles. They left a film on her tongue and a bitter taste in her mouth.

‘Health… is bad. Have we considered dying?’

Jiraiya had evidently brought a large and festive toad into the production by this point. Some people were cheering. At least one actual shinobi was clapping to the rhythm.

Unfortunately, she had no idea where to go at this point, so she had to wait. She bowed at people who bowed at her and avoided eye contact with everyone who walked by. Several shinobi vaguely approached her, but didn’t actually introduce themselves or walk within social engagement radius.

‘If they’re hoping I’m like Jiraiya, they are in for at least one sad, sad surprise.’

Evidently Jiraiya’s presentation was not stopping soon- he was reenacting some fight with the toad.

The bitterness on her tongue was too much, so she dipped back inside to get a drink that didn’t taste like sadness.

When she came back out, she watched. He’d apparently gotten to the romance section. There was a beautiful lady that he made out of a clone, and they embraced. But then something something sad- he had to leave her? She died? She realized that he was never going to get a real job at a bank and told him to get lost?

He mimicked being sad for a while, while also apparently hocking his new Icha Icha book that he’d had printed a few months ago in Iron. Then, apparently, Regina appeared.

She wasn’t sure she liked his artistic rendition of her- she looked a bit too fluffy and fake- like a confectionary of a human being. He’d transformed her pajamas into some very fancy hanfu-looking thing. Her hair was… fairly accurate, she’d give him that. It was odd to look at it now, though. Tsunade had done something to her hair with her freaky glowing hands to make her look more like Jiraiya. It was silver, now, which seemed to be an odd color even here.

No one had actually bothered to tell her whether that was permanent or what. It didn’t seem to have been dye. She watched a woman with light pink hair walk down the street, balancing her shopping.

Then the fucker pointed at her- true, she was dressed nicely and in makeup with her hair styled. It was not the worst she could have looked.

And yet…

They oohed. They ahhed.

Then he said something that made it even weirder.

Something about a… new book. He was still pointing at her.
She did not like this. At all.

‘It is not appropriate to make a sex and romance book about your adoptive daughter, you incorrigible degenerate.’

She was going to learn how to whoop his ass into the sun like Tsunade. She felt it deep down in her soul.

Or at least she was going to inform Tsunade of this development, and tape the beatdown for herself.

Well.

He was still going on about the plot of the book, but she had had about enough of this as she cared to endure. She started walking again, in the same direction. Eventually she’d find somewhere with food that didn’t taste like grass and eat it. Just as she would eventually find an anbu to direct her at least back to the hokage tower, if she wandered far enough.

She walked for more than twenty minutes, noting that she was approaching the same ramen stand she’d gone to last night.

A familiar-looking tiny butt was on a seat.

It seemed otherwise empty.

Fair enough, it was pretty late for lunch at this point. Regina still didn’t love ramen that much, but it was sure food.

She ducked under the curtain and sat a seat away from the child, who was slurping down his ramen with table manners that may have spontaneously tied her fallopian tubes.

She ordered the same thing as the night before. It didn’t take long before a hot dish of ramen with seared pork belly was placed in front of her. She noted that the pork belly was augmented with an extra side.

When she looked up, the proprietor gently tilted his head in the direction of his other patron, and winked.

Huh.

The kid didn’t seem to notice her, so she ate her food and just watched. He was about the size of one of her handbags in a past life, but managed to put away two big-ass bowls of shio ramen before tapping out.

Regina couldn’t summon quite that much enthusiasm. She happily ate the extra pork with hers, and ate her noodles with a minimum of slurping. Yes, she knew it was polite. But also mouth noises are disgusting and she wasn’t interested in being part of the problem.

Evidently at some point the kid had noticed she’d arrived, because when she turned to get a napkin she found his face about 8 inches away from hers.

She blinked.

What…

Why was everyone here so irredeemably weird?
The ramen man came towards the counter and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

“Naruto-kun, that’s rude.” He chided gently. “You can’t get that close to people who don’t know you.”

The boy’s eyes went wide.

His ass smacked back into his seat. But he was still staring.

“Staring is also… not polite.” the man said, looking a little embarrassed.

Ramen man was good people. She tried to remember his name. Ta… Te? Ta for field was a usual name kanji.

Dammit, she should have paid more attention last night.

The boy - Naruto, like that weird little rolled fish sausage, she reminded herself- looked ashamed.

“That’s true,” she said slowly, “but I think today it’s okay. Why were you staring?”

Naruto kind of froze. He shrugged, but it looked really stiff and mechanical.

“I’m not angry.” she said, feeling a little amused. “Do I have something on my face?”

He shook his head.

The silence lingered. He wasn’t going to give her more answers.

The curtain behind her parted, and her ersatz father figure sauntered in. He looked pleased with himself, which Regina could only take to mean that that crowd had provided him the incredulous love and admiration that she had denied him.

It wasn’t like she wasn’t grateful, it just seemed to be a bottomless well. He needed more attention than any one human being could ever provide. And also her schedule was pretty full, what with her life being on fire.

She was trying very hard not to blame him for that.

It was only somewhat working.

He plopped down with a decided lack of grace and ordered five bowls of ramen, both shio and miso.

‘Everyone I know here is at severe risk of cardiac arrest.’

She watched him slurp them down. Unlike her, he seemed to revel in making more noise than necessary.

The loudness was kind of giving her a headache. She gritted her teeth.

Naruto was now watching them both, but trying not to stare. Which seemed to mean that this six year old was hunched over steepled fingers and fully staring, but out of the side of his eyes.

Wow. The stealth.
She wondered if she’d been that obvious and adorable at that age. Probably.

Jiraiya finished slurping down his noodles and then started to make horrible teeth-sucking noises.

She was now 100% sure he was doing this purely to fuck with her.

“Rejina-chan, are you paying?” Jiraiya cooed. When she turned to look at him, he was picking his teeth with a metal stick.

She looked at the proprietor. To his credit, he looked mildly disgusted but nonplussed.

The teeth sucking noise started again.

Out of the corner of her right eye, she could see that Naruto was now openly watching Jiraiya with no small amount of amazement and confusion.

Oh, no. She was enabling him to teach children.

Regina, for no apparent reason, suddenly remembered the USA policy on not negotiating with terrorists.

Her father looked smug. There was no other word for it.

Fine, he could have this one.

“Of course.” She said, handing over an appropriate bill to the ramen man.

The tooth-sucking immediately stopped.

She turned to him and eyed the very sharp metal stick in his hand.

“You should probably burn that.” she said, as she held out her hand for her change and turned to smile at ramen man.

Regina slid off the seat and out of the curtain.

“Gouchisousamadeshita,” she called, and smiled at Naruto. “Take care, yeah?”

Jiraiya affably ambled out behind her.

“I guess I should take you home, yeah?” He asked, surveying the city.

“That would be nice.” she said. Some people walked by and stared at her. She felt uncomfortable and overly exposed.

She stepped closer to Jiraiya, pressing into his shoulder. He looked down.

To his credit, he was decidedly not weird about it. He reoriented to pat her on the head. Then he held out his arm.

Was she supposed to grab it? She reached out to lightly hold his forearm. It was too big for her to do that.

“No, I’m gonna pick you up and carry you. You’re real slow.” He clarified, with a shit-eating grin.

“Whatever. Pick me up, then.” She said.
He scooped her up like she was nothing in a princess carry, which was probably more dignified but definitely less fun than the times when he’d let her do the piggyback thing.

He jumped up.

Regina looked down. He was balancing on a telephone line. She could see the ground more than 30 feet below.

‘Yeah never mind, fuck this. Don’t look down.’

She relaxed and leaned into his ugly vest thing. He wasn’t likely to drop her somewhere she could get hurt.

About twenty minutes later, he stopped moving.

She removed her face from his collarbone and looked out.

They were standing in a pretty secluded area- there were some groups of large houses in the relative distance, surrounded by massive walls.

Oh, this was bougie.

“Is this where you finally murder me?” She asked, out of reflex.

He twitched. Then he carefully put her on the ground.

Jiraiya walked away, up what was a decidedly overgrown stone path.

‘I guess maybe that doesn’t play as well with people who kill for a living.’

Well, that was a good thing to know. She made a mental note for later.

She followed him carefully, trying not to trip over the overgrown grass and jutting stones. She was paying so much attention to the ground that she nearly ran into him.

He was stopped. She looked up, and leaned to the side.

This had to be a joke. He was just fucking with her some more. She wished that she was surprised.

He turned around with a grin. “Welcome home, Reji-chan!” he gestured grandly, and beckoned her towards what could be best described as a shack made out of garbage.

The walls were uneven- the boards were obviously just whatever the builder had been able to locate. There were windows, in that there were holes at various places.

“Sasuga.” she said, and walked in the shack.

He followed her in, which was an achievement in itself because it was basically a six foot by six foot closet with a fire pit in the middle.

“Do you like it?” He asked, obviously waiting for her to flip her lid. He kept wiggling his hands as if to sell her on the idea. His mouth was frozen, open wide.

Regina thought that maybe he was too used to riling up Tsunade. That would have worked on her. But Regina didn’t wind up quite the same way. He hadn’t ever managed to hit any of her buttons,
really.

She held her hands out, palms down.

It seemed to break him. He was puzzling it out. He put his hands under hers, very slowly.

She walked into him a little bit, into a hug. At the last second, she lifted her hands under his vest and lifted it up and towards herself, taking the vest with her.

Then she balled it up, turned around, plopped down on the ground, and used it as a pillow.

“This place is just like you.” She chirped, facing a crack that led right out into a field that had to be full of snakes. She closed her eyes. “Very your style.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He only let her lay that way for about ten minutes before he gave up.

“You’re really gonna live in the tax shack?” He asked, voice nearly cracking at the end.

Oh no. She may have broken him.

She rolled over and opened one eye. “Is this not your house, the house in which I, your daughter, am expected to live?”

He squinted.

She huffed, and sat up. “Why wouldn’t I want to live in such a luxurious estate, so rich in…” she looked out one of the many cracks, and couldn’t reign in the look of disgust, “nature.”

God. There were definitely mukade and venomous snakes in there. Yike yike yike.

“It’s like camping. Every day,” he agreed, definitely now catching on that she was giving him shit.

She gestured emphatically. “My very favorite thing! I’m very hardy, you know. Hunting and killing animals, living in the dirt…”

“Yeah, that does sound like you.” He leaned forward, reaching for his vest.

She clutched it tighter and made eye contact.

He backed off, hands raised.

“Should we actually find you a place to live, then?” He asked, scratching the back of his head. His long hair shook.

“That would be good.” She didn’t move.

He squatted and was evidently in thought.

“You mean this was actually your plan for housing me?” She asked. “Or was there another option?”

He grunted. “No, of course not. You’d die in a week. This thing isn’t even meant to be lived in at all. Tsunade-chan and I built it to avoid the extra taxes like… twenty years ago.”

“You can tell, by the craftsmanship.”

He looked defensive. “We were really drunk. Sober, it would be way better.”

She doubted that at least a little. Competent, they were. Master builders? No. Tsunade-sama’s specialty seemed to be in destroying homes, not building them.

He sighed. “Looks like I have to finally build a house.”

“Why do you even have this?” She asked. It was weird. Like, he obviously didn’t live in town. He
traveled. But to have literally only a tax shack as a shelter in his home country seemed…

Well. It was really fucking sad, is what it was. He obviously didn’t want to be here, and didn’t make any effort to leave something here he’d want to come back to.

Why did he and Tsunade want her to live here, again? They obviously longed for the freedom of being literally anywhere else.

He shrugged. For a second, he looked a little vulnerable.

It made her mildly uncomfortable.

“Thought I’d have a family someday, bought the land after the war.” He looked around, and pulled a weed out of the dirt floor. “But I didn’t get married, so…”

Oh no. That was profoundly sad.

Regina eyed the door, hoping for an opportunity to escape feelings.

He sat quietly for a second, then straightened his shoulders.

“I didn’t know I had such a cute little daughter then!” He launched forward.

Regina had to make a choice. Protect her hair, which he was doubtless going to tangle and ruin, or continue to hold onto the vest- which was mostly her prize for dealing with him. She couldn’t even wear it. The shoulders were way too big. She just wasn’t gonna let it go.

She chose the vest.

He obviously did not anticipate that choice, moving for the fabric on the floor before diverting to ruffle her hair with way too much relish.

He laughed- it was loud. So loud.

“Good kid.” He scooped her up into his chest.

“I’m an adult.” She said, into his shoulder. “I’m over twenty years old.”

“A baby,” he soothed, “just a little baby with beautiful hair like her father.” He rubbed his horrible face into her hair, evidently smelling it like her parents used to.

“Christ.” She groaned.

He obviously understood the tone. He bounced her a bit.

Then he put her down.

“Are you really gonna keep that?” he gestured to his vest, obviously wanting to grab it.

“Maybe.” She folded it up and held it to her stomach. “We’ll see.”

He walked her all the way out of the very ritzy district in which Jiraiya had built his snake-infested tax shack and back into the administrative area of the city. They were fairly close together, which made some sense. She noted that the apartment buildings and other housing were all in a circle
around them, quite far from their bougie area. Some areas were more obviously run down than others.

“Oh, great. I wonder if there’s also gentrification in Hell Japan.”

She followed Jiraiya to an unassuming office near the Hokage tower, where someone registered his presence and immediately sprinted behind a door.

They took seats in the lobby. Jiraiya examined a magazine, commenting on the articles. Regina took the opportunity to write in her journal- she was working on a short story. Having very little to read and no one to speak to in English was soul crushing. What was the point in having gotten so good at it, if she couldn’t use it?


Dear God, he was really good at being annoying. She put down her notebook.

“What?”

He gestured to an article in the magazine. He was obviously beaming. “Look- there’s a review of my new book. They said it was a literary triumph.”

“That’s really good!” she said. He obviously thrived off positive reinforcement. “Who wrote it?”

“A fan.” He said, looking fond. “A very good fan.”

“Is it only a good review when they’re your fan already?” She asked.

His bottom lip puffed out. “No, I get many good reviews. I’ve also gotten good notes on the book about you.”

She blanched. “Please don’t make it gross if it’s about me.”

“Never!” he clapped his hand on her shoulder. “I write only the most respectable and romantic adventures. What kinds of things do you think I write?”

“Tsunade said it was porn.” Regina said carelessly, opening up her notebook again. “And that your main love interests always look too much like her.”

He was quiet. Still affronted, but a little taken aback.

Tsunade hadn’t said that last part. Regina doubted she’d ever read the damn things.

A very stern-looking man came out to greet them and beckoned them back into an office. On the table was what looked like a floor plan.

“Jiraiya-sama, Jiraiya-hime.” The man bowed deeply. “My name is Kamata Hiriyoishi. My apologies for the wait- we had to locate your house plans from the files.”

Jiraiya nodded. “Thank you very much. My daughter and I would like to see them again, and contract some builders, I think.”

Well, that was surprising. She thought they were waiting to like, rent an apartment. Evidently the tax shack was still the plan, it was just going to be a garden shed?

She examined the plans in front of her. It was fairly big, by Japanese standards. But very utilitarian.
There was no real entryway for a tokonoma or greeting area. The kitchen was small and suffocating—it was essentially a hallway. There were four tatami rooms, measuring in 8 tatami per room.

“Can we… change this?” She looked at Jiraiya. “Just a little.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“The kitchen, for example, is smaller than I would like.” She directed that at Kamata-san. “I would like it to be bigger, with stone flooring.”

Jiraiya was looking at her oddly.

“Wood is ruined when it gets wet.” She shrugged. “I don’t like soggy floors.”

Kamata-san sat down immediately and pulled out another set of drawing paper, laying it over the original.

“Is it ok?” She asked Jiraiya.

He huffed and winced. “You’re the one that’s going to live there, but…”

“I will pay for it.” She said. “I think I can.”

He looked a bit mystified, but nodded.

They spent hours there. She put in a greeting room with a big tokonoma (which Jiraiya seemed to like—he seemed to aspire to fanciness) near the genkan and entryway, and added a second floor. She asked for privacy options, and Kamata-san produced options on door and window covers.

“I would also… like for it to be up higher.” She stated. Damn, she was demanding.

Kamata-san took it in stride. It was fairly common for Japanese houses to be elevated, due to flood risk. “How high?”

She thought about the measurements, converting feet to meters to shaku. “About…ten shaku?” she asked, counting on her fingers. Shaku seemed to be about \( \frac{1}{3} \) of a meter. Or around a foot.

Jiraiya choked a little. She patted his back.

“…I don’t like snakes. They can’t scale stone, right?” She said, by way of explanation.

“Unfortunately…” Kamata-san said, about to crush her hopes and dreams of a mini castle with no snakes in it.

“That’ll be expensive, but it should be good. A good idea.” Jiraiya cut him off. He redirected masterfully. “You see that, Regina-chan?” He pointed to a weird little circle on the map.

“Yes.”

“That’s why I bought that land.” He said, like he was confiding a great and powerful secret to her. “It has a natural hot spring on it.”

Her spine shot up straight.
“I want to go to there.”

He giggled. It was odd. He was so big. She didn’t think a man as big as a truck could giggle.

“So we elevate that to here…” he gestured with a pencil, “and attach it to there. And over there, by the bath.”

“Ohhh. Sugoi.” She marveled.

He was on a roll now. “I think we need a tea house.”

“For what?” She ventured. She didn’t drink matcha and she sure as shit wasn’t going to impress anyone with her manners.

He shrugged. “For important people. And because we want one. We’re fancy.”

“We are fancy.” She agreed, slowly. “Can we get one of those kotatsu that is sunk into the floor?”

“A whaaat?”

His eyes were wide.

“They’re, um, like a slight layered pit in the tatami floor. It’s tatami at the bottom, and the table can go in the deepest part. You can sit on the bench like a chair, and your feet are under the table. It’s supposed to be warmer because…” she tried to remember why. “Oh. Less air moving? It stays really warm.”

“Yeah, we need that -for reasons.” Her spirit dad said, pointing to the room off the kitchen. “Not in the entryway, that’s fancy. In the living area.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

Kamata-san was scrawling frantically. When he was finally done, he held it up.

They inspected it.

Jiraiya made a lot of changes and specifications for the onsen area- evidently it was going to be a three-pool affair. Then he looked at her, his face drained of all color, and immediately added a fence around the property, with a secondary aesthetic privacy fence around the onsen.

She was getting a sense of a theme. It was suspicious as hell.

“And a pretty garden, around here.” He gestured. “Around this area, and next to the decorative tea house.”

Oh, wow. He was *into* this.

He had almost as many demands as she did- then he took her modifications and seemed to modify them. The kitchen island she’d asked for changed into a more aesthetic shape. The fancy room became a few jo bigger.

Then something occurred to her.

“How hot or cold does Konoha become?” She asked, dreading the answer.
“Really hot in summer, really cold in winter.” Jiraiya answered blandly.

She frowned. She looked at Kamata-san.

“Have you heard of… insulation?” She asked.

He looked fearful. She liked it.

When they went out to the front part of the office, the sun was starting to set. Of course, that only meant it was about 5 pm.

“So, with these changes…” Kamata-san tapped at a calculator, as an assistant listed off charges and a team of people took the plans off to the finalized and printed.

Jiraiya whistled, soft and low.

The amount of money was large, for sure. Regina still had very little concept of the scale of the economy here, but it seemed like between her gambling winnings and what Jiraiya had given her, she always had so much left over. And she hadn’t even touched what Mifune-sama had given her.

Regina pulled out her little magic papers and got out her bags of money. She handed them to Jiraiya, one after the other. Oh, hey, she’d gotten the purple bag back in Hot Water Country. That had been a good time. She wanted the bag back.

She counted the bills out carefully, in stacks.

Kamata-san looked uncomfortable, just staring.

“Is something wrong?” She asked Jiraiya, emptying another bag. She was about half the way there, by her count.

“No.” Jiraiya reassured her, dutifully holding an armful of bags.

She finished counting and barely broke into her money from Iron. Damn, Tsunade was a hustler. It was unfortunate that her luck was so catastrophically bad.

Kamata-san took the money and sent an employee to put it away immediately.

“Of course, furnishings are not included.” He said, sounding mildly apologetic.

“Of course.” Jiraiya said, clearing his throat. He helped Regina put the rest of her money back into her magic paper.

‘This is genuinely more money than I thought I would ever have in my life.’ Regina marvelled, not for the first time. She just hadn’t realized she had enough to build her own house. That was a scale she hadn’t comprehended before.

“Does this cost include a genin team?” Jiraiya asked. “They usually do this work, right?”

Kamata-san paused in his scribbling.

“We have our own tradesmen for the actual building and special work.” He allowed. “You are, of course, welcome to hire a genin team for the strength-based aspects. The first part of building would be creating the foundation, which without a genin team would take at least a month.”
Oh, her ten foot tall foundations. Regina probably could have foreseen that that would take time.

Well, you live and you learn. Plus she wanted her little castle. Speeding it up didn’t appeal, as long as she had somewhere to sleep in the interim.

Which was a pretty important thing that she hadn’t considered. Surely, Jiraiya or someone had thought of that, since no one reasonably expected her to live in a drunkenly-constructed fire hazard.

They left the office, and Jiraiya took her back to the Hokage building, where they evidently filed a request and paid for what he called a C rank mission. The ANBU in the room looked just as creepy as ever, standing stock still in corners.

The secretarial staff waved goodbye when they left, and Regina waved back.

“Hey, um,” Regina paused. What the hell was she gonna call Jiraiya? Anything but Dad would be incredibly weird.

She decided to avoid that conversation for now.

“Where am I going to live while the house is being built?” She asked, drifting behind him.

He shrugged. “Same place as now, probably, the diplomatic house. It’s not for that long, maybe a month or two.”

“And they won’t throw me out for a guest?” She asked, curious.

He snorted. “There’s more than one. And if that happened, Sensei would move you into the Hokage Mansion. He’s not going to let you disappear or something.”

That was mildly reassuring. And supported her earlier assessment of her being too important for one of those clan heads to murder without a problem.

Ugh. Why was she remembering them? What a bunch of dicks.

She glared back at the Hokage tower.

“Remembering this morning?” He asked, slowing down to meet her side. “Were they just as awful as I remember?”

“How awful is that?” She asked, warily.

“Rude, dismissive, very self-important, terrible manners except the few that have too good of manners, lack of personal style..” he rambled.

“Oh, wow.” she commented. “Uh, not quite that bad. Some of them were nice.”

“That’s good!” He said, beaming. “They weren’t rude about you not being a shinobi?”

‘Of course they were.’

Her sour face gave her away.

“Yeah, I thought so.” He huffed.

He led her back to the diplomatic house, stopping by the door.
“I’ll be back to take you and Shizune-chan out to dinner, I gotta go do some things first.” He informed her, leaning down a bit to make eye contact.

“Okay,” Regina replied. Today had been oddly exhausting. Maybe just because of how stressful that meeting had been. She wanted to lie down under a fan for a nice nap.

“Be good!” He told her, walking back out the gate before doing that shunshin thing away.

She went inside the genkan, took off her shoes, and crawled to her futon. It was nice and cool and so soft…

She went to sleep almost immediately.

Chapter End Notes

i'll be trying to update this weekly, after (WEBSITE OF SECRETSSSS). In other news, we may be getting our own website soon, to put everything we want people to see for free, talk with each other and (mayyyybe merch?). so be looking out for that in the coming months, if you're interested! We've renamed ourselves RuthlessMaehem, and you'll be able to find us on social media with that ;)

thank you all for your support and comments! We couldn't do this without you.
She woke up probably about an hour later, feeling the ache in her muscles.

It was dark out. Ugh. Could she go back to bed?

Regina laid on the floor, listening. Evidently Shizune and Momo were back- there was some light noise emanating from the next rooms. Someone was unwrapping or wrapping something with plastic.

Shizune would want dinner. Momo, too, probably.

Regina idly wondered whether Jiraiya was aware that a missing ninja was her contractually-obligated bestie.

At least dinner would be interesting. They could hardly leave Momo to his own devices. The anbu would flip their shit.

She rolled over and crawled out of the futon, bidding it a fond goodbye.

Regina stood up and padded over to the fusuma, opening the door slightly.

Shizune was briskly Being Productive, evidently. There was a bag of detritus and a lot of storage seal papers. She was currently muscling a bunch of stuff into one- which was bizarre. If you could fit stuff into tiny papers, why over cram them?

She used her chakra and rammed the pile of clothes in, sealing it shut.

Regina dutifully pretended not to see anything, and made some intentional noise in closing the open fusuma door.

“Just getting ready.” Shizune said, in a brusque way that said she was taking no questions whatsoever.

Regina distinctly saw no less than 5 drums of high-grade sake, and a pile of weapons on the floor.

It just seemed like something not worth dying for. Shizune could handle herself just fine.

Momo was just waiting by the genkan with the door open, polishing his kunai. His big-ass sword was on the table.

‘Just glad this isn’t my house. I don’t think I want weapons where I eat food.’

Then she remembered something. He was doing this in full view of the street? That probably seemed really aggressive. Was this the shinobi equivalent of peeing on someone else’s stuff?

She plopped down next to him and watched him work. Jiraiya-dad had to be arriving soon to take them all to dinner.

“Hold this.” He told her, carefully handing her the handle end of a short sword.

Regina dutifully took it and held it out from her not unlike how she would hold venomous snake.

He produced some cloths and poured some oil on them.
“Rub them in circles.” He instructed, pointing his finger at the blade. “From here,” the hilt, “to the end.”

She did not grumble, but just looked at him.

“If you’re going to live here, you should know how to care for a weapon.” He grunted. “They’ll never respect you if they think you don’t know anything.”

That was a fair point, probably. She wasn’t going to be using any weapons (hopefully), but that didn’t mean she should be completely unaware of them.

Regina followed instructions, polishing the short sword until it gleamed. Momo showed her how to tell how sharp it was- and showed her kunai to demonstrate what damage meant it was irretrievable or just needed to be filed and sharpened.

Some of that was vaguely familiar- Regina’s real dad, universes away, had been something of a gun and knife enthusiast. He’d shown her how to polish them when she was little, and the kitchen knives they’d had would have served handily as murder weapons.

Regina had displayed roughly zero interest in the subject even then, but had learned the required levels of competency to keep in her father’s good esteem.

She probably wouldn’t remember all of this, but Momo did end up teaching her sharp thing words that she hadn’t known. Those would probably be important to her impending career.

Speaking of which.

She felt doom on the horizon. It started as a shiver up her spine and a learned tightness in her stomach.

Regina swallowed the excess saliva in her mouth and looked up slowly from her ‘arts and crafts with Danger’ project.

The first thing she saw was a claw the size of her leg outside the genkan.

‘Nope.’

She looked back down.

It smelled like lake water.

Momo didn’t seem to even register it, so she refused to, either.

Somewhere above her there was a small coughing sound.

She polished the sword. Yes, it was shiny and she was probably done. But there was no way she was moving on from it without being budged. It was going to be the shiniest fucking sword in the Elemental Nations. That or she’d wax it to a stub long before acknowledging Jiraiya’s giant fucking toad summon 3 feet from her body.

‘Nope nope nope.’

She even polished the handle, wiping away the grime before taking a clean towel to get the oil off. So shiny. She was such a good helper.
There was a surprisingly high-pitched whine somewhere above her head.

She examined a nonexistent scratch.

“Regi!” Jiraiya whispered, sounding like he was doing it out of the corner of his mouth. She had no idea how, but that’s what it sounded like.

She carefully did not look up.

Someone observant and not entirely kind might observe this was similar to how she’d met him again this morning.

Someone kind would say that civilians maybe lacked spatial/danger awareness.

She knew well enough that the only real danger was how much more weird he could get. And that seemed to usually correspond with engagement. If she met him on his terms and gave him a reaction, he would be delighted. And do it again. And again.

If she ignored him for long enough, sometimes there were baffling and positive behaviors. It didn’t stop him from trying to do the same weird shit, but at least sometimes she got cake instead of a headache.

“Regiiiii,” he stage-whispered. “Come on. You can hear me.”

Momo clanged two kunai together for seemingly no reason. It drowned out Jiraiya’s whining, even if it hurt her ears.

“Oh no.” He said, without emotion. “These two need to be sharpened now. Rejina-hime, would you mind?”

She took them without comment.

Momo was her hero. Why couldn’t she hang out with him and not be subjected to people who needed her to clap for them and their coordinated toad self introduction song?

She could feel her father’s eyes popping out of frustration and Sad.

Shizune was evidently the weak link (that, or maybe just nice), because she huffed out past them and gamely said, “Why, Jiraiya-sama! You look so impressive!”

Fair enough. Regina wasn’t naïve enough to believe that it could last forever. She looked up, dully, and purposefully suffocated her natural response to 7 foot tall toad with her dad on it.

No wonder he’d been upset- he’d been holding a pose with one leg out. He was grinning so hard she could tell it ached.

She tried not to look amused, but she was sure she failed. She could tell because he suddenly looked victorious.

Then he did that snaky kagura dance, shaking his hair like an oni. He jumped from foot to foot, making some sort of drumming sound. How he did that, she didn’t want to ask.

‘Is that why he does his hair that way? You’d think it would be easier to just brush it.’

Luckily, he only did the short version of his self-introduction. That was kind of him, since at least two people had already known him.
A lady with a baby walked behind him, pushing a toddler in a stroller. She took one look at the toad and sped up, rounding the corner so fast that one of the carriage’s wheels left the ground.

Regina held in the snort that inspired- it just came out as a huff. Hey, improvement.

He twirled and then sashayed down the surprisingly amenable toad, then unsummoned it in a puff of smoke.

Momo coughed really loudly, and put his many weapons on the floor with a clank.

Shizune gave him a stink eye of such incredible power that it almost blew Regina’s hair back.

Momo prickled for a second, but then quietly put all his kunai and other murder accoutrement away into his pouches and wherever the hell else he’d been storing them.

Jiraiya was holding a pose, obviously expecting applause.

Regina clapped for him, feeling resigned and actually kind of… impressed. He was very dedicated to this bit for some reason.

“I have come to escort you two beautiful ladies to a dining experience of wonder and utmost romance!” He wiggled his big fingers.

“….I’ve never been invited to a ‘dining experience’, with or without romance.” Momo grumbled.

She could just make out Jiraiya saying something like ‘what a surprise’ sourly, but ignored him.

“You have now.” She said, standing up and brushing off her clothes.

Then she looked at her father, who was probably carefully not reacting to that.

“Please tell me I don’t have to eat fish.”

Jiraiya recovered quickly. His daughter was a little shit, that’s what she was. But honestly, it was a massive improvement from the (admittedly shell-shocked) soft kitten he’d had to haul around.

Shockingly, he was proud. If her new independence and the way she was engaging with him was any indication, she was going to be the best/worst thing to happen to Konoha in decades.

Being a father was not all that bad- past the crying and potty training stages. He wasn’t fooling himself that he’d gotten a kid at the hardest juncture. She wasn’t a pubescent kid, either- no puberty talks for him, thanks.

Unfortunately, she was probably at the age where someone would have to give her the sex talk. Had Hime done it? Probably not.

But he’d at least heard some interesting and positive things about her time in Iron from Sensei.

‘And what I could get out of the limited gossip, anyway.’

Samurai never really had any good gossip. It was hard to get information out of them. Unfortunate, boring bastards.

He’d anticipated that Zabuza (and how the absolute hell had she befriended an A-class missing
nin? It beggared belief) would probably be invited. They made an odd little pair.

It was unfortunate, but that’s what it was.

He was good at improvising.

It wasn’t really going to change anything. Sensei had already evidently decided that Zabuza was either not that much of a threat with about two full ANBU teams following him around, or that he could kill him off later when Rejina was secured.

It may have helped that Jiraiya had been spying on them since yesterday. Zabuza didn’t seem to be a threat to Rejina at all, which was odd.

He would reserve judgement for later. Sometime after Tsunade-hime got whatever stubborn little brat he’d been dragging around to talk. Apparently he was just shyly watching her from corners and occasionally picking up the mail.

Still, both his little himes’ wishes were his command. There would be no fish at dinner tonight. Just his most fervent admirer, and Sensei.

She probably wouldn’t love that, either, but not everything was about what she wanted.

He seated them at the private room in the yakiniku restaurant. Regina was on one side, with her little shinobi entourage.

That part was super cute. Even if he didn’t currently totally approve of one of her companions, she looked good with bodyguards.

Not as if she’d ever be able to leave the country without them, now. That would be unfathomably stupid.

He just hoped she’d be amenable to trading out her missing nin with someone nice and respectable, preferably with excellent literary tastes…

Which was why Hatake had been invited, even as Sensei grumbled. That grumpy little shit would show up on time for Jiraiya. Especially if he wanted the signed copy of the new book he’d just finished.

Someone staring caught his attention.

Regina was giving him a surprisingly hard stare.

Could she read minds, or had he been giggling again? The book was definitely *inspired* by her, but it wasn’t *about* her…

...Okay, so it was about her. He was man enough to admit that. A silver-haired princess lost in time and space, needing to be rescued by a gallant shinobi, who was actually definitely not him. He wasn’t that perverted, no matter what Tsunade-hime said.

To be honest, he’d probably paid her her share of royalties in kimono. But hey. Having a cute kid wasn’t so bad, even as she gave him an impressive stink eye accompanied by what had to be one of her first attempts at killing intent.
So cute. So quality.

Sensei came in, accompanied by a flock of anbu, and took his seat at the head of the table.

He actually smiled at Regina, and she smiled politely back, hostility at her own father evidently forgotten.

A book with her actual face on it was on the table.

Regina prayed for strength. To whom, she didn’t know.

It didn’t help when Jiraiya started cackling like a sea witch while clutching it.

Shizune quietly placed a hand over hers and gave it a comforting squeeze. At least now she was sure that he was gonna get his ass beat when he left town. Tsunade would probably be waiting for him.

‘Avenge me.’ She thought, with some level of malice.

He stopped giggling, and actually watched her for a minute.

Then he smiled? His eyes were beaming.

‘What the hell is that for?’ she felt confused and angry about it. ‘Why are you so happy? What’s about to happen to me, now?’

She got her answer when the fucking Hokage ambled in, looking like he was wearing his pajamas.

Oh, wait, he’d been wearing those pajamas earlier anyway. They were, like, his daywear? Incredible.

He sat at the most prestigious spot at the table, and his ANBU guards flickered back to the corners of the rooms.

‘What could possibly happen to anyone in this room but me?’ She thought out of entertained curiosity. She was the only one in the room that wasn’t apparently some sort of monster even by ninja standards. She was, obviously, a nothingburger on any scale. But it didn’t bring the room down.

The Hokage smiled at her, evidently more relaxed than earlier. She smiled back, well aware that this particular military dictator was now her military dictator cum employer. Manners mattered.

Seiza the whole time was going to suck, but she hadn’t had to go to finishing school for nothing. Obviously they hadn’t taught her any of this shit, but she’d genuinely rather die than embarrass herself. There would be no failure at this juncture, even though her shitbird fake dad had somehow managed to ruin grilled meat by bringing decorum into it.

She noted that there was an unoccupied seat next to Jiraiya, and realized that was probably why the staff hadn’t brought any food in yet.

They were waiting on somebody.
The Hatake brat slunk in twenty minutes past when he was supposed to be there. Jiraiya was only mildly surprised- but made a show of sliding the draft book back into his shirt. Dammit, without his vest, he was much less cool-looking.

He avoided looking at Rejina, who was watching him with that smirk that seemed to be permanently affixed to her face.

It wouldn’t do to let her have that point.

He’d just sneak into the quarters and steal it back later.

Poor Kakashi-kun evidently was suffering as intended. He took his seat quickly, and tried to sit up straight.

If he was going to convince Reji-chan that Konoha was actually worth trusting, his most dedicated fan was going to have to give at least a decent impression. He hadn’t failed to notice her evident distrust of the ANBU in the room, as small as her reaction was. He had been watching her like a hawk.

To be fair, it was super creepy to never see someone’s face. He looked at Kakashi-kun, who was, in retrospect, probably not the person he should have asked if that was a source of discomfort.

At least he wasn’t shouty or something. And the way she’d reacted when he’d used a senbon to clean his teeth meant Shiranui was right the fuck out.

He willed Kakashi-kun to behave. He had no doubts that Shizune-chan had orders and the gall to pick up Reji like a sack of flour and high tail it if Reji didn’t like it here.

In front of the Hokage or not.

“So, should we get the meat plate, or the meat plate?” He asked, pretending that he actually gave a shit about the menu.
Jiraiya ordered a good amount of cheap beef and absolutely no vegetables. Then he put his filthy elbows on the table.

‘I can’t believe I have to pretend to be related to you.’ she thought, not without some fondness. He had the manners of a dingo.

The Hokage was quiet. He was obviously watching her. And probably Momo.

Shizune looked like she was longing for the grave.

Regina bumped her companionably when she swiped the menu from her father, directing her to the drink menu.

Then she ordered some vegetables to go with their pile of gristle. After some thought, she ordered some edible cuts for herself. And tea for the table.

It arrived fairly quickly, which was par for the course when they made you cook your own food.

Momo initially tried to take over grilling duty, but Jiraiya and the Hokage eyed him like he was a particularly smelly bug. He backed off, with his hands up, and began to admire the utter lack of decor.

Jiraiya took the tongs in a surprisingly aggressive manner and clacked them menacingly.

Then he proceeded to wave them around while he was talking with the Hokage, and let the meat burn.

Regina watched her pieces of cabbage wither and crumble into ash.

Then she called the waitress back and asked for a second set of tongs.

The worst part was that Regina was forced to pretend to be a lady while she ate grilled meat, which felt like an insult to her personally. Grilled meat was meant to be enjoyed with abandon. It was the American way.

She tried not to glare at anyone.

“So, Sensei…” Jiraiya took an entire slab of meat that was intended for sharing and dumped it on his rice, (Regina tried not to twitch) “what are you going to have my beautiful daughter do in the glorious service of Konoha?”

Was this death? She had never really considered working for a military dictatorship. Regina had always kind of seen herself as the dictator, if anything. Not a secretary.

“We will see, depending on her abilities.” The Sandaime smiled wanly. “I believe that her language ability will need some improvement.”

‘Two things. First, I am going to burn this country to the ground. Second, I have reason to believe the Hokage is a grade-A troll.’

Regina carefully did not react to that, taking another sip of her tea and trying to think calming thoughts.
If she flipped her lid or defended herself, it wouldn’t look professional. This wasn’t actually a safe place full of friends. And pretending to not know the language as it suited her was actually a significant advantage, so long as she actually understood what was happening.

There were a limited number of times in her career she’d be able to use the wrong verb form to tell them she didn’t ‘eat’ the Japanese language before someone would catch on.

If he presumed he couldn’t read her contract and what he’d empowered her to do… he was mostly right. But Momo and Shizune had walked her through every line.

Technically, she could make any Hokage-level decisions that weren’t military maneuvers. Which would basically be war decisions, anyway, and there wasn’t a war going on.

The implication was that it was with his expressed approval, but technically there was no real oversight. Who would be able to do that but him?

Shizune leaned forward, shielding her from the Hokage’s view.

Beautiful, wonderful Shizune. Always looking out.

‘But not for much longer.’

Regina felt a wave of depression wash over her. God. Jiraiya was definitely going to leave, probably to get more secret mail and distribute softcore porn. And Momo couldn’t stay, either. He had a tiny little kid to watch, and mysterious Momo things to do.

She was going to be so alone.

She took another sip of tea. She still hated it. It tasted like grass.

But to be honest, that sounded about right. Everything in her life was garbage. She drank her grass water.

Her father and her dictator were having a polite conversation about her. She didn’t know whether they were assuming that she couldn’t understand, or that she didn’t have the authority to talk over her supposed father figure. Probably some combination of both.

She glanced over at the man who’d shown up late to see if he seemed like a candidate for her new squad. He was sitting rigidly straight and staring directly down at his plate. Occasionally, he took nervous glances to where Jiraiya had hidden the book with her face on it.

He evidently noticed her looking, because he looked up to make eye contact with his one exposed eye.

He (she assumed by body posture, but couldn’t tell for sure due to the very baggy clothes and face mask) wrinkled up his eye in an obvious attempt at a smile.

Something tickled at the back of her memory. She shoved it right back down to hell, where it belonged.

She smiled back, but not too wide. He was obviously connected to Jiraiya somehow, so he was an approved person. How much stock she wanted to put in that, she didn’t know.

Her father was evidently a man who was taught by a dude in a snuggie. His judgement was questionable at best.
She tried not to think of her past life with Tsunade, and how about now she would have been napping with Tonton in a hot spring without masked weirdos watching.

Momo took the opportunity to start ordering drinks and meat, which was nice of him. He asked her what kinds she liked, and wasn’t startled when she pointed out basically the most expensive things on the menu.

“Himepoi.” He said, in what was definitely a personal joke at her expense.

“Sou desu, ne.” She said quietly, folding her hands in her lap. “I wouldn’t know. Maybe I’m just very expensive.”

He ordered it all anyway, correctly ascertaining that it was on someone else’s tab.

Dinner took hours and drug on into the night. By the end, Regina had vaguely settled into Shizune’s side. Shizune was warm.

Jiraiya and the Hokage were still talking, now exaggeratedly exchanging stories about killing spider people. Oh wait. Cloud people.

Jiraiya’s friend was obviously wilting, but rapt with attention.

Momo was now doing math. She didn’t care to acknowledge that discipline in her life, so she ignored it.

“Onsen after?” She asked Shizune.

Shizune hummed assent. She was about to drift off into sleep as well.

Technically, no one could leave until the Hokage did. Even though this wasn’t an official state dinner, it Just Wasn’t Done.

But also- Regina was bored and tired and she wanted to leave.

She stood up, and bowed.

“Excuse my rudeness, Hokage-sama, but I and my companions should leave.” She directed her head to Jiraiya. “Father, if you will excuse me.”

They blinked.

She took that as a yes and used her thumbs to pull Shizune and Momo up by their collars.

“Good night.” She bowed again.

The Hokage bowed back.

They scarpered. She noted that the dude next to Jiraiya was trying to mouth something at her, but she couldn’t read lips. He would have to find his own way out.

“I see the family sense of manners has survived intact.” Sensei sipped his tea meaningfully.

Jiraiya didn’t really feel the need to respond to that. It had been a waiting game from the start, anyway. He’d held them effectively hostage for about five hours, after purposefully attempting to
starve them.

He shoved some jou karubi into his mouth. Mmmmmmm. Medium rare. Reji-chan had done a good job.

“She was very polite, actually.” The ends of Sensei’s mouth curled up. “One might say that being raised by her mother was a real benefit.”

“Certainly.” Jiraiya felt a little heart pang at that. It felt like a gross betrayal to lie to his teacher and Kage. But it would probably be worse to let anyone know she wasn’t related to him at all. Danzo might have her dumped in a ditch somewhere.

Especially since no matter how he tried, he couldn’t figure out how the hell that scroll had picked her up in her jammies and dumped her in a fight to the death.

‘Maybe that attitude she has. She seems to have some people cowed. I doubt Tsunade-hime would have brought her here at all if she was as soft as I’d thought earlier.’

She did seem to want to fight everybody, up to and including God. He really respected that.

And shit, she still had his vest. He glanced over to his dining companion, who had been twitching in the direction of the very visible book in Jiraiya’s pocket.

The harder thing was that Jiraiya believed in destiny. Sometimes too much, maybe. And a girl in the right age getting dumped into his life felt more like fate than he was comfortable denying.

He’d never asked. But maybe, in a way, she was meant to be here? If he’d had a daughter, he would have been pretty happy if she’d turned out like Reji.

If he’d had any kids with Tsunade, he would have expected someone like Reji who could punch people through walls. Tall, gangly, with big eyes and a bad attitude.

He got out his money and sent the waitress off with it to pay for dinner.

“I think it is time for me to go home,” Sensei said with amusement. “I will see you tomorrow, perhaps.”

Then he stood and walked out.

Jiraiya tried not to flinch at how much difficulty Sensei seemed to have in standing and walking. He was too old to be Hokage. It was much harder to pretend otherwise when you were staring at him.

Of course, Sensei knew that. Which was probably a chunk of the reason he’d used Reji as an excuse to drag both him and Tsunade-hime back to Fire Country. Now he had an emotional connection to exploit.

Jiraiya respected the ploy even as it coiled around him like one of Orochimaru’s nasty-ass snakes.

He turned to Hatake, who was feigning polite disengagement. Who was he fooling? He sucked up information like a sponge.

“Well, Kakashi-kun, how about we go find Rejina and Shizune, make a night of it?”

The kid startled, looking at him with some mild distrust. To be fair, Jiraiya had only implied that he had to attend dinner in order to receive Literature.
“How can you look after my beloved daughter if she doesn’t know you? I need someone vaguely responsible to make sure she doesn’t die of papercuts.”

Jiraiya stood and stretched like a cat.

Kakashi hadn’t fled, so he knew that the poor kid was locked in. Pitiable little bastard didn’t understand the sunk cost fallacy, evidently.

Shizune woke up quite a bit after they’d left all the smoke, actually. She chattered nonstop on the street.

Then she stopped.

Regina stopped, too. What was she looking at?

Oh. It was a bar. ‘Covert… schnapps?’

“You wanna go in?” She asked, sticking out her thumb at the sign.

Shizune obviously did, but she was working up the nerve to say what she wanted. She hemmed and hawed a bit.

“I’m going in, then. Maybe someone in our relative age group is in there.” Regina parted the curtain and stalked inside. Evidently they’d invested in some nice stone flooring (probably for cleaning up spills), because her heels made nice, satisfying clacks on the floor.

She took a seat and had a small, smiling staring contest with the bartender before Shizune walked in behind her, sitting at her tiny table.

Evidently this was a shinobi bar. Everyone had their hitai-ite on. They looked very sharp in both a fashionable and literal sense.

They were also pointedly not staring, which meant they were definitely watching her.

God. These people were so rude and weird.

“Have you been here before?” She asked Shizune idly, swirling the glass of umeshuu she’d ordered first.

Shizune had not.

Regina handed her the menu. “Knock yourself out.”

“Zabu- ah, Momo-san said he would wait back at the residence for us.” Shizune said quietly.

That was probably for the best. Regina pointedly looked around at all the prickly little ninja. One of them was holding a glass hard enough that his hand was changing colors.

“Yeah, good call. He probably wants his mandatory ten hours of sleep.”
They tried something called a “Konoha Slammer”, “One Night in Mist”- which seemed to be lit on fire and then drenched in blue liquor, and then a “Sex on the Beach” before her grumpy looking father showed up, with Mr. Me in tow.

‘Oh, no. That’s where I know him from. I should never drink. I remember things.’

Regina chugged her inappropriately named drink before Jiraiya could ask what it was called.

He plopped down in a chair he’d stolen from an aggrieved looking man in sweatpants, and stole the next set of drinks going by with the bartender.

“I have to imagine those were for someone else.” Regina said blandly. “We didn’t order those.”

“It’s fine.” Her father said, dropping them down his maw like nothing. He set the empty glasses on the table with a disrespectful kind of clank.

‘You animal, glassware is expensive.’

She just gave him a Look.

He was, as usual, completely unashamed. He flagged down the bartender and ordered a whole bottle of heated sake.

Shizune seemed to be frozen, hand still tipping her drink into her mouth.

“Reji, you didn’t finish listening to my war stories.” Jiraiya whined. “They were really cool. Even Sensei was impressed.”

“Maybe you should make me a picture book, then.” Regina ordered two more drinks for her and Shizune. She gestured to Mr. Me, whose real name was still a mystery. He actually ordered a glass and some sake before disappearing

He reappeared with another chair and smiled at her.

A man in the back of the bar shouted.

Regina leaned slightly over to see that a man with brown hair and a face-framing hitai-ite was sitting on the floor and rubbing his ass, looking hard done by.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mr. Me seemed to be examining his fingernails. He didn’t move.

She raised her hand delicately to cover her face.

Shizune cough-laughed, and swallowed the last of her drink. Then she stared at the table with incredible focus.

Jiraiya seemed to be considering something.

“How long were you annoyed in there?” he asked.

Man, subtlety was not his suit.

She smiled. “What do you mean?”
That seemed to bother him. He blinked and shuddered. “Sensei was right. It’s creepy when you do that.”

“What do you mean?” Her smile was frozen on her face. Her head stayed tilted.

“You understood like, all of that, didn’t you.” He stated. “In there.”

“Who can say.” God, this was irritating. Was this all just some massive test?

Normally, Regina would say she was good at those. Six or so months in to whatever the hell this was, she wasn’t so sure. This was an awful lot to ask of anyone. She would probably never see her family again, no one understood her really, and she was going to be herding contract killers like carpet sharks at a daycare. God, the depression was overwhelming.

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

“Reji.” Jiraiya said, gently. “Reji.”

She slightly lifted her left eyelid.

“Wanna get really drunk about it?” He tried, jiggling a bottle of heated sake with his right hand. Mr. Me looked uncomfortable.

When did he not, though.

She reached out with her palm up. Jiraiya paused, a little confused. Why did he never learn that she only meant fuckery with it?

She took the hot bottle. She opened it, and she dumped it all in her and Shizune’s ice-filled cocktail glasses.

“Kampai.” She said, holding up her glass for a clink.

Let it never be said that Shizune left her hanging
They left the bar in a drunken blob, and Regina even let Jiraiya give her a bone-crushing hug and a kiss on the top of her head before she escaped into the diplomatic housing complex.

Mr. Me who was evidently maybe a scarecrow waved goodbye and eye smiled at her, clutching that book in his little spidery hands. Regina carefully chose to never acknowledge that again.

She and Shizune crawled back into the genkan, over Momo’s unconscious body in the doorway, and back into their rooms.

Shizune glanced around her room, face comically pulled into a moe of disappointment.

“No futon.” She pouted. She cradled herself with both arms.

Regina looked over. Oh. It was in the closet. Japanese people put their beds away because otherwise it wasted space.

She glanced back through the fusuma to her room, where she knew that her futon was on the floor with her blankets everywhere.

Regina blinked gummily. Then she patted Shizune’s shoulder companionably.

“That’s hard. I’m sorry.” She slurred, before lurching forward to crawl to her bed. Opening the fusuma was harrrd right now. Where was the little handle thing.

Shizune got it for her, and they stumbled into Regina’s room together.

“When I was little, I used to share a bed with my sisters.” Regina offered clumsily, crawling under the futon, on top of the other one. Stupid Japanese, making covers and mattresses and cushions and… other things, all the same word. Very hard. Unreasonable.

That seemed to be all the permission Shizune needed.

In the middle of the night, she stole Regina’s pillow and most of the blankets. Regina was drunk and tired and cold. She tried to sneak some of them back, but mostly ended up rolled up in Shizune’s blanket burrito. It was as good as she was going to get, so she closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.

They woke up reeking of alcohol and smoke, which was… not cute.

“My mouth tastes terrible.” Regina complained, trying to crack her neck. It was hard to sleep without the back support.

“Ugh. Smells like it.” Shizune grumbled back, pulling the last of the covers over her.

Shizune was not a sharer. That was good to know.

Regina carefully extracted herself from the tangled mass of blankets, clambered up, and went to
bathe and brush her teeth. After she got back, Shizune was finally starting to get out of bed. She did that magic thing Tsunade did to get rid of hangovers, and gestured for Regina to sit down to get the same. Then she clambered out of Regina’s room to her own.

“Whatcha wanna do today?” Regina asked, feeling remarkably blank. What else could they even do here? She’d already been rude in front of multiple important people and eaten steak.

Her temporary needs were pretty well filled.

“Coffee, onsen, cake shop. In that order.” Shizune shuffled past her with her change of clothes, running her free hand through her hopelessly tangled hair.

Ouch. Regina had forgotten that she’d tried to braid it last night in the bar at some point. Poor Shizune. It was probably sticky with fruit juice, too.

Shizune appeared fresh and clean about ten minutes later, and they drug Momo out for coffee and breakfast.

The place by the Hokage Tower was the most recommended by the anbu Regina cornered, so they took off in a pack.

She really wondered if they thought she hadn’t realized they’d be there. If they followed around assets like the Hokage and had shepherded her all the way here, why wouldn’t they be stuck continuing to do that? As well as guarding the general populace from Momo, a man who was apparently somehow more terrifying to them with every hour he didn’t attack someone.

It wasn’t like she could sense them. Or find them if they didn’t want to be found. But they treated her like she was a twit who couldn’t tell a bunch of nerds in masks were always behind her in a crowd.

It could be insulting, if she wanted to take it that way. Regina preferred the idea that she was just too important to lose. It was better for her ego.

The coffee shop was fairly crowded, but they managed to get seated quickly and ordered too much coffee.

Ooh.

The eggs here weren’t hard boiled. Regina thanked whatever God was loving her today. She politely dug in to her breakfast, and watched a bunch of civilians and shinobi alike walk by with suspicious eyes. She waved every time.

After breakfast, they ditched Momo at the gate.

She gave him a hug. Damn, he was big.

“Tell Haku hi for me.” She said, feeling a bit melancholy. But she couldn’t subject a preteen to Tsunade’s tender mercies for long, and Momo couldn’t stay even if he wanted to.

He grunted and patted her on her head, gently. “I’ll see you around, yeah? If you’re out in non-shinobi countries, we can meet for coffee or something.”
Regina held in the sniffle. He really was a friend. A good friend. “I’d like that. I suppose if you wrote letters, they’d check them.”

“Oh, for sure.” Momo stood straight and cracked his neck. “Which is exactly why I’m going to do it. Prissy little shits.” Then he winked at her.

“Don’t let them see you blink, princess.”

He turned away and left, lightly tossing his approved paperwork at the gate guard before shunshining off into the forest.

“Ready to go?” Shizune asked quietly, still only about a foot behind her.

Oh damn. She’d be leaving tonight, too.

Life was a misery.

“Yeah, ok.” Regina summoned up some false chipper attitude and followed Shizune through the crush of people, off on their way for their last day together.

The onsen was nice- it was close to a park, and a little secluded. Probably optimal for a place you planned to go nude.

Shizune led Regina into the building, and Regina went through the motions of scrubbing up. She washed her hair with the neroli and honey scented shampoo (yum, she’d never encountered that before) and scrubbed herself from head to toe before rinsing off and tying her waist-length hair up on top of her head.

Shizune had taken less time, being that her hair wasn’t so stupidly long. Regina mildly regretted her hair-based vanity, even as she knew she’d never ever cut it. It took ten fucking years to grow out.

Then she joined Shizune in the warm onsen waters. They’d move to different pools with increasing heat, but starting off there was unpleasant from start to finish.

Regina slumped down in the pool, so that the warm water would reach her ever-tense shoulder muscles. Ohhhh that was good. Her eyes slid closed.

“So, are you going to be okay here?” Shizune’s voice wafted over her.

Regina opened her right eye. Shizune looked unhappy. She was worrying her lower lip, which was a very bad sign.

Regina willed herself to sit up. It took more effort than she’d anticipated because she just really didn’t want to leave the hot water, but she got there. She looked around the onsen- there was no one around.

“I’ll probably be all right.” Oh, her neck felt ready for a pop. Regina reached up and put one hand on her jaw and another on the back of her head and gently twisted. The resulting crack was so satisfying that she nearly sighed out loud.

Shizune flinched.
“If you don’t want to stay…” her eyes darted in the vague direction of the city gates.

“Thank you.” Regina said, and meant it. “I’ll stay here for now.”

Shizune nodded slowly.

“If I wanted to find you, how would I do that?” Regina asked, trying not to sound too desperate. “I evidently have quite a bit of vacation time, I might like to see you and Tsunade-hime.”

She and Shizune shared sharp grins.

“I’m sure we can figure out something.” Shizune said, in a syrupy sweet tone. It set shivers down Regina’s spine.

They spent the better part of two hours in a companionable silence, watching young mothers with children and elderly ladies come in and out of the baths.

Life went on, didn’t it.

They left when their hands were shriveled prunes and their stomachs began to growl. As Regina stood up, she noted a hole in the fence.

It was fairly innocuous, but for that it was at an eye height for someone. Say, someone who had suspicious onsen-related behavior.

As she walked by, Regina violently poked her towel into it.

She was equal parts gratified and repulsed by the obvious grunt of pain and surprise on the other side.

“Jiraiya-san is quite eccentric.” Shizune said, placid as a lake. She bent over to pick up a decorative boulder, and delicately threw it over the fence. Regina watched it get easily a hundred feet of air straight up, (enough to gain some significant velocity, she noted with some sympathetic pain), and came plummeting down to earth with a sickening thud.

“He survives just about anything.” Shizune informed Regina, readjusting her towel.

‘Kind of like a cockroach.’ Regina thought, with no small amount of amazement. ‘Also, I may have been too hasty in giving all of my adoration to Tsunade.’

They tried to go to a cake shop Shizune remembered from youth- but it was gone.

“That’s odd.” Shizune wrinkled her brows and stood back. “I could swear it was here… oh. Maybe when…”

“When what?” Regina piped up, mildly curious. Pauses were full of interesting information. She wanted deets.

“Nothing.” Shizune said a little too quickly, which really only hardened Regina’s resolve to find out exactly what she meant. The look on Shizune's face showed that she knew it, too. Her mouth set in a stern line.

“Don’t ask.” She warned. “It’s a state secret.”
“I am the state.” Regina countered with a coy grin, gesturing at the Hokage Tower for emphasis. “Or, I will be… next week.”

“You can wait until next week then.” Shizune smiled. She held up her palms, as if to say it was out of her hands.

Oh, she was the best. The worst. The best of the worst.

“I will find out.” Regina said. It wasn’t a warning. It was merely information. “I like to know everything. No secret is safe from me.” She stepped forward and made a kissy face. “And I will not rest until there are no secrets between us, Shizune-chan.”

Shizune snorted, and Regina’s face cracked. They started giggling in the middle of the street.

“I seem to remember there was another, less-good cake shop over on Tobirama.” Shizune wheezed. “It might be passable.”

“Oooh, passable cake. I have to know what esteemed establishment earns such a high ranking from you.” Regina cooed. She held out her arm with some pomp and did her best Jiraiya impression, dopey grin and all. “Shall we go for a cake adventure of incredible romance and daring?”

Shizune was obviously about to lose her shit, but took her arm and let Regina gallantly lead her in the wrong direction for about twenty minutes. Then she gave up the ruse and brought Regina to a little cafe with overly cutesy curtains and about two million more items of cat-themed decor than any business had any right to have.

Regina got the maple chiffon cake, and Shizune went for a chestnut creme tart. It was pretty good, actually, which was a surprise. Either Shizune’s standards were even higher than Regina had previously considered, or that other place had been heaven-sent.

It seemed like Regina would never know. That was a tragedy.

It was fun! But. Every once in a while, Regina remembered that every hour that went by meant that Shizune would leave her increasingly soon. It was a tough cycle. Couldn’t they ease her off of friends by spacing off their leaving at least a couple days apart?

Of course, she knew she’d been pushing it anyway. Both Shizune and Momo had a person that was counting on them. Haku was a child, and Tsunade… she needed someone to depend on her, otherwise her self-destructive tendencies would veer entirely off the rails.

To be honest, Regina only wanted to leave with them. But she also knew it wasn’t rational. Tsunade and Shizune lived a nomadic kind of life. Regina wasn’t suited to it. And Momo had never invited her along for whatever the hell kind of ride he was on.

She suspected it was rather more murdery than the crimes Tsunade had had her do.

And sure, Konoha was full of weirdos, and it smelled like sweat, and the Hokage was a troll. But…

Um.

Well, no one had attempted to threaten her since she got here.
Wow, that was Konoha’s best feature? Regina actually scowled.

Shizune looked a bit startled. She had been in the middle of telling Regina about the time that Tsunade had gotten them thrown out of Tea Country after an incident with a watermelon cart.

“Sorry! Sudden unhappy thought.” Regina apologized quickly, with a smile. “Please go on.”

Shizune resumed quite happily, but Regina went back to examining her life choices. Absentmindedly, she noted that Tsunade was not a fan of grammatical mistakes. Apparently that was how some sorry bastard had lost his arm.

She had been right to not go with the man who had threatened her in the toilet. That contract from Orochimaru-san was creepy as fuck. Who seriously asked someone to initial next to a clause that expressly gave him permission to perform live surgery on their person? And added that it was agreed that it wouldn’t necessarily be under pain medication. Or sedation.

Yikes.

Not living in Iron was probably where she’d boned it. Mifune-sama was nice, and the samurai weren’t jumpy and weird. She even missed the terrifying Fujita-san.

There was nothing for it. Regina would have to make friends. Or enemies. Whichever, really.

She glanced around the coffeeshop at the next conversational opportunity, noting a suspicious shock of silver hair.

Didn’t Jiraiya have anything better to do?

At least he might be around for a couple more days. And wasn’t going to murder her on accident or on purpose.

It looked like Regina was going to have to have some fun family time.

Shizune insisted on walking Regina back to the house, where she gathered up her things slowly. It wasn’t even that much with it all packed.

They stared at the empty house together. The mood was palpably depressed.

“I’ll miss having you around.” Regina confessed. “I don’t think I’m going to make many friends here.”

Shizune nodded, shoulders hunched. Her nose was suspiciously red.

“I’ll miss you, too.” Shizune offered, looking down and away from Regina. “It was good to have someone my age around.”

“Write me?” Regina asked. Her throat felt tight. It was hard to open herself up to friend rejection. It wasn’t like Shizune lacked for things to do.

Shizune choked. “Could you read it?” she joked, running her hands through her hair.

Regina felt like pouting. Seriously. She had flaws. So many flaws. Was not being fluent the only one people were ever going to notice?
Actually, that was a good thing. Never mind. She retracted the grumpiness. She’d eventually get fluent, and none of them would be the wiser. Then she could continue to sin in peace.

Shizune chuckled. “I’ll write you every week.” She promised. Then she swept forward and lifted Regina in a hug. It was nice and comforting.

Unlike Jiraiya’s hugs, which were like being crushed by a trigger-happy python.

She waved goodbye to Shizune as she walked off. If they said goodbye in public, Regina was going to cry. They both knew it.

Regina watched her best friend disappear down the street, and willed herself not to bawl like a little baby. She wanted to. She just couldn’t afford the luxury.

Shizune was long gone by the time she looked away, down to the garden path where she knew Jiraiya was waiting. He looked sad for her. It actually kind of made her mad. He didn’t get to be unhappy for her- he’d put her here.

“Well.” She said, swallowing the excess saliva that had appeared instead of tears. Stupid body, making liquids. “Are you going to come in, or what?”

Jiraiya leapt into the house, and twirled on his geta on the nice tatami mats.

No matter how many times he did stuff like that, it never failed to surprise her how bad his manners were. Regina pointed to his shoes, then the genkan. Where they were supposed to have been left.

He looked mildly ashamed for a second, but didn’t move.

“I have to live here.” She reminded him. “This is a nice house.”

He silently chucked his shoes into the genkan, before plopping down next to the nice table.

Momo’s sword had left some scratches in it. They both kind of looked at the long, un-repairable gashes silently.

He looked at her.

She stared back.

“You try telling Zabuza-san what to do, see where that gets you.” She said dryly, not leaving any room for comment.

He held up his hands, evidently surrendering.

They sat in silence. God, it was weird. He was never quiet for that long, unless he was planning something awful.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked, ducking his head in what had to be a learned reaction from knowing Tsunade. His hands flickered to protect more sensitive areas.

Regina got the impression Tsunade did not like fielding questions about her personal life or feelings.
“No.” She offered instead, giving him a wan smile. “But thank you for asking.”

“You know, Tsunade-hime probably won’t leave for another day or two.” Jiraiya said quietly, averting his eyes. “To give you a chance to escape.”

“Escape what, exactly.”

He blanched.

“You know…” he gestured around slowly. “All of this.”

She stayed silent.

“The politics, the death, the fucked-upness of everything.” He shrugged.

He was obviously going through some of the same doubts she was. Only he had more history and context.

“But it’s safer.” Regina simply said.

He nodded, staring at the wall. He was obviously lost in thought, somewhere far away from her.

“You know, when we were together, some man attacked me on the toilet.” She said, conversationally. “When you and Ando-san were talking.”

He didn’t register that immediately. Regina watched it filter through, and he stiffened. He did not seem to know that.

“I think he worked for your other team mate.” Regina shrugged. “Orochimaru-san offered me a very terrifying work contract at about the same time as Kumo and Iron.”

Something seemed to dawn on Jiraiya. He looked pretty mad.

Regina scooched back, out of radius.

“That bastard,” he seethed. Oh no. This version of Jiraiya was kind of scary. All affability was gone.

What she now knew to be killing intent was filling the air, muddling her senses and activating her flight or fight instinct.

Regina tried to remain still and suffocate it. Her dad wasn’t going to hurt her. And if she balked every time a shinobi did that, she’d be laughed right out of the country. She’d be useless.

She couldn’t be useless.

A moment later, he seemed to notice where he was and stopped.

The air seemed much more breathable again.

“Sorry.” he said, leaning forward cautiously like she was a scared animal. “I shouldn’t have done that.” He looked off to the wall. “He just makes me so damn mad.”

She hummed. Regina really didn’t know what to say to that. And she knew better than to pry.

Her nerves felt raw. She was tired. At least the killing intent had shaken the sadness off of her.
“You know, you made some killing intent of your own last night.” he said, which startled her. He sounded…. Happy?

Regina eyed him mistrustfully.

“It was kind of weak, but a really good first try. If you keep it up, you can get these chumps into line in no time.” He winked.

“I wasn’t trying to.” She said with some irritation. “I was trying to be polite.”

“And I was goading you.” He grinned. “Looks like I got your number, Reji-chan.”

Ugh.

He was probably right.

“Yanno, funny thing…” he scratched the back of his head, “Tsunade-hime gets angry and punches me like crazy, but I don’t think she wants to hurt me. You…” his eyes sparkled, “I genuinely believe you’d poison me if you knew how.”

“I’d never.” Regina defended herself from accusations of crimes she had definitely mildly fantasized about, but usually only when working in retail.

“I don’t mean you’re a murderer.” He waved his hands as if to dispel the illusion. “But your intent is different. Feels more… serious. Like you mean it.”

She turned that over in her head, biting her lip. She felt her eyes go wide, into her ‘blank face’. “Is that… good?” Regina asked. It would be nice if she actually had that power. A lot of people around here sucked, and she’d prefer that they were aware.

“Does your face always look like that when you’re thinking?” His voice was flat.

She blinked. Once. Twice. She looked at her father.

“Yes?” She said. “Is that a problem?”

He grunted. “It’s creepy. But not a problem.” He perked up. “Could be useful, actually. It’s very… unusual.”

“Thank you for your diplomacy.” She grumbled.

He suddenly flopped down on the floor and wriggled on the tatami. “It is really very nice in here.” Jiraiya stretched. Then he eyed her again. “Shame you’ll have to live here alone.”

“What do you even mean by that?” Regina asked warily. What was he doing to her now? And was it going to involve more of his awful friends?

Probably. What else could he even mean by that?

He rolled over and picked her up so fast she missed it happening. Suddenly, she was flying in his arms across the power lines.

‘Why did I ask? Why would I ever give him an opening?’

They jerked to a stop outside a crappy looking apartment building. Regina looked down.
She did not like that, no sir. She looked back up.

“In there.” Jiraiya whispered, gesturing with his chin.

Oh. There was a window.

Regina obediently looked in.

“Are you spying on kids now, too?” She turned and asked, probably too loudly.

He winced.

The kid didn’t stir, though. No wonder- he was snoring up a storm.

It was the same boy she’d seen in the ramen place. Probably. There couldn’t be that many blond children in this place, right?

“My godson.” Jiraiya whispered. Wait, he had a kid he was responsible for here?

Regina remembered the kid’s sunken face and obvious lack of social skills. It made her angry.

She glared at her fake father. “You suck.”

He looked hurt. He probably deserved it.

“Who’s watching him, then?” She asked, kind of dreading the answer. There were a truly improbable amount of orphans in the bingo book.

Silence was her answer.

“You want me to do it.”

He didn’t say anything.

Regina thought about it. She had… roughly zero parental experience. Her own relationship with her real parents was nightmarish. She’d seen healthy parent-child relationships in like, two movies.

She remembered her first interaction with Naruto. And how being nice to him had made him so upset that he’d run away. In retrospect, that was a damning kind of observation.

“You suck so hard.” She sighed, running her hand through her hair and then turning into his chest for comfort. “I’ll do it, though.”

Chapter End Notes

Just as a reminder, on (secret website for legal reasons) we update this fic more- it’s about two chapters ahead. If you’d like to join us, find us as RuthlessMaehem!
She sat on her father’s shoulders and watched a kid swing alone on a playground.

‘Has a playground ever been this depressing? I think the fuck not.’

This was after their riveting day watching Naruto have no friends and get the piss beat out of him by a very violent Hyuuga.

That kid got no breaks, to be honest.

No one seemed to feed him. He ate instant ramen or cereal when he didn’t have the time or money for the ramen stand. No wonder he was nutritionally stunted.

No one cleaned up after him, either. He was surprisingly tidy for a baby… Regina looked down at the notes Jiraiya had written her. Shit, he was seven? Eight?

He was definitely small.

He had trouble focusing in class, and seemed to react to that by being a class clown. It didn’t net him any friends, though. Even though it should have.

And people walking down the street looked at him like he was actual garbage.

‘I will take this small child, and after I teach him how to do arson, we will leave this place.’ she thought darkly.

Jiraiya nudged her leg with his arm, and set her down on the ground.

Ah, yes. No killing intent around infants. That was bad bad bad.

Regina thought about puppies. Big, fluffy ones with soft ears. Like a direwolf. A cuddlewolf.

A bell rang, recess ended, and Naruto walked stiffly back into the building.

‘I know that feeling, buddy.’ she sympathized, looking over at her father.

“Otousan.” She said, finally bestowing upon him a title (he perked up- and his hair lifted). “Someone should take him to get a checkup after that beating, yeah?”

“Probably.” He agreed, with a small smile. “But I have a very important appointment-”

“With the hole outside the onsen?” She asked, showing a bit too much of her teeth when she smiled.

He went white.

“Don’t do that anymore.” She commanded imperiously. “It makes me look bad. Also, it’s gross. You obviously know how to compliment women enough that some of them will get naked for you on purpose. No more.”

She put enough emphasis on the last two words that it vaguely sounded like a dog command. Regina stood by it.
He nodded, slowly.

“You’re a good dad.” She said, attempting to reward positive behavior. If she did enough carrot and stick, maybe he wouldn’t immediately wreck the house that was currently being built by very sad genin and contractors. “I just need you to be a better…”

She couldn’t quite think of the words. Pervert?

“Just stop violating people’s consent.” She amended. “You need to be a good role model.”

“For what?” he grouched. “You’re an adult.”

That was news.

“Oh really?” Regina countered sweetly. “Not four days ago, you called me a little baby.”

He slouched so far that his fingertips almost touched the ground. Really, he was missing his calling as an actor. He emoted for the back row.

“And that is definitely a child in there.” She gestured to the Academy class where Naruto was evidently struggling through a writing class. “Unless he’s just a very short adult.”

“Fine.” Jiraiya bit out. “I will endeavor to be more respectable. Do you want me to stop writing my literary triumphs as well?”

He was trying to be bitchy, but it made her stop and think. “Only if they’re actually gross.” She said thoughtfully. “Most of them only go so far as light petting.” Regina shrugged. “Except for writing about me. I do not care for that shit at all.”

He pursed his lips. “The one about you isn’t really an Icha Icha…” he explained. “It’s just an action and romance series. You don’t even have a love interest.”

She glared at him.

“That’s somehow worse. You could give me legions of not-gross admirers, you know.”

“Next book.” He promised. He turned back to the Academy.

“What are we going to do about him?” He pointed his thumb at the window.

She huffed. “What’s this about we? Don’t pretend you’re going to be staying here that often.”

Jiraiya looked ashamed.

“I’ll come back when I can.” He said, quietly. “Once a year.”

“At least twice a year.” She countered. “This place is ridiculous. And you need to teach me the fine arts.”

“And also how to make matcha.” Regina added, remembering how that was doubtless going to pop up in her life.

“Take a class, Reji.”

They stared at each other. He gave up first- she was noting that he did that easier and easier every time.
“At least twice a year.” He agreed.

Her father flitted off, doubtless to torment someone else, and Regina waited. And watched. Naruto obviously got too far behind at some point, and then he stopped trying and started goofing off.

‘Material is too advanced, or being taught badly?’ she wondered, looking around the room. To be honest, none of the kids looked confident. They looked like they were in the throes of varying degrees of panic, frantically taking notes.

Possibly both things, then. They all looked a lot bigger than Naruto, too- they were losing some of that baby fat around their faces and fingers.

Okay, it was boring watching children fail at learning.

Regina walked inside, dared the secretary to say boo when she obviously looked like Jiraiya and had had an incredibly public introduction by the Hokage, and knocked on the door to the classroom she was after.

A man with white, shoulder-length hair and a very ugly hitai-ite hat answered the door, looking cross.

“I’m here for Uzumaki-kun.” Regina stated plainly, feeling more than a bit bored. The kids in the room were obviously straining to see her.

She stepped forward, which forced the man to step back. He looked absolutely livid about it. His jaw clenched and his shoulders tensed.

Regina smized. Eventually he seemed to think she was some sort of well-meaning idiot, and backed off.

“Jiraiya-hime.” Another man’s voice said, farther in the room.

“Sou desu.” She smized harder. Any second now, she’d get away with it. “May I please borrow your student?”

White hair, bad hat moved enough that she could see the other man was actually pretty cute.

‘Ooh.’ Her eyes traced him up and down. ‘Yes, yes, and yes. And a teacher. Probably not a lunatic.’

Good call, her. Eye candy that wasn’t twitchy with their kunai. It seemed like barging into this unsuspecting elementary classroom was going even better than expected.

Cutie Sensei coughed awkwardly. Regina cocked her head, just a little.

“Is now ok?” She asked, knowing damn well he was in the middle of teaching a verb form.

Naruto would just have to learn the past subjunctive another day, when his brain probably wasn’t bleeding.

He started, and turned back to his class. “Uzumaki Naruto- please go with Jiraiya-hime.” He barked.

Naruto got up, and snickers erupted all over class.
Regina narrowed her eyes at the group in general. They ceased.

It was dead quiet as Naruto gathered up his books and supplies and put them into his backpack.

She restrained a twitch as he shoved all the papers in and crumpled them hopelessly. Regina thought more adorable animal thoughts.

Naruto walked to the front slowly, as if he was about to get yelled at. Regina just held out her hand. He took it, and looked down at the floor.

“Thank you.” She smiled at Cutie Sensei and Bad Hat, before bowing a little bit. Not too much. “I am sorry for disturbing your class time. Thank you for your kindness.”

They bowed back, low and kind of frantic. Regina wondered whether people just wandered in here to check out kids like library books. Probably not.

Then she led Naruto out of the room, down the hallway, and out the front door.

“Am I in trouble?” He asked, really quietly. He wasn’t looking at her.

She blinked rapidly. Oh. Yeah. He probably thought he was gonna get an ass chewing for being rude to her or something.

“Nope.” She reassured him. “You just looked really bored in there.” She poked the top of his head. “Plus, that Hyuuga kid launched you across the playground like a rocket. I wanted to take you to the hospital, maybe get some ice cream?”

Children liked ice cream, right?

He seemed hesitant about this kind of attention, but gripped her hand a little bit tighter.

She took that as a yes.

‘Take that, Mom. I’m fucking great with kids.’

The hospital staff were absolutely unbothered with her in general, which was a nice change of pace. There was no stuttering or obvious hopes for a princessy introduction, no vague threatening gestures, and no stares.

Regina found that she liked the hospital.

Naruto did not.

“Nee-chan,” he whined.

He really did go from 0-1000 in terms of casualness, didn’t he? Regina let it blow past her like the breeze. “How long do we have to wait? It’s been forever.”

“It’s been ten minutes.” She corrected absently.

He was bouncing in his chair. It looked comically oversized- juxtaposed with his tiny, scrawny body.

So cute. So smol.

“Foreverrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr…” he whined, directly into her ear. She resisted the urge to swat him
away, because that reminded her of her own parents.

Instead, she snaked her arms around him and hoisted him onto her lap.

He seemed stunned.

It kept him quiet and still for a good minute, before his sticky little hands were around her neck and in her hair.

How? When? She hadn’t given him anything. Were all children just sticky?

Luckily, he seemed mostly appeased. He gradually relaxed into her grip, and stuck his pointy little chin on her shoulder.

It hurt.

Regina sighed, but tried to keep it quiet. She’d been bony like that when she was little- all elbows and knees and sharp chin. Unfortunately, she had never thought about what it felt like to be on the receiving end of that kind of affection.

The nurse called Naruto’s name, and Regina stood up. He immediately hooked his legs around her waist like a little koala.

Okay, so this was how she lived now.

Regina followed the nurse into an exam room and peeled her found child off of her and stuck him onto the table.

The doctor pronounced him perfectly healthy, but cautioned about any head injuries. Regina nodded dully, agreeing to vaccinate him for rabies and the flu or whatever.

‘I mean, he’s in training to be a shinobi. I can’t imagine that concussion is actually the worst of the things he has to worry about.’

Not when he could plausibly be lit on fire or something.

Regina eyed her sticky child. He was watching her intently. Like he was waiting for something.

She thanked the doctor and followed the next nurse down the hallway, towards the vaccination area. Naruto was clinging to her hand like a drowning sailor. It kind of hurt.

He stopped dead at a door, which jerked her to a stop. Regina barely braced herself from the fall.

“What is it?” She asked, trying not to sound too irritated. Landing on her ass in public was not dignified.

He pointed to the sign.

Uh. She squinted. Obviously it was a name. But it wasn’t a name kanji she knew. The first part was probably ‘uchi’. Probably.

“Who is it? Do you know them?”

He nodded. “Sasuke-teme.”

“Rude word.” She chided him, looking at the nurse for any sign.
“Uchiha-kun isn’t ready for visitors, Jiraiya-hime.” The nurse said, with an apologetic tone.

Oh. Ooooooh.

She had wondered where that family went.

Regina peeked in. A little body was under a white blanket. He definitely had a catheter and an iv. The beeps of the machines signalled that his heart rate was kinda fast.

Regina didn’t know much about medicine. But she supposed that people who were sleeping or in a coma tended not to do that.

There was no one else in the room. There were no flowers. No cards. No balloons. Not even a chair by the bed.

Regina stepped back into the hallway, pulling Naruto with her. A feeling she couldn’t explain crept into her gut and lodged there.

Something was very, very wrong with this place.

She left Naruto with the nicest nurse she could find, with the promise that she’d be back. Then she came back around to the nurse’s desk and asked for information. She had to produce her work contract, but eventually they caved and gave her the paperwork she asked for.

Regina took them and tucked them under her arm, before coming back for a band-aid covered Naruto. Evidently he really liked the frog ones.

‘Buddy, have I got great news for you.’ She thought with a grim smile. Maybe he, at least, would appreciate Jiraiya’s elaborate toad choreography.

She fed him his promised ice cream and then unleashed him upon the Academy. He knocked over two trash cans and a training dummy rushing back in, maybe to show off his new bandaid swag?

She shrugged, but didn’t bother thinking too much about it. Children were a mystery.

Sarutobi Hiruzen, first of his name, Third Hokage of the Land of Fire, was surprised to begin his Monday morning with his new, supposedly-illiterate assistant smacking a pile of papers on his desk.

“Good morning!” She chirped with aggressive cheerfulness. He suspected it.

“Are these… my usual papers?” He leaned over to inspect them. Oddly enough, they did not seem to contain anything about mission reports, spy reports, or diplomatic letters.

Something in his heart began to sink.

“Sorry, no.” Jiraiya Rejina-hime said, not sounding even remotely sorry. He had flashbacks to his little genin team.
“They’re my personal business, I’m afraid.” She flipped through the stack, pulling out certain pieces. “I need you to hanko here, here, here, on this one… and over here.”

He blearily read something about clan adoption, and had some idea what this was about.

“Oh, we didn’t file that paperwork for you to be officially listed, did we.” He said. It wasn’t a question. His student was absolute shit at paperwork. And the one time Jiraiya had actually done any, he’d wrecked the clan system so badly that the other clans petitioned to make it impossible for a one-man clan to be formed.

He pitied anyone who waded into that mess.

“All right.” It was part and parcel of bringing little Rejina in, after all. He actually respected her initiative in getting it filed. Otherwise, she couldn’t be considered a real citizen of Fire Country. She’d have been in some very iffy legal territory.

He stamped and stamped. It was only about ten minutes before he was finished, and he looked up at her.

She was watching him. No. Watching implied that she had some sort of goal in mind. She was observing.

“Thank you,” she said, and bowed very low. “I appreciate your trust in me.”

He hummed. That was a nice thing to hear. But he hadn’t really trusted her with anything yet. Mostly, he’d tried to use mild genjutsu and psychological warfare on a twenty year old civilian girl, and she hadn’t either outed herself as a murderous fraud or cracked under the pressure.

“When can Uchiha-kun be released into my care?” Rejina asked, after she whisked the paperwork away. “I feel that he needs extra medical care immediately.”

Hiruzen blinked.

Uchiha…

What the hell.

He wracked his blurry, age-addled mind. Damn it.

She cocked her head and looked at him with big eyes. Like a barn owl. Hiruzen did not shudder.

“You just stamped my petition for legal guardianship, Hokage-sama.” She said, eyebrows furling.

He said nothing. It was 5 am.

“For Uchiha-kun and Uzumaki-kun.”

He didn’t respond. She slumped a bit.

“Anou, Hokage-sama…” she rubbed the back of her head with a sheepish smile (like Jiraiya, so much like her father) “was that a mistake?”

“No.” He said, fairly quickly. Naruto-kun… well. That was entirely fitting. Jiraiya was her father and Naruto-kun’s guardian. That made sense.
Uchiha Sasuke was another matter. But, try as he may, no one else was beating down his door for the job. He silently cursed Danzo to hell, and then smiled. “I am merely surprised to see you taking on so much responsibility, so early.”

She blinked, a childish affectation on an adult’s features. It was disarming and odd.

Hiruzen then wondered if he just didn’t spend enough time around civilians. Shinobi were trained out of that kind of expressiveness at a young age.

Then she smiled. Or smirked. It danced along razor-thin lines.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.” She bowed again. “My apologies, but I have a desperate message I need to run before I come back during office hours.” Then she swept out, holding the door open for Keiko-chan, who was struggling with a stack of papers that covered her head.

What an odd little duck.
Chapter 19

Regina came back to the office at 9 with a sunny disposition and another set of papers. This time, Hiruzen read them fully before approving them. It was normally unreasonable for him to read everything brought- there was too much paperwork. It was why he had a staff of ten people just to pre-approve all paperwork and approve non-critical functions.

These were just amended building approvals for Jiraiya-kun’s house.

Wait, what was happening to that horrid little shack he and Tsunade-chan had built?

Oh. It was there, technically considered part of the main house. That was apparently necessary. The next few sets of paper were a series of complaints from the city planning board about the previous plans, because Jiraiya hadn’t had the foresight to apply for a multi-building complex, and hadn’t given permission to demolish that godforsaken safety hazard.

Unfortunately, he also hadn’t given Rejina-san the clad head position yet to authorize those changes, even though he didn’t live here.

Hiruzen felt an eye tic developing.

He sympathized with the poor girl quite a bit. And she’d ‘solved’ the problem by adding a set of steep, useless stairs out to the shack. It was labelled ‘Father’s quarters’ in the building plans. There was no corresponding opening in the stone walls to let him out. Or in, he supposed.

Fair.

Jiraiya-kun was good at camping. He was sure he’d be ok.

He stamped them with a small level of personal satisfaction and handed them back. Rejina-san whisked them under her jacket, and bowed.

“There are some requests from the Daimyo awaiting your review, Hokage-sama.” She seemed to hesitate, as if uncomfortable in her role. The prestigious role that she had supposedly sought out.

He just sat and watched Rejina for a moment.

True to form, she didn’t look away or flinch at eye contact. That showed an admirable amount of self-possession. She didn’t seem scared. She might have been bored as the moments dragged on.

She hadn’t responded to his roundabout methods the last few times. Whether that was a cultural misunderstanding or willful denial, he didn’t know. He didn’t have enough information. And that was a shock- he had never considered that Jiraiya would hide something of this magnitude from him.

‘Damn me for not checking more into Jiraiya’s life before this. I dislike unknowns.’

Maybe being straightforward was the best route. By all accounts, she seemed friendliest with people of that character.

“So, your language skills have improved quite a bit since you last stayed with your father. You must have been studying.”

Rejina peered at him through downcast lashes. The side of her mouth tensed. “Yes.”
Well, that was an odd reaction to a compliment. He resisted the urge to sigh. Perhaps she just wasn’t particularly bright. She certainly wasn’t comfortable in Konoha.

“Rejina-san.” He said, trying to sound friendly.

Her left eyebrow raised, just a little. The rest of her face stayed the same. The small movement somehow communicated significant displeasure.

“Rejina-hime.” He corrected. The eyebrow lowered. Evidently he’d set a precedent with introductions, and she wasn’t interested in a downgrade.

That did remind him of Jiraiya, all puffed up and prideful. Much quieter, but the similarity was enough to bring out the faint resemblance.

He had work to do. “Rejina-hime,” he started again, “would you be so kind as to get some coffee from the office for me?”

Regina couldn’t read most handwriting in Japanese, which really limited her usefulness. There seemed to be a few computers in the office, but most of the reports seemed to be written by hand.

She sorted out the mission scrolls and reports by color- which was at least a task she could easily do. Intermittently, she filled the coffee machine and hot water pitcher.

Evidently several people in the office had been Uchiha- they were surprisingly shorthanded. That meant at least that there was a gap for her to fill, even if she couldn’t do many things that involved the actual paperwork.

Frankly, her conversational Japanese ability was what had improved most. So they put her to work as the face of the office, taking appointments, checking names.

Regina took several secured scrolls down to a bored-looking woman in Torture and Interrogation (yikes) and the Jounin Commander down the hall (less yikes, until she wondered what that title entailed).

It felt demeaning and humiliating, to be honest. Making coffee and doing intern work wasn’t exactly below her- she knew it was a job that needed to be done. And that Japanese culture didn’t have those stigma about certain kinds of jobs.

Just working in the Hokage’s office was prestigious in and of itself. Which was why she’d been rightfully accused of nepotism.

Oddly, no one had a problem with nepotism everywhere else. Which was a thing Regina would never be able to address, due to how she got her job. Sure, she’d had qualifications. Lots of them. She even had done this kind of work when she’d done a Capitol Hill internship as a staffer.

But that wasn’t why they’d hired her. The Sandaime obviously considered her a total inconvenience. She was just being kept around in comfort to make Jiraiya and Tsunade happy.

Regina didn’t contemplate what would happen to her if someone figured out she had no relation to Jiraiya whatsoever. She’d be dead before she knew it, probably.
She looked around the office, and remembered that none of the other staffers were civilians. All the staff were at least Chuunin. They needed that kind of loyalty and clearance to get anywhere near here.

Every single person she worked with, handed papers to, shared office omiyage with was a trained killer.

She felt tense and overwhelmed. It was like living with her own parents again.

The constant dread, the lack of being able to express her emotions for fear of reprisal. She didn’t feel safe in her home, or on the street.

Jiraiya was kind and well-intentioned. He had probably meant to keep her safe by forcing her to come here.

If he couldn’t get her to her own home, it might have been kinder to kill her quickly in that post office. She doubted it was going to get any nicer.

Eventually, Keiko and the other office staff members left to go get lunch.

Regina didn’t particularly mind staying behind. She really needed to catch up to what was going on in this place, and being alone made her feel less unsafe.

She poked into the office supplies for a new notebook, paper trays, and writing utensils, and started taking notes in English.

Shinobi who were on her shit list for missing parts of their paperwork were highlighted in pink. Things for her to relay to other office staff were green. Anything that needed to go to the Hokage was in orange, which seemed to suit him.

There was a report from the T&I department that she shouldn’t open. That went to the Hokage.

A letter addressed to her, from Iron. Huh.

Uh. That should probably… be reviewed? She doubted anyone would appreciate her receiving secret mail in the Hokage Tower. That went in a separate pile. She’d ask Keiko how she should handle those.

God, the paperwork was unending. She started scanning for keywords and sorting as much as she could accordingly.

She noticed Keiko returning from lunch early, because a pile of papers for the Hokage disappeared.

They coughed loudly.

She looked up. A man with face-framing facial hair and a bored expression was staring at her. He was also built like a brick house. Two other people were behind him- a man in a green jumpsuit and a woman with ruby-red eyes.

“Worker-san, I need to see my father.” Brick House drawled.
Also, he was an asshole. He could have asked her name.

Still, it was probably her job to figure this out.

“Name?” She asked.

He glared at her a little. Then he pointed to his hitai-ite, and down to a sash on his waist. Obviously he thought she was stupid.

“I’m new here.” She said simply, ducking her head in polite but false apology. “I need a name.”

“Very new.” He sniped a bit- then seemed to remember that he was not in fact an animal. “Sorry, Sarutobi Asuma.”

“Thank you.” She was aware it came out clipped, but hey. Regina was only human. Or maybe just a worker.

She was trying to find his name on the register, but it didn’t seem to be there. And the Hokage had meetings now, at 11, and…

“It’s Asuma, not Fusuma.” He snapped.

She glanced down. Her hiragana shorthand did look pretty illegible.

“How are you working here, anyway?” He griped, leaning down over the desk. “I thought you had to be competent to work here.” His voice was slightly raised.

He didn’t know shit, but that hurt. It was only her first day and frankly this guy could fuck a tree for all she cared.

She gritted her teeth and wrote his name down on the next available appointment time.

“Anou, Sarutobi-san, that wasn’t very youthful of you!” The man in green said, giving her a thumbs up.

She wished she could summon up that kind of cheer. She smiled at him.

“This is Jiraiya Rejina-hime!” The man hyped her up, and evidently there were now… flowers? And a rainbow? Involved. A petal fell slowly down to her lap and then evaporated.

Oh. It was genjutsu. That made more sense. She had been betting on a pocketful of petals.

“Thank you for the lovely introduction.” She said, with a slight smile. “May I have your name, shinobi-san?”

The two shinobi with him blanched.

“I am Might-o Gai!” he beamed. Oh wow. There was more genjutsu. “The Green Beast of Konoha! I am pleased to finally make your acquaintance, Jiraiya-hime!” He winked. And suddenly there was a considerably large tortoise under him.

Regina quite liked tortoises and turtles, actually. She really liked grumpy-looking animals who used salmonella as a defense mechanism.

Maybe Jiraiya wasn’t a one-off? This seemed similar to his self-introduction, only less long.
“I’m very pleased to meet you, too!” She smiled again. She wrote down his name.

“Are you all here separately, or would you be wishing to meet with Hokage-sama together?” She asked. If she got off track, they would likely miss the open window in five minutes. The Hokage was constantly busy.

“Same appointment time, please. Yuuhi Kurenai. Thank you, Jiraiya-hime.” Yuuhi said, with a polite smile.

Regina took down her name as well.

“The Hokage has an open meeting time at 12:15, if you would wait by the door.” She didn’t really mean the smile, but she was in her customer service mode. It was that or the depressive, mildly suicidal mood she couldn’t shake just yet. She hoped that having something to do at night would keep her from the edge.

And the other would probably make the Hokage think she was too much of an inconvenience to keep.

They took their seats by the door. At 12:15 she let them into the office with a polite smile and a bow.

She was glad when they left about half an hour later. Sarutobi-san looked pretty irritated. The other two didn’t show any indication of how their meeting might have gone.

They all waved at her as they left, with varying degrees of friendliness.

Regina went back to sorting color-coded scrolls. She was interrupted when the Hokage called for her. He looked tired and worn, and far older than she remembered from this morning.

“Jiraiya-hime,” he said. He closed the drawer in the center of his desk, but the smell of smoke was hanging heavily in the office air.

She resisted the urge to cough. “How can I help?” Regina said, waving her hand in front of her face. It wasn’t very polite, but she liked to breathe.

The Hokage didn’t acknowledge her pulmonary distress. He breathed out, and the smell got even stronger. He was staring into the air. “How have you been finding the office?” he asked.

She didn’t get the sense that he was really invested in that topic. “Fine,” she said, a little helplessly. She didn’t particularly feel fulfilled, but she wasn’t screaming and dying.

“Good, good,” he said. He sighed and bent his head. “I’m going to have Hatake-san come in sometime this afternoon. Can we fit him in? It may need to be a long appointment.”

She forced down a grimace and pulled up her mental stock of the schedule. “Can it wait until the evening?”

“If it must, yes.” The Hokage tapped his fingers against the desk. “I admit that some time would help me to arrange what I must say.”

She knew that tone. “Maybe even enough time to think of a good reason that you don’t have to have that conversation.”
He looked up at her sharply, as if he had just realized she was there. She had enough time to wonder if she had made a mistake. And then his face melted into amusement. He nodded at her.

“As you say,” the Hokage said. “Are you prone to that as well?”

“I can convince myself of anything when the alternative is intolerable,” Regina readily admitted.

He snorted, and then immediately straightened his face. “An apt turn of phrase,” he said. “I must tell Hatake-san something that he will find intolerable.”

“And he will take it calmly and reasonably, and then talk with his therapist about how it affected his feelings?” Regina asked. “He seems relaxed.”

He outright laughed.

She blinked and drew back.

He kept laughing. It turned into coughs.

Regina scowled.

The Hokage wheezed a bit, leaning back in his chair and patting at his chest. “Relaxed…” he said. “Ah. I would not say ‘relaxed,’ exactly.”

“So, I was wrong,” Regina said, wondering what was so funny about this. “I’ll make the appointment for after my work hours end, in that case. Have fun with that.”

“Oh no, no,” the Hokage said, eyes crinkled with mirth. “Please stay. I would like to extend a formal invitation for you to attend this meeting.”

“What,” Regina said.

“Just a joke.” He waved it away. “I might like for you to sit in on my other meetings today, however.” He eyed her evaluatingly.

“Starting now. Would you please open the door for my councilors?”

She did so, watching silently as a trio of deadly elderly filed into the room. They, unsurprisingly, did not seem to register she existed.

They all went into the adjoining conference room, which was bland and grey and sad. They took their seats on the surprisingly luxe couches. They had some sort of velvet upholstery and looked full of stuffing.

‘If he ever lets me, I’m gonna nap in here so hard.’

Regina went to sit quietly in the corner by a large and leafy fern, observing.

She did note that Shimura-san went immediately to sit across from the Hokage in a single chair. From another perspective, it seemed like he might be at the head of the room.

‘Interesting, maybe. Or it means absolutely nothing, except that these people won’t share a couch, despite having worked together their entire lives.’

They seemed to cut through the formalities, though, barely acknowledging the common beginnings of a normal meeting before getting down to business.
The massacre of an entire clan seemed to be the item of the day. Regina wondered how her new puppy was doing in the hospital. She’d need to go by to check, as soon as she could. And maybe send another panicked letter to Tsunade.

She refused to come in the village for obvious reasons, even as Tsunade obviously waffled about helping a boy in a coma.

“The Uchiha were formerly in charge of both our police force as well as a founding clan. Their absence in the village presents a significant loss of strength.” The Hokage said. He sounded strong and confident. But somehow oddly formal for the group.

Hadn’t they known each other since, like, infancy? Tsunade had said they were appointed to these made-up positions purely based on friendship/nepotism.

Homura-san hummed and leaned on his cane. “This loss is crucial. Iwa and Kumo will note our lack of strength. It is very possible that we will be encountering conflicts with them.”

“Only if the absence is made known before we recover ourselves.” Koharu-san countered, her voice wavering with age.

“It is no real loss.” Shimura-san countered. “The clan was a weakness, due to their treachery.”

The other two counsellors hummed in acknowledgement.

Regina felt more than a bit sick. They were talking about three hundred something people of all ages, murdered in their beds, as if they were debating the pros and cons of local bakeries.

She felt more secure in her initial assessment of them as total and utter garbage. It was hard to even to pretend to want to sympathize with them when they disregarded human life so entirely.

Luckily, she didn’t have to like or even respect them to do her job. She was just an observer today.

“The lack of a police force is a real loss.” The Hokage said firmly. “Our ANBU are already occupied. Patrolling the city as well as our borders will put a strain on our resources.”

“We could outsource it to the genin corps.” Homura-san said, thoughtfully. “It is a large and somewhat competent body of shinobi.”

‘Except that means the same problem of over-militarization, alienating the civilians that power your economy.’ Regina thought sourly. She kept her face blank as a sheet of paper. It took a surprising amount of concentration.

Shimura-san grunted. “The Uchiha were incompetent as a police force. Is it necessary to replace them?”

Christ, what a dick.

“They could not even determine the cause of the incident that killed the Yondaime.” he went on, contempt oozing out of his mouth like an open wound.

The Hokage levelled him with a look.
“I believe that is at least partly due to your actions, removing them from village operations, and alienating them from our forces with baseless accusations.” It came out dry.

To her, it was clear he was angry beyond belief.

She edged closer to the potted fern, hoping that no one would remember she was here. Everyone looked past her like she was furniture anyway, could it not work for her today? It was worth a shot.

The room was dead quiet.

Regina tried to become one with the plant. Leafy thoughts.

“In any case, we must have patrols to monitor the city and mediate disputes.” The Hokage redirected.

“This is why I asked Jiraiya-hime into this meeting.”


“Jiraiya-hime, you have come highly recommended for your intelligent analysis and relevant education.” The Sandaime said, being both highly complimentary and putting her in the line of sight of three elderly people who sniffed at infanticide. “Would you have any recommendations for the formation of a new police force?”

She thought for a moment, but then reasoned that waiting too long would smack of idiocy. She waited for just long enough that she hoped they thought her Japanese wasn’t good enough to catch everything.

“Was the police force entirely made up of Uchiha Clan members?” She asked.

The Sandaime shook his head. “I believe that some of the police force were other shinobi who displayed interest. They currently have no orders.”

“How many remain?” She stared at the space above his head by about a foot.

“About twenty, all told.”

That wasn’t many. But it did mean that there were enough that there wasn’t necessarily an information or training gap. They didn’t need to lose all their institutional experience.

“I believe that Homura-sama’s (she added the upshot in title to what they seemed to think they deserved, out of a sense of self-preservation) suggestion of the involvement of the Genin Corps has merit.” She said slowly, letting the words roll off her tongue. It was best to speak incredibly carefully. She didn’t want to be misunderstood. “However, an all-shinobi force alienates the civilians whose trade and missions power Konoha’s economy. I would suggest interviewing the remaining police officers for their appropriateness to leadership positions, and draft a training regimen and standards with their cooperation, so as not to lose the benefit of their experience. The real duty of a police force is to maintain peace within the village, and therefore shinobi abilities are not always necessary. Traditionally, they are for awareness or information distribution, as well as investigation of smaller crimes”

She looked around the room. They seemed to be actually listening to her.

“In order to both eliminate unnecessary waste of shinobi forces’ time and energy, as well as provide more perceived and real security for the entirety of Konoha, I would consider implementing this
police force as a cooperative effort between members of the Genin Corps and interested, qualified members of the civilian sector. This would rapidly increase the numbers of the police force, inspiring confidence in merchants and other residents, and delaying or eliminating the perception of weakness.”

She swallowed spit, and looked to the floor without angling her face down.

“This may still require ANBU patrols for security from outside forces, but would dramatically decrease the need in numbers to do so, allowing those special forces to be more appropriately allocated according to their specialized skills.”

To be honest, she’d probably forgotten something. Or been unintentionally rude. She hoped that if she’d perpetrated a faux pas, they’d be forgiving enough.

Silence reigned. She didn’t raise her eyes.

“Very apt analysis.” The Hokage said.

Someone grunted in what she thought might have been affirmative.

She looked up to her Hokage.

He was examining her again. She was tired of being examined, but at least he didn’t seem to think she was useless anymore.

“I assume your silence is in agreement.” He looked out to his counsellors.

They said nothing.

“Very well.” He turned back to Regina. “Tsunade-hime stated that you had significant education in this area, yes?”

“Hai. My education was focused in both security inside the state, and international negotiation and statebuilding.” Her heart was beating in her throat.

He hummed, and apparently decided something. “Submit this proposal to be as soon as possible. I would have you implement and design it, with my approval.”

It was an obvious dismissal. But he looked to her hiding plant instead of the door.

She bowed, and stepped back to the wall of the room. That had gone surprisingly well. But she thought leaf-melding thoughts anyway. These people were terrifying.

“As for the matter of the Uchiha massacre, we need to determine what happened.” Sandaime-sama said. He was gritting his teeth. Evidently this was one of the many intolerable things he had to discuss today.

“They were traitorous.” Shimura-san dismissed.

Regina judged him hard. There were definitely murdered babies in that shitstorm.

The Hokage was maybe judging him too- she was guessing by the way that he lightly clenched his fists in his lap. It was over in less than a second.
“They were members of this village.” He countered gravely. “And may I remind you that they committed no treasonous actions.”

Shimura-san continued on anyway.

“It is clear that Uchiha Itachi took action himself, despite your counsel. He sought more power in the preceding days, seizing one of Uchiha Shishu’s eyes for his own in order to dispose of a family he hated.”

This wasn’t even the one she’d decided to assault with bees. What a bunch of charmers.

“That is an obvious lie, Danzo.”

The Hokage’s voice was cold. So cold.

Regina felt her shoulders start to tense. The atmosphere in the room was distinctly murderous. The plant wasn’t enough cover for this kind of shit.

“You took action against a clan you despised and distrusted, against my orders.”

Regina looked at the floor. She hoped to God all these people had bought that she was a ninny.

“Get out of my office. Disband your Root. You are hereby and forever removed from my Council. It is only by my indulgence that you have been allowed these freedoms, despite your past actions. No more.”

She was not going to look up. Regina slowly and quietly moved actually behind the plant in the room.

This was not the kind of thing she wanted to be involved in. At all. This was tantamount to treason, and she would like to be very far removed from any discussion about it.

“Jiraiya-hime, please escort Shimura-san out of the tower. And cancel our standing appointments.”

Fucking hell.

She re-emerged from behind the fern. And bowed really really low.

She averted her eyes as she followed an obviously angry Shimura-san out of the room. Regina resisted the urge to swallow the excess saliva in her throat as she held the heavy office door open.

Shimura wasn’t moving.

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Shimura-sama.” She said quietly, and bowed lowly again.

He just stared at her.

“Princesses don’t bow that low to shinobi.” He said dryly. “You need lessons.”

She didn’t exactly disagree, but she wasn’t going to be taking advice from a man who’d just been ousted out on his ass in front of her.
He evidently saw that on her face. He visibly clenched his jaw, then seemed to purposefully relax his face.

“It is a sad thing when pragmatism gives way to emotion in the running of a state.” He said.

She wasn’t really interested in his manifesto at the moment. It was her job to chase him out with a newspaper. Like a dog who just pissed on the carpet.

“You seem a pragmatist. Capable of reason.” He made eye contact with his one exposed eye. “I trust you are aware of your defects in this area, and will rectify them to serve your country better.”

He looked her up and down. She was wearing the nicest version of Tsunade’s chosen outfits for her.

He sneered a bit, then it disappeared.

He was really getting on her last nerve. She wanted to fight him. If she thought he wouldn’t immediately whoop her ass, she might have. She looked out into the hallway. No one was there.

‘Come on, you fucks. Save me.’ She chanted in her head. But it was deserted for some reason.

“You should comport yourself as a princess and representative for Konoha’s shinobi, as dictated by your birth station.” He informed her, seemingly unaware that he now had about as much authority over her as the average melon. “You are foreign, and so your lack of knowledge is not your fault. You should have been a shinobi. However, you’re too old.”

‘I’m too old for something?’

“Please, come this way, Shimura-sama.” she gestured and only bowed her head. Was it smart? No. But this dude was being a real pain in her ass. “I was told to escort you out of the building, and must do so. Shall I consult you for career advice at a later time?”

He processed that with a blink. He seemed to go through the stages of grief so quickly that she missed a couple.

“Yes, please.”

Oh. She forgot that sarcasm wasn’t a Japanese thing.

Dammit.

He followed her out of the building without any other words. She was aware that he was watching her the whole time.

She was starting to feel twitchy and a little scared. She probably should not have talked back to him.

“Thank you for your time and expertise, Shimura-sama.” She bowed at the door and gestured out into the street.

“I look forward to our future meetings, Jiraiya-hime.” He bowed, stiff and surprisingly low.

Then he left.

“Yikes.” she murmured, and wandered back up to the Hokage’s private meeting room in a daze.
The counsellors were still sitting there, evidently in some sort of shock.

The Hokage looked livid.

She bowed. “Shimura-sama has left the building, Hokage-sama.”

“Good.” His voice was ice. “Counsellors, our meeting for today is adjourned. I trust you will remember this.”

They scooted.

Regina held the doors open as they walked out. They managed to compose themselves before leaving his office.

The office was still empty- she wondered where everyone was.

After Homura-san and Koharu-san left, she went back to the Hokage. He was at his desk, smoking and staring at a crystal ball on a pedestal.

“Hokage-sama.” She said quietly, not wanting to intrude. This dude’s job sucked pretty hard.

“Jiraiya-hime.” He replied, not really looking up. “Did Shimura-san give you any trouble?”

“He offered me advice.” She admitted readily. “To learn how to conduct myself as a… princess.” The word still sounded foul in her mouth. All this lying was getting to her.

“Not bad advice.” The Hokage said, blowing out a series of smoke circles. Regina began fanning the air in front of her face.

“I believe in this circumstance he is entirely correct, sir. I would best be able to represent Konoha in this station, as I am far too old to pursue shinobi training. I do not know how to find a teacher, however.” She looked down at the floor.

Comportment lessons were hell. But she’d gotten through before. She’d be so comported. The most comported, maybe.

“I will have one found for you.” The Hokage said lowly, as if turning the idea over in his head. “It would make you a better asset.”

‘Thanks. Love to be dehumanized in the morning.’

“I also accidentally asked for his advice in general.” She put forward. “I… forgot that this was a cultural difference.”

He blinked. Once. Twice.

“How.”

“In my culture, if you ask a question that is ridiculous, it is not an actual question. I asked him if he had any other thoughts as to how I could improve myself. He took it as a question of mentorship.”

The Hokage choked a little.

“I am aware that a man now banned from your office and council is not an appropriate mentor. I made a mistake with my cultural understanding and words.”
It was nice to be honest, for a change. Plus, again, Regina didn’t want to be in the middle of traitorous nonsense. She had enough intrigue in her life.

He shoved more tobacco in his pipe and puffed furiously. He evidently got enough nicotine to calm his nerves, because he slowed down after a few seconds.

“Shimura-san is not without merit.” He said, obviously disgusted in general. “He may have some perspectives that you may find useful. So long as you report to me, I see no problems with your interacting with him.”

He looked up at her and made direct and authoritative eye contact.

“Besides, the village cannot know that he has been disgraced in this way. It would be devastating to Konoha. I cannot disallow him from appropriate contact with you or others.” He looked at her, conveying meaning with his eyes and speaking very deliberately.

Well. Okay. He was definitely a traitor. That was awkward. But… outing him was somehow worse than keeping him around? He was an elder. He had the exact same amount of implied authority. All the Hokage had done was removed him from an official position.

Fuck. Her job was shit, too.
While her first Hokage meeting was nothing but nightmare fuel, the rest were tedious. Nara Shikaku actually noted her presence at one point during his briefing—evidently the Jounin were all up and at ‘em and stressed as hell.

That was less of what he said and more of an interpretation.

She took notes as directed about how many Jounin needed to be brought in for debriefings, as well as a personal note about how few Jounin there were, as compared to Genin. It seemed like there was a really bad clog there somewhere. Genin were basically the lowest level of real shinobi, apparently. (Academy students not included.) Was there just that wide of a skill gap in between the levels?

Tsunade had informed her that as she was, she was basically a really crappy genin. That was with Tsunade’s personal attention, but only for about a month and developmentally about twenty years too late. There was no way that these numbers made sense.

What was the barrier keeping so many from promotion?

It was an interesting question. They had too much work for the Jounin they had, and so any even vaguely qualified Chuunin was getting bumped up to Tokubetsu Jounin in the face of their massive personnel shortage. But they weren’t able to increase the Chuunin promotions by a significant enough number.

Then she started doodling questions about infrastructure and education in general. She had a lot of thoughts.

There was another debriefing meeting with a series of genin teams—evidently some had been increased in class in the field, and therefore a written report wouldn’t do. Mostly they were boring things about bandits, only notable by the fact that they had definitely killed all those bandits and burned the corpses.

She shuddered, but tried to keep it to a minimum. Regina was sure she’d get inured to that sort of thing, which was galling. But she’d need to to stay in this job.

After her working hours were over, the Hokage bid her to provide her notes to the rest of the staff for action. She thought maybe, just maybe, he looked at her approvingly.

So she did as he asked, and also sent off his suggested two full ANBU teams to find Hatake-san and bring him in for a terrible meeting that she thankfully would not be attending. The first terrible one had been more than enough excitement for the day.

Regina tried to keep the glee she felt at escaping off of her face, and fled to the Academy a block away to pick up her new son.

Naruto screeched like a little banshee when she saw her, and ran at her and into her arms. Her chest made a sickening whumph noise when he smacked into it.

‘Ouch, damn.’

“Hey, nee-chan!” He chirped, all happy and somehow also frantic. “Mizuki-sensei said you wouldn’t be back for me, but he was wrong, huh?”
“Which one is Mizuki sensei?” She asked, feeling mildly affronted on Naruto’s behalf.

Naruto looked exasperated, and then pointed. She followed the grubby little hand to the one with the really ugly hat that she’d met earlier.

“Who’s your other teacher?” She asked, asking because she was a responsible parent and guardian and not a horny twenty-something.

“Iruka-sensei.” Naruto scowled. “He’s really strict, though.”

“That’s kinda hot, no lie.’

“Can I meet him?” She asked, ruffling his hair. He squawked, but he was grinning.

He led her in past the other children, whose parents were also picking them up from school. Naruto seemed happy to hold her hand and lord it over the other children.

One woman gave him a nasty look, and Regina stared at her until she decided that her laceless shoes needed examining.

‘Love to see it. Mind your own business.’

Iruka-sensei was as cute as he’d been last week. He was grading papers and abusing a pen with his teeth when she knocked on the door, child in tow.

“Iruka-sensei!” Nauto ran in, dragging her up to the desk. “This is my new mom,” he looked at her and blushed, “or nee-chan.”

His teacher flushed and shot straight up to his feet.

“Jiraiya-hime.” He bowed deeply and precisely. If he’d gone much farther he would have smacked his head on his own desk. She waited until he came back up.

“Rejina, please.” She smiled at him, and tucked her hair behind her right ear. Naruto was clutching her left hand. “Jiraiya is my father’s name. Quite literally.”

He blinked with some amusement, but recovered quickly.

“My name is Umino Iruka.” He enunciated, looking at Naruto with slightly narrowed eyes.

Ah. Naruto was being inappropriate again. Regina was glad she hadn’t said his name. That was presuming a lot.

“Thank you for teaching Naruto-kun.” She bowed, more deeply than she had yesterday. “I wanted to meet you to talk with you about him and about the other student I’ve taken into my care.”

“Oh?” He was definitely blindsided.

“I have assumed guardianship for Uchiha-kun.” She confided, a bit quieter.

Naruto gripped her tighter. Poor thing probably didn’t want to share.

She didn’t want to say that no one knew if Sasuke would ever even wake up. Umino-sensei seemed to be somewhat aware, because he flinched.

“I might need any assignments he missed, after he recovers.” Naruto was getting fidgety, so she
picked him up and balanced him on her hip. If he ran off, she wasn’t fast enough to catch him. And apparently he liked to get into trouble.

He clung to her like plastic wrap.

Umino-sensei seemed a lot less unbalanced. His face softened.

“Of course.” He flipped through some folders on his desk, and started putting some sheets together in a hurry.

“I’m sure you’re busy, we don’t have to do this today.” She reassured him, readjusting Naruto so that he was digging into her ribs less. Such a bony kid. “But I’d like to schedule a meeting with you and their other teacher, Mizuki-sensei, to talk about their educations. Unfortunately, I have a lot to catch up on.” She smiled apologetically.

His nose twitched. It was very cute.

“What was the nervousness about? It was odd.

“Unfortunately, you and I have similar scheduled hours. Would after four pm be workable for you?” That was literally the earliest she could do. She was sure that he couldn’t exactly just tell his little monster students to behave themselves for an hour while he was in a meeting.

God, that was ridiculous. He probably couldn’t really take vacation or sick leave, either.

He agreed, so they made a meeting for the next day at five. That would give her time to stow Naruto somewhere with an activity or something.

“Thank you, I appreciate your time.” She bowed again, and he snapped down fast to bow as well. She couldn’t bow terribly deeply anyway, with an 8 year old hanging off of her neck.

They left, and she brought him back to his apartment.

It was cute (but also terrifying) that he didn’t notice that she didn’t need any directions.

He showed her around his apartment with pride. It was even bleaker inside- some of the food was definitely expired. There was no furniture. He lived in a box with his cute little walrus hat and no one to make sure that he even bathed properly.

“Oh, I think you’ve been doing good at taking care of yourself,” (and her initial suspicion that he was severely craving compliments proved true when he puffed up in pride), “but I want to take care of you. You’re not supposed to have to do this alone. Would you like to live with me?”

The question seemed to break him a little bit.

His eyes teared up, and he breathed out shakily.

Naruto gulped, and some tears leaked out.

“That a yes?” Regina leaned down and brushed his hair back from his face, lightly rubbing at his scalp with her fingers.

He sniffed. “Yes, dattebayo!” he fist pumped. “And when I get big I’m gonna be a great shinobi and take care of you and keep you safe because you’re a princess and I’ll be really cool and blast
people like pow pow pow!!!"

“I look forward to it.” she smiled, and tried not to wince at the sheer volume of enthusiasm. He
didn’t need or deserve that. It wasn’t his fault she wasn’t great at feelings.

“Right now I live in a temporary house, and in about a month, we would move to our new house.”
Regina watched his face for emotions.

He was an open book. And not a hard book. He was one of her father’s exceptionally trashy
romance novels.

She missed that weirdo. Things seemed simpler with Jiraiya around to murder-punch any problems.

Also, he had feelings. So many. He might have been useful right now.

But Jiraiya wasn’t here. She was.

Regina had a bleak sort of feeling that that was going to be a recurring theme in her life here.

“Well, get anything you need to take today.” She looked around. “Clothes, pajamas, your
toothbrush…”

He rushed around and chucked everything into a bag. Some of it was obviously dirty, and none of it
was folded.

Regina politely stared at the plants in the window. There were some cute little ferns, much like
baby versions of the one to which she owed a debt of gratitude in the Hokage’s office. There was
also an orchid, which evidently needed less watering.

Orchids were a pain in the ass. It was admirable that he was trying.

“Do you have a box to carry your plants?” She asked, pointing.

He squeaked.

“I can’t leave them behind, I almost forgot!” He picked one up in his arms. “Um…”

“We can also come and get them tomorrow. Or later tonight.” She told him. “You don’t have to
bring them right now. This apartment is still yours until next month.”

He seemed less panicked then, petting the plant’s leaves and putting it back on the sill.

They gathered up his duffel bag and she carried his favorite fern, reasoning that the orchid might
benefit from some time apart from his watering can and attention. They walked down the streets
side by side, and when they got home he screamed “Tadaima”.

She blinked.

Oh. That was probably… different for him.

“I don’t live with anyone else.” She advised him. “But on days that you walk home yourself I’ll be
here.”

“Until we and Sasuke-teme move into a castle, dattebayo!” He asserted, taking off his grimy little
shoes and scrambling into the house.
He wasn’t wrong. She distinctly remembered designing a small castle.

“Yes, but you can’t keep calling him that.” She chided. “It’s a rude word. You’re going to be living together, and I expect you both to try and get along.”

He crinkled up his cute little nose.

“You’re a good boy, I know I can trust you to be nice. Sasuke-kun is going through a lot right now.” Regina went through his bag and put all of it in the washer. It wasn’t worth messing with. Especially because she was going to buy him new clothes.

Actually, it was only 4:30....

“He’s not even awake.” He grouched.

She just looked at him.

“...Okay, I’ll be nice.” Naruto relented.

“I think you and I need new clothes.” She pushed out her lips and thought. “What do you think about that?”

He screeched in excitement- he evidently liked clothes. It was a good start to their relationship.

So they put his plant in the windowsill and left again, walking past store after store until Naruto saw one he liked. They went in, and he tried to buy the shop down. He did need new shoes, for sure. His socks had also been worn.

She bought him seven outfits and two pairs of pajamas, and a truly heinous amount of underwear and socks. They were a bit big on him- luckily that was Japanese, and would keep her from having to replace them too soon.

She also needed to get him the few things her father had recommended, but they were shinobi equipment. Things that wouldn’t wear and tear, protective gear, and a baby’s first murder weapon kit.

It seemed that she had been wrong about not needing a blacksmith.

After Naruto received his fancy clothes, they went shopping for her. She tried on outfit after outfit- reasoning that she didn’t need any more kimono. Jiraiya had her covered on that front. What she needed was professional wear for a princess. It was an odd balance.

“I don’t like that outfit.” He said, sticking out his tongue. “Too boring.”

Regina liked black clothes. They were flattering and, when cut well, were visually pleasing.

But plain black was boring. He was right. And she was never going to fit in.

So there was no point in blending.

Regina knew there were a couple of options for princesses in general. She could go the traditional route, which would be uncomfortable and unsustainable for someone with a real job. Or she could go fashionable and forward-looking.

She put in several custom orders and tolerated the seamstress measuring every aspect of her body, while Naruto got some pens out of her purse and started drawing on the back of her receipts.
Afterwards, she went to a cobbler and did the same damn thing with her feet. She’d have boots and heels for days.

It wasn’t very Japanese. Fuck ‘em anyway.

Then she took her sticky little son to the shinobi outfitting store, and got him everything off Jiraiya’s list.

If Sasuke woke up, she’d get a second set picked up. If some of it wasn’t already at the Uchiha family complex.

She was up to her neck in what they’d left behind, anyway. She might as well go look.

They dropped off their loot in their genkan, and then swung by the flower shop.

Evidently it was run by the Yamanaka clan- pretty blondes without pupils were everywhere. She let Naruto pick out the balloons, and took the flower recommendation of the gorgeous woman behind the counter.

A little girl ran out from the house behind the counter and accosted her with a glare and a pointed finger.

“You said you’re getting flowers for Sasuke-kun. Where is he?”

Regina looked at the woman who was apparently this little girl’s mother, who just smiled tightly. Ok, then.

“He’s in the hospital, he’s not feeling well right now.” Regina watched the little girl’s face screw up, trying to intimidate her into providing more information or something.

“Would you like me to bring him a message?” Regina asked. The girl’s face was red with concentration.

She evidently gave up on whatever she was trying to do, because she blew out a bunch of air and then huffed.

“Yes.” She stomped back behind the counter, and brought something in an envelope back within a few minutes. “Here. Tell him I miss him.” Then she disappeared again.

“Will do.” Regina promised, tucking it in her purse carefully. She had a soft spot for bossy little girls.

No idea why. Not worth examining.

“Thank you, Yamanaka-san.” Regina directed at the woman behind the counter, who smiled at her much more genuinely than she had earlier.

They left. Naruto was grumpy. She couldn’t exactly blame him- that little girl was far from the first person who had chased her down today to give Sasuke something, or to ask how he was.

“Why does everyone like Sasuke so much?” he asked her. “If I was sick, no one would care.”
“I would care.” She informed him. “And so would your teacher, and Hokage-sama, and Jiraiya...”

“Who’s Jiraiya?” He groused. “I don’t know him.”

“My dad- your grandfather, sort of.”

He made a little ‘hmmm’ sound reached out to grab onto her shirt, but lightly. Her hands were occupied with all the flowers.

“And Sasuke probably doesn’t want all that attention.” She admitted. “Nobody ever wants so much attention. You don’t get enough, and he gets too much. I promise you nobody is happy.”

He seemed skeptical.

“Just wait. Someday you’ll get attention that you don’t like. There’s good attention and bad attention, and you’ll learn to know the difference.”

Sasuke’s hospital room was just as depressing as before when they showed up with decor.

They set about distributing it immediately, placing bouquets on all available horizontal surfaces. The various letters and presents were arranged on a table next to the bed.

While Naruto carefully arranged the pre-sorted flowers, Regina called for a nurse.

“Any change?” She asked, trying to keep her voice low. There was no need to scare Naruto with the seriousness of Sasuke’s condition. He was little and she doubted it would help.

“None.” The nurse confided. Regina noted that her family name was Okada, from her nametag. “His vitals are strong, but his pupils are reacting to something. They’ve determined that it’s a very strong genjutsu- his mind is fully awake.”

“He’s been awake for a week at this point?” Regina was horrified.

“A little more.” Okada-san nodded. “And we don’t know how long he was in this state before he was brought here.”

Everything about this was a horror show.

“Genjutsu ends, right?” She asked, whispering. “At some point he has to wake up.”

The nurse shook her head, slowly. “It should have ended long before now, if it was a regular genjutsu. We can’t dispel it. Uchiha Itachi is... very skilled in genjutsu. He might never wake up. Or the shock to his body might just kill him.” Okada-san swallowed heavily.

“Is there anything we can do?” Regina couldn’t stand just watching him shudder in that bed. It wasn’t necessary or kind to let anyone suffer like that.

“We’d need a very, very skilled medic nin.” Okada-san seemed to examine Regina’s face. “There isn’t anyone good enough here. It’s just such delicate work.”

“You mean Tsunade-sama.”

There was nothing for it. She’d have to beg. Hopefully Tsunade would be up for it. At least Sasuke wasn’t bleeding- that didn’t seem to be as much of the source of her discomfort so much as the fact that he was in Konoha.
Or at least, that’s what she’d been gleaning from Shizune’s letters.

She might have to appeal to a higher power to get what Sasuke needed. Or several.

“Okay.” Regina nodded, lining out her path before her. She knew what to do. If it didn’t work…well. She’d try something else.

“Naruto, say goodbye to Sasuke. I need to stop by the Hokage’s office.”

“I get to see Ojii-chan?!?” He bounced. It made Sasuke’s bed shake.

She couldn’t restrain the flinch. “Please, Naruto, be careful. Sasuke is sick.”

He calmed down, looking guilty.

“Bye, Sasuke. You’re sick, so I won’t call you teme anymore, dattebayo.” Naruto poked Sasuke’s cheek. “I hope you wake up soon, so I don’t get too far ahead of you at everything and you have to tell me I’m the best ninja in the world.”

He waited for a reaction that never came. Naruto wilted a little bit, and walked back to her with slumped shoulders.

That may have been his attempt to make Sasuke wake up due to sheer rage. Unfortunately, it didn’t work.

She rubbed her knuckles on Naruto’s back, and hoped that the Hokage’s meeting with Hatake had ended. She didn’t want to be anywhere near that.

Evidently it had- but the Hokage was worse for wear. He looked ancient and worn, like an old shoe left out in the rain.

“Hi, Hokage-sama.” She called quietly, leading Naruto in by his grubby little fingers. When he obviously attempted to make a break to jump on the man’s lap, she picked him up by the torso and snuggled him again.

She didn’t know who was training who. But she did know that he responded positively to the touch, and was much more tractable if he was filling up his love tank.


He’d definitely been smoking.

“That bad?” She asked, looking around the room. There was no obvious physical damage.

When she looked back at him, he huffed. “Hatake-san is not a violent man.” He corrected her prior misconception. “He will be spitting me in other ways, probably until the end of my life.”

“And possibly beyond the grave.” he muttered.

She pretended not to hear that part.

“I’m very sorry to bother you,” her face screwed up in stress. She bit her lip. She disliked that she was stressed enough that she couldn’t control her own face.
He relaxed somewhat.

“I need to take Sasuke-kun out of the village, I think.” She admitted, juggling Naruto a bit so she could brush her long hair out of her face. “And I need help convincing Tsunade-hime to help him.”

“Ah.” He blinked. “I have not been successful in my efforts in persuading her. Do you think you might have better success?”

Regina winced.

“I don’t know. But…” she eyed Naruto, knowing he was absorbing everything with wide, blue eyes. “I think she’s the only one who can help him.”

He looked at Naruto as well. Something in his eyes flickered.

“I don’t think she’ll come back to the village, at least not right now.” She made eye contact. “My messages with Shizune-san lead me to believe that she’s at least considering helping, because she hasn’t left Tea Country yet. And there’s no blood involved, so I’m hoping…”

“That if you take him out there, she would try.” The Hokage asserted. “I can understand.”

“But I’d need to contact her quickly to ask. And I can’t carry him myself for that long.” She was adult enough to admit that. “I’d also worry that it wouldn’t be safe without a shinobi escort.”

He nodded. “For you, and for him.”

She jerked her chin down at Naruto. “I can’t exactly leave my responsibilities behind, either.”

His mouth set in a line, but his eyes just looked sad. “No, you can’t.” He sighed.

“Can I buy an appropriately-ranked mission?” Regina asked. “Escort, to a non-shinobi country and back? I know it’s personal and I have to take care of it myself.”

He nodded silently, and took out his pipe. Then he looked at Naruto, blinked, and put it back into his desk.

“Tonight?” The Hokage asked. “It’s more expensive to do these at the last minute.”

“I hate to ask, but yes.” Regina swallowed bile. Damn, this entire chapter of her life was unending stress. “I’m worried about the state of his mind, the longer this goes on. Trauma in children…”

The Hokage nodded quickly. “Yes. I know. That’s why I raised the age for Academy graduation, years ago.”

He was a fairly good dude, all things considered. Regina decided to table that thought for later consideration. At least he wasn’t a homicidal creep.

“...Do you have any shinobi you’d prefer? I’m sure that you aren’t familiar with many.”

Regina thought about it. She trusted…. basically none of them. She’d met Hatake, who it seemed might be in the middle of a psychotic break somewhere and had been odd before that anyway, the Hokage’s jerk son, the woman with him, and…

“Might Gai?” She asked, quirking her head to the side. “He was nice.”

“He is.” The Hokage actually smiled. “And a good choice.”
She got Naruto to bathe, brush his teeth, and put on pajamas before she heard a knock on the door about half an hour later.

An ANBU handed her a note and stood there.

Apparently this one wasn’t going to fuck off until she read it. So she opened it with her nail and scanned the written notice.

“Oh. ANBU Cat.” she addressed the person in front of her. “My son is in the other room. Thank you.”

They followed her into the house, carefully taking off their shoes. It had to be weird to do that- if someone attacked them in their house, did they take the fight outside barefoot?

“Naruto, honey.” She called. He poked his little head out from the door suspiciously. “This is ANBU Cat. They will be watching you while I go help Sasuke get medical treatment.”

“Can we bring the flowers back here after he gets better?” He asked, which kind of threw her for a loop.

“Sure.” She mussed his hair, and he gave her a sleepy grin. “You didn’t do all that flower arranging for nothing.”

“I’ll be back as soon as possible.” She promised, and then tucked a bill into his hand. “If I’m not back by morning, have someone take you to the cafe I promised you. Buy them what they want, ok?”

She kissed his forehead. He smelled like her shampoo.

“Go get in bed.” She directed quietly. “I don’t want to hear back that you stayed up all night.” He nodded, and closed the door.

Maybe she did kinda get the appeal of kids. She wanted to smother him in love.

“Take care of him for me, yeah?” She asked the ANBU. They nodded, quick and authoritative. “I know babysitting is well below your pay grade, but he’s kind of important to me.”

She heard a sleepy little sniffle behind the closed fusuma.

Then she went to change her clothes into something more appropriate, and left.

She met Might Gai by the hospital.

He was still wearing workout clothes- she’d figured that he only wore the jumpsuit for running or something. But it was basically athleisure, so she didn’t honestly have any right to judge. If she had any choice at all, she would be wearing nothing but form-fitting yoga pants and sports bras for the rest of her natural life.

At least it looked less weird to her than the literal bags everyone else here wore. It was very Japanese to dress as an ambiguous, gender-less entity. But to her it still looked weird as shit.

“Hello, beautiful flower of Konoha!” He didn’t shout, probably because it was pretty late. He still
gave her a megawatt smile and a thumbs up. “I have heard that you have contracted me for a most noble mission!” He handed her the paperwork, so that they could leave the gates and then Fire Country.

“Mmm.” She agreed, tucking them into her pocket. “You’re saving a little boy from potential brain death. Did the Hokage tell you if Tsunade-hime agreed?”

“She did.” He advised. He looked a little worried. “Do you feel that you’ve taken on too much responsibility? Uchiha-kun and Uzumaki-kun at once.”

“Thank you for your concern.” She smiled. This guy was actually nice. She liked him. “I probably have, you’re right. But no one else was going to do it. I thought it would be worse not to try.”

He seemed to decide something. He gave her a toothy grin again. “Then, off we go.”

The nurses carefully unhooked Sasuke from his various machines. The beeps faded one by one. It was a grim kind of scene.

This was either going to save him, or kill him. She hoped to God she’d made the right choice in asking.

The nurses dressed Sasuke in a loose pair of shorts and shirt. They didn’t bother putting shoes on him, just nice thick socks.

Might-san picked him up gently, and cradled him in his arms.

Regina peeked at his face.

Sasuke looked distressed, and his breathing was fast and shallow. It didn’t look good.

“It is a two hour run to Tea Country, Jiraiya-hime.” Might-san said, very gently. “We should leave now.”

She gulped and nodded. “I’m afraid that I’ll be slowing you down quite a bit.”

He just blinked.

They left the gates without incident- though the shinobi at the gate were obviously intrigued. They were nosy, and she normally would have appreciated that.

But not now. She was far too stressed.

Regina ran her hands through her hair- but thinking better of it, tied it up. She didn’t have time to fiddle with it.

Then they started running.

Might-san was obviously slowing down quite a bit for her, but Regina thanked Shizune’s awful, soul-shredding training and her nutso magic for making her able to run with chakra. It made her quite a bit faster than a regular civilian, even if she had absolutely no hope of keeping up with him or even a good genin.
They made the border in two hours as Might-san had said (she wondered how much faster he’d have been on his own), running quietly through the dead of the night. Once, she saw a weasel run from them and disappear into a hidey hole off in the bushes.

At the border, she showed the guards her papers, and checked on Sasuke. He was doing about the same. Might-san was obviously making every effort to not shake him too much.

The hotel she’d left from was only about twenty minutes from the border. She knocked on the door.

Tsunade was leaning against the doorway with a glass of alcohol in her hand. The ice clinked against the glass as she swirled it around in her hand.

“Rejina.” She said warmly. “Good to see you immediately ruined at least five other peoples’ day, as well as brow-beating me. I trust you aren’t bringing Gai-kun and this small child to defect with you?”

Regina blinked. “No. Technically I adopted a second one at the same time, probably couldn’t leave him behind.”

“Have him shipped with your luggage.” Tsunade suggested. “Well, come on in. Bring the kid with you.” Then she disappeared into the rooms.

Regina led Might-san into her old room, where Shizune had laid out a futon. He put Sasuke on it, then returned to her side. Shizune covered the boy with the thick blanket.

The boy’s breathing was shallow. His skin pallor was bad.

It made Regina feel uncomfortable. Her natural reaction when she encountered a problem was to fix it. But she’d done what she could. She wasn’t a doctor. And if anyone could fix it, Tsunade could.

It still made her tense up with stress.

Tsunade walked in on her bare feet a few minutes later and sat herself down on the floor, legs gracefully folding under her, straight into seiza.

She lit up her hand with medical chakra and scanned the boy’s head, obviously concentrating.

Then she checked his chest, and opened his eyelids. “Uchiha.” She said, sounding mildly grumpy.

Tsunade sat back and sighed. She made meaningful eye contact with Shizune.

“That’s one hell of a genjutsu.” She removed her jacket, revealing her shoulders. Then she leaned over, bringing more medical chakra in her hand to Sasuke’s temple.

It was a long and horribly stressful thing to watch- and probably more so on Tsunade’s end. Shizune seemed to be reaching up to stabilize his heart rate and check her other vitals.

Regina felt bad for asking them. She knew that Tsunade didn’t practice medicine anymore, and probably for a really good reason. She just hadn’t had anyone else.

After a good hour, Tsunade seemed to be done.
“Good thing you brought him.” She remarked offhandedly. “That would have fried his brain like an egg. As is, he’s going to need consistent monitoring and check-ups.” She gave Regina an eye. “I suppose that’s your responsibility.”

“Hai.” Regina felt more than one pair of eyes on her.

Tsunade snorted. “I’m sure that pissed more than one person off.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“No.” Tsunade sounded amused. “I’m sure you’ll find out in the future, in very unpleasant ways. In any case, I deserve a drink.”

She draped her jacket on Sasuke’s little body and left the room.

“He’s going to need to sleep for a few weeks. If he wants to sleep, let him.” Regina heard from the other room.

He was deep in sleep now, already.

Shizune gave him a sedative just in case, delicately inserting the needle into the crook of his elbow.

“He’ll need to be in the hospital for a bit.” Shizune advised. “I assume you can’t be with him all the time.”

“No.” Regina admitted. “Probably not.”

“He should be ready to come home after a week or so, but he might not be ready to go back to school. It’s up to him.” Shizune rubbed her hand up and down Sasuke’s arm. It looked very maternal. “I’d let him do what he says he wants to, within reason.”

“All right.” Regina wasn’t in a position to reject informed medical opinions.

Then Shizune pulled the covers back over him and stood up. “Come with me, we should let him rest.”

Might-san followed her into the main room, where Tsunade was relaxing on a fluffy zabuton.

“Reji, come here.” Tsunade commanded imperiously, sloshing a little bit of sake onto her hand. She obviously considered licking it up, but seemed to remember that Might-san was there. She primly dabbed at it with her shirt.

Regina obediently sat next to Tsunade, who pulled her practically into her lap.

“You’re stressed.” Tsunade whispered. “What are they doing to you there?”

Regina made a face that communicated ‘horrible things’. Tsunade sighed.

Tsunade’s nails began to scratch her back.

“Gai-kun, how have you been doing?” She asked gamely, with a smile. “I can’t imagine you’re only on medical emergency runs.”

He regaled them with tales of taijutsu fights and his Eternal Rival, while Regina nearly passed out.

Eventually, they all crawled into futons and fell asleep.
They woke up so early in the morning that it was still dark out. Normally, Regina would not acknowledge that this hour existed.

But Sasuke seemed much better. His breathing was normal and he didn’t look like a tiny zombie.

“We should let him wake up.” Tsunade said, stretching her arms and leaning over his bed. “He should know he’s safe as soon as possible.”

That made sense- the last thing he remembered, he was being attacked. No one knew if he’d actually seen his whole family dead or dying. Regardless, whatever he’d seen had been traumatizing and scary.

Tsunade ran her green hands over his chest, running diagnostics. She evidently tuned up a bone crack in his ribs before moving up his neck and to his brain.

“Hold onto your butts.” She said grimly.

The little boy was fast and obviously overexerted- the instant his eyes shot open he sat up and tried to claw Tsunade’s eyes out.

Shizune had to hold him down, which had to be a delicate balance.

Then he seemed to realize Tsunade was not attacking him, stopped, and started bawling immediately. The tears ran down his face, making his tiny chest shudder.

Regina sat down next to him, watching Tsunade run more chakra over his body. She reached out slowly to touch his back, trying to telegraph her movements so that he didn’t freak out and hit her. She wasn’t nearly as fast as Tsunade.

He actually leaned into it, hiccuping and crying. He was evidently exhausted from being in a genjutsu coma for more than a week, because he tired himself out pretty fast, leaning over and passing out on her lap, clawed hand in her hair.

Tsunade-sama huffed, evidently satisfied with a job well-done, and walked out of the room for another drink.

“That went about as well as could be expected.” Shizune said uncomfortably. She leaned back to sit on the floor.

This was the second time in a week a tiny child was attempting to rip Regina’s hair out. She did not care for this particular experience. Was this parenthood?

She slowly and carefully massaged the tiny hand open and re-oriented him so that he was pressed up against her torso, sitting on her lap.

The tiny hands immediately shot back up and around her neck, tangling in her hair.

She felt her lips disappear into a line.

At least he wasn’t pulling this time. Her hair would probably survive.

A silvery-white strand of her hair fell into her lap. She tried to think positive thoughts. Like how
hot she’d look bald.

Shizune crawled across the empty futon, behind her, and then brushed her hair out of the child’s grasp, up into a high but messy bun.

“Thank you, Shizune.” She said, gratefully.

They let Sasuke cry himself out, told him reassuring things, and Regina introduced herself. She doubted he’d remember, but it was worth a shot.

Then Shizune sedated him again, so that he’d sleep for the rest of the day.

Might-san picked him up again, bundling him close to his chest.

Might-san was a real bro. She was going to make him her friend. Regina had decided.

“I love you, I’ll miss you.” She told Tsunade and Shizune, giving them hugs. Tsunade’s hug was a little on the painful side, but Regina decided that was just feelings.

“Be good.” Tsunade gave her a big, wet forehead kiss. “I love you, come flee the state with me when you can.”

“I’ll… try?” Regina looked over at Might-san, who didn’t seem at all concerned with her proposed defection. “Thank you for helping him. I know it was really hard for you, I’m sorry that I had to ask.”

“You were helping someone who needed it.” Tsunade said brusquely, obviously not interested or able to continue that line of conversation. “I’m glad that I could help.”

Regina gave Shizune another hug, noting that her pocket suddenly became a bit heavier. She was so sneaky.

“We should get back, I need to get Sasuke-kun back to the hospital as soon as I can.”

They nodded. Tsunade, who did not like feelings, went back into the ryokan.

Shizune waved. Regina noticed that if she turned around, she could see her waving in the lantern light until she couldn’t see her at all anymore.

The run was quiet again, but the forest was waking up. When they returned to the village, the birds were starting to sing.

“Anou, Rejina-hime, what will you be doing today?” Might-san asked, conversationally. Sasuke was being reattached to his many tubes. She didn’t look.

She shrugged. “Probably paperwork. Then I have to meet with their Academy teachers. The worst part is tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” He seemed genuinely interested.

“The beginning of one of my classes.” She admitted. “I have to start taking tea ceremony and ikebana classes, and shodo… tomorrow is tea ceremony, and I’m really nervous. I don’t know
anyone and I always want to be good at everything I do. Knowing I’m going to fail at first is hard.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “That is quite difficult. I admit that I know very little about the noble art of tea ceremony.”

“Would you like to?” She asked, pretty sure he was gonna turn her down. “I’d love to have a friend there.” She looked down at the ground. “You remind me of my dad… except the part where he’s a pervert who stares at women in onsen.”

Might-san seemed to process all of that with remarkable speed.

“You wish for me to come?” He asked, slowly. Like this was a mild surprise.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t? I’ve heard you’re really competitive. I’m very competitive but…” she looked out the window. “I can’t really compete with people here on what they consider worth doing. I want to be the best. Would you help me?”

His eyes SHONE. It was almost a little disturbing.

“Rejina-hime, I will help you!” He exclaimed. He wasn’t moving, but he was basically vibrating. The world seemed to distort around him oddly.

“Okay, then. Do I need to tell you where the class is?” She asked.

Evidently not, because he was suddenly gone.

“Huh.” she said out loud. Sasuke’s monitor beeped. “Look at us, Sasuke, doing good and doing well.”
Chapter 21

Regina gave her hospital kid a kiss on the forehead and left him a note by his bed, on top of all of his gift swag. She’d come back over lunch to check on him, at least.

Then she walked back home.

She was exhausted and her whole body ached.

Regina crawled back into the genkan and waved to ANBU Cat, who nodded and then quietly left.

Naruto was still sleeping. He was in his adorable little sleeping hat and snoring up a storm.

She decided to take a shower before waking him up. He was the one that was clean.

After her shower, she admired the hot onsen longingly. She looked at the clock. 6:30. She had time.

The onsen felt good on her sore muscles, and she wriggled her way into her silky silky clothes. When she came back into the bedroom, Naruto was waking up.

“Hey there, monkey.” She tickled his stomach and relished the peals of surprised laughter. He convulsed and then swung up to affix himself around her neck.

He really liked being up there, huh.

“Monkey, you need to get dressed. I can’t take you to breakfast if you aren’t dressed.”

He was off like a shot, peeling off pajamas like a banana skin.

“Hey! Don’t strip in front of people, you gotta do that in some sort of privacy.” She called, “Anyone who wants to see you naked at the tender age of 8 does NOT have your best interests at heart.”

She instantly regretted saying that, because of how children are.

But he seemed to take that at face value, and thankfully did not pepper her at breakfast about who would want to see him naked in public. She knew that was only a matter of time, though.

She watched as he stuffed himself full of eggs.

“Eat slower, you’re not going to starve. You might choke.” She was on her third cup of coffee now, but she’d need it for the long winter.

Plus, the Sandaime drunk the office coffee almost as fast as anyone could make it. If she didn’t get her caffeine fix in now, the likelihood that she’d get any at all nearly disappeared.

“Can we bring Sasuke some breakfast, too?” Naruto talked with his mouth full. Some egg fell out.

Sasuke probably wouldn’t be awake, but she figured it couldn’t hurt. He probably was hungry, and encouraging Naruto’s thoughtful impulses was definitely Good Parenting. “Yes, but please don’t talk with food in your mouth. If I’m a princess, you’re a prince, and you need to have manners.”

She sipped the last of the sugary dregs and ordered the next one.

She had to meet with their teachers, a two hour long shodo class that Naruto would have to attend,
and probably would be hearing back about that etiquette teacher.

Regina pushed down past traumatic thoughts. Going through finishing school had been a months-long nightmare.

What was irking her was the suspicion that all the teaching would amount to ‘everything is the opposite now, because fuck you in particular’. It was just a feeling.

Naruto ordered Sasuke a massive breakfast of everything he didn’t get to try, which seemed like overkill, but whatever. Regina ordered a bunch of coffees to be put in a tray and delivered to the nurses, because they were going through some shit and she liked it when medical professionals loved her.

Heroes, all of them.

They showed up, and Regina and her cafe helper carefully arranged the trays of hot coffee and tea at the nurses station. They disappeared so fast it almost gave her whiplash.

She thanked her helper and went down the hallway, where Naruto had immediately shot off. He was concerned that Sasuke’s breakfast would go cold.

Sasuke was sitting up, looking confused and slightly apprehensive. Naruto was holding up chopsticks to his mouth.

“Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun’s arms and hands work just fine. You don’t need to feed him, though your love and concern are good.” Regina swept Naruto away out of Sasuke’s personal space and onto a comfy chair.

“Good morning, Sasuke-kun. Do you remember me?”

He took a moment to focus on her, big black doe eyes squinting.

“...Yes. I think so.” His voice sounded hoarse.

“That’s good.” She readjusted the platter of food on his lap. “I hope you’re hungry, Naruto insisted on bringing you breakfast.”

He grunted softly, and looked down at it. She recovered a second pair of chopsticks she’d gotten for insurance purposes (children), and gave them to him.

“I took you to Tsunade-hime last night, if you remember that. How are you feeling today?”

He looked at her blankly.

“Bad, I’m guessing.” She asserted. “That’s ok. Tsunade-hime and Shizune-san said you would need to stay here for a week, and you need to sleep. But I’ll be by every day as much as I can.”

He looked at Naruto, asking a question with his eyes.

“Hey Naruto-kun?” She asked. She handed him some coins. “Could you go get Sasuke-kun a tea from the machine upstairs? It’s a very important mission.”

His eyes went wide the instant the word ‘mission’ dropped out of her mouth, and he ran off like a shot.

She shut the door behind him quietly.
“I’m sure this is a surprise. And none of it’s great.” she said quietly, sitting by Sasuke’s bed. “Do you remember why you’re in the hospital?”

He nodded, something catching in his throat. “Itachi…”

She let him talk, but reached out to put her hand on his back. He leaned into the warmth and touch.

“My family is dead, aren’t they?” His voice cracked.

Christ, this was probably a job for someone who knew him better. Or someone that wasn’t currently feeling the pull of the abyss because they were also forever separated from everyone they knew and loved.

That or it meant she and Sasuke would trauma-bond real hard.

“Yes, I believe so.” She answered, watching him carefully. She hoped he wouldn’t start hyperventilating. Tsunade had said that his tiny heart had been stressed quite a bit by that genjutsu, and she didn’t want him to have some sort of attack.

“And Itachi?” He asked. Tears were rolling down his face and onto his blanket. She started rubbing her palm in circles between his shoulder blades.

“He left Konoha.”

He sniffed up some of the snot that was running out of his nose.

“You’re safe now.” She promised, even though she couldn’t personally guarantee it. Well actually, if this place continued to be shitty she would take Tsunade’s advice and take these two babies on the road.

Maybe she and Shizune could start a family band. It sounded less stressful and dangerous, at least.

“You saved me.” He said, wiping his snot and tears on his sleeve. Ew.

“I helped.” She said simply. “Tsunade-hime cured you, the doctors and nurses took care of you, and Might Gai-san brought you all the way to her and back.”

“What happens now?” Sasuke asked, looking around the room at all the flowers. She was glad they’d decorated. At least it was a visual reminder that he wasn’t entirely alone.

She hummed. “Well, I asked for guardianship of you, because you didn’t have one. You can live with me and Naruto-kun, if you want. I assume we’ll need to take care of your family house at some point, but we can do that together.”

Regina leaned closer and hugged him lightly. He gripped into her clothes tightly.

His breathing slowed.

“If you want or need anything, just tell me, ok?” She whispered into his hair. He nodded. “It’s going to be hard. You know that. But you’re not alone, and you’ll be ok.”

She kissed the top of his head, because it seemed like the thing to do. He didn’t register it either way.

“Is there anything you want right now?” She asked, slowly pulling away. Naruto would be back soon, and didn’t need to immediately hear all the gory details. Children were horrendously bad at
keeping secrets.

“My clothes?” Sasuke sniffled. “And my dinosaur.”

“It’ll be done.” Regina ruffled his fluffy hair. “A lot of your classmates gave me things to bring you- I don’t know whether they’ll make you feel better or worse. Unfortunately, other children don’t understand what happened. So let me know what you want to do with that.”

He nodded.

“I’ll bring your things over my lunch break in a few hours- try to get some sleep. You’re supposed to sleep as much as you can stand it, ok?”

Naruto barreled through the door like an enthusiastic battering ram, and chucked a can of tea at Sasuke’s head.

Sasuke caught it.

“Please don’t throw heavy cold cans of metal at people.” She intoned. His manners were horrendous. “You can hand people things.”

“I used hands!” Naruto jumped up and onto her torso, clinging. Once his legs were good and attached, he wriggled his hands in her face to make his point.

“I see.” She looked at Sasuke. “I’m sure Naruto will be coming by to see you often- I hope you two get along well.”

“Come on Naruto, you have to go to school.”

“Why doesn’t he have to come?” Naruto whined, and pointed. She carefully and gently lowered his rude little hand.

“He’s sick.” She said, ending the discussion. “We’ll see when he can go back, but it’s not today.”

So they said their goodbyes, and she dropped Naruto off at school by eight thirty. Just as she was required to do.

‘Okay so I was truly stupid for adopting two kids, but so far nothing is on fire and nobody died. I call that an unqualified success.’

Regina drug herself the half-block to the Hokage Tower with trepidation. Today had already been too exciting. She wasn’t sure she was up for whatever these weirdos had to offer.

Three hours later, she was politely reminding a genin team that they shouldn’t track blood in on the Hokage’s carpet. She may or may not have accidentally used some mild killing intent.

Animals.

“They’re just children.” The Hokage said with amusement, watching them go. “It happens.”

‘It just happens that they bring a puddle of someone else’s blood into your office?’
“This experience is not universal.” She said dryly, watching one of the preteens helplessly grind the blood into the fabric to destroy the evidence.

The disembodied head they were holding (that she refused to look at) remained unbagged and continued to drip on the carpet.

‘Thanks for that, I definitely won’t have nightmares about this for the rest of my life.’

She let their ridiculous Jounin sensei talk with increasing nervousness about their mission and how they had brought in a head with a significant bounty.

Evidently he’d left the usual plastic wrap, or sealing scroll, or whatever this donkey farmer usually used to ferry decomposing body parts from place to place at home.

They wrapped up the meeting, and then the Hokage had her sit in on a few more debriefings before turning her loose.

“Is it cleared if I need to go in the Uchiha clan complex?” She asked, after snagging her jacket and purse. “I promised Sasuke-kun that I’d get him some things.”

“It’s not dangerous and you’re the only adult with any vague reason to be there, so yes.” The Sandaime took a puff of his afternoon ‘lunch’. Dude smoked so so much. How he was alive was a medical mystery.

“Has it… been cleaned?” She asked. She tried not to wince.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I believe so. All the blood was cleaned up and the bodies were cremated.”

“Cheery. Thank you, Hokage-sama.” She bowed and left the room, before someone else could accost her with something disgusting or ask her to move something on a high shelf.

She had had no decision whatsoever in being tall, but she regretted it immensely.

The Uchiha complex was conveniently close to her new home. And the snake shack.

Regina watched a team of sad-looking Genin build the foundations for her castle, and resisted the urge to smile.

‘Hey, at least it’s a safe mission. What’s that thing Grandma used to say? Oh, yes. Suffering builds character.’

She walked through the gate and stopped involuntarily. The difference was stark. It was like walking into a cold room. And just being there felt deeply unpleasant. Fear and apprehension were palpable in the air.

There were so many houses- it was about the size of the small town Regina had grown up in. It was all clustered together, with their own little businesses and small gardens.

Except it was enclosed by a fence and had used to house only one family.
It was fairly easy to identify the main house, which was apparently where Sasuke had lived.

It was eerie, walking through that space. Two weeks ago it had been bustling with people.

Now they were all dead, except for Sasuke and his brother, who may or may not have been a traitor.

That office meeting had been a hell of a trip.

She slid open the doors to the main house and stepped in, removing her shoes at the genkan. Even as she did it, she wondered who she was doing it for. It wasn’t like anyone was watching.

It almost would have felt better if she had the feeling that someone was watching. There was just nothing. This place wasn’t full of ghosts. It was cold and barren.

Whoever had cleaned up the blood had left everything else- there was a pot of tea on the counter.

She looked at that a long time. Cold tea, oversteeped, probably molding. This had been a family home. Now it was silent.

It made her feel vaguely queasy.

She walked from room to room, because she had no idea where the hell Sasuke’s was.

She found his parents’ by accident.

There was a chest of drawers with the same fan crest on it. Regina resisted the urge to look inside. That was private.

She very well might be the one to have to clean it out, but she’d be damned if she did it before even telling Sasuke about it. She didn’t know what was precious to him to keep.

She couldn’t help but look at the pictures, though. They’d been a beautiful family. Sasuke’s father was a stern-looking man. Their mother looked gorgeous and serene.

Sasuke was smiling, snuggled up against another boy.

The boy who must have been Itachi had bags under his eyes for days, and looked far too serious.

Christ, he was young. Regina didn’t know how old he was, but he just looked like a baby, too. She thought he’d have been older.

‘Even the children here are killers. I’m in so far over my head.’

She turned away.

Eventually, she found Sasuke’s room. She determined that by her excellent detective skills- it was the only room with babyish toys in it.

She identified the important dinosaur and put it into her purse. It was too big. Its head stuck out, like it was surveying the room with her.

Regina rifled the drawers, and came up with a large selection of clean clothes. Someone must have just done laundry before……

It didn’t bear thinking about. Somehow the mundanity made it all the more horrible.
She left the room and house as quickly as possible, eager to be somewhere alive. It seemed to take far too long to find her way out. She didn’t remember whether Japanese houses were always this confusing, or if this was a shinobi affectation.

She resented it because this place was creepy as hell. The hallway opened up to a small garden in the center. There was a koi pond and some greenery over white stones.

She stopped in her tracks on the wooden hallway floor.

‘Those fish have to be hungry.’

She swallowed, hard, and pushed down the slow-burn fear she felt every moment that she stood in this place. She started opening doors, hoping to find a closet. In a home this lovely and well-maintained, the homeowner had probably had the sense to keep fish food near the fish pond. Her intuition was right. The fish food was in a canvas bag, on the lowest shelf of the nearest closet.

The lowest shelf.

‘I bet this was Sasuke’s chore.’

She tried, but she couldn’t imagine him doing it. She had seen him crying, unconscious, clinging, distraught. She couldn’t imagine a normal little boy cheerfully throwing too much food to the family fish.

When she threw it in, the particles only floated on the surface for bare seconds before fat fish vacuumed them up. Greedy mouths kept breeching the surface, demanding more. So she did, watching the food all disappear just as quickly the second time.

Regina had probably thrown out too much- but it felt slightly better than letting the things starve. She replaced the food, put on her shoes, and hustled out past the empty buildings.

When she got out of the gate, she let out a breath she didn’t know how long she’d been holding. It was like it was a liminal space. A small town with no one in it didn’t feel like a good place to linger, even if she hadn’t known about the murders.

That happened less than a month ago.

Something creaked behind her- probably just a house settling. Or the wind blowing something.

Except there wasn’t even a breeze.

Regina swallowed the fear that inspired and headed off towards the hospital. If someone or something was there, her lizard-brain told her that she didn’t want them to see her flinch.

Sasuke was sleeping when she came around again-which was good. She didn’t really have the time to linger. She put the dinosaur on his bed, and the clothes on the table.

She was back at the Tower in time to let in the Hokage’s first afternoon appointment.
Regina’s new office was still being cleared out, as it had been unoccupied for a while and used for storage. Still, a beautiful and obviously expensive name plate with her job title and name—自来也令神娃女王—was now on the door, and the receipts for her desk, chair, office couch, and other acquired accoutrement were taped to it.

“The bureaucracy is efficient, as always.”

There was an envelope in her mailbox.

Regina snagged it as she walked by. She didn’t have a desk yet, or any privacy. She wondered what mail could possibly be going to her yet.

She hoped whoever it was had had the decency to chicken-peck at one of the few office computers.

Her first edict when she assumed enough authority would be the mandate to transition all paperwork to typeface. She was going to claim it was for standardization, even though everyone who knew her would know it was utter shit.

She glanced at the outside. No such luck, probably. But at least it was in very precise strokes—she might actually be able to read it anyway.

“Hokage-sama, mail for you.” She put the fancy, embossed envelopes into his waiting hands.

“What about that one?” He asked, gesturing to the one under her name.

She looked at it.

“It was in my office box, I don’t know what it is yet.”

He pursed his lips. “Open it?”

She knew enough to know that wasn’t really a request. He was very polite when ordering her around.

She obediently slashed it open with her nail, and removed the paper.

Yeah… she couldn’t read this. She could pick parts of it out, though. Something about a meeting—that was an address and a time. It was in Konoha.

“May I see?” he sounded amused.

She forked it over. If he didn’t translate it, she’d probably miss it. Or have to spend an hour looking up the right kanji to make sense of it at all.

“Shimura-san means to work fast.”

He let the letter fall to his desk and stared at the closed door.

“Is that what the meeting he wants is about?” She asked, looking at the letter curiously. It was upside down from her perspective, anyway, so she didn’t know what she was hoping to see.

“It is an invitation to begin your apprenticeship tomorrow.” the Hokage rubbed at his forehead. He
looked suddenly exhausted. “He would like for you to meet him at Hanami at nine pm.”

“The kaiseki place?” Ew. Regina wouldn’t eat that.

He looked at her obvious disgust and snorted. “I don’t think either of you will eat it. Shimura-san is infamously for not eating food that has not been prepared in front of him.”

‘Then why make me go there?’

‘Oh. Duh. It’s a public place. Probably a limited amount of places to have meetings.’

“I look forward to the experience.” She said, not bothering to modify her tone to make the lie even somewhat believable. It’s not like the Hokage was thrilled, either.

He hummed equally unconvincingly. “I’m sure. In any case, your princess tutoring will begin next week. Madam Shijimi has taken a special interest in your welfare and will be sending her personal recommendation for a teacher.”

‘That bodes ill for me. I don’t like powerful people being interested in my life.’

“Evidently she spent some time in a country far away as a young girl, learning a foreign language, and has heard about your time in Iron. She is interested in talking with you.”

‘Less weird, people always liked to use me for my English when I lived in Japan before. Still not a fan, but less terrifying.’

“She speaks my language?” Regina asked, to confirm.

He handed her letter back to her. “She believes so, in any case.” He studied her face. “It would not go amiss for you to be friendly with her. The Daimyo’s wife is quite influential.”

‘That was another order. He gives the worst orders. ‘Go, be apprenticed to a traitorous lunatic.’ ‘Please, spend your free time becoming friends with a woman who could hire us to kill you.’ ‘Sit in on this meeting and don’t yell at my ninja for behaving like wild animals.’

“I understand.” She said, trying to keep her voice unaffected.

He smiled at her a little bit, then dismissed her for the day. It was technically before her working hours were up, but only by about ten minutes.

If you figured in all the mandatory ‘voluntary’ princess-related lessons, she was working more than 50 hours a week anyway.

That wasn’t including the Japanese language tutoring she was having to sign up for. She’d get all that kanji beat into her head if it killed her. At least she could do her homework at her work desk in between other work.

She left and waited by the Academy, noting that there was a crowd of parents doing the same thing.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted.

There was a chorus of responses. A couple people stared.

The Yamanaka woman from the flower shop actually smiled at her, though. Regina waved at her in particular.
“How was the office?” Yamanaka-san asked, brushing her hair out of her face. Damn, it looked so luxurious.

‘I’m going to ask her what conditioner she uses, like immediately after this. It’s official princess business. Very official. Very princess.’

She needed it. Her hair was not reacting well to most of the products here.

“It was good,” Regina answered vaguely with a smile. “How was your day?”

“You know flower shops.” The woman chuckled. “Not very busy. I read quite a bit. How are the boys?”

“Doing pretty well so far.” Regina didn’t know what else to say to that. They seemed to be fighting the urge to duke it out in some sort of four-foot-and-under Battle Royale.

“Uchiha-kun as well?” The woman asked, eyebrow raised. Oh yeah. His coma was probably hot gossip.

Regina may or may not have made a mistake in implying that he was okay. She didn’t know if that was confidential or not. Probably not, if the Hokage hadn’t told her to keep her trap shut? “He’s awake, but not really able to receive visitors yet. I’m hoping he will be able to return to the Academy in a few weeks.”

Several women nodded, even ones that were pointing not looking at her.

Regina tried not to roll her eyes. If they were going to listen in on her conversation, they might as well be obvious about it. It was just rude.

Yamanaka-san grinned. Regina had the uncanny feeling that she understood what she was thinking.

‘That’s… likely. People here do all sorts of things I had previously supposed were impossible.’

The bossy and improbably hot Inuzuka clan leader was here, too. She looked bored. Did she always look bored?

‘This place is full of absolute foxes. This is unfair. Unamerican. Probably a violation of my rights and an assault on my imagination.’

The kids were released in a riotous mass, and they ran out and bombarded their guardians with affection and bad drawings of unknown objects.

Naruto came out looking a little apprehensive, peeking out from the doorframe.

That must have been hard for him before. It’s not like kids were polite or aware of social situations like that.

And they were deeply unsympathetic towards what they determined as weakness. Kids could just smell it.

He saw her and bolted- nearly knocking down several other kids in the process.

“Don’t run other people over.” She scolded lightly, opening her arms for him to fling himself into. “It’s not polite.”

“Yes!” He chirped, taking the criticism like a champ. Regina picked up the backpack that he’d
flung on the ground, which was difficult considering he was still stuck on her and throwing off her balance.

She bowed lightly to the other parents and scammed before Naruto started wiggling.

They booked it to the hospital, where she installed Naruto in the soft chair in Sasuke’s room.

“Okay, so.” She looked at her kids.

Sasuke was out like a light still. At some point, he’d evidently decided to open some of his classmates’ letters.

Naruto was staring at her with the intensity of the sun.

“Naruto, I need you to do your homework and keep an eye on Sasuke-kun.” She commanded, running her hands through her hair. This was stress. It was all stress. What was she supposed to do with them when she had to do classes at night?

Stupid job. Wanting her to be good at it and mildly useful.

“I have to take my own classes.” She confided in Naruto. “I’m sorry that that means I don’t have all the time I want to for you both until I’m finished.”

He looked suspicious. “What kinds of classes does an adult have to take? You’re not in the Academy.”

“It’s because I didn’t go to the Academy.” She said honestly. “I grew up in a very far away place, and so I don’t know a lot of things I have to learn. Like kanji-”

He made a horrified face.

“-and shodo-”

He actually receded into the chair.

“-and tea ceremony, and manners, and ikebana. You know, princess stuff.”

“Don’t like that.” Naruto said, pouting. “Can’t you just not do it?”

She scooched onto the chair and pulled him close.

“No, unfortunately.” She kissed his little forehead. “I have to go to my classes, just like you have to go to yours. You can come with me sometimes, if you want.”

She looked at Sasuke.

“I just don’t like the idea of him being alone all the time in the hospital, either.”

He nodded, slowly. “So I watch Sasuke.”

“And be a good… sibling?” She tried. “It’s important that you two get along. I know he may not have been as nice as he should have been in the past, but…” she gave him an affectionate look, “it looks like that may have been mutual.”
He had just enough manners to look embarrassed.

“You need each other. Be good to him, he needs friends right now.” She gave him another kiss.

He put his head onto her shoulder and held onto her shirt.

She let him linger, and ran her fingers through his hair. Damn, it needed a cut. So many split ends and tangles.

“So, what homework do you have today?”

He slowly disentangled himself to pull a bunch of crumpled papers out of his backpack. Regina took them and straightened them out on his textbook.

“Do you need folders so your homework doesn’t get destroyed?” She asked, trying to get the worst of the wrinkles out. “It can’t make them easier to read.”

He wrinkled his nose.

“You’re getting folders.” She informed him. “I hear that truly awesome ninja do all their homework and get good grades.”

There was a sharp intake of breath.

“How are your grades?” She asked, having a bad feeling.

He looked absolutely ashamed. He shrunk away from her and his head lowered into his chest.

“I’m dead last in my class.” He said quietly. “I fail a lot.”

That made some sense with what she and Jiraiya had seen. She hadn’t known it was that bad, though.

“Well, we can help you. It’ll be ok.” She put the book down, and lifted up his chin gently to make eye contact. “It’s just important that you try. I’ll make sure you get what you need.”

She tilted his face to kiss both of his little cheeks.

“That’s my job now.” Her snuggly baby seemed to be processing. “If you need help, I get it. That’s how this works.”

He sniffled.

“Let’s try to do your homework. I don’t know if I can personally help, but if I can’t, I’ll figure something else out.”

She in fact could help with some of it (a fact which was both surprising and not, because he was a foot long and 8 years old, but also learning how to kill people), which left him in a much better place than on his own. He apparently thrived off the personal attention. If she could explain something, he seemed to retain it and continue to apply it.

Maybe he just got stressed in a lecture setting? She’d get it sussed out.

She looked up at the clock. It was about ten minutes until her meeting with his teachers.

“I have to go meet with Umino-sensei and Mizuki-sensei about you and Sasuke. I don’t think you
want to come, so could you stay here?”

He nodded, using basic geometry to calculate kunai throwing angles. Bizarre, but whatever. She wasn’t in charge of the curriculum.

‘Yet.’

She wriggled out from under his bony butt and let him resettle in the chair. Then she checked Sasuke’s presents, still sprawled out all over his tummy. He’d evidently been overtaken with the need to sleep in the middle of opening letters.

Regina picked them up and re-stacked them on the table, and walked out. She paused at the door and surveyed the scene. Sasuke was calmly sleeping, and Naruto was obviously working hard.

She’d get him ramen for dinner. She might even eat some.

She had to book it to get to the Academy on time, but she made it. The secretary showed her to a meeting room, and brought her some tea.

“Thank you very much.” She smiled with her eyes. She took a sip. Ew. Oversteeped green tea.

Regina hoped that it was one of those things that she could force herself to like.

The teachers showed up a few seconds later, looking mildly frazzled and clutching piles of paperwork.

“I’m sorry, Rejina-hime.” Umino-sensei said, looking embarrassed. The other teacher gave him a weird look. “We were running late, due to grading.”

“That’s perfectly all right, I understand.” They probably had piles of shit to do. Luckily, this hopefully wouldn’t take too long.

He smiled. The other teacher smiled, too, and took a seat.

“So I understand that you have assumed guardianship of both Uchiha-kun and Uzumaki-kun.” Mizuki-sensei said, all professionalism. “We prepared all of their assessments for your perusal.”

He carefully passed two massive folders over to her.

“Am I allowed to review these elsewhere, or do they need to remain here at school?” She asked, eyeing them. It would take hours to read, even if she had been totally fluent.

“They are copies, you may take them with you.” Mizuki-sensei smiled.

She smiled back. “Thank you. I look forward to reading them.”

Regina leaned forward just a little bit, trying to look friendly. “I wanted to talk with you both about your personal assessments and recommendations for my wards. I thought it would be both faster and more accurate to meet with you directly, instead of receiving these reports third-hand.”

They each nodded.

“Let’s start with Uchiha-kun, shall we?” She picked up his file. “I have been informed that he is an excellent student.”

“He is.” Umino-sensei said quickly. “Very quick. He has the best grades in his class.”
“He’s quite good for his age.” Mizuki-sensei agreed readily. “Good taijutsu scores, and excellent chakra control. He tends to do more than the required coursework. Uchiha-kun appears to be both dedicated and driven.”

“And his interactions with other students? How does he handle situations?” Regina pried. She needed a baseline. And these two were among the few living adults that had had significant experience to him prior to… everything.

“Perfectly friendly, and very… admiring of his older brother.” Umino-sensei winced.

“Uchiha-kun has a tendency to get upset easily.” Mizuki-sensei said clinically. “He has been known to cry when he experiences even mild failure.”

A tiny perfectionist placed under incredible pressure. Great. This was great.

“Do you have any particular concerns regarding his behavior, performance, or other issues?” Probably not. At least from before the incident. After this, who only knew what behavioral issues might surface. He was very young.

“None.” They agreed.

“Good.” She took a note for herself and put it in his file. They seemed to be very interested in it, because it obviously wasn’t in Japanese. She closed the folder quietly, and switched to the other.

“And Naruto?” She asked, restraining the urge to tap her pen nervously on the folder. She doubted the assessment was as positive, if Naruto knew he was failing.

“Unable to concentrate on almost anything, failing most assignments, and incapable of basic chakra control.” Mizuki-sensei analyzed. He was very professional. It almost made her forgive him for his hideous hat.

Almost.

“Any potential reasons for these issues?” She prepared another sheet of paper for Naruto and started taking notes.

“Lack of intelligence, maybe.”

‘Maybe. But Naruto seemed quick to think on his feet when I explained his homework earlier. He could recognize patterns and use tools, provided they were explained.’

“Any other reasons?” She asked, trying to sound positive and noncommittal.

Umino-sensei coughed. “I believe he has a very short attention span. Uzumaki-kun seems to have particular trouble when a lecture is very long, or when expected to read for prolonged periods of time.”

“Which is most classes.” Mizuki-san interjected. “He has trouble with the learning environment.”

‘So do lots of kids. I didn’t study education, but my roommate Lindsey did, didn’t she? She said a bunch of things about learning and teaching styles. So, lecture style not working for Naruto wasn’t necessarily indicative of anything, save for that it doesn’t work with how he processes information.’
“And his interactions with other students?” She asked. It was almost a formality, to some degree. She and Jiraiya had spied on him for a few days. It wasn’t the whole picture, but she thought she had a pretty good idea.

“They seem to be irritated by him.” Umino-sensei admitted. “He has few friends, if any. His loudness often bothers others.”

“They are under the impression that he’s volatile and stupid.” Mizuki-sensei admitted, drinking his own tea. “He does little to dispel that impression.”

‘Where had they gotten that impression?’ she wondered.

“Any particular concerns or suggestions?”

The room was oddly silent.

“I don’t know that he’s capable of passing.” Mizuki-sensei said evenly. “He might be better off removed from the pressures of the program.”

Umino-sensei interjected. “I believe he might succeed, given proper time and attention.”

From the chill in the air she suspected that this was an area of contention for these co-teachers. She didn’t acknowledge that fact.

“Do you believe that private tutoring or remedial work would be beneficial?” She didn’t look up from her notes. Something about this was making her angry. It was hard to pick out what exactly was bothering her, though. It might have purely been personal- her time in primary school wasn’t great.

“Yes.” Mizuki-sensei said slowly, like he was contemplating it for the first time.

“Yes.” Umino-sensei chimed in- but the tone was oddly aggressive.

“Thank you.” She wrote that down, glad they couldn’t read what she was writing. It was like being a spy. She closed the book and smiled with her eyes closed, willing the frustration away until she had the time and energy to re-examine it.

“I believe that Sasuke-kun has missed a significant amount of class now.” She started again.

“Would you be able to provide any assignments for both Sasuke-kun and Naruto-kun that are incomplete? I would prefer that they are not left behind.”

“Of course.” Mizuki-sensei handed her a folder with Sasuke’s name on it. “Although we had only prepared Uchiha-kun’s work for you today. Would you be able to return later this week for Uzumaki-kun’s missing assignments?”

“It will be… a rather large amount.” His face was tight, but apologetic.

‘Well, that’s suck city. But definitely my problem, now.’

“Thank you. I would greatly appreciate that. Would you prefer that I come by for another meeting, or to send it to the Tower?” She made another note. She would definitely not have enough time to help Naruto with years of missed homework. She’d have to outsource some of that.

They concluded the meeting with the traditional niceties, and she left carrying over twenty pounds of paper.
She took it to the house and sealed it up in a storage seal, then put it in a private space. Hopefully she wouldn’t lose it. That was a lot of work for Umino and Mizuki-sensei. She couldn’t ask them to compile it again.

Then she swung by the hospital. Sasuke was still sleeping, and Naruto was coloring on the back of his homework.

‘I need to get that kid a sketchbook. I doubt doing that will further endear him to his teachers.’

“How’s the homework?” She asked, trying not to seem too depressed. She didn’t want him to feel like she thought he was too much work.

He was. But probably about as much as any other kid.

And he didn’t deserve to feel that way.

“Good!” he held it up so she could see the front of it. It looked complete and fairly neat.

“That’s great!” She ruffled his hair. “But maybe I should find you different paper to draw on. I feel like your teachers don’t appreciate your art as much as I do.”

He blinked and smiled.

“It’s me, saving you!” He flipped it over. It was definitely two shapes, that’s for sure. High art. He was a tiny, not-sexist Picasso.

“Oh, I can see that. That’s really good!” She encouraged. She tried to remember how a teacher had managed to get her to stop doing the same thing, when she was little.

Oh, yes.

“I’ll get you a sketchbook soon, so we can have all of your art in one place. That way it’s easy to find.”

He thought about that, then nodded seriously. “I don’t want it to get lost.”

“Of course. Did Sasuke wake up while I was gone?” It had only been an hour, but still.

“Once, but he just told me to stop eating caterpillars. I wasn’t even eating any.” He sniffed, as if insulted.

‘Probably talking in his sleep. At least it wasn’t violent or anything.’

“Well, I have a suggestion for you that isn’t caterpillars.” She grinned. “I have shodo class. You can come with me if you want, and after we could go get-”

“Ramen!??” He asked, eyes lighting up. “I was really good today. I want ramen.”

“Yeah, ramen.”

They wrote a note for Sasuke and left it on top of his other presents and then left.

Shodo class was long and boring. The little old priest continually lifted her arm and critiqued every stroke.

Naruto painted little ink drawings in the corner.
At the end of the two hours, she got some grudging feedback. She wasn’t too bad, but not good. He was cautiously optimistic that she would eventually not be a disappointment.

‘I’m 24 and doing this basically for the first time, I’ll take it.’

‘Although apparently I’m pretending to be 20. Jiraiya didn’t even bother to ask me how old she was before announcing my ‘birth’. At least he didn’t provide a birthday, so I can use my own.’

Keeping the lies as simple as possible helped.

She carefully put Naruto’s dried masterworks in a protective tube with her own, because the Sandaime apparently wanted to see her work. Hopefully he also liked artistic ink renderings of butts, shinobi, and princesses.

They went to the ramen stand hand in hand.

“Teuchi-san!” Naruto crowed, yanking the tube out from her other hand and wielding it aloft like Excalibur. “I made art and shodo!”

“You did shodo?” She asked, finally mentally logging the name of one of the few people who were nice to Naruto and therefore deserved her personal attention. ‘Hand inside’ was not a name she was particularly familiar with, but it was distinctive. So hopefully she’d actually remember it.

“Yeah, I copied some of yours.” Naruto wiggled the tube.

“We can show Teuchi-san later,” She corrected gently, prying it from his hands. “The Hokage wants to see it first.” She would not be happy if broth got on them.

The prospect of importance made Naruto’s chest puff up.

“That’s impressive.” Teuchi-san said, giving her a wink. “I’m sure he’ll love it.”

“Same thing as usual?” He asked them both.

They nodded and took their seats. After they ate, Regina paid and took her kiddo back home to scrub up and get ready for bed.

Today had been long and stressful- being responsible for two children was even more work than she’d anticipated. It was terrifying. They needed so much, and she had to do it all even though she had work and mandatory training.

But she’d gotten through today, hopefully without ruining anything.

Tomorrow, they’d just try it all again. One day at a time.
Regina woke with the sun, and immediately resolved to buy light-reducing curtains.

Naruto was snuffling into his pillow. He was moving enough that she figured he was probably starting to wake up by himself, so she crawled out from under the covers and left the room in her pajamas.

She did her usual morning yoga stretches and the exercises Tsunade had mandated, before taking a quick shower and starting breakfast.

She was making toast and eggs when someone knocked on the door.

Regina looked down at her clothes- she was perfectly decent. Her house wear was pretty nice, actually. So she turned off the heat on the eggs and went to the door.

Might Gai was standing outside, grinning.

“Good morning, Jiraiya-hime!” He boomed. He gave an extremely positive set of thumbs up.

Regina gave him a thumbs-up back. She was too overstimulated to perform at his level, even if she was naturally inclined to that kind of outward positivity.

“Good morning!” she said, as cheerily as she could. “You’re up early.”

“Always up early!” he walked closer to the door. “I wished to confirm our tea ceremony learning experience for this evening, Jiraiya-hime.”

“Rejina, please.” She said, waving the name away. “Can you believe he named himself Jiraiya Jiraiya? If we’re going to be friends, please don’t make me think about my dad in a dress.” she grimaced a little bit, “And I’d like to be known for things I do. Not things he did.”

He laughed. “Very true! It is most youthful of you to determine your own future!” he leaned in, “Rejina-hime, what time is this class? I wish to challenge my Eternal Rival today, and I need to know what time I have available.”

“Oh, yes, your Eternal Rival.” Regina blinked. He’d… talked about that person the other day, hadn’t he? “Um, Might-san, would you like to come in? Naruto is sleeping and we can talk about it while I try to make eggs.”

He gave a thumbs up and came inside. Might-san was very precise about how he took off his shoes and stowed them in the genkan, which was interesting. Usually Regina shed them like a skin and flopped down onto the floor like a jellyfish.

He chattered at her about his Eternal Rival and their lifelong series of competitions (current score: 28-29, favor to Rival), his philosophy involving Youth (always with what she thought of as a capital emphasis), and his passion for taijutsu.

They agreed to meet for class at 5:45 and walk there together because Regina was nervous about
being judged, and afterwards Might-san would seek out his Rival for their next competition.

“Rejina-hime, would you mind taking the finishing photos of our competition?” he asked, looking a bit embarrassed.

“I wouldn’t mind at all, Might-san.” She answered thoughtlessly. It wasn’t like he was asking a lot. “I don’t have a camera, though.”

“No problem, Rejina-hime!” he gave her a decidedly more genuine smile. “And please, if I can call you by your name, I insist you call me by mine. Gai.”

She blinked again. Oh yeah, that was fair. She just hadn’t considered that other people would accept the decrease in formality as easily as that.

“Of course, Gai-san.”

Naruto walked out in his pajamas and sleep hat, yawning.

“I smelled eggs…” he said, mewling pitifully. “I’m hungry.”

She just looked at him. “That’s probably because I was making eggs. You want some?”

He threw himself onto a zabuton and smacked his hands in front of his face. “Itadakimasu!” He crowed.

Gai just blinked at him, then laughed. “So much youth in this home!”

Regina put a plate full of eggs and some toast in front of Naruto. “Do you want anything, Gai-san?”

She didn’t actually want to make any more, but it seemed very rude. Definitely not very Midwestern. Gai could have moved in at that moment if he’d wanted to, and she’d never tell him to leave. If she violated those kinds of rules, she genuinely believed her grandmother would somehow both be raised from the dead and transport dimensions to ask her what barn she was born in.

“No, no, I ate.” He waved it away. He leaned towards her, as if sharing a secret. “Don’t offer shinobi food often. We eat too much.”

“Oh, yes. I remember how much Momo ate.” She said grimly. “Unfortunately, my upbringing makes it impossible for me to not offer.”

He seemed a little confused, but sympathetic.

Naruto made a truly awful horking sound. She patted his back.

“Manners.” She reminded him quietly. “Don’t choke yourself on scrambled eggs. It sounds like a particularly embarrassing reason to go to the hospital.”

Naruto just grinned and started shoveling more down his cheerful little maw.

“He’s some sort of egg-fueled fiend.” She said to Gai, with a quirked smile. “I’m sorry, his manners are…” she shrugged. “Youthful?”

“Very.” he said, seriously. But his eyes twinkled. “Will Naruto-kun be coming to tea ceremony class with us today?”
“I dunno, do you want to, Naruto?” she lovingly poked his little shoulder.

He gave her a skeptical face.

She tried really hard not to laugh. The corners of her mouth hurt. He was just so cute.

“No, I did shodo with you yesterday. Today, I want to keep Sasuke-kun safe from assassins until you get done. Tea sounds boring.” Then he started putting eggs on his toast and eating them as toppings.

‘I feel like somehow mentioning assassins did not make me feel better.’

She blanked for a moment, then turned to Gai.

“I guess not! I’m afraid you’re stuck with just me.”

Gai left a little bit later, promising to meet her outside the Hokage Tower.

She and Naruto got dressed, walked to a bento place, and grabbed their lunches. Then she dropped him off at school with a big, embarrassingly loud kiss on the forehead.

“Ewwww!” He grumbled, but she could tell he was enjoying the attention. “Come and pick me up after school?”

“Of course. Then we’ll get you some art supplies. You can do your homework and your art in Sasuke’s room, while you’re keeping him safe for me.”

He gave her a Gai-style thumbs up, complete with gleaming grin. It was uncanny.

“You should consider acting.” She told him. “If this shinobi thing doesn’t work out.”

He giggled at her and raced into the building.

Regina worked on her police proposal on the couch in the Hokage’s office. He took meeting after meeting. Mostly she was just there to maybe absorb anything through osmosis and repetitive listening, apparently.

She had a vague idea sketched up pretty quickly- and the twenty or so shinobi were scheduled to come in for a meeting with her and the Hokage at 2 pm. That gave her enough time to have a proposal worked up.

The timeline for training was something she wasn’t sure on. And how this training should be done—was it a job, and they went home at night? Were they brought to a special facility and stayed there for a few weeks?

She supposed it depended on the goals of the police force. She knew she wanted to significantly demilitarize it, and make it accessible to civilians. They shouldn’t be violence-prone people.

There would need to be entry testing and at least yearly evaluations. She didn’t want to start a program that killed people.

But what indicators would she be testing for? And perhaps more importantly, what indicators
would mean elimination from candidacy?

For sure a history of personal violence would have to disqualify a candidate. If that was disqualifying, it also had to be a fireable offense.

The kind of people who might apply to be part of a historically shinobi (violent) police force were probably already disqualified. That meant that the whole idea of police needed rebranding and marketing. The goals had to be different. This wasn’t just an extension of anbu or an outlet for people who didn’t wish to be held accountable for their actions.

She wrote up multiple proposals and trashed them all one by one.

Regina caught more than one person staring at the overflowing trash can beside her, but she didn’t really care. She had the opportunity to do this thing right, it had to be thought through.

So, the role of police as she saw it was to inform and protect its citizens. They did traffic control, awareness campaigns, and investigated crimes.

Although, what happened once those crimes were investigated?

She waited until a brief lull in between meetings to ask her Hokage.

“Hokage-sama, who decides whether a person is guilty? And decides their punishment?”

He gave her a wry smile.

She slumped her shoulders. “It’s you, isn’t it.”

He nodded, and took out his pipe.

“That’s not sustainable or particularly fair.” She pointed out. “What if you were some sort of loon? You’re not, but you’re also busy.”

“That’s a good point.” the Hokage looked at her. “I suppose that means you’ll have to add that aspect of things into your proposal.”

Then another genin team walked in, and he was busy again.

Fine. She would reinvent the judicial courts system. But probably not today. Unless this plan went incredibly well.

Regina went back to writing.

Something white flashed in his peripheral as he rounded the staircase. He had a spike of adrenaline and a hand on a kunai before he looked at it directly.

Someone had attached a note to his door with green washi tape. There was a lumpy turtle bluntly scrawled in thick black ink.

The suspect list was short.
Kakashi put the weapon down and readjusted the groceries in his left arm so that he could tear it down on his way in.

“Dearest Eternal Rival,” the letter began.

That was convincing evidence for his theory.

He shoved the paper in his back pocket and put his vegetables in the fridge. He left the eggs out because he had ambitions of making tamagoyaki in the morning and he wanted the visual reminder. That done, he wandered through his apartment.

Had it always been this small? Or had he just not been spending time in it? The answer was obvious and did not improve his mood.

When he felt like he couldn’t avoid it any longer, he fished out the letter and smoothed out the worst of the wrinkles to read it. It began the way he expected it to.

“I am writing to inform you of two things. I would like to have a rematch tonight at 8pm, at the site of our most recent challenge.”

His impulse was to claim that he had work, but then he remembered he was borderline unemployed now.

He waited a moment. Ah, yes, there it was. Sadness? Was it soul-sucking despair? Something like that. He was fairly fucking certain he was still unhappy about losing ANBU status.

He had been told to look at this as an opportunity. Maybe one day he’d find meaning in churning through B class missions, now that he’d been robbed of any opportunities to numb himself.

Ah, right. Letter.

“And I have made a Best Friend. You will always be my Eternal Rival in my heart, and cannot be replaced.”

He squinted.

‘Is he reassuring me?’


Kakashi took a moment to breathe that in. It didn’t clear up. Optimistically, he flipped it over to see if the back had anything that might put this into context.

Despite himself, he was a little bit curious. This was new.

...that did mean he had to go meet Gai.

At one pm, she had something that she was fairly pleased with. It wasn’t final, but it was a good start. She had it typed up and printed immediately, after getting the Hokage’s approval. Getting her new police officers on board was likely going to be much more difficult.
“Why would we not be armed.” One of the shinobi said deprecatingly, looking to the Hokage like she was some sort of idiot. “Our job is to apprehend and eliminate criminals.”

Okay. Regina put a mark next to his name. Kagami-san would not likely be in charge of her new police force. He would be lucky if she didn’t try to have him demoted to a living trash can. Or worse, Anko-san’s assistant. She might be able to pretend that one was a promotion.

Being super into extrajudicial executions was definitely a disqualifier.

“With all due respect, that is not the job anymore.” The Hokage said, watching her reaction. “The police of Konoha serve a different function.”

Kagami-san didn’t insult his Kage, which meant he at least wasn’t ridiculously infantile. But he wasn’t happy either.

“As I was saying,” Regina continued, “the police force is better used as a friendly face of Konoha, and a protective arm to investigate crime. Your special skills in investigating crimes and finding guilty parties are necessary to the stability of Konoha. However,” and she looked around the room to see who might be actually paying attention, “punishment is no longer within your purview. To investigate and non-violently apprehend those who have committed crimes is the goal, as well as to provide information to citizens and visitors, making the city appear safer and more navigable.”

“How is it safer if we don’t have weapons?” One man asked. Regina clocked his face. This one was Inoue-san.

“Good question.” She complimented. “The answer is complex. Traditionally, we think of safety in shinobi terms- which is why it is difficult to comprehend using no weapons or lethal force.”

Heads around the room nodded.

“However, safety relies on a number of components. For example- someone steals something. Traditionally, the punishment is left up to the police, or maybe the Kage. It tends to be extreme in nature.”

Kagami-san nodded, gruffly.

“However, this makes people feel more unsafe. They believe that the police are there to attack them and maybe even kill them, for crimes which are nonviolent in nature. They do not believe that the police are acting in their best interests.”

There was a mildly offended murmur around the room. She ignored it.

“There is little authority over the traditional police, except for the Kage, which means that justice may actually be elusive. There is little for evidentiary requirements and no guidelines for punishment.”

She wanted to lick her lips. They were feeling dry. But she persisted.

“This leads people away from Konoha, and into villages without shinobi protection. They may fear us more than other threats. This harms them, and brings harm to the village when our people die or leave the country, both realistically and in matters of reputation.”

A few of them were obviously chewing on that. She took it as a win. She didn’t think she’d be
winning over much of anyone in just one meeting. It was going to be a gradual process.

“In that vein, we must think about what face we want to present to both Konoha and the Elemental Nations at large. Shinobi are by nature feared and secretive, whereas in your position you are able to represent Konoha very visibly in your specific duties. This allows ANBU, border patrol, and our assigned shinobi to continue their work separately, while changing the perception people have of our country and shinobi as a whole. The idea behind adding civilians to the police is that showing cooperation and mutual benefit of different skill sets projects strength and wisdom to the rest of the Elemental Nations, as well as providing further incentive and comfort for the civilians who live here and drive the economy.”

She eyed them. A couple of them looked promising.

“Are there any further questions?”

Kagami-san raised his finger to indicate that he had one.

“Yes, please.” She gestured.

He grunted. “What happens to the criminals that are caught? If we don’t punish them, who does? Do they just go free?”

She smiled. He tensed up a little bit.

“Also a wonderful question. They would not go free- though the plan for the judicial system is not fully finished.”

He looked skeptical again.

“We would nominate people who understand the laws as listed to judge offenders, and must create a significant amount of rules and sentencing guidelines for punishment for those found guilty. It will require a significant amount of work, which is why Konoha needs your perspectives and experience.”

They perked up a little bit at that. She wasn’t surprised. They seemed to love it when she threw out the party line.

“This change is necessary, but it cannot be executed properly without your input and support.” She gestured down at the proposal on the table. “You are the ones who have held these positions, and know how vital they are. I am asking you to help improve upon the system you know, for the betterment of Konoha and its people.”

They didn’t give her much feedback- but it wasn’t surprising when this was the first meeting and the Hokage was watching. She made sure they all took their proposal booklets with them. She’d meet with them individually later for further interviews.

“Do you have any input for me, Hokage-sama?” She asked, after the room was cleared and secured again.

He put down some papers and looked at her for a long moment, evidently dissecting her and her performance.

“Good job.”
That would put her on a high all day, she just knew it. The thing was damned far from done, but that was a great start.

“How are we going to fund it?” He asked, looking at her. “You say yourself that our economy isn’t as strong as it could be.”

“That’s very true.” She admitted. “Lack of promotion to civilian merchants, trade contracts, and confidence in security mean that Konoha isn’t as financially stable as it could be.”

She twitched her nose in thought.

“Does that mean you want me to work on that, too?”

He held up his hand, as if to ward off her enthusiasm. To be fair, every single thing she did caused him much more trouble and paperwork in the short term.

“Not today, I think. One thing at a time. I don’t wish for you to become overworked.” The thought seemed to make him sad for a moment and he looked away, lost in his own head.

Regina let him wallow for a minute. She’d be a real ass not to let other people do that when she did that all the time.

She didn’t know what it was about, but she could guess. The access she’d had to some records indicated that suicide rates were high, even when conflict casualties were low.

She carefully did not contemplate which death(s) he was currently mourning.

She quietly cleared her throat to bring him back down to Earth. “So, I should look at our yearly budgets, then?” She asked. “And see if there are any extra expenditures that we should cut, or reallocate.”

He blinked a few times and turned back to her.

“Yes, that’s a good plan, Rejina-hime. Thank you.” he looked off to the side again. “Please ask Keiko-san for all the necessary paperwork and records.”

“Of course, Hokage-sama.”

She bowed low, and then she left him to his thoughts.

Keiko-san had all the paperwork delivered to Regina’s large, surprisingly luxurious, and newly-cleared office.

Or now, newly-filled-with-budget-shit office.

“Why is there so much.” Regina asked incredulously, as Marunosuke-san brought in box after box. She couldn’t even reach her desk like this. Reaching the couch was a pipe dream.

Keiko-san shrugged her shoulders. “Big village. This is all our income and outgo for the last few years.”

“I don’t really need the income right now.” Regina rubbed at her temples. “Can we take that out, and I’ll look at it later? I just need our expenses.”
About ¾ of the boxes were removed.

‘That’s better.’ She thought idly, watching the shinobi move the boxes all around again. She noted that they were normally kept in a locked room near the Jounin Commander’s office.

‘I probably need security for my office, sooner rather than later.’

Locks weren’t really much of a deterrent to shinobi. Or even a significant amount of civilians.

No, for this, she’d need…

“The fine arts.” she growled.

“What?” Keiko-san asked, from her desk. “Is there a problem?”

‘Yes. I have to learn the art that displaced me from my home and dumped me in this mess. It’s my nemesis, if I’ve ever had one.’

“No.” She lied brightly. “Sorry, my stomach was growling.”

Keiko either bought the lie or decided it wasn’t worth pursuing. Either way was fine.

She only had time to start on the first box before it was time to get Naruto from school.

Regina pulled herself away with a mixture of feelings. She regretted having the extra obligation, she wanted to finish the work she’d started, but…

Hanging out with her little weirdo kids and Gai was a lot more fun than circling line items in a budget and asking people what the hell they were. She found that the office discretionary fund was oddly high for what they got, for one. There were some weird numbers, which meant she was going to have to do a lot of her other worst enemy, math.

‘Why do I want to square up against whole disciplines? It’s not like math or the fine arts actually kicked my ass.’

She tabled that thought for later.

When she reached the Academy minutes later, the other parents received her presence with significantly less stares than the days before, which Regina took as a good sign. They’d get used to her eventually.

Someday, she might even get used to them.

Then she and Naruto bought a ton of markers, stickers, glitter pens, and two drawing pads. They stopped to get takeout and Sasuke’s file of homework on their way to the hospital.

Regina would normally worry about ruining her appetite for her mandatory party with Shimura-san, but she was as sure as the Hokage about her likelihood of actually eating it.

Sasuke happened to be awake when they got there, and gratefully received his homework, dinner, and art supplies. He tore into the homework almost immediately, forgoing his food.

“Don’t forget to eat your dinner.” She advised him, noting that his dinosaur had ended up on the floor. She put it back on his pillow. “How was your day?”
“I slept, mostly.” Sasuke sounded far away. He was obviously concentrating. “It was ok.”

“No bad dreams?” She asked, knowing she was prying a bit.

He shook his head. “Not lately.” his pencil danced over his homework.

Naruto broke into his donburi and started snarfing it down.

“You know, I’ve been asked to re-form the Konoha police.” She delicately placed the topic out there, to see if he’d touch it.

Dark eyes flickered her way. They narrowed a bit.

“I know it was traditionally a Uchiha clan position, is there anything you think I should know?” She watched him carefully, while she pretended to be super interested in her rice bowl. “I want to make sure I do a good job. I think the police are very good at helping people.”

The pencil dropped.

She could see Naruto look up out of the corner of her eye.

“I wanted to be a police officer.” Sasuke said, quietly.

She waited for him to say anything else, but he didn’t. “So you know how important it is to help people.” She pushed a bit.

He looked down at his papers. “Yes.”

God, was this how the Sandaime felt when he tried to ask her about her personal life? She momentarily felt bad.

But not really.

‘GiT GuD then, old man.’ She thought with some mild amusement.

“If you have any ideas or thoughts, you can tell me anytime.” she said, extending the offer.

“I think police are really cool.” Naruto said, eyes darting around the room. He was obviously straining to participate in the conversation, even as he seemed to recognize that it had an odd feeling to it.

The baby really did try.

“That’s a good thought. I like that.” Regina replied with a grin, tickling his stomach. He giggled and then scooched out of her reach.

“Anyway, you two watch each other and get some homework done.” She put her finished bowl in the recycling, and brushed off her clothes. “Don’t fight. The nurses will tell me if you do.”

“Where are you going?” Sasuke asked, looking sad.

She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “Unfortunately, since I’m new, I have to go to training at night most weekdays. So far, all my weekends are free. But until I’m finished with my classes…”

“You don’t have a lot of time for us.” Sasuke inserted. He sounded a little angry.
She slumped. It wasn’t her best, she knew that. She sat down on the bed, at his feet.

“That’s not good, I know.” She said quietly. “It’s all I can do right now. I have to work to pay for us, but also I came from an entirely different country.”

She looked at her boys. “Did you know that?”

They shook their heads.

“Not surprising, I guess.” She ran her hands through her hair. “I only came to the Elemental Nations less than a year ago. Japanese isn’t my first language, either.”

“Alone?” Naruto asked.

She didn’t want to cry, so she killed that urge violently. It wasn’t like she couldn’t be vulnerable. But right now probably wasn’t the time.

“Yeah.” she said. “Alone.”

“Isn’t Jiraiya your dad?” Naruto asked. “You told me he’s my ojii-chan.”

“That’s true.” The ojii-chan part. Legally, at least. “But I didn’t meet him until then. I didn’t know anything about him. Coming here wasn’t my choice.”

That was putting it lightly. But they didn’t need to hear the rest today, and she’d never say it outside of a room that wasn’t secured by a seal master and vetted.

‘Because I like living. Kinda. Sorta. Most days.’

“So I have to learn all of these things so I can live here.” She explained. “All the princess stuff, but everyday things, too. My reading ability is fairly limited. And I’m too old to take shinobi training, so I have to be perfect at everything else.”

They seemed to get it- as well as young kids could, anyway.

“So I want to spend all my time with you- but since I came here at the same time,” she looked at Sasuke, “I have to take care of those things too. After I’m finished, I’ll have more free time. And I’ll be with you whenever I can.”

“It’s duty, then.” Sasuke seemed much more relaxed. “That’s why you can’t stay with us all the time.”

She nodded. “It’s not what I want. And I’ll try to make sure you both have everything you need, and keep things clear once I’m done. I’ll still have to go to work but so do you. You have Academy, then you’ll have your genin teams if you pass.”

“Okay.” He tapped his pencil on his papers. “So how long do we live with you?”

Her head snapped back a bit. What?

“Until you’re adults.” She pointed out. “And you’ll only be in the hospital for a few more days, really. Then you can come to the diplomatic housing I’ve been staying in. In a few weeks, we can move into the house.”

“Why not now?” Sasuke asked, eyebrow quirked.
“It’s being built.” Naruto said, seeming thrilled to be in the information loop for once.

She nodded. “That’s right.” She looked at Sasuke in specific. “I don’t know how you’ll feel about this, but it’s fairly close to your other home.”

He swallowed.

“Don’t worry about it too much.” She advised. “We’ll get to that issue in time. It’s still there, whenever you feel ready to deal with any of it. I won’t let anything happen to it.”

Sasuke nodded, but Naruto just looked confused.

“Sorry, buddy.” She patted him on the head. “I am getting rid of your old apartment with great prejudice. It was old, and we deserve to live in a tiny castle.”

“Tiny?” He asked. “I wanted a big one.”

“It has a natural hot spring and two floors of rooms.” She informed him. “I thought I would be living alone at the time.”

Sasuke made a face.

“Don’t judge.” She told him. “You don’t know me well enough yet. I deserve to be judged based on my real flaws.”

“Can we have staff like rich people?” Naruto asked, lights dancing in his big blue eyes.

That was an idea.

“I’ll see.” She said, musing over it. Regina was not much of a laborer. And running a house with two kids in it was a full-time job. She should probably hire somebody, if she could find anyone she trusted. “It’s a good idea, seeing as I work a lot and have so many classes.”

“Plus, you can’t cook very well.” Naruto pointed out.

Sasuke looked offended on her behalf.

“You can’t just say that, idiot.” He whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “It’s rude.”

“She can’t, though!” Naruto squeaked. “I mean, the eggs this morning were good, but you told me yourself, nee-chan!”

“She’s technically our mother, idiot.” Sasuke berated again.

Naruto stopped.

They both looked to her for confirmation.

“Technically, yes.” Regina ran her fingers through her hair again. She was self-soothing a lot, lately. “You don’t have to call me that though. ‘Nee-chan’ is also fine.” She swallowed. “I’m not trying to replace anyone.”

“Anyway, I’ll look into finding someone who can cook for us and look after you when I’m not around.” She looked at the clock. She’d have to run if she took much longer.

“I have to go to tea ceremony class now, though.” She gave them a sad smile.
“Sounds terrible. My mother said she hated those.” Sasuke said simply.

That didn’t really help.

“I have to go, though. Something about princesses being cultured.” She reached out to him, and he leaned closer.

She gave them each a peck on the forehead, and then slid off the bed and out the door.

“Come back to pick me up, after!” Naruto yelled.

How could she forget?

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Gai-san was waiting for her outside the Tower, just like he said.

“Sorry Gai-san, got caught up with the boys.” She apologized.

He shook his head. “You’re not even late, Rejina-hime. Shall we go?”

They walked through the rapidly darkening streets, until they arrived at the appointed house. It was big, and fancy. Regina tried to be appropriately awed, instead of just nervous.

The class was small, evidently. And mostly done in kimono.

Regina felt underdressed. She should have accounted for that. But seriously- how could she have the time to put on a kimono in between her job and this, especially if she was responsible for kids?

Gai-san didn’t seem to notice. She doubted that was true, but maybe he was just immune to feeling out of place.

Chapter End Notes

Hey uhhhhh I'm in surgery this week, so could use all positive comments possible. Believe it or not, having a major surgery done in a country that doesn't speak your primary language is 10000% stress. Hope you enjoyed!
“And so, today we begin with the noble art of kadou.” the immaculate older woman said, evaluating each of the woman (and Gai) like they were fresh meat. “You will be expected to learn how to present at both chakai and chaji. Today, we have two new students. Please introduce yourselves.”

She looked at Regina first, so she bowed.

“My name is Jiraiya Rejina. It is very nice to make your acquaintance, please take care of me.” Regina said as demurely as possible.

The woman echoed the greeting back. At least that hadn’t gone badly. Tsunade had drilled her on princessy introductions. Regina hadn’t been particularly worried about this part.

“I am Might Gai,” he bowed a little lower than Regina. “Nice to meet you.”

Their teacher’s lips quirked for a second. But everyone repeated back, and then introduced themselves.

“I am Hyuuga Amai.” One older woman said sourly, leaning her head back so that she could look down her nose at them.

Regina and Gai were pretty tall, even sitting down. She had to lean reeeal far back.

‘Either this woman is having the worst day in human history, or it’s a severe misnomer.’

“The Hyuuga are a storied and highly respectable family. I am thrilled to make your acquaintance.” Regina lied through her beautiful teeth. She remembered the other pleasant little Hyuuga who’d spent last Thursday pounding her kid into the pavement.

And their clan head, who was also a dick.

That or may not be a theme.

‘Are the Hyuuga my enemies now? It seems like a sign that they’re everywhere I go, annoying me.’

No.

She refused to acknowledge people that way. She had loftier goals, and would defeat the fine arts. Mere human beings weren’t worth that much effort.

The woman smiled politely, but in a way that put Regina’s hackles up. She would eat Regina for breakfast if she could, all while pretending she was a polite lady of good breeding.

Regina immediately resolved to be so goddamn good at tea ceremony. She’d hate every second-the tedium, what she considered unnecessary ceremony, the bitter tea.

‘Let my hatred fuel me and my success.’
She made it her mantra.

Nakayama-sensei led them through the very beginnings, evidently for Regina and Gai’s benefit.

“The preparation is the most important aspect of chadou.” She said sternly. “When guests arrive before the appointed time, fresh tabi must be available in a pleasing way.” She gestured lightly to the aesthetically arranged tabi that Regina and Gai had also changed into on their way in.

“They then enter a waiting room, where you must have a suitable and seasonable presentation in the tokonoma. Your guests must also be served refreshments while they wait. What are the acceptable drinks to be served in the waiting room?” She looked around the room with hard eyes.

“Hot water, kombu tea, roasted barley tea, or cherry blossom tea.” Hyuuga-san said easily.

Regina got the feeling Hyuuga-san did not need lessons.

“That is right, thank you, Hyuuga-san.” Nakayama-sensei gently clasped her hands together. “We will practice preparing these aspects today, to perfection.”

‘Oh, snap. We haven’t even gotten to the matcha.’

Well, that made some sense. It couldn’t just be about the matcha making, if it was one of the three noble arts.

Regina belatedly remembered that she’d forgotten incense appreciation classes- the three classical arts of ‘refinement’ were chadou, koudou, and kadou. But that was so rare and expensive that it was probably ok to wait for a while to start- if she took everything at once, she’d mostly just adopted Naruto and Sasuke in order to have the privilege of paying for their expenses. She’d never be able to see them again.

“It is now summer.”

‘No kidding.’

“There are particular flower arrangements and tatejiku that are appropriate for display.” Nakayama-sensei gestured to a roll of scrolls and a set of flower arrangements.

“It is important to give the suggestion of nature with your arrangements.” She lectured, looking particularly severe. “This is not kadou.”

“The flowers in chadou are those typically found blooming at the moment in nature. Nothing out of season or presented as an ikebana arrangement.” The red and white flower was brought forward to the table.

“Mukuge is a typical flower of choice for July. See how it has been arranged by its stem to look as natural as possible, complemented by leaves of silver grass.”

It did kind of look like it had been plucked fresh from a meadow somewhere, in its beautiful bamboo basket.

“The circle reed around the top of this basket implies a safe adventure and return home. It is therefore a very appropriate arrangement for families of shinobi.”

Everyone in the room said, “Sou desu.” in unison.

It was the obvious answer and very socially aware, but Regina always kind of felt creeped out by it.
Then she went on to explain that the tatejiku in the room would also need to be seasonally or atmospherically relevant. If it was a ceremony at night, a painting of rabbits might be used, for their relation to the moon.

Then they were given their first assignment.

“Please, choose the most appropriate combination of flowers and tatejiku for your tea ceremony tonight.” Nakayama-sensei commanded. “The flowers are in the vases in the anterior room. The selection of tatejiku are in the cabinet.”

‘Oh god, okay. But hey. It’s practice? I just… hoped there would be more guidance before having to do something.

Regina thought about it. It was summer. What kanji were appropriate? Wind, probably. A night meeting was fairly informal, so a poem wasn’t necessary. It was the one at noon with five guests that was the height of sophistication.

Summer seasonal painted scenes would be appropriate.

She needed to decide what was more important to do first. The flowers in the anterior room she’d seen had been plentiful and there was a relatively small variety.

But the tatejiku were one-of-a-kind. Those would be where she would most likely make or break the assignment.

Regina walked to the cabinet to see if there were any labels on the scrolls. They were already on shelves for all four seasons.

So she pulled out multiple ones to check, and carefully opened them one at a time on the table.

One of her ‘maybe’ options was a rabbit pounding mochi, old-style.

It was an obvious answer.

She carefully re-rolled it, and placed it to the side by her feet. She wasn’t letting that one go unless she found a better one.

The next likely one was a painting of rolling mountains. On it, she could see little animals with long ears gamboling in the foliage.

Bingo.

She placed the rabbit pounding mochi back in the cabinet, as well as her other options.

Her scroll was in her place.

So it was time to get a flower. She walked carefully on the wood in her slick tabi socks. It would be so easy to slip and fall.

There were hydrangeas, irises, sunflowers, and lavender, as well as the answer they had been provided, which kind of looked like the famous flowers from Hawaii- hibiscus?

Regina was fairly sure that copying their teacher was just the passing grade. It was the easiest answer of all possibilities.

Or maybe she was overthinking it?
A lot of the other students had chosen mukuge. She remembered that one of her other study abroad friends had complained about their ikebana class- individuality was not encouraged. They were supposed to reproduce their teacher’s composition exactly.

It was a lot like being taught by Tsunade, she thought idly, avoiding looking down at her clothing. Maybe she’d get punished for not choosing the provided answer.

She was definitely overthinking this. She just had to make a choice and see what her teacher said. Regina doubted there was an answer so wrong she’d be thrown out of the building on her ass.

So she tried to remember what little she knew of Japanese flower language. It was… really really little. She mostly remembered connotations.

She knew hydrangea was pride, because she really liked it and worried about whether it was seen as a good thing or not. Culturally, pride wasn’t admired. But also, she was Jiraiya’s daughter apparently, so pride was kind of part and parcel with her family reputation.

Sunflowers kind of reminded her of Naruto, and they were a good solid happy choice. Probably?

She decided to listen to her heart. She picked up a few hydrangea stalks, and some blades of grass. As a concession, she picked up a sunflower. She could compare them to her chosen tatejiku and see which flower complimented it better.

Not that she was good at that from a Japanese perspective, either. She considered those color and pattern combinations messy. It wasn’t, actually, it was just a matter of cultural perspective. Hopefully she’d get better at it.

She ended up going with her ajisai hydrangea, delicately bending and resituating the flexible stem to look like it was bending in the wind. Wind was definitely summer.

She’d chosen a basket with a narrow mouth and wider bottom, because the long stem needed the support. She didn’t know if she was supposed to trim it. No one else was.

When she was happy enough, she left it alone and put the extra flowers back.

Gai had evidently gone with a strong-looking style of kanji that said “wind” and a massive sunflower by itself. She liked his style. It was very honest and up-front.

“Please take a basket, pad of paper, and a pen.” Nakayama-sense said, gesturing to the stacks of each. “Place the basket in front of your display, then walk around and write words for the impression each presentation gives you. Fold the papers and place them in the respective baskets.”

They did as they were told.

For Gai, she wrote, “bright”, “summer”, and “friendly”.

The next presentation was fairly reserved. It was one iris, sideways in the vase. The thing about irises was that their stems were long and thick- they were normally straight up. Maybe the same wind implication as Regina? The vase was a black lacquerware tube, with gold details.

The scroll was the one she’d initially turned down, with the rabbit pounding mochi.

She wrote “night”, “moon”, “elegant”, and “wind”.
The others were fairly standard. She wrote “summer” a bunch, and there were no more rabbits. Basically everyone else had chosen the same flower as the model.

“When you are finished, please go to your stations and read your comments.” Nakayama-sensei intoned, sharp eyes sweeping over the room. Regina had no doubt that she had critiques. She wouldn’t have been recommended if the woman didn’t demand utter perfection.

She couldn’t honestly read the notes in her basket. That was going to be hard.

She did catch the ones she was looking for: “summer” and “wind”. But there were others she couldn’t quite make out.

“Please redo your presentation as you see fit, according to your comments.”

It was actually really smart to teach it this way. Just memorizing wasn’t helpful. If your guests didn’t get the message you were trying to send, you may as well have not sent it at all.

Regina genuinely respected that.

She waited until the other students had mostly left the room, and tapped Gai on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Gai-san. I’m not very good at reading handwriting. What do these say?” she whispered, handing him the notes.

He read them with good cheer. But his brow furled on reading one of the last ones. He looked around the room.

“Most of them say ‘pride’, ‘night’, ‘casual’, ‘friends’, ‘summer’, and ‘wind’, Rejina-hime.” He held up one. “This one just says ‘conceited’.”

“What do yours say?” She asked, feeling mildly hurt.

“Same things, mostly, but one does say ‘childlike’.”

He was very full of Youth, but Regina doubted the author of the note intended it that way.

“So you have concerns regarding my notes?” A voice behind her said, sounding very polite.

It was Hyuuga-san. Of fucking course.

“Hyuuga-san!” Regina eye-smiled. It did not really move her mouth much.

Gai twitched a little bit. Huh. That was odd. Normally the dude seemed to be totally solid.

“Was this yours?” She plucked the offending note out of Gai’s hand and proffered it.

“We wish to become proficient at the noble art of chadou, Hyuuga-san,” Rejina said, trying to sound full of humility, “would you be so kind as to explain what gave you these specific impressions?”

Hyuuga-san gave her an equally fake smile back. “I am glad to, Jiraiya-hime.”

Something about the way she said ‘hime’ made it sound vaguely like a question.

“Chadou takes a very long time to learn properly,” she continued. “You have done admirably for being foreign and lacking the earlier education.”
'Okay, so. Very insulting. I will fight this entire crappy clan with my bare hands.'

“And Might-san, you may find that your… particular tastes… are unsuited to the art.” She smiled, but Regina watched her take in Gai’s hair, clothes, and strong eyebrows with a punishing kind of condescension. It was so light that others wouldn’t notice it. That was genuinely the worst part. No one would believe she was being awful. She sounded like she was giving the nicest advice and compliments. Her tone was immaculate.

The real thing Hyuuga-san might have been a master at was bitch-fu.

It was classy. Regina admired it, even as she was temporarily devastated and upping her commitment to tearing this woman apart with her teeth instead of her hands.

“Thank you for your wise counsel.” Regina replied, even though she hadn’t actually provided them with any advice.

She elected to change nothing about her presentation, as only Hyuuga-san had said anything bad about it. Regina wanted to see what Nakayama-sensei said, instead.

“Rejina-hime, will you not alter your display?” Gai asked quietly. He seemed to be vibrating again.

“No. Will you?” She asked, taking a seat on her cushion in as prim and elegant a fashion as she could muster. She saw Hyuuga-san narrow her eyes out of the corner of her vision.

She wasn’t trying to get a rise out of the woman, but damn if it wasn’t happening.

He looked at it, obviously calculating.

“If you like it, I’d say leave it and see what Nakayama-sensei says.” She suggested, fluttering her eyelashes down to the floor. She didn’t want to exacerbate the situation by actually making eye contact with an elderly woman who would doubtless find it offensive.

He grinned and followed her movement, sitting down on the floor.

They waited for another five minutes while the other students fluttered around. Regina thought that some of them had been overcorrecting- they had way too many plants, or they’d switched moods entirely. It meant that their flowers and scrolls weren’t as cohesive as earlier, even if earlier they’d been boring.

‘I guess I’ll see how that pans out for them.’

“Disorganized.” said Nakayama-sensei, walking around the room. “This scroll has fall imagery on it, a month too early.” She kept walking. “This one clearly implies the sun, when the gathering is at night.”

It panned out pretty much how she’d thought, apparently.

Hyuuga-san received the small praise of ‘rather good’, which Regina figured was probably about as high as Nakayama-sensei went.

Of course, Hyuuga-san’s had been the one she had earlier described as elegant. Why couldn’t the one she had complimented have belonged to literally anyone else?

Nakayama sensei looked at Gai’s. “It is adequate.”

Huh. What do you know, Hyuuga-san?
When she got to Regina’s, Regina held her breath a bit. She wanted to be good, so good it hurt.

“Good.” Then she walked past her, and went to the last woman. “Adequate.”

‘Take that! And that! I am a fucking champion.’

Regina kept her face still. But there was a heat on her face and a good feeling in her heart. Praise came very rarely for her since coming here, being as she couldn’t do anything properly.

It was precious, and to be treasured.

Somehow, that was the end of the two hours. How had that happened?

Nakayama-sensei bid them all to get the hell out of her house, and they did the polite goodbyes.

The night air was a bit cool and breezy. It caressed her skin and blew her hair into her face. It stuck to her forehead.

‘Less elegant than maybe I would have wanted.’

She tied it back, reasoning that she probably could have anticipated this issue before leaving Nakayama-sensei’s genkan.

When she turned back, Hyuuga-san was looking at her with pursed, wizened lips.

“Thank you, Hyuuga-san.” Regina bowed politely. “I look forward to taking classes with you in the future.”

Hyuuga-san returned the greeting, and left into the night.

Regina carefully did not say ‘what a nasty person, right?’ She wanted to. But she suspected that Hyuuga-san might have bat hearing, the way a lot of people here did.

And eyes in the back of her head.

Like an oni with incredibly poofy hair.

“I believe that we have an appointment with your Eternal Rival, do we not?” She asked Gai, putting her hands on her hips. “I don’t want you to be late.”

He seemed to spark up at that.

“Yosh!” He exclaimed, with a grin. “We must meet my Eternal Rival at the usual place, for our next competition.”

“And where is that?” She asked with mild interest. Was this something she could watch fairly frequently? Was it a good spectator sport?

“The monument, of course!” he threw his head back with laughter.

‘The rock with all the dead shinobi names on it? Sounds… cheery.’

She smiled anyway.

“Okay, lead me to it. I suppose you have a camera for me? Is there even enough light? You’re going to look like cryptids.”
He handed her the camera and cheerily bounded away, gesturing excitedly for her to follow.

The memorial stone was pretty close to a section of training grounds, which were blessedly empty. Regina passed by what had obviously been the site of a mighty battle earlier that day and gave the residual scorch mark a wide berth.

‘I really, really don’t want to get skewered or burnt by a fucking genin in training.’

She made a note to never come over here without a human shield.

The memorial stone was a massive structure, made of some sort of strong black stone in the shape of a kunai. There were little offerings at the bottom- some flowers, a set of orange goggles, and various trinkets that had evidently belonged to those lost. Necklaces, kunai, and pictures were scattered around its base.

Several of the items were definitely child-sized.

‘Christ, this really is depressing. I do not like being here at all.’

She’d never actually had a problem with the concept of her own mortality before she came here. But when it lingered over her like a heavy fog- child killers, body parts in her office, and a dead woman’s tongue lolling out of her mouth, she was covered in blood, her life reeked of death-

Regina shook it off. The dead woman who had summoned her hadn’t appeared in her nightmares for at least a week. She wasn’t getting any more airtime. If she stuck around any longer, Regina would need to start asking for some goddamn rent. She needed that headspace for her laundry list of other problems.

‘Sidenote: I should 100% find a therapist.’

She was definitely staring at the thing, now. The world seemed to shake and sway under her feet.

Regina blinked.

‘No, it’s definitely actually shaking.’

Gai whooped.

“Rejina-hime!” He called, looking thrilled. “I am pleased to be the first to introduce you to my Eternal Rival! We are linked by destiny to continually push each other to even greater heights! Although I am not his match in many of the shinobi arts-”

A wind kicked up and blew at her thin clothes, as well as interrupting Gai entirely.

Regina quickly held down her shirt with her hands, sensing that it was about to start an Incident.

Bizarrely, the wind began blowing in a circle. It quickened in intensity and brought leaves and other detritus into the mix.

Gai gave her a grin and a thumbs up. “He is a shinobi of great influence and a great genius- while I am a genius of hard work! He is a gentleman, a scholar, and a lover of dogs and eggplants! Do not be alarmed- though he has a fearsome reputation, he would never allow any harm to befall any beautiful flower of Konoha.”

‘That’s a weird-ass list, but I like it.’
The wind tube contracted, and then exploded—flinging leaves and twigs and dust into her hair and face.

When she wiped the dust out of her tear ducts, she saw Mr. Me sitting right in front of her on the ground, cross-legged. He was holding a book close to his face.

“So cool!” Gai cheered, clapping. “My Rival is so hip!”

She could tell by the crinkling around his eyes that I, Satake was pleased. With himself or with Gai’s great hype man routine, she didn’t know. She could feel a twig that was stuck in her now-tangled hair.

‘Great. Thanks, Hatake. If you knew how long this took to brush, wash, and dry, you’d know I should be billing you for this.’

“My Rival! It is time for us to again join in glorious competition!” Gai struck a pose.

He didn’t really seem to register her being there at all, being that he barely looked up from his book and didn’t even respond to Gai.

Regina sighed and began the long work of detangling her hair with her fingers, working out the shit that had been purposefully and (maliciously, she thought) blown into her hair.

“Is that the wind?” he asked in a monotone. “I can’t understand you. I only speak Japanese.”

“Rival! You are too cool!” Gai wailed.

Then he straight-up WEPT.

More interestingly to Regina, when Mr. Me he tilted the book she could just make out a word or two. Something about a noble shinobi and a princess?

“Oooh, is that the book about me?” She leaned over his shoulder with her fingers still in her hair, trying to get a better look.

He instantly disappeared and reappeared at the edge of the clearing, snapping the book closed. He gave her a betrayed sort of look.

Or, at least that’s what she thought. Hard to say for sure. He might have been confused.

‘Wait, I definitely said that in English. He didn’t understand me at all. lolol’

She regretted nothing. He should have known better than to read a romance book about her in her presence. She had every right to ask about it.

‘Especially when he still looks like a mop and was being purposefully rude to Gai. Is that, like, his Kryptonite? The book is publicly available, what is he possibly hiding?’

She cocked an eyebrow at him with a smile. His lone eye narrowed.

“Rival! Are you now ready to begin?” Gai asked with a grin. He was no longer drenched in tears.

‘Say what you want, the man recovers fast.’

Hatake lazily looked around the clearing. “What’s that?”
Evidently this was going to take a significant portion of the allotted time. Regina took a seat on a log, after inspecting it for fire ants and snake holes. Didn’t she have a comb somewhere? She had a very unimportant meeting after this, and she probably didn’t want to show up looking like she’d fallen out of a tree.

The lack of banter went on for about five minutes, when Hatake evidently got tired of pretending Gai was just an exceptionally shouty breeze and agreed to a competition.

Which. He had evidently agreed to earlier? That was why they were meeting, right?

Mr. Me was kind of a dick.

Though to be fair, he’d been sacked from ANBU that week, so he probably wasn’t at his best.

Regina decided to attempt to delay her final judgment on him until she had a better assessment of his character. Before this, she’d just thought he was awkward. And Gai had literally just provided her with a great recommendation on his behalf. It just probably wasn’t his best day out.

“Fine,” Hatake eventually sighed, rubbing his temples with his left hand. He didn’t put down his closed book of porn, apparently electing to hug it close to his chest. “What ‘competition’ would you like to do tonight, Gai? It’s your turn to choose.”

“Yosh!” Gai fist-pumped. “Tonight we will gather flowers!”

“Flowers.” Hatake repeated, evidently confused.

“As many flowers as you can in ten minutes! They cannot be taken from people’s gardens, and cannot be damaged. The more varieties of flowers, the more points.” Gai leaned back and laughed.

Hatake looked surprisingly small in the moment, even though he was definitely tall. Maybe he just wasn’t built like Gai. Or he was wilting again.

Regina seemed to remember him doing that.

“We put them there!” Gai said, pointing to the memorial stone. “Rejina-hime will do the counting for us, and photograph the winner.”

Ah. There was a method to the madness, probably. Putting flowers on a grave was a cross-cultural similarity. Maybe Gai thought Hatake was depressed about someone who died? It seemed like a safe bet in a shinobi village.

‘Wait, wasn’t Gai also in the meeting just before the Hokage asked me to make that appointment with Hatake?’

It was probably related. She didn’t see how, but their personal lives weren’t any of her business.

Regina resumed combing her hair and cleaned the dirt off of her face and arms.

“If I lose to you, I will do cartwheel laps around the village 500 times!” Gai held out his finger and struck a pose.

It was interesting. He hadn’t really done that in front of her. Was the posturing for Kakashi? It vaguely reminded her of her and her friends goofing around.

Particularly when someone was sad.
Regina thought about them. Kendra, Michelle. Her childhood best friend, Victoria. She missed them a lot.

God, when would everything stop reminding her of everything she’d lost? It was intolerable. She blinked back a tear, and listened while Hatake complained about Gai setting ludicrous self-limits and conditions again.

What time was it anyway?

“Sorry to interrupt, but I have an appointment at 9.” She called out, wishing that she had a watch. “I don’t suppose you could start?”

They were off like a shot.

She noted that this time, Hatake didn’t blow a bunch of soil in her face.

Both of them reappeared within what she presumed was only a few minutes, dropping armfuls of flowers on the sides of the mass gravestone.

Regina stared at them. Gai’s side was riotous with color- and she wondered how far they had to be going to get those flowers if they weren’t looting some granny’s gardens.

Hatake’s was more muted, he’d grabbed a large number of two or three kinds of flowers first. His were sorted.

By the end of ten minutes, she was pretty sure she didn’t want to count them all.

But she did.

208 flowers for Gai, of 21 varieties. Hatake had 332 flowers, of five varieties.

Weirdos.

It was one point per flower, and an extra ten points for every variety. That left Gai with 418 points, right? And Hatake with 382.

“The winner appears to be Gai-san.” She said, snapping a picture while they scrambled forward. “Gai-san, do you want to pose with your flowers?”

Oh, did he ever. His grin was literally blinding in intensity and brightness. How?

“I don’t know if I need the flash…” she muttered to herself. She took one with flash anyway, and one without. “Here’s your camera, Gai-san.”

She tried to hand it back, but Gai raised his hand. “Rejina-hime! Can you get one of myself and my Eternal Rival, first?”

“Oh! Sure.” She stepped back and got them both into frame. Two camera pops later, Hatake had disappeared and she handed it back to Gai.

He took it and held it over his head triumphantly.

“A good win.” He grinned. “Well, Rejina-hime, you said you had a meeting? What about your two youthful companions?”

“Naruto and Sasuke?” She winced with regret. “Unfortunately, it couldn’t be helped tonight.
They’re in Sasuke’s hospital room, supposedly doing homework and making very glittry art.”

He seemed sad about that. “I am sorry if my diversion with my Eternal Rival distracted you from your obligations.”

Gai was nice. She appreciated that. “I don’t mind, for one night. I do need to meet Shimura-sama at Hanami, though.” Her face started to react in disgust, but she schooled it back. “Hopefully it won’t happen very often that I’m out so much.”

“Would you like for me to check on them?” He asked, sounding sincere.

“I would love that. Naruto needs like… much love. All the time. So much.” She brushed all the wayward petals off of her clothes. “And I bet Sasuke would love to meet you when he’s conscious. They both really need adult role models.”

He gave her a thumbs-up and a grin, and jumped into a rolling cartwheel. She watched him careen down the path.

“Huh. So even if he wins, he does it anyway?” She considered that. “I guess he counts it as training.”

She walked down the path back into the village, and tried to make sure she looked presentable. Even though she was going somewhere she didn’t want to go, with a person she did not want to spend any time with, for mentoring she didn’t want.

Lots of ‘not wants’ in there.

The restaurant was gorgeous, in a refined and classical Japanese way. Oddly, it was also basically empty.

She was led to her table by a distinctly aloof waitperson.

Shimura-san was sitting at the table, looking very stern.

“Rejina-hime.” He said. “You are looking well.”

“As are you, Shimura-sama.” She bowed, and sat down in her provided chair. “You wished to meet with me?”

He adjusted in his chair, drawing attention to his covered arm.

She wondered what had happened to it. Couldn’t have been that recent, right? He was retired. But she didn’t remember that he had it covered the week before.

“It is time to begin your training and apprenticeship.” He said plainly. “We begin tonight.”

Whatever Hokage-sama was, he wasn’t wrong. Shimura-san got right down to it.

“Very well.” She blinked, adjusting to the fact that he had formally offered her an apprenticeship. She hadn’t anticipated that. Foolish. “Please, teach me, Shimura-sensei.”

“Shishou,” he corrected, examining her. “Call me shishou.”

Chapter End Notes
Survived my surgery! Other than bland hospital food, there are no more immediate threats to my well-being. Happy reading and holidays!
Regina eyed the fish on her plate. Sure, it had been prepared in front of her, and sure, Shimura-sa—shishou didn’t seem likely to poison her.

She still had no interest in eating it.

The fish looked back with dead eyes. She wasn’t going to win this staring competition for sure. It was already dead, but she wished it ill.

“You are cautious with your food?” Shimura-shishou asked, attempting to affect some sort of paternal body language.

She had learned to immediately suspect that kind of thing. Usually, it preceded a series of uncomfortable requests, and ended with one of a sexual nature. Then she’d bolt. There was definitely a time in her life when that would have had her hook, line, and sinker. Having a shitty dad would do that.

But frankly, he was about eight years too late to completely get it over her head. She was sure she was vulnerable. Why would she not be?

But it wouldn’t be as easy for him at all, if it was an attempt at manipulation.

‘Unless this is a different brand of bullshit.’

Or assisted by chakra.

‘Men are maybe awful? Have we considered that?’

Yes. She had. That was why she was obsessed with sexy and stacked ladies like Tsunade. And the Inuzuka clan head. She was not opposed to men in theory or in aesthetics. But for all practical purposes they seemed to by and large be total garbage.

‘Except Gai, and Jiraiya- who’s regrettably still debilitatingly obsessed with sex. Gai might be the only good man in the world. Does he know? Should we get him an award?’

Oh yes, they were talking about food. Not about how she would hip-check this elderly man into a lava pit with no hesitation purely based on past experience.

“Sometimes.” Regina allowed. It seemed rude to let him know she just hated fish with a fiery passion. Especially when she was expected to ooh and ahh over the fact that it wasn’t cooked. She could get botulism or salmonella at home.

“Wise.” His tone was definitely approving. “Many people do not have your best interests at heart.”

‘What a weird and concerning thing to say after inviting me to a suspiciously-deserted restaurant, in which I was not allowed to order my own meal or drink.’

Regina reconsidered her earlier supposition that he would not have an interest in poisoning her,
after inviting her publicly. It wasn’t like he’d told her to keep quiet about it.

“Rejina-chan.”

She couldn’t help it. She narrowed her eyes at him.

He just looked amused. “Rejina-hime, it is.” he barely paused. “There are those who will see you as a threat to be removed, whether you are or not. Therefore, you must learn to be as much or more.”

The logic followed, but his delivery still sucked.

“And how would you recommend going about this, shishou?” She asked, reasoning that pretending to be interested in the conversation would be an acceptable reason for not eating a hundred dollars worth of raw, judgmentally-staring fish.

Her grandmother would be unhappy with her for wasting food. But, she also never would have served Regina anything raw.

Shimura-shishou blinked at her, pleased. “I would recommend that you learn to surprise people.”

He tried a decidedly different tack than the Hokage. Where the Hokage seemed to draw from her connection to Jiraiya and let her take the initiative when it came to her ideas, Shimura-shishou wanted to draw out and understand every aspect of her education and experiences. He didn’t seem to give a single shit about her relation to Jiraiya, after noting that she’d only met him about six months ago.

‘And why do you know that.’

It bordered on being invasive. She didn’t like it.

To be honest, she didn’t love the Sandaime’s approach either. Couldn’t everyone just ask her questions about her relevant work experience and never ever ever discuss her personal life?

She started lying about some of it, just for the hell of it. None of it would contradict, anyway. She was in a country with no records of her. A universe with no records of her. It was just smarter to be honest about as much as she could, so that she could keep her lies straight.

She kept the facts basic. She was from Minnesota, the land made up of fields of beautiful wives.

Yes, she was twenty-one years old.

‘Oh shit, I’m actually 25. December is definitely over and done. I almost forgot that I celebrated a birthday while traveling with Shizune and Tsunade. Which is odd because we definitely ate a three-tiered cake and committed some sort of fraud. How did I forget that?’

She had studied for most of her life. She was interested in politics. She had had two half-sisters, who had been left behind.

Was she trained for any combat? No, but she’d done a significant amount of ballet dance (which he seemed mildly confused by) and ice skating. When she was very very very young, she’d been in tumbling classes.

He asked her more than her supposed father ever did.

‘You’d think Jiraiya would have tried to ask just to make sure our lies matched up, if nothing else.’
Regina took a sip of her water, while Shimura-shishou bemoaned her lack of shinobi training. He seemed to be angling towards blaming the Hokage for that- he must be under the impression that the Hokage had known about her all along.

‘Well, it’s just a series of massive lies anyway, who cares about my age in the scheme of things?’

He took a break from his earlier subject. “Did you have political aspirations?” Shimura-shishou asked. She noted he’d barely eaten, either.

“Yes, I did.” That kind of gutted her. She’d never get to even run for office in this hole.

He didn’t seem to find that off-putting. She thought that a lot of people didn’t like ambition in women.

If he didn’t, he certainly didn’t show it.

“Then why did you come here? You must know that you will never be a viable candidate for Hokage. You are no shinobi.” He watched her like she was under a microscope.

She resisted the sudden and violent urge to stab her food with a chopstick.

“So you’ve said. Repeatedly.’

“I wasn’t given a choice.” she said. Regina hoped she sounded calmer than she felt. She tried to channel Mifune-sama’s utter lack of emotional delivery. “I was informed that my mother had died, and that I had to come live with my father.”

And none of that was a lie, technically. Regina couldn’t honestly say she knew her mother was alive, and Jiraiya couldn’t either. And she’d never had genetic testing done to determine her birth father, as it had never been a question.

The Hokage had been the one to strongarm her into Konoha. Maybe she was relying on too many technicalities, but it was supported by enough facts that no one would investigate too much and wonder how she appeared out of fucking nowhere.

“How unfortunate.” Shimura-shishou said. He was probably pretending to be disinterested. If he was actually bored, he would change the topic.

“It was.” Regina agreed. “I have spent most of my life in pursuit of a goal that is now impossible.”

If she was actually stuck here.

And maybe even if she got back to her own universe. There was no guarantee how much time had passed or hadn’t. She was very unclear on how the fine arts worked.

He actually looked sympathetic, which seemed off-brand from what she knew of him. Wait. He had expressly disobeyed an order from the Hokage, who was his peer. And he’d definitely been talking some shit when he’d left that meeting earlier and now. Was it too ridiculous to assume he had ambitions, as well?

It would have explained that blast of cold air when he took the head of the room opposite the Hokage. And why he was such a colossally important pain in the ass.

He might actually be sympathizing with her. Maybe pressing on that topic would be good…?

“In my birth country, it would have been hard to succeed in my ambitions.” She tried to sound like
it was offhand. “There has never been a woman leader of my country, though we have had more than forty. However, many of the former leaders have been…”

She curled her lip in distaste, thinking about some of the boys and then men she’d encountered in her pursuits- who she’d studied with, worked with, and competed against.

“Not up to the standards I would have to meet to be considered.” She said, definitely a little bitter. She’d had so many boring, incompetent men underestimate her. More than once, they’d been so butthurt about losing that they’d accused her of cheating. They just assumed they’d win, whether they deserved it or not.

She chanced a look at her proposed mentor.

He seemed to be thinking- his eye was focused on her with extreme intensity. She could see him calculating her worth in his eyes. But maybe, for once, it was about her real merit. And not who she wasn’t or wasn’t related to, or her potentially manipulable situation.

She hoped to god it was that.

It probably wasn’t. But she hoped anyway.

“You would try regardless.” It was a statement, and not a question.

She cocked an eyebrow despite herself. She hated that- the left one was always rising almost of its own volition. She was going to wrinkle horribly on the left side of her face.

‘I wish I knew how to freeze it. Botox? The things I do in the name of vanity.’

Plus, anyone could read her damn thoughts when she did that. That or they horrendously misread her when her eyebrow got stuck and it looked like she was smirking all the time.

‘Stupid face.’

“Try what?” she took another sip of water. She was gonna be very hydrated. Or potentially- very poisoned. It wasn’t worth getting all worked up about. If he was gonna kill her, it would be pretty easy to actually do. He’d just have to be willing to suffer potential consequences or contrive a solution that would make her death not a problem. It was the consequences of her death or disappearance that all but guaranteed her safety- not any innate ability to survive.

He raised his own eyebrow to match hers.

“You would attempt to achieve your goals here, with or without competence in the shinobi arts.”

‘Well, yeah. Except the Hokage part. I don’t particularly fancy being an assassination target with an ugly uniform.’ That’s basically what she was doing with the police reforms. But wasn’t that what he was asking? If she was going to gun for the Hokage job?

‘I don’t feel like being murdered, possibly by you, the Hokage, or those other two goblins I met the other day. I don’t like how many Hokage candidates are dead as doornails, and I don’t know who’s doing it.’

“I don’t know, Shimura-shishou.” She blinked. “I am unsure of how that could be done, without shinobi training. Though I have not been here long.” She ducked her head. “Please forgive my lack of understanding.”
“It’s quite alright.” He was pivoting back to the fatherly kind of approach. “That is why you need a mentor. For direction.”

He poured tea, and did something to it with chakra. Then he took a sip.

“Do you know how steel is tempered, Rejina-hime?”

She shook her head. She knew some theory. Iron was mixed with something, it was heated… something something strong metal. Oddly enough, that kind of thing didn’t really pop up in her readings on political theory or mission creep.

“The iron ore is smelted until all impurities are removed and carbon is added, to give it strength. To use it, we douse it with fire and hammer it to its purpose.” He set the cup down on the table and looked at her. “A weapon is made with time, and care. It requires someone to remove its weaknesses, strengthen its natural properties, and give it shape and an edge.”

The implication was obvious. And probably overused. Hadn’t he already gotten her as his little apprentice? What was the sell here?

‘Also, what is with everyone basically calling me a tool? Is that a compliment here, or an insult?’

“As your shishou, that will be my duty.” He gestured lightly with his finger, and waitstaff immediately removed their plates.

She’d gotten away clean without eating fish, at least.

“I am glad to see that you immediately moved to take my advice as to your deficits in decorum and cultural knowledge, as befits your station.”

She had not... told him about that. That felt creepy. But it wasn’t exactly like her movements were secret.

Regina felt a little frozen, but willed herself to relax.

He stood, using a cane to push himself up. It looked awkward. She didn’t remember him having that last week, either.

She wondered really, truly, what kind of person to whom she’d gotten herself apprenticed. Was he out there getting injured on missions? There was so much she didn’t know, but she was really sure he was retired. Was it a health issue? Why did he know so much about her timeline of arrival? He hadn’t asked.

“Your training with me will begin soon. I will send a message to you at your office regarding our next meeting, Rejina-hime.”

He bowed, and left.

Regina looked around. The restaurant was still deserted except for silent waitstaff.

She gathered herself, and followed him out the door and into the night. It had to be at least 10pm.

‘That’s way late for a couple of kids to not be in bed.’

She winced. She really was shit at parenting.

So Regina hustled to the hospital, and was gratified to find Sasuke asleep. His homework was
stacked neatly by the bed, and there was a folded note on the table. Someone had drawn a turtle on it. There was glitter on its back. She assumed that part was Naruto’s input.

She opened it.

“Rejina-hime,” it began.

“Thank you for attending my latest competition with my Eternal Rival. I have taken Naruto-kun home, so that he may sleep as much as possible before he must go to the Academy tomorrow. I write this so that you will not panic at his absence.”

“Your Friend,
Gai
The Green Beast of Konoha
And Fellow Chadou Student”

Well okay, then.

Regina nuzzled Sasuke for a moment, giving him a kiss that definitely left some red lipstick on his forehead.

Eh. He’d know she cared. That, or he’d think some other strange woman was giving him motherly attention in his sleep. That was actually kind of concerning, now that she thought about it. She moved to rub it off-

He moved a little, though, and opened his eyes.

“Hey buddy.” She whispered, “just stopping by before I go to bed. How was your night?”

“Slept.” He yawned. He stretched his little body, and curled up closer to her. “How were your meetings?”

She groaned. “I may have made an elderly Hyuuga lady angry with me for life, I met Gai-san’s friend, and I now have a shishou.”


“Always.” She said, “But hopefully everyone will decide I’m boring soon, and it’ll stop.”

His chest rose and fell with his breaths. Sasuke seemed to be pretty calm. That was a good change. He wasn’t angry, and he wasn’t afraid.

‘We’re thinking only positive thoughts.’ She instructed herself.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” She promised again. At least she wasn’t breaking any promises she was making them. That was a very good thing.

Sasuke rolled over, so that he could look her in her face. “When can I come back with you?”

She didn’t know. She said so.

“I have absolutely no idea. I was told you’d probably need to stay here for a week, because I can’t watch you around the clock.” She pushed out her lips and tried to think. “Two days is way short for you to leave. Do you want me to ask?”

He nodded.
“It’s depressing here.”

‘I think you’ll have a different set of complaints, sharing a bedroom with Naruto. But I’m not sure that’s worth saying right now.’

“Anything I can do to make it less depressing while you are here?” She asked.

He scrunched his little face up in thought. But moments passed without any response.

“You can tell me next time- or write them down for me, when you think of something. Would you like other visitors?”

That got a quick shake of the head- well, at least he knew what he didn’t want.

“Got it. No visitors. Love you, good night.” She said, gently extracting herself from his bed. He looked so small by himself.

Maybe… bigger stuffed dinosaurs? Or his own bed.

She should maybe go see the building contractors to make sure bedrooms for them fit into her plans. They’d need their own space.

Naruto was snoring loudly in her futon, not his.

‘Adorable little shit. Bet he thinks that means I have to wake him up to go to bed.’

But it wouldn’t hurt, probably. He had been alone before- he might just be worried that she wasn’t coming back.

He was clutching her pillow awfully tight.

Regina changed into her pajamas quickly after washing up- that dirt had gotten absolutely fucking everywhere. Her hair was still wet, but she didn’t feel like staying up another hour to blow-dry it.

So she towel-dried it as much as possible, then braided it around her head. It wouldn’t help it dry faster, but it would be less inconvenient.

Then she turned off the light and budged Naruto over to get in bed. He seemed to wake up just enough to register it was her and attach like a barnacle.

‘Yeah, whatever. I’ve had worse sleeping pals.’

She wondered where Shizune was right now. Probably sleeping in her own blanket burrito.

Regina thought about the bundle of letters and horrifying sharp hair ornaments Shizune had given her. She’d need to read them and learn how to put weapons in her hair.

Tomorrow. She’d do it tomorrow. Tomorrow Regina was better than Today Regina.

When Today Regina woke up, she noticed that something heavy was pressing on her bladder.

‘Oh. It’s one of those children things I’ve heard so much about.’ She registered the snoring lump
blearily, squinting to look at the clock to determine if it was human hours yet.

It was 6:30. Ugh. She had to get up.

“Come on monkey, it’s time to wake up.” She jostled him just a little as she sat up. He fell off of her, but her arm wrapped around his torso kept him from fully hitting the ground.

“Breakfast?”

The Hokage called her in shortly before she left that day, after Hatake had stalked out of his office again.

‘I wonder why they’ve been having so many meetings lately.’

She walked in cautiously. Judging by Hatake’s mood, whatever it was hadn’t gone well. The Sandaime bade her to close the door immediately.

She did, activating the privacy seals that she needed to ask him how to make.

“Yes, Hokage-sama?” She asked.

He exhaled in relief. “Yes. Rejina-hime, that’s the third meeting Hatake-san has scheduled with me to protest his ANBU reassignment.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t taken those meeting requests- Keiko-san had taken most of those duties back when the Sandaime had put Regina on the police department/funding projects as well as helping with the mission assignments. “I’m sorry to hear that. I assume this is what you meant when you said that this would be a continuing issue.”

“Not anymore.” He waved his hand. “You know the list of persons to be kept out of my office?”

Oh yes, she did. It was basically her new shishou, his other two counselors (why were they still employed by the city then?), and about five nobles from Fire Country.

“Put Hatake on it for the time being. I’ve explained to him that I won’t be changing my decision, but he just refuses to hear it. I cannot have the same meeting over and over again.”

‘Especially with how busy we are.’ Regina grimaced. That was why Keiko-san couldn’t get in enough meeting times today for clients? Hatake was throwing a royal fit?

“I’ll take care of it, sir.” She assured. “I’ll make sure they know to refer him to me from now on.”

He didn’t bother to make any sounds as he stalked up to the desk. He stopped when he was closer than was polite. The civilian woman gave a small, sharp inhalation when she noticed him. That obvious reaction made it very clear that she chose to ignore him, keeping her eyes trained on whatever she was writing.

He leaned forward, casting a shadow over her notes.
Without missing a beat, she shifted the paper a few inches to the side to put it back in the sunlight. Kakashi gave a put-upon sigh. “Jiraiya-hime,” he allowed.

“Oh, Hatake-san.” She looked up at him with a professional smile. “How can I help you?”

“I need an appointment with the Hokage,” he said. He didn’t leave any room for argument in his tone.

“I see,” she said. Her tone was pleasant, but her accent was still a little hard to understand. “Regarding?”

He whipped his prepared notes out of his back pocket and unfolded them on the desk. “I think that this helps outline my position on my recent reassignment and why I believe it could and should be reconsidered.” He gave her his most charming smile, eye crinkling.

She pulled the paper over and picked it up to study it. It took her quite a long time to read it. She tilted her head slightly to the side. She pinched her lower lip between her teeth. She held her breath without seeming to know it. “Hatake-san,” she said slowly.

“I have a very good argument,” he said defensively. “If you look at my statistics, you’ll see that I was an asset to the program. I successfully completed missions at a rate higher than the average. My performance has only been increasing. However, my missions before joining that program had this performance rate.” He pointed at the relevant percentage, buried in the third paragraph.

Her eyes followed his finger. She narrowed her eyes in concentration.

‘Can she read my handwriting?’

“And since rejoining the standard mission rosters, I have had 7 complaints filed by clients about my performance. I have yet to fail a mission, but 3 of 24 have exceeded the projected timelimit, which is worse than the average jounin, who can expect about 3 complaints per year and a lower rate of delayed missions. In addition-’

“Hatake-san, you’ve already had this meeting, and these materials need to be reworked,” she interrupted.

He blinked.

“This is just a mess. You have some good information here, but it’s inaccessible. Bring it back to me in a format that is less heavy if you want to meet with him about this again.”

A less ‘heavy’ format? He didn’t let his face show any confusion. Dense? Did she not know the word ‘dense’?

“You should use graphs comparing your performance over time, as well against peers to illustrate your point.” Jiraiya-hime picked her pen up and scrawled a box in the margin of his paper.

He winced.

She made a series of dots in the box and then connected them with a line. And then she did the same thing slightly higher. “Compare like this,” she said. No. That was an order.

He felt his brow furrow.

“Ano, saaa.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I think it’s fine.”
“It isn’t.” She said it decisively. And then she held his paper out.

He did not take it.

She tilted her head slightly. She raised an eyebrow.

It was not intimidating. He did not move.

She sighed, pulled the paper back- and threw it in the garbage by her desk.

What.

He controlled a sudden flinch and bit down anger at the casual rejection.

“Thank you, that’s all.” And then she went back to her work, silver hair slipping down to cover her face as she bent down to frown slightly at something.

He gritted his jaw. He took a long, controlled breath. And then he fished the paper out of her garbage and went home to workshop it.

On Saturday morning, Naruto practically dragged Regina out of bed and to the hospital at 8am, excitedly jabbering about what he’d planned to do with her and Sasuke today. Evidently they were going to start by breaking him out of the hospital, training, and taking Sasuke out for some ramen as soon as Teuchi-san opened.

She wasn’t sure about the logic of this plan, especially as the hospital wanted to hold Sasuke until Monday morning, when she’d have to leave work at 10am to go pick him up and bring him back like a purse dog.

Regina was also unsure of the logic of that plan. The Tower was probably just as boring and depressing as the hospital, and likely wasn’t that much of an improvement.

“Please, kaa-chan?” Naruto whined, tugging at her arm. “Sasuke-kun is so bored here. Just for today, kaa-chan.”

She also didn’t know how she felt about the title Sasuke and Naruto had worked out. Though it did seem to be a decent combination of ‘mom’, without the honorable ‘o’ in front, and a more familiar ending instead of ‘san’. It was probably good? It suited her better than a very formal ‘okaasan’. ‘Oneechan’ just seemed weird, given her legal relationship to them.

But it did net her some big stares from disapproving older people in the hospital lobby.

To be fair, their approval meant absolutely nothing to her.

With that in mind- “Okada-san,” she called, catching sight of the nurse she’d met before. “Would we be able to take Sasuke-kun out for a few hours?”

Okada-san smiled, and went to pull out some paperwork. “Let me check what his reports say, and we can see.”
Naruto was fidgeting with excitement, tapping his feet and mercilessly squeezing her hand over and over again. He was about to blow.

She looked around. The lobby was filled with patients talking with visitors, people waiting to see doctors, and families. Many of them looked the worse for wear- she distinctly saw several of them waiting with blood-soaked clothes. She couldn’t tell what their injuries were, or if they had any.

‘Yikes again. I don’t know what I’d thought I’d see in a hospital in a shinobi village.’

“Naruto, would you go and see if Sasuke is awake? I’ll be there in a minute and I’ll let you know if he can leave.” Regina suggested, hoping to prevent his enthusiasm from triggering a spook-related heart attack or kunai throw. Ninja seemed to be twitchy.

He let go of her hand and bolted down the hallway.

‘If Sasuke wasn’t awake, I suspect he will be shortly.’ She thought with some mild amusement. Naruto wasn’t terribly patient.

“Danzou-sama!” Someone called.

Danzou tried not to scowl and kept walking. He had to walk so much a day or his physical therapist would throw a fit. He didn’t want to talk to anyone when he was contemplating his imminent mortality.

“Danzou-sama!” The voice was closer now. It sounded like it was coming from a child.

They were going to catch up anyway. There wasn’t much he could do for it unless he felt like shunshining. It wasn’t particularly dignified for him to do so at his age.

Danzou stopped.

“Danzou-sama!” There was panting behind him, and then a flash of color in front of his face. A young man stood where the walking path had been clear a millisecond earlier.

‘The youth only become more rude with every year that passes.’ he thought sourly. ‘I would have never presumed to walk in front of an elder like this.’

“I’m such a big fan!” the boy said, holding out his arm. “Of alllll your work. The treason, the genocide- I really love your ingenuity with genetic tissue theft in particular.”

‘What?’

“We’re going to enjoy working together, Danzou-sama.” the boy said cheerfully, flash-stepping closer and forcing eye contact.

Danzou didn’t even have the time to activate his Sharingan.

Chapter End Notes
You guys were so great with comments (thanks for the healing serotonin, I'm doing fine) that I decided to put this one out early. There *might* be a few-chapter dump on Christmas, both to ruin and enrich lives for those of us with varying family situations/religious holidays/etc. Someday I might do chapter releases on other holidays, but tbh I have no memory for dates.

Happy Holidays, I hope all of you are staying safe and feeling good.
Chapter 26

Hatake-san was lingering outside her office before her working hours even started on Monday. Regina ignored him until exactly 9am, taking a very long time to arrange her papers as he glared.

“Hello Hatake-san, how may I help you?” She smiled. “It’s a lovely morning, isn’t it?”

“Good morning, Jiraiya-hime. When can I meet with the Hokage?”

‘Damn, he just isn’t going to give up on this one, is he? I’m not allowed to give him a meeting, Sandaime-sama explicitly said that he didn’t want Hatake-san ruining his work days.’

“Did you ask Keiko-san?” She tried to defer. “I’m not actually in charge of scheduling anymore.”

He seemed utterly confused. “Then what do you even do here?”

“Things that would both bore you and are over your clearance, probably.” She shot back. “Keiko-san might have more power over his schedule than I do.”

He narrowed his eye at her, but he left. He came back less than two minutes later.

“She says that she can’t do anything for me.” It was terse. “You have final say.” He pointed to the sign on her door. “I’m informed that you outrank her.”

‘Fair enough. I shouldn’t have thrown her to you, even if it is her job again.’

“I’ll see what I can do for you then.” Regina put down her budget sheets. Hatake looked at them for a moment before his eye glazed over and he went back to looking at her.

She flipped through her calendar. Hatake seemed to untense a little bit, and shoved his hands into his pockets.

Regina hummed to herself as she flipped meaninglessly through pages. The Hokage was actually busy, but to be honest she could have crammed Hatake in there almost any day he wanted if the Hokage would allow it. He wouldn’t. Which is why she was about to piss Hatake off again.

“Are you available… September 31st?” She asked, tapping her pen on her calendar.

“That’s more than a month from now.” He grated out. Then, he paused. “Also, that day doesn’t exist!”

She sat up quickly and waved her hands. “Don’t say that so loudly!” She put a finger up to her lips. “I managed to delay Danzou-shishou’s meetings indefinitely that way. Don’t ruin it.”

“Then give me a day that exists?” Hatake-san suggested quietly, sounding mildly amused.

She flopped back down. She couldn’t do that. Technically, scheduling wasn’t even her job anymore now that she was doing actual work.

“Technically, he has time today, but…”

“But what.” He didn’t even sound angry.

“He’s been having…” she struggled to find the right words. “Intestinal difficulties. Someone gave
him three day old sashimi yesterday.”

“Is that so?” He sidled up to her desk, getting way closer than most Japanese people ever did.

“Yes, unfortunately.” She shook her head. “It’s really unfortunate. If it continues, we might have to send him to the doctor.”

“Well, I’d hate to distress him.” Hatake lingered, examining all the papers on her desk as well as her person. It was like he was trying to make her intimately aware of the fact that he felt totally comfortable invading her personal space. “I’ll come back in a few hours to see if he’s feeling better. Just to check on his well-being.”

“I’m sure that he will appreciate that. You’re very kind, Hatake-san.” She smiled.

He eye-smiled back. “See you soon!”

She slipped out of the office just before 10:00, so she could pick up Sasuke as soon as he could be released. He was getting awfully twitchy about being stuck in an ugly white room that couldn’t be aired out.

‘The mustiness in there isn’t great, no lie. Maybe it’s how hot Konoha is?’

He was ready to go, in his regular clothes with socks on and all his swag packed. The instant she rounded the door, he slipped off the bed and into his shoes with his backpack on.

“Can we go, kaa-chan?” He held out his hand. “I’m very ready to leave.”

“I know you are. Let’s go get you checked out.” His hand slid into hers and they went to the nurses’ stations, where she chatted with the nurse on duty and got his discharge forms.

She filled out a myriad of forms and swept him up back into the office.

“Well,” she looked around.

‘It’s a gorgeous office, really nice mokuton wood flooring and details, gorgeous decor… but not a great place to hang out for a kid.’

Luckily, she’d at least sort of prepared.

“I have work to do,” she bent down and told him, eye to eye. “You’re welcome to hang out in the office, but papers on my desk shouldn’t be looked at or touched. The couch is for you, and the bottom left drawer is filled with art supplies, puzzles, and games. Please don’t open any other drawers, or open any envelopes, or scrolls, no matter how interesting they seem. Ok?”

“Will you play with me over lunch?” he asked, surveying his new domain. “You have free time then, right?”

“Right.” She confirmed. “We will eat lunch together, and play games and stuff. After work, we go to pick up Naruto, then we go for more ‘family time’ at my classes.”

“I don’t really want to take your classes.” He whined, sticking out his lower lip. “I want to train.”

‘That’s a fair point.’
“I think you need to do both,” Regina said slowly, trying to think. He’d had family to help him before. She needed to get Naruto a tutor, stat. Maybe she’d just get them both tutors and save herself some grief. “Come with me to classes sometimes, so that we all have manners and you don’t accidentally embarrass yourselves or me, and I’ll find you someone to help train you.”

He whipped around to her, focusing hard.

“I want Gai-san.”

‘Also fair. He knows Gai saved his life and met him again the other week. I can’t blame him for making that logical leap.’

“Gai-san might be busy.” she warned him. Jounin kind of had a massive overwork problem. “But I’ll ask him for you.” she ruffled his fluffy hair, and he batted her hand away.

But he seemed pleased with that, and flopped onto the couch after removing his shoes. He stretched out like a cat, and immediately passed out.

“Thank you, Ebisu-san, for such a comprehensive report. Is there anything else?” The Sandaime asked, more out of practice than real interest.

“Yes! Thank you Hokage-sama. Please, I really would like to impress upon you again the fervour of my devotion to teaching your grandson the noble shinobi arts.”

Regina looked up from her notes. She definitely hadn’t lost track in the last minute and started doodling.

It was just that all of these mission briefings were basically identical, unless they suddenly veered into hellscape territory. How many times could she really write ‘Bob-san went and got the thing. He did not somehow fall in a hole, kill anyone he wasn’t supposed to, or get seriously injured. Bob deserves a cookie’?

But this was a personally intriguing development. She watched a Jounin with sunglasses and what looked like a hair bonnet shake with determination.

“Konohamaru-kun is two years old, Ebisu-san.” The Hokage said patiently. “Though your persistence and passion are greatly appreciated, he’s just too young to benefit.”

“Please, Hokage-sama, let me prove myself!” the man implored, looking at the Sandaime and then to her.

‘Wow, he really must be desperate. No one ever remembers I exist.’

The thought that had piqued her interest filled out in delicious detail. Her lizard brain was doing calculations. She quite liked her odds.

“Anou, Hokage-sama.” She said casually. “A thought occurs.”

He gave her what she now knew to be a supremely amused look, even though it was with the most minute of facial indicators. That was what happened when you spent upwards of eight hours a day staring at a person.
“What would that be, Rejina-hime?” He leaned back in his chair.

“As you know, my son Naruto came to me with abysmal scores in his classes at the Academy. He is dead last in his class- and certain to continue falling behind without intervention.” She tried to watch the Jounin in the room without moving her eyes from the Hokage. He was definitely facing her direction. She couldn’t gauge his reaction super well with those sunglasses on. But he wasn’t affecting any defensive or aggressive body language, so… “If Ebisu-san would be able to improve Naruto’s grades, which I know are of as great concern to you as they are to me, I would think that would prove his suitability as a tutor for your grandson, when he is ready.”

She put on as much of a demure face as possible, looking to the floor. “That is, of course, if you believe that Ebisu-san would be up to the task.”

Ebisu-san’s jaw dropped, just a hint. Enough that she knew that he was shocked.

But he didn’t protest whatsoever.

The Hokage nodded at her. “I think that would be a very good indicator of the talent and quality of Ebisu’s ability as an educator.” He turned back to the man in the room slowly.

“You’ve stated for quite a long time that your ambition is to train the children of kage,” a slight tilt of his eyes in her direction hammered in the point that she, in a technical sense, fit the bill. “This seems like a very good opportunity for you. Would you agree?”

Ebisu swallowed. He looked at her again for a moment.

Then he turned to the Hokage. “Yes, Hokage-sama. I would be honored to teach the son of Jiraiya-hime, fukukage of Konohagakure.”

‘Oh, no one has ever said my title out loud before. I really. Really. Like it. This might be my kink. I’ve finally found it. Vice-dictator of a military village. It’s not too shabby at all, really.’

Satisfaction curled up in her stomach, and she didn’t fight the smile that bloomed on her face.

“Thank you, Ebisu-san.” the Hokage said, stamping his mission briefing and handing it back. “Rejina-hime, you can take him back to your office now, to start this important undertaking.”

She led him back to her office, where she beckoned him to sit at the chair across from hers.

He swallowed again, his adam’s apple bobbing up and down. She tried not to look too much like the cat that got the canary. That tended to inspire negative reactions in people, and she needed this relationship to go well.

‘To think, I thought I was going to have to really bust my ass to find Naruto a tutor.’

“So, Ebisu-san.” She smiled as pleasantly and vacantly as possible, getting out her schedule-book. “I’m afraid Naruto is very behind on his written work, as well as his physical performance in the Academy. You’ll have your work cut out for you.”

“Yes, Jiraiya-hime.” His face looked tight.

“But I’m sure you’ll succeed.” She said kindly, willing him to not flee and abandon his commitment immediately. “And when you do, I will endeavor to help you succeed in your goal of teaching the kages of the future.”
She huffed to herself, thinking of Naruto’s own personal goal. “Maybe you’re even starting now. Speaking of, when can you start?”

Hatake was loitering near the coffee machine in the office staff room. She had no idea for how long, but Homura-san was glaring at him from a table.

‘Sure, this seems like stable behavior. Very normal of you to hang out in a place you have no reason or right to be to bother me. A+ demonstration of why Hokage-sama does not want to meet with you.’

He watched her as she got her coffee, poured sugar and creamer into it, and stalked behind her back to the outside of her office. Then he coughed.

She turned around.

“Oh, Hatake-san, I didn’t see you there.” she smiled as cheerily as she could. “Are you checking in on our beloved Hokage?”

“Yes.” He sounded perfectly pleasant, but his eyes weren’t playful at all. He was definitely annoyed. “Is he unoccupied yet?”

Regina saw Keiko purposefully throw her pen to the floor behind Hatake, and dive under her desk, ostensibly to retrieve it.

She thought about how sad it was that she didn’t have the same option. It did the thing she wanted, contorting her face. “Unfortunately, no.” She leaned closer to him and whispered. “I’m afraid that he’s, ah…”

He blinked at her. He was obviously waiting for the lie.

‘Well, let’s give the people what they want.’

“It’s actually apparently orange in color, now.” She confided. “The medic-nin are a bit mystified, but they assure me that he’ll be back to one hundred percent just in time for his bird-watching seminar this weekend.” She shrugged helplessly.

He just stared. He was uncomfortably close, if she really thought about it. She decided not to think about it.

“He really loves birds.” She gave a sad little half-apology smile. “Thank you again for checking on him. You’re his favorite Jounin, you know.” Then she took the last few steps towards her office, turning the door knob and looking back at him.

Hatake paused and seemed to consider following her into her office anyway- but then abruptly turned on his heel and left the office area.

She watched as Keiko crawled up from the floor like a B-grade horror monster, slid into her chair, and resumed scrawling away at her work.

When she shut the door and turned around, there was a beautiful gilded letter on her desk, and a
discarded piece of snakeskin next to it.

Sasuke was still lightly snoring on her couch, little chest going up and down with his breaths. That… made her really angry about whoever did this.

“The list of suspects is small, and I need better security.” Regina narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to peer at it suspiciously. She did not touch it.

The envelope was gold leaf. It had presumably been delivered by snake-mail.

‘And the handwriting is familiar.’

She used chopsticks to move the envelope into the conbini sack that had transported her breakfast, and tossed the snakeskin in on top. Then she put the chopsticks into a trashcan immediately and brought the suspicious letter to the office next door.

“Sandaime-sama,” she called.

“Good afternoon,” the Hokage said absently.

“No,” Regina said, “I brought a threatening letter.”

He put down the folder in his hands and looked at her directly. “Do you have enemies?”

She blinked. That was not a train of thought she had considered. “Ano.” Regina thought about it. “I recently started learning to play the koto, and Naruto is learning taiko to accompany me. So I suppose any of our neighbors could want us dead. Other than that… The contractor who built my house was really unhappy when I asked him to add a third and fourth floor. I had to be very insistent. Ah, Hatake-san is probably unhappy that I told him you couldn’t have a meeting this month because you’re scheduled to have gastrointestinal distress whenever he visits. Oh!” She snapped her fingers. “The creepy guy who offered me a job. The one whose employee assaulted me in a bathroom. Can’t rule him out.” She held up a hand. “About this tall, terrifying, polite, lovely hair.”

The Sandaime let out a long, slow breath. He folded his hands in front of him. “Orochimaru,” he said dryly. He looked up at the ceiling. “I suppose that it would be too much to hope that he would have no interest in Jiraiya’s family. That cannot be helped. And I am certain that Hatake-san has not sent you any letter. He is more direct.” He frowned. “You will know for certain when he is displeased with you. He will not allow you be unaware of his malcontent… I will also be more clear in future about what excuses to give when avoiding meetings.”

“Yes, sir,” she said mildly. She was fully aware that without being directly forbidden, she was going to continue to use that one all day.

He gave her an unimpressed look. “The neighbors and the contractor, however, seem to have been enemies of your own making. You might exercise some restraint going forward.”

“I choose to live out loud, sir.”

He sighed again. “Might I see this letter?”

She held out the bag. “I didn’t want to touch it.”

He took it gingerly, and peeked inside. Then he dropped the bag to his desk and sighed, pulling out the envelope.
“Your instincts regarding Orochimaru-san were right.” He said, sounding annoyed. “This would be his stationery.”

‘A fucking missing nin has internationally-known, instantly recognizable stationery?’

He opened the mail and read it, looking increasingly irritated. He threw it back onto the pile of papers on his desk.

“He wants an apology for your lack of acceptance to his very generous job offer.” The Sandaime said.

‘Oh. That’s all? I can write thank you notes or apology notes in my sleep. Except… in Japanese. Dammit.’

“I’ll work on that straightaway.” She promised, looking at the thing. Regina still didn’t want to touch it.

“We’ll write it together.” The Hokage corrected. “You might fall into trap of words. He loves those.”

“So, I’d tell him that I was sorry for not responding with my regrettable refusal of his very generous offer, because I did not previously have a return address.” She guessed. “Not for not accepting the offer, and definitely nothing to insult him.”

“Not bad.” The Hokage grabbed a brush and his inkwell. “I’ll write it up, and we will send it off. Just to warn you,” he made eye contact, “he will likely contact you again.”

“Through mail, and not with more toilet attackers, right?” She clarified. “I did not like that.”

“Probably through mail, so long as you respond in the appropriate manner.” He pulled out a nice sheet of paper, and dipped the tip of the brush in the ink. “He will continue to be interested so long as you remain interesting. Or so long as your father lives and breathes, and Orochimaru-san knows that it will continue to drive him insane.”

He completed the letter within only about ten minutes, and she blew the ink dry while he addressed the envelope.

“Seal them yourself using your wax seal after leaving it on your person for a time, for the scent.” He instructed. “He will suspect my involvement, but so long as I imitate your handwriting and not my own, he cannot be sure.”

‘Okay then, glad that’s figured out.’

Regina carefully took the materials and had them sent to the tree trunk with a hole at the border of Grass, as the address stated.

‘Y’all are so weird that you’re on a whole new level. Who sends threatening Miss Manners letters?’

Agent Boar bowed, dim light glinting off the tusks of his mask.

“Yes, Danzou-sama.”

Danzou just looked at him, clutching his walking stick.
Still, there could be no doubt about who held the power in this situation— and he would go to great lengths to ensure that it remained that way. Even the disrespectful abuse of dead flesh was tolerable, if it helped Danzou to ensure the safety of the village he loved. And Boar would help him do it, because Boar was loyal.

“Boar.” he stated, eye lingering on the mask and the face he knew was under it.

To his credit, Boar did not flinch.

“You have your orders.” He said, “Go.”

True to his word, he arrived again a bit after lunch. Regina was gathering the next set of folders to take into her office for budget examination. These numbers were just not adding up. It was making her crazy.

He opened his mouth, but she shook her head immediately. He picked up a stack of folders and followed her into her office. He shut the door behind them and looked at the boy coloring on the floor. His gaze momentarily seemed to soften.

“What now?” he asked.

She shrugged, trying to look sad. “You know, sometimes when people get old, they just have problems with incontinence. It’s really unfortunate.”

“And embarrassing.” He added, picking up a folder and examining it. “Also, this looks very boring. You were right.”

“I’m glad that I can continue to live up to expectations,” she said dryly. “I’m sure my life is not up to your measure of excitement. Incidentally, how is your presentation coming?”

He blinked. “You approved it earlier.”

She shrugged. “I assumed you would continue to improve it, as we’re having such severe scheduling difficulties. I thought you wanted to present as best a case as possible. Perhaps we’re very different people.”

“Perhaps.” He allowed. “I’ll be back tomorrow, to see if Sandaime-sama is still…”

“Indisposed.” She said, smiling with her teeth. “Yes, please do.”

He leaned in closer, and it was definitely tinged with intentional intimidation. “I will. Thank you, Jiraiya-hime.”

Hatake-san strode out of her office and Regina went back to figuring out why the hell the budgetary allotments for almost every department didn’t match up with their expenditures.
She fled work with a bit more mania than she would have preferred, scooping up Sasuke and practically running out the door.

They met the crush of parents outside the Academy, and Yamanaka Yuina waved them over. Sasuke’s arms around her neck got a little tight- too tight- “Sasuke, it’s ok.” she whispered. “It’s going to be fine. We’re just picking up Naruto and going home, but I need you to not choke me.”

The python-like grip released a bit, and he dug his face into her neck instead.

“How are you, Sasuke-kun?” Yuina-san said, peering around to see his face. He dug in.

His fingers gripped her hair tightly. He wasn’t going to respond. “He’s tired.” Regina smiled in mild apology- not for his behavior, really. He didn’t owe anyone shit. But Yuina-san was nice.

“Of course.” Yuina-san smiled back, all calm demeanor and grace. “Ino has been worried, I’m glad to see you back, Sasuke-kun.”

He gave a little grunt.

“I would actually love to invite you and your family to our greenhouse, if you’d like to come. Kuri-san is doing a class on perfume making that I thought you might enjoy.” Yuina-san leaned back, and gave a leisurely glance at the clock. They had less than a minute left before all the children were released like a horde of orcs.

Regina looked down at Sasuke, who didn’t seem interested in responding one way or the other.

“I think we’d love that. When is it?”

The bell rang, and the doors exploded open. Ino ran out holding hands with her little friend with the pink hair, and they only let go when they reached their respective parents.

Naruto ran out and saw her and Sasuke, and looked visibly confused.

“I know, I can only carry one of you at a time. I’m not that strong.” She apologized. “Can you settle for holding my free hand?”

He could, grabbing at it immediately.

Yuina laughed, drawing Regina’s attention back.

“I can see you’re busy, but the class would be Saturday, from one in the afternoon. The greenhouse is next to the flowershop, if you would meet us there?”

Ino-chan waved at Sasuke, but he wasn’t looking.

“Later.” She heard Yuina-san say. “Sasuke-kun isn’t feeling good today.”

There was a miffed little sound, but no protest.

“We will see you there, I’m looking forward to it. Have a wonderful day, Yamanaka-san, Ino-chan.” Regina bowed, and looked to the crowd and bowed again, “shitsureishimasu.”
They made it back home in time to shove the boys into nicer clothes, which was good because not twenty minutes later there was a polite but firm rap on the floor and a very unapologetic ‘shitsureishimasu’.

“The etiquette teacher.” She advised the boys. “We’re all doing this together. If we rely on each other as a team, we just might live through this and become better and stronger as a family.”

“What if our teamwork is bad?” Naruto asked, looking a little perturbed in his cute kimono.

She looked at him. She wanted to reassure him. “If she’s anything like other etiquette teachers I’ve had, she will destroy our wills to live.”

Then she went to the genkan, checking that everything was perfectly clean. It was, because the Hokage had cleaners in here literally every day.

She opened the door. Maybe her other experiences weren’t indicative of etiquette teachers everywhere, and this one was nice.

An impossibly tiny and severe-looking woman was on the other side. Her kimono was perfectly wrapped and reserved in colors. Her updo was impeccable, and was fixed with what Regina was sure was one of those sharp kanzashi like she had, with beautiful natural pearls dangling down on golden thread.

Her face was the picture of genteel placidity, but for the quirk in her eyebrow that indicated some displeasure.

‘Called it.’

“I am Tanimoto Yuuka. I am pleased to be your etiquette teacher, referred by his Majesty, the Daimyo of the Land of Fire. It is good to meet you.” The woman bowed, gracefully but with a steel spine.

“I am Jiraiya Regina, daughter of Jiraiya of the Sannin. I am pleased to meet you, and eager to learn from you, Tanimoto-sensei.”

Regina bowed, but not nearly as low. It was weird, both being in the position of outranking someone, but with the added complication of a student/teacher relationship, which tilted the balance. She was pretty sure she hadn’t gotten the exact angle right.

There was some evaluation in Tanimoto-sensei’s eyes.

“Thank you for having me in your home.” The woman said crisply, stepping into the genkan. “If you would guide me, we will begin your classes in the living room.”

‘Prepare for the worst, and hope for the best.’

Regina gave her winningest smile, and led the woman into the living room.

“It was good of you to involve your children.” Tanimoto-sensei said slowly and approvingly, walking in a tiny circle around Sasuke and Naruto. “Their behavior will reflect on you and your father, regardless of their occupation.”

To their credit, the boys stood perfectly still, just watching Regina for any hint of how to behave.
‘Smart kids.’

“We will begin with self-introductions, as well as a discussion regarding your position relative to others, and how to determine social rankings in any given situation. In order to behave properly, you must know your audience.” Tanimoto-sensei stopped next to Regina. “Rejina-hime, your introduction was adequate. Let us see how your sons do.”

She looked at Naruto and Sasuke. “I am Tanimoto Yuuka, and I will be your instructor for proper behavior. It is good to meet you.” She bowed, not terribly low.

‘Technically the age difference tilts it way in her favor, even though their family station is as high as mine. I only got more respect because I’m an adult.’

“I am Uzumaki...anou.” Naruto looked at her, panicked. “Am I supposed to say my old name?”

“That’s an excellent question.” Tanimoto-sensei looked at Regina. “Am I correct in assuming that both boys were technically subsumed into the Jiraiya clan upon their adoption?”

“Yes.” Regina confirmed. “That would be correct. Upon adulthood, they are able to choose which family name they prefer. But for now, all records of them would be under the name Jiraiya, not...” she looked at her boys. “Their birth family names.” Luckily, she had told them about that earlier. It had seemed relevant.

“So you introduce yourself as Jiraiya...” Tanimoto-sensei prodded.

“Jiraiya Naruto.” He bowed quickly, probably the same distance he did in class.

Tanimoto-sensei didn’t even blink. She just looked at Sasuke.

“I am Jiraiya Sasuke, and I am very pleased to meet you.” He bowed a little bit lower, to what Regina thought was probably a more accurate assessment. Sasuke had had the benefit of being born into a clan and had probably picked up some of the necessary skills just by observation.

Tanimoto-sensei hummed.

“We will have to start from the very beginning, I see.” She beckoned Regina around the room, to a position just in front of the boys. “Let us begin.”

Two hours later, Tanimoto-sensei left, promising to be back every day until they were up to snuff.

“That wasn’t so bad.” Regina said, feeling slightly suspicious. Maybe her prior teachers were just dicks.

“What are you talking about, kaa-chan? That was awful.” Naruto whined, slinking down to the floor. “My back hurts from bowing and I didn’t do anything right.”

“You’ll get there.” She reassured him. “That’s the point. She will make you do it over and over again until it’s perfect every time. You can’t get a bad grade. She won’t leave until it’s impossible.”

She sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “Speaking of, Naruto, you should go get some training clothes. I found you a tutor for the Academy, and he will be taking you for training after dinner.”
“What about me?” Sasuke demanded.

She ruffled his fluffy head. “You’re coming with me to tea ceremony class. Gai-san will be there.”

He looked at her suspiciously, but nodded.

“I think you should keep the kimono on for now, though. What do we want for dinner?” She thought about the options. There was a cute little cafe she wanted to try.

“-Not ramen.” She cut off Naruto, with a cocked brow. “Sandaime-sama is taking you there for lunch tomorrow. You can wait.”

“I want something fresh.” Sasuke said, looking down at his clothes. “Something not messy.”

“Kozora cafe it is, then!” She announced. “Naruto, make sure your kit is ready and that you have everything you need in your bag.”

He skidded out, sliding on the wooden floor of the kitchen in his socks. His shinobi gear was dangling out of his bag.

“Don’t lose it.” She warned. “I can replace it if they get damaged, but they’re too expensive to just let fall out of your bag.”

“Naruto, just that shirt costs like 5000ryo.” Sasuke pointed out.

His eyes went wide, and he crammed everything into his bag and zipped it shut.

“Okay, we’re doing things- training, tea ceremony, manners. Team Jiraiya!” She gave Naruto a little high-five, and Sasuke followed up. “We’re going to be the best there ever was, because…” she thought about it for a minute.

“We have to, really.” She shrugged. “Let’s go eat.”

Ebisu-san came into the restaurant as they were eating, and she beckoned for him to take a seat. He did, looking at Naruto. He ordered a water and sipped at it while they finished up.

“I’m told that you will be my student for the foreseeable future.” Ebisu-san said, sounding very nonchalant and not at all like he’d been desperately wheedling at the Hokage this morning for a prestigious pupil.

Naruto, fresh from two hours’ worth of etiquette lessons, managed to wait until after he’d chewed to dot at his mouth with a napkin to say. “And the future Hokage.”

Ebisu-san took that without any reaction, she’d told him earlier anyway. “That would be very respectable for me, if my student could achieve such a thing.”

He looked at Sasuke.

Sasuke was not interested, just eating his pile of tomatoes she’d had to specially order for him as a side. To be fair, he had his eyes on a particular role model and he didn’t seem like the type of kid to settle.

“If you’re finished, Naruto-kun, I have a training field reserved and we should get going.” Ebisu-san stood.
Naruto finished his chicken, grabbed his bag, and gave Regina a kiss on the cheek before running out of the restaurant.

“So, we’re doing tea now?” Sasuke asked, sounding bored.

She grinned at him. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll be the best at tea ceremony, Sasuke-kun. If you’re finished, too, we can go meet Gai-san.”

He popped the rest of his tomatoes into his mouth and slid out of his seat.

She paid the bill and they left, with him holding her hand the whole way to Nakayama-sensei’s house.

Gai-san met them outside, and gave Sasuke his best thumbs up and smile combo.

Sasuke actually smiled back, which was no minor thing.

‘Yeah, I gotta ask Gai. I hope like hell he somehow has the time.’

They were still in the ‘matching decor’ part of the course, which was evidently going to take the rest of Regina’s natural life.

‘Maybe that’s why Hyuuga-san is still here. It’s impossible to pass.’

But she was determined.

Tonight, the theme was for the fanciest of tea gatherings- a full chaji. Which meant that they had to pick out a full season-appropriate kaiseki meal as well as the tatejiku and flower decorations.

“It is in fall, at noon.” Nakayama-sensei said, walking around the room like a caged tiger in a meat locker. “Do your best.”

‘Fall season foods are chirimen, shishamo (both of which I hate), chestnuts… what else. Shit.’

She couldn’t make a meal plan based on that. But if it was fall, she wouldn’t be doing sakura tea. That was for spring. It should be hot, as well. Oh, maybe umecha? No, that technically wasn’t allowed.

“Kaa-chan.” Sasuke elbowed her side. “What should we write?”

“Saury?” She asked, “That’s fall, isn’t it?”

He nodded, and wrote it down. She looked at it.

‘Oh, I’m going to bring him to things more often. His handwriting is actually nice. Very useful. He’s the cutest secretary.’

“Tsukemono would be… yuzu based?” she tapped her finger on the table.

He grunted.

“Shishamo, chirimen… shinmai rice. Then a sweet using jagaimo, kuri, and apples… a tartlet?”

He didn’t know what that meant. She drew it for him, pointing to the different elements.
paste, with sliced and stewed apples and pre-baked pumpkin slices to be added on top in a pattern to the top of a thin pastry crust.

Sasuke nodded, and filled it all out.

She looked at it. He’d added a lot more details than she’d given.

‘Oh, right, his mom took these classes and his family was rich and old. He probably knows some of the right dishes.’

Though grilled saury with grated daikon and ginger didn’t particularly appeal to her, tbh. It wasn’t like she actually had to eat it today.

“Roasted barley tea sounds like a good complement.” She said softly. “The thick and thin matcha are a given.”

He nodded.

“Now we need a visual theme. Traditional fall imagery is… well there’s the changing of the colors.” She puzzled it out. “It’s still furo season, not ro, because it’s not that cold.”

‘And during the middle of the day. You know, she didn’t say the purpose of this meeting or our guests. Maybe we have to determine that for ourselves?’

To be honest, that was the fanciest kind possible, for people that were above or at your social position. In her position, for Regina that would have to be… either clan heads, the Hokage, the Daimyo or his family, and some better-known lords. Maybe a foreign one.

‘Crap, this is gonna be fancy.’ Regina eyed the women around the table and wished that she didn’t have to learn everything on Insanity Level.

“Have a decorative radish cut to look like billowing flame and dyed, and decorative kabocha puree on the plate.” She instructed Sasuke, gesturing out a drawing. “In a circle, for safe returns. We’re having the Hokage and Daimyo over.”

He gave her a look.

“This is fancy.” She reminded him. “We’re also having… Tsunade-hime, Jiraiya-tousan, and…”

‘Orochimaru?’ her mind giggled. ‘Complete the set.’

“The Daimyo’s wife.” She finished. “If Tsunade-hime and o-tousan cannot come, then Koharu-sama and Homura-sama.”

‘These are all people I could reasonably expect to have in my tea house, to be honest. And Dad would be tickled silly that we invited him and used it.’

Then she got up and went to the cabinet, avoiding the seasonal shelves entirely. She was on a mission.

The scroll she wanted was about one hundred years old. She’d seen it last week at the last lesson on Friday, but couldn’t remember what the handle looked like.

‘Come on, come on, will of fire.’ She chanted. ‘I want to beat Hyuuga-san’s face into space.’

She located it, just another hand reached for it. She slipped under and pulled her prize away,
looking up to lock eyes with...oh. Mitarashi-san.

“Hey!” She said, holding the scroll close to her chest. “I didn’t notice you were here today, I’m sorry. How are you?”

Mitarashi-san looked down on the scroll and up to Regina’s face, like ‘Really?’ But she didn’t go there.

“Not surprising, seems you’re occupied with the kid.” Mitarashi gestured back to Sasuke with her head. “It’s my hobby. How long have you been coming?”

“Only a week.” Regina said, a bit bashfully. “But I’m trying my best.”

Mitarashi-san hummed. “Well. If you want to practice sometime, let me know. Work is boring.”

“I will definitely do that.” Regina promised. “Can I invite you over to practice next month?”

Mitarashi-san just nodded, and slipped another scroll out of the cabinet. “Ah, this one is good enough. Saaa, I think you took the best one.”

“I know.” Regina blinked. “That was the point.”

She laughed and walked away, leaving Regina standing there. So she went back next to Sasuke with her prize.

‘And now, a flower.’

Well, if her tatejiku was a copy of a poem written by Senju Hashirama on the nature of shinobi, that could be... any number of things.

She went out to the other room where the flowers were stored.

‘Okay. Yuina said that chrysanthemums meant either, like truth or imperial. Imperial could be good- that’s the flower and color of the Japanese Imperial family back home. But truth might be better in this context.’

She looked at the last couple of vases.

‘The red spider lily is gorgeous, but I’m pretty sure it basically means death or suffering. Cosmos don’t have any meaning in hanakotoba, but they’re a fall flower.’

She thought for a moment. A couple of women picked up some cosmos. Mitarashi-san went right for the red spider lily and left. She wondered who the hell Mitarashi-san was inviting over for tea.

‘...I’m pretty sure I’d get more mileage on saying there’s truth in Hashirama’s ruminations on the nobility of shinobi than anything else.’

She brought two of them back, big and white and fluffy-petaled. Now the vase? Shit. There was a surprising amount of work in this.

‘Everything means something.’ She coached herself.

A black and orange lacquered vase caught her eye. It implied flames as well as elegance.

‘Normally, fire has a bad meaning. But not necessarily here. Fire means home and fighting spirit. Eat that, Hyuuga-san.’
She prepared, letting Sasuke watch her finesse every aspect.

Gai’s presentation was, as usual, very direct and clean. Cosmos with decorative sheaves of grass in a basket, like they had just been harvested, and a painting of a tree during fall. She loved it, and told him so.

Sasuke just sat down on the floor in seiza, evidently willing the thing to be over.

When they went around the room, she admired the compositions. Everyone’s menu was fairly similar, to be honest. Hers was only different in that she’d sketched out the presentations on the plate, added a pumpkin puree for decoration and added fall element, and a tart. They were decidedly European additions, to be honest, combined with the more traditional Japanese elements on the plate.

‘But why the hell not? I’m the only one who has that extra perspective, I may as well use it for my benefit.’

When she got back to her presentations, she noted that Sasuke was already reading the comments.

“Any notes for me?” She asked, kind of curious.

He sniffed. “They like it. Except one person, who wrote just ‘almost acceptable’ on it.”

‘I probably don’t need to guess who that was.’

She looked over to Hyuuga-san, who slightly sneered in her direction. Her impeccable display got full marks, as usual.

‘Someday I will crush you like a bug, Hyuuga-san.’ Regina vowed.

“Gai-san, were your comments good?” She asked, and got a thumbs up in return.

“Rejina-hime, I believe we are improving at a good rate.” He gestured to both displays. They did look markedly more cohesive than the last two classes before.

“But what if we could improve at a great rate?” she asked, leaning closer. “Mitarashi-san has extended an invitation of sorts, to practice together. When my tea house is built in a few weeks…” she let the thought trail off.

He picked it up, just as she thought he would. “We would be able to practice certain things on our own! Yosh.”

“But who will our guests be?” He asked.

She shrugged and tapped Sasuke’s shoulder. “Sasuke-kun, do you like matcha?”

Gai walked them home, and she sent Sasuke inside for a bath. Naruto-kun would be home any time, and he liked to linger in there. Doing what, she didn’t want to ask.

“Hey, Gai-san? Could I ask you for some advice, and maybe a favor?” She asked, feeling a little awkward. It wasn’t like she’d known him that long. Asking for favors was a bit tactless.
But Sasuke had made it very clear that he would not let it stand to be ignored. And he had needs she couldn’t meet.

“Yosh! Of course, Rejina-hime. What is it you would like to ask me?”

She tried to keep her hands out of her hair.

‘What am I getting stressed for? It’s Gai. If he doesn’t want to do it, he’ll say no, and he’s not a lunatic.’

“Sasuke-kun has been having some trouble adjusting to things.” She sat down on one of the decorative wooden benches. “Since he woke up. It’s not surprising, but he’s…”

“Scared.” Gai supplied, nodding and sitting down.

She nodded. “Yeah. He wants to train a lot. I’m not sure how much is healthy for him. His body is still recovering. Naruto just got a tutor, and he’s also feeling left behind.”

“That sounds difficult.”

“It is.” Regina agreed. “I’m not a shinobi- he seems to think that’s the only way to be safe. He’s not rejecting me, but… it’s not what it could be. He distrusts people. Thinks some of them can’t help him.”

“He’s taken up a sudden interest in medical jutsu.” She supplied. “Those are the books he wants me to buy for him right now.”

“That’s… good?” Gai seemed a little perplexed.

“Is that not usual for someone who experienced trauma?” she asked. “He’s obviously fixated on you and Tsunade-hime as mentors. So he’s pushing that way- he wants to learn taijutsu and medical ninjutsu. Evidently he found out how impossible curing him should have been.”

“Ahhh.” to her surprise, he didn’t sound annoyed. He sounded happy about it. “So Sasuke-kun needs a mentor.”

“I’m afraid of who he’ll find on his own, if I told him he couldn’t have one. To be honest, I’m surprised he didn’t accost you at class to demand your attention.” She admitted. “I’m sure you’re really busy, but if you have time sometimes, I’d feel better knowing that it was you who might be checking on him, or giving him advice.”

“Rejina-hime, are you asking if I will teach your son the noble art of taijutsu?” he turned to her. His eyes were sparkling.

‘Oh, he’s much more excited about this than I’d anticipated.’

“Yes.” She answered, glad for the relief. “Is that ok? I’m sure that I’m asking for a lot. If you can’t do it or don’t want to, please tell me.”

“I want to, Rejina-hime!” he jumped up. “I have wanted a student of my own for the longest time, to impart the lessons of genius of hard work!”

“Sasuke does like to work hard.” She said, smiling. “I’m pretty sure he’s been trying to make up his own extra homework and make the teachers grade it.”

Gai turned to her and laughed.
“I promise you this, Rejina-hime. You will not regret trusting me with your friendship or Sasuke-kun’s training.”

“I already know that, Gai.” She leaned back into the backrest of the bench. “I never worried about that at all.”

“Anou, Hokage-sama.”

His mini-kage tapped on the side of the door politely, to get his attention.

“Yes, Rejina-hime?” he asked, putting down the reports he was reading.

She looked a bit concerned. “Hokage-sama, I believe that Hatake-san is not going to stop pursuing a meeting. He seems very, very invested in making sure you hear what he has to say.”

That wasn’t exactly a surprise. What was a surprise was that Kakashi-kun was the only one off his list of ‘no meetings, ever’ people that she was complaining about. She’d even somehow gotten Danzou to make a series of appointments on days that didn’t exist.

“He is that persistent?” he asked, getting out his pipe.

She nodded, looking a little ashamed. “He has come to my desk at least once every day for the past two weeks, providing progressively more documentation and increasingly sophisticated presentations. He will not take polite rejection, and refuses to be misdirected or distracted. I believe that he has made it his singular goal.” She swallowed, placing her hands in front of her body in that defensive posture he’d only recently gotten her out of. “I also believe… I now understand what you meant in our earlier conversations regarding his approach to people and untenable situations.”

He felt like sighing. So he did, putting his head in his hands.

“I suppose you had better prepare a rebuttal for this well-planned presentation, then, Rejina-hime.”

Eventually he’d have to give way and let Kakashi-kun have his say (again, though the last few times he admittedly had not had any sort of presentation or plan beyond insubordination). Whether he took the latest refusal or not, he couldn’t delay the inevitable forever. If Kakashi was going to be this relentless, they’d just have to deal with it.

‘Though it does very much hammer in the point that his friends made.’ He thought, with no amusement. No one even vaguely well-adjusted would be tormenting a civilian like this about an answer they’d already gotten.

It wasn’t her fault that he’d accidentally set her out to incur his Jounin’s wrath. He couldn’t let this keep up. At that rate, Kakashi-kun might just start camping outside of her house and finally terrify her right out of town, leaving her defenseless and liable to get picked up by any number of dangerous persons. Rejina-hime was slow to give trust and quick to revoke it.

“Did we tell him why he was being removed?” She asked, fiddling with her fingers. “Or, what was he told?”

“I told him he was removed by order of the Hokage.” he said, “and normally that would be enough.”
Rejina hesitated.

“Was it connected to the meeting you had with Might-san, your son, and Yuuhi-san?” She bowed her head and bit her lower lip. “I’m sorry if I’m being invasive. I just don’t want to accidentally set him on someone else. He… doesn’t seem to be taking it well at all.”

Every single one of his employees was a singularly unstable, twitchy oddball. This is why he’d never be able to give up smoking. Even Rejina hadn’t used to do that. Hatake must have been subjecting her to some of his particular focused ‘charm’ in the last week.

“It was.” He allowed. “They expressed some concerns. But that knowledge does not-” he held up a finger- “cannot leave our confidence for those reasons.”

“Understood, Hokage-sama. I have prepared materials for him, may I schedule him in?” Big green eyes bored into him. Her hands twitched again.

“No.” he said, a little too quickly.

Her eyes narrowed at him. “Why not, Hokage-sama?”

He didn’t really have an answer for that. He just really, really did not want to have this meeting. The last three had been painful enough. And Kakashi-kun wasn’t actually likely to take this as a no, either.

“I’ll schedule it as soon as I can.” He said, sighing. “Don’t do it without me.”

She bowed and left quietly, shutting the door behind her.
Chapter 28

The next time that he came into the office, he did not wait for any power games. He stalked to the office of the ridiculous woman who barred his way to the Hokage and slapped his materials down on her desk. He ignored the child napping on the couch.

“Good morning Jiraiya-hime, this is what I’d like to talk to the Hokage about in my meeting today.”

She lifted her head slightly to look up at him. “Good morning, Hatake-san. Just a moment.” She perused what he’d brought, lips pursed. This time, he could see palpable approval. He had gone beyond what she had suggested the times prior. When she was finally done, she handed his folder back respectfully.

He tucked it against his leg.

“Thank you, that was very well done,” she said. She smiled at him. It seemed sincere.

He frowned down at her, a little offput. “Thank you.” He knew it came out stiffly. “About the meeting…”

“What are you going to say to his likely rebuttals?” she asked.

He felt his muscles tense. “I have thought about it.”

“What if he doesn’t ask? What if he does not want to consider it at all?” Her hair must have been a very soft texture, because it slipped to the side when she tilted her head. Her big green eyes were fixed on him with a nearly unnerving intensity. It was aggressive, challenging body language that did not match her relaxed muscles and high, friendly voice.

‘Is she really as useless as Jiraiya implied?’

Kakashi frowned at the supposed civilian. She was awfully comfortable being rude and confrontational. That usually meant a person could handle a situation that went downhill after offending someone.

‘She acts too cocky. I don’t like it. I don’t buy this.’

He thought about testing it. And then he thought about the consequences of if he was wrong and threw a kunai at a totally untrained civilian princess.

“I’ll deal with it as it happens,” he said. He kept his tone professional, slow, maybe a bit bored sounding.

She hummed, and the sound was somehow unimpressed. She leaned back and pulled out a planner. At the angle she held it, he could not see it at all. “What time today are you free for a meeting?” she asked.

He listed off his availability.

She nodded as she listened, and ran a finger over the page she was looking at. Then she sucked air through her teeth and made an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, that won’t work.”

His whole body was tense. “Tomorrow.”
She made an “mmmm” sound, lifting her shoulders and continuing to look sorry. “Ah, there are no meeting slots tomorrow.”

‘That’s a lie.’

“Why?” he challenged.

She paused for a second. She was clearly thinking. “It’s No Stress Thursday,” she lied, and it was yet another obvious lie. But she looked him dead in the face as she said it.

‘There is no possibility that is true.’

Maybe she read the disbelief in his face. She smiled, very slightly. She might have thought he didn’t see any amusement. “He’ll be doing a hair mask and can’t be disturbed. It’s a chance to catch up on the work we already have.”

“The Hokage is bald,” Kakashi said flatly.

She sat back, looking offended. “He’s always wearing a hat. You don’t know that. In any case, tomorrow is impossible.” She inhaled sharply, as if she had just remembered something. “Oh, no.” She made a face that was bordering a pout. “I was about to say we have plenty of openings on Friday. But you have a mission, don’t you.” She held her hands up, as if to say, ‘What can you do?’

She was such an awful little person that… that he grudgingly liked her.

‘But I see why Jiraiya kept her out of the shinobi system.’

He turned and left without another word.

“Regina-hime.” Keiko called lightly from her doorway. “The Hokage wants to see you.”

So she went, after tucking the mildly sensitive info on her desk into a drawer.

When she entered the office, the Hokage leaned back and lit his pipe. “Close the door, please, Rejina-hime.”

She obediently did so.

“How is he?” the Hokage asked, quietly.

She blinked. Uh. “Who?”

That could be referring to at least three people off the top of her head. Her neglected, bullied orphan adopted son? Her very recently and violently orphaned son? The desperate young man slowly breaking down because he’d been moved from a prestigious murdering position to a respectable job where he wasn’t likely to be violently murdered?

“Uchiha-kun,” he clarified. “The hospital reports showed no sign of recovery, until you and Might-san left the village. I see that he’s recovered, but not yet in school. How is he now?”
‘Scared, clingy, jumpy.’

She bit her lip. That was obvious.

“As one might expect after that kind of trauma. He isn’t ready to be alone. I think he would benefit from specialised therapy.”

Even though she wanted to, she did not say ‘and being removed from the shinobi training program entirely.’

Gai was absolutely great, but it was really hard to see how continuing his murdering education would be good for Sasuke’s mental health. He was starting out so traumatized.

She had a sinking fear that Sasuke really didn’t stand a chance.

“Do you remember the Yamanaka clan?” he asked, taking out his pipe and letting it dangle from his hand. Ashes spilled out and dispersed into the gentle breeze from the window.

She nodded. He probably knew that she was making friendly overtures with the clan head’s wife.

“They have a number of mental health specialists in that family. If you went to their clan head, I believe that he would provide a list of acceptable names to you.”

Regina bowed. “Thank you, Hokage-sama.”

He rubbed his temples with his free hand, looking tired. “Is there anything else you think you might need?”

“I believe that Naruto might benefit from treatment as well, but that requires nothing further from you. Another issue is that I may require someone trusted to help me to take care of them—between work, my classes, and my apprenticeship, I have little time to do certain caretaking necessities such as cleaning and cooking.”

He just looked at her.

“Very well.” the Hokage picked up his finished stack of papers and put them in her hands. “You may go. Uchiha-kun can come to the Tower with you until he has been signed off by a Yamanaka therapist to go back to the Academy, and I will find a list of potential housekeepers for you to peruse.” His lips twitched. “I believe that a salary was provided for this purpose in your contract.”

‘Bet no one foresaw me calling in that one so early. Tsunade really went hard on the benefits package.’

“Thank you.” She bowed and left, shutting the door behind her. She went directly into her office.

Sasuke was sitting up, pale and drawn. His big dark eyes followed her as soon as she walked in.

“Oh, I thought you were still sleeping,” she said. “I’m sorry I left while you were asleep. I wasn’t gone long.”

He nodded once. He looked a little guarded still, with his knees pulled up to his chest.

“I’m going to look at budget requests from the Academy,” she said, and instantly regretted. That was not an interesting topic for children. She was committed now, though, so she soldiered on. “Want to help me?”
He scrunched up his nose, but then nodded seriously. He unfolded his legs and trundled over to her desk. She sat down and held her arms out. He didn’t climb onto her lap, but he stood right next to her and leaned into her body. It was only natural to drape her left arm over him in a hug as she got down to work.

“Mizuki-sensei says he needs 100 more kunai,” she said. “Does that make sense? Should we give them to him?”

“Mizuki-sensei is lazy about sharpening kunai,” Sasuke said. His high-pitched voice was a little raspy from disuse, but it came out hilariously stern. “Don’t approve it. Tell him to maintain his tools.”

Her jaw dropped. She looked for words. She didn’t find any. So she wrote that on the page--

“That’s not right,” Sasuke said. This was the most alert and engaged she had ever seen him. He wiggled in her grip, nearly crawling on her lap in order to point at what she’d just written. “You wrote that wrong. The left part should be like- like this.” He picked up her pen and scrawled the kanji radical on his own hand. Then he held it up to her. “See?”

She leaned back a little, because he nearly bopped her nose. “I see, thank you.” She crossed out what she’d written and wrote it correctly above her mistaken kanji. “Anything else I should change before I rewrite this?”

Sasuke looked back at the paper, very serious. He was silent for a long moment. “No,” he said. “It looks good now.”

Regina nodded. “Thank you.” She took a clean sheet of office letterhead and copied out the polite denial.

She had a thought. Jiraiya had fucked off without correcting any of her writing practice in her workbooks. She had kinda given up hope of finding someone invested or perfectionistic enough to do that for her. But… “Sasuke,” she said, to her very small and serious son. “How would you feel about correcting my homework?”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “This first, though.” He pointed at a paper she hadn’t even begun to read. “This is a mess.” She couldn’t see his face, but she could hear the scowl. “Tell them to get a lot better at their jobs.”

She craned to read. It was from T&I, and she did not know the kanji to know what bleak things they wanted an additional 2000 ryou for.

‘It’s not a huge number, so I almost want to let it slide because they are scary. On the other hand, budgetary decisions shouldn’t be made out of fear.’

“I trust your judgment, but I’m afraid of Mitarashi-san,” Regina said. She tapped the paper. “I don’t want to tell her she’s bad at her job. She uses snakes liberally.”

“It’s your job to tell her no,” Sasuke said, instant and stern. Then he softened a bit. “…I guess you can leave off the bit about her work performance.” He seemed doubtful.

She very nearly snorted. “Thank you. What are they asking for? I don’t know those kanji.”

“Budget for house-keeping services,” he said. His tone was acidic.
“That doesn’t sound that bad,” Regina said. “It’s probably gross down there.”

“Yes, but.” Sasuke wiggled. “Firstly, it’s their job to maintain their own space. Secondly, this is ambiguously worded and that’s suspicious. I don’t see anything indicating that these cleaning services would be used by the actual department.” He pointed at a kanji. “It specifically says ‘house’ cleaning. I think whoever wrote this has a dirty house and low estimation of your literacy.”

“She’s not wrong, but she’s not getting that.” Regina wrote “I refuse this,” in red ink and decided to give the request back just like that. She took a moment to wish she had stickers or even a stamp that said ‘good try’. Then she looked down at her dark-haired son. “Thank you for coming to work with me today.”

He tilted his face to grin up at her. The gap in his smile where he was missing a tooth stuck out to her, childish and carefree. “You’re welcome. Let’s see who else is bad at things, and tell them to do better.”

‘Maybe the stamp I need just says “NO” on it.’

She kissed Sasuke’s forehead. “I like you so much.”

After she and Sasuke finished gleefully refusing spurious budgetary requests, they picked up Naruto from the Academy. Tanimoto-sensei was waiting for them.

“Princes and princesses should never be late.” She said, beckoning them into their own home. It was a little funny. “Please come, we have much work to do.”

‘We weren’t late. You were just earlier than usual.’

“Bow as you would to the daimyo.” They did.

“No, lower and longer. Bow again.” Tanimoto-sensei instructed. “Now, how would you greet a foreign lord or lady of similar station to you? Demonstrate.”

Regina went first, then Sasuke, then Naruto. As always, because technically, Sasuke was the eldest son.

It took a long time for Regina to get approval. She couldn’t really tell the difference, but Tanimoto-sensei was forever adjusting the angle of her head. There was clearly something that Tanimoto-sensei didn’t like about her inflection, either, because she made Regina repeat the greetings again and again.

Sasuke barely needed correction. He had an eye for detail and seemed to excel with the slightest bit of feedback.

Naruto landed somewhere in between the two of them. His biggest problem was that he tended to forget the second half of phrases and mumble or mix it up with another greeting.

She was starting to feel worried that Naruto would feel frustrated or dispirited, but then Tanimoto-sensei nodded briskly and switched tracks. “Acceptable for now. Today, we will begin to talk about poetic form. As lords and ladies, it is necessary for you to possess knowledge regarding art and poetry. You must be able to write your own, to recite the most famous, and to conduct yourselves in a cultured manner.” She opened up the case she had brought and withdrew sheaves of paper, brushes, and black ink.

Regina looked at the writing utensils like she would look at Mitarashi’s snakes. This was a terrible
way to do first drafts of poetry.

‘Turns out, I hate a whole new art form now.’

They suffered through two types of poetry. Tanka were long. She could see how they could be beautiful, but it was hard to enjoy that when they were being mercilessly beat into you by an unsmiling woman you could not escape.

She already knew the vague basics of haiku, but it meant she had to write them.

Her poems weren’t very good, to be honest. Sasuke’s were evidently ok. Naruto did the best by far. He actually got a facial expression that was nearly a smile from Tanimoto-sensei.

‘With all our efforts combined, we might make one acceptable princess.’ she thought glumly, attempting to think of nice words to describe trees.

Tanimoto-sensei finally left after two and a half hours.

“I’m tired,” Naruto whined. He stretched. “Can we do something fun now?”

‘Oh god. We have dinner, then koto lessons. Then I can die in my bed.’ Regina looked at her room longingly. This was a marathon. Her entire life was suffering.

‘Though it’s the same for the boys, too, to be honest.’ She thought guiltily. ‘They’re kind of being drug into this.’

But tomorrow was an off-day for them, after etiquette lessons. She’d go to tea ceremony alone, and they’d have monitored play time with Yuina-san and her daughter.

“Next is dinner. You boys can choose a restaurant. What should we eat?” She asked, kind of dreading the answer.

Sasuke won out with udon, so they drug themselves out the door and into the street to the restaurant Sasuke recommended.

“I’m sorry that you two have to keep being so busy.” She apologized over her noodles. “You deserve more free time than this.”

They seemed to shrug.

“Other than the etiquette lessons, I’m ok.” Naruto said, stretching out like a cat. “And those end at some point, right?”

“Yes. When Tanimoto-sensei knows we’ve learned everything she needs to teach us, she’ll go. Apparently, all little princes and princesses do this at about your age.” She felt mildly depressed about that. What a sucky way to spend your childhood.

“Yeah.” Sasuke agreed. “I had some lessons before.”

“Is Tanimoto-sensei similar?” Regina asked, curious.

He shrugged. “Tanimoto-sensei is more… particular.”

“She did come to us at the special recommendation of the Daimyo’s wife.” Regina informed. “I don’t know if that makes a difference.”
At least she’s probably really good at it, then.” Sasuke popped a bit of fried daikon into his mouth.

They walked to koto lessons together- and evidently Naruto had decided to switch to koto basically overnight.

‘Probably because that’s where I and Sasuke are going. He can keep his taiko lesson if he wants. It’s the healthiest expression of hitting things I can possibly think of. Taiko, taiko for everyone. Fuck those neighbors.’

Sasuke plucked at his assigned instrument with a demonstrable lack of interest. But he was happy to be told he had delicate little fingers, which evidently made him a prize pupil.

“You know, once we get good enough, I’ll let you pick a class we can take together.” Regina mentioned. “I like doing things with you.” She plucked the chosen note again. The song was supposed to be performed by memory. No sheet music, here.

“Mandatory, educational family time?” He asked, looking bored. Then he seemed to think about it. He plunked out a few notes.

She wondered where that was going, but to be honest it was going to take a long time to be finished with any of the classes they were currently stuck in.

‘He has tons of time to figure out something. Wonder whether it’ll be heinous punishment or really interesting.’

Naruto was examining the instrument from top to bottom, looking at how the wires were tuned. She had no doubt he’d figure it out in time. He liked to figure out how things worked.

The next morning she was dragging, but she managed to pretend to be alive anyway. Naruto was at school, and Sasuke was with Gai in between appointments with Yamanaka Santa. She was currently free and clear with only her regular work to do.

Another letter was in her box. It was clearly from Danzou-shishou.

She went into her office to open it.

'My God. It's more training. How much training does one woman need. I'm literally running out of hours in the day.'

Regina breathed out. It was good. This was hard, yes, but would make her life better. It wasn't forever.

Then he walked in.

'Oh, no. This will definitely not improve my life in any way at all. Go away. Please.'

Judging by body language, his mood was even worse than usual. Hatake was stalking like he was on a mission. Knowing him, it was a mission to ruin her life, personally, for literally no reason other than spite.

'Please let him go somewhere else. Bother someone else.'

But no. Six feet of bad news and worse attitude was on an unmistakable course for her open office
She was definitely not fast enough to lock the door before he got there, and she didn't have another plan. Maybe Sasuke could have, but he was at his appointment with Yamanaka-san.

Glass shattered somewhere nearby. ...Or maybe Hatake just had that aura.

She steeled herself for the inevitable battle.

'So be it. Let him come. I am the master of my sea, queen of this domain. I am not going to cry in front of this very troubled man and the entire office pool. They'd get it, but no.'

She took a deep breath and looked down at the budget from the Department of Corrections. It was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen. She could not even hear footsteps in her office.

Actually, she literally did not hear any footsteps. But she did have a sense of looming doom, so he was probably really close.

'Here we go.'

The woman he was going to see looked up and stiffened when she saw him. Her eyes glazed over. If he had to put a name to the emotion on her face, it would be 'grief.'

'A bit dramatic, that.'

She wasn't alone, though. He could feel the whole office hold their breath the instant he stepped into the Hokage Tower. Someone who was leaving the breakroom swiveled midstep and went right back in. An older woman covered her face with her hands. But what really hurt was that the chuunin secretary flinched on hard-won reflex and used both hands to sweep everything on her desk to the floor. Something broke.

"Oh no," she said, in a very quiet monotone. "I dropped something." And then she slid bonelessly underneath her desk, where absolutely none of those things had landed.

He was a little offended. After all their conversations, she would treat him like this? So cold.

'What is she crying about? I'm not even here to see her this time.'

He stepped over a stapler and two photos of some mediocre-looking children. The glass frame they had been in crunched underneath his sandals.

Jiraiya's stubborn daughter was still looking at him. Her gaze darted upward for a moment, as if looking for help or divine intervention. And then-

She ducked her head and pretended to be very busy.

He stifled a snort, but he did not alter his trajectory for a second. He walked into her office.

She was still staring intently at what looked to be some exceedingly dull sheets of numbers.

Kakashi walked directly up to her desk.

The office princess took a deep, steadying breath.
'This is a little awkward.'

He shifted from foot to foot.

She valiantly continued to ignore him.

He put his palms on the desktop and leaned forward. She flinched backward and finally looked up at him. He noted the flinch, regretted it, and dismissed it.

"Jiraiya-hime," he bit out. "Give me a meeting. I know there are times available. I am tired of playing these games with you. Get out the calendar, schedule me a time."

The words were sour in his mouth. He was practically begging and he hated it.

She looked down at the floor.

The body language was new, but he had the sinking fear that this was just going to be the pause before some more bullshit. He clenched his jaw. "I assume he's already taken his daily walk with all the feral cats in the village."

The silence stretched on. He felt his hand twitch, but pressed it harder onto the wood to ride out the muscle spasm.

"I need to see the Hokage." His voice came out stronger and harder than he felt.

There was a quiet sound from behind him as someone closed the door to Jiraiya-hime's office.

He still didn't see a way to change the Hokage's mind. But if he kept trying, threw himself on the Hokage's mercy, cited his career statistics- maybe. Maybe he could add just enough to outweigh whatever the Hokage had based his decision on. He just had to get access to have a chance to plead his case. And convincing this civilian to schedule an appointment was the only way to force his way into that office without getting arrested. He knew she didn't want to, had probably been told not to, but she did have the power to do it. He could outlast her. He even knew she was sympathetic. There was no other reason for her to try to improve his arguments if not to increase his odds of success.

"I gather that you want to. However, I won't schedule it. I'm sorry to break this bad news." His temporary adversary finally bit out, quietly. She held her head a little higher.

Kakashi frowned. He narrowed his eye at her.

She swallowed. He watched the motion on her unprotected throat. "Hokage-sama expressly asked me to reject your meeting requests for the foreseeable future."

He furrowed his brow.

...Obviously. She had not taken the law into her own hands and arbitrarily black-balled a jounin she barely knew.

"I'm sorry to be so blunt. I tried polite deferrals, I hoped you would give up and come to terms with this on your own." She lifted her head, but still wouldn't look at him. That was an accomplishment, since he was nearly breathing on her face. He glanced down at her hands when they shook. They were curled into fists, stupidly, with her thumb tucked inside and so much tension that her knuckles were turning white.
'Bad form.'

"But you keep refusing to acknowledge what we both know, and I have to assume that you don't want to."

He felt his brow furrow. Yes. That was the point.

When he didn't answer, the silence dragged on for whole seconds. He watched her take a deep breath. She slowly, deliberately forced the air back out in a rush of air that was clearly doing something to calm her nerves. The fists on her lap were beginning to uncurl. Her shoulders were not quite as hunched forward.

"So here we are, again. I'm tired of this harassment. I can't get any work done when we are having this tired discussion, and yet I'm still not allowed to give you that meeting. You have me at your mercy, Hatake-san."

He hid a flinch. Luckily, there was no risk of her noticing.

She shrugged, unclenching her hands and splaying them a bit to work out the tension. She rolled out her shoulders. After another pause, she finally looked up and made eye contact. "I can't do what you want, and I can't authorize your reentry, either."

'Yes, you can. You'd just be disobeying a direct order from your superior officer. That is what I am trying to get you to do.'

Sure, she would lose standing and trust in the office, but she'd ride it out.

"If you want to continue standing over me, harassing me, or intimidating me, I have a couch there for your convenience- I don't know what to tell you anymore." She pointed to said couch, on the side of her office.

He felt a pinprick of guilt.

"The only thing I can tell you is that Hokage-sama is not going to reinstate you into ANBU, and I don't think there's anything anyone can do to convince him otherwise."

She then muttered something under her breath, but he didn't understand it. Her language, probably. The lack of meaning in the syllables made it even easier to hear how tired she sounded.

'She's close to breaking.'

And oddly, he did not feel pleased by that. It didn't sit well in his stomach to be able to get what he wanted by wearing down a civilian through harassment.

'...Damnit.'

That was definitely guilt. He glared at her, but he knew it lacked teeth.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Hatake-san?" She asked wearily, running her pale hands through her hair. "As long as you understand that I absolutely cannot schedule a meeting for you to discuss this topic, I am happy to help."

He felt his muscles go very still at the last phrase. That… That was true, wasn't it. She couldn't schedule a meeting about his reinstatement into ANBU, but she was not opposed to his goal overall.
'I can use that.'

He didn't need to be here now. "Okay, thanks, bye." He gave a two-fingered wave.

She narrowed her eyes. A line appeared between her eyebrows. She looked between his face and his hand.

'Looks confused.'

He took the chance to leave via shunshin to the stairwell, therefore avoiding any risk of seeing the office staff hide from him again.

...Though if he were to be perfectly candid, that was one of his favorite things about visiting offices.

'I should put that into my presentation,' he mused. 'People would rather chew off a foot to escape than talk to me about paperwork. I am a deeply troubled individual and cannot integrate into regular society.'

Had a nice ring to it.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had a nice, early night, because he had a mission in the morning. He had been planning to phone it in because he didn't care about it, but that was the attitude of the old, wrong Kakashi. This version woke up feeling the most cheerful and alert he had in weeks.

He gave his best grin to the gate guards on his way out. Kotetsu gave a gratifying shiver and looked, wide-eyed, for help. Kakashi sauntered out, and broke into a run once he was out of sight. He made it to the Fire Daimyo's palace by sun-up, and had a nice cup of sencha while he waited for his client.

The Daimyo from the Land of Tea was stupidly early, which was the first sign that they were perhaps not destined to be. A messenger came running and Kakashi had to drop everything to meet the traveling party. The retinue from Tea were 3 bleary-eyed young men, in varying states of resignement. The least sleepy of the three was patiently listening to the Daimyo herself earnestly detail their travel plans, which included 2 stops that were not mentioned in the brief sent to Konoha.

Ah. Kakashi watched 4 more men walk up, carrying a palanquin. The retinue was 7, then.

"Ah, Konoha?" the Daimyo waved him over. Her dark eyes seemed sincere, but her smile was thin and a bit awkward. "Thank you for your promptness. We are just getting ready to head out."

He bowed. "At your service. I overheard that we'll be making some stops?"

"Yes," she said, enthusiastic. She stood even straighter. "They're on the way, I checked ahead."

'I have a really bad feeling about this.'

"What are we going to be doing?" Kakashi asked.

She looked absolutely delighted. "Oh, there are two really famous court doll collections that I want to see. That's why we're taking this route, I saw a different one on the way here, so this time I want to go just a little bit south."

He could feel his eyes glazing over. "I see," Kakashi said, in his politest tone. "I haven't seen one in many years. I look forward to it."

His father had not been disappointed, exactly, to have no daughters. It had not stopped him from impulse-buying a full doll collection of fat little white dogs in court paint and kimono. It was probably still in the house somewhere.

The 4 palanquin bearers set their burden down. 3 of them stood pertly at their station. The last one opened the door and unrolled a frivolous little rug. "Oh, this is going to be so nice." The Daimyo picked up the edges of her traveling clothes, which were as practical as any he had ever seen nobility wear. She gave the courtyard one last friendly lookover before she stepped down into the transport. The door was slid shut, and then they were off.

It was a long walk, but it was surprisingly casual and friendly. The men carrying luggage were carrying on about someone who had recently gotten engaged. The Daimyo herself was clearly
listening in, and occasionally interjected with details about the villagers in question and the apparent family drama. It was all very nice.

'I hate this,' Kakashi thought, wishing for a mask, silent teammates, and an objective that got his heart-rate up and sharpened his focus. He scanned the treeline continuously. He kept a sharp ear. He made clones that circled around the slow-moving group.

Absolutely nothing was wrong. No danger at all.

It was deeply unnerving.

"Daimyo-sama," Kakashi tried, brow wrinkling. "Who was your escort to Fire Country?"

"Oh, nobody," came the cheerful answer. "We came by ourselves. But Madoka-sama was quite insistent, he likes having security around and he's so proud of you. Tea doesn't have any shinobi, of course, not much happens that we can't handle."

...He tried to assimilate that into his worldview, failed, and rejected it entirely.

"But you're very important," he said. It wasn't sucking up. It was a statement of fact. Her country was small, but it was well-connected and rich enough. "Surely you're in some danger. Assassins, rivals, spies, ambitious family members looking for you to slip up and show weakness."

Birdsong. The sound of their footsteps on the muddy stone path.

"No," the Daimyo answered. She opened her window and peered up at him. She looked very concerned. "Nothing like that. Are you alright?"

'That is very depressing. There goes plan 1, 2, and 4.'

He flashed her his most cheerful expression. "I'm doing well, thank you."

She hmmed, tilted her head slightly, and then closed her eyes against the sunlight. "I see," she said. She closed her window again. "Shinobi-san, so far I have not been assassinated. It doesn't seem likely to happen soon. I do, however, have some ambitious family members." Her voice brightened. "I have 4 nieces. They all seem very happy in their career choices. Bright young women. And my daughter is really artistic, I'm so proud of her."

"Only ladies in your family?" Kakashi said, not interested in the slightest.

"Oh, I have a nephew too." She paused. "He's ...okay."

Effusive praise for 5 children, and an awkward deflection about 1. That was notable.

He felt his mouth open, because now he actually did have curiosity. But he clamped it shut in time. It was better not to get too involved.

The first stop involved abandoning the palanquin at the foot of a steep hill, along with the 4 men who had been carrying it. They were apparently having a break while the venerable lady hitched up her trailing hems and earnestly hiking up a poorly maintained path.

She was, he noted, wearing hiking shoes underneath her silken kimono. They were brown, worn, and deeply ugly.

With the general air of preparedness that he was sensing from the Daimyo, Kakashi was not at all surprised to find out that the people they were about to see were already waiting for them. He did
feel bemused to note that the owner of this marvelous collection was a tiny, trembling lady who had to be 11 billion years old. She was not any type of nobility, he surmised, because she lived in a one-room shack with ten racks outside full of onions drying on rope. She did have a son, who had been handy enough to build another shack behind her home. She slowly led them there to show off the collection in question.

There were 21 complete sets of court dolls, Kakashi noted. He made polite noises and looked at them. They were exactly like most sets he had ever seen- pale, round-faced porcelain dolls in kimono fabric, arranged in cascading rows on a paper backdrop. The top was the royal couple, and the lower rows were full of ladies in waiting, generals, and other court staples.

They stayed a very efficient 15 minutes. He was not surprised when the second detour was similar. The dolls were nearly identical, but the second old woman did not have nearly as many onions. He thought that was a mark against her.

He didn't mind the detours, actually. The longer this mission dragged on, the better his chances of finding an opportunity became. With that in mind, his mood began to sink as they neared Tea Country. There was always tomorrow- there would be another depressing, petty B-rank mission slated for him. But it probably wouldn't involve nobility of any kind, and being near politics and the wealthy significantly increased the chances of meeting one of the criteria he needed to escape his personal corner of hell.

"Daimyo-sama," he ventured, feeling a little desperate. "There's no trouble at all in your country? No unrest, no criminal element?"

"It's all very friendly and pleasant."

Fucking abominable.

"Nothing at all you can think of that would require you to, say, request another mission from Konoha," he wheedled. "Because since I'll already be in Tea, of course it might just be most convenient to add that mission as an amendment to my current mission."

One of the palanquin bearers gave him a judgmental look.

"Ah..." Her voice was oddly muffled. He wondered what she was doing inside her palanquin. "Missions that shinobi can do..." She trailed off, contemplative.

"We can do all sorts of things," he said. He felt like a walking advertisement. "We're fast, quiet, strong-"

"Oh, fast," she said, surprised. "That does bring something to mind, actually. I was thinking it would be nice to deliver informational pamphlets to city residents summarizing the discussions that I had yesterday. I've been writing up copies, actually, while I'm in here."

'This woman is very odd.'

"That sounds wonderful," Kakashi said, smelling his chance. "I can deliver those for you. One to-" He faltered. "Every house in Tea's capital city?"

That sounded so tedious.

'B class mission,' he thought darkly, cursing them all.

"Oh, that would be lovely," the Tea Daimyo effused. "I'll add it to your contract. It might take you
some time to deliver, I worry that you won't make it back to Konoha tonight. Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, absolutely," Kakashi said, thinking about how many checkmarks this would make. A timeframe extension, contact with politically important personnel, and a revision to the contract. Yes. Yes, this was exactly what he needed.

"Hatake-san," Rejina-san greeted. She looked a little less stressed than he remembered. "You're two days later than we expected."

"I ran into some complications," Kakashi said somberly. He put his mission scroll on her desk, along with a sealed envelope. He let his shoulder hang heavy. "This letter is from the Daimyo of Tea Country, relating to what occurred."

She picked it up. Her big green eyes were full of concern. He was mildly insulted when she gave him a clear once-over for injuries. There were none, because he was a competent professional. "I see," she said. "That's why you came to the office instead of leaving this downstairs, I take it?"

"I thought it was best to be thorough," Kakashi hedged. "Since the Daimyo asked me to extend the original mission and complete a new task, I believe it would be most appropriate to come here directly."

She opened her mouth- and then froze. Her eyes narrowed.

There was a long silence, wherein Kakashi looked as innocent and guileless as he could possibly manage.

"Oh dear," Rejina-san said, voice dry. She very obviously looked behind him into the main office for anyone else to deal with him. He did not have to look to know that they had all fled for mysterious reasons.

He waited.

"I see." She seemed to be talking to herself. She let a long sigh. "I believe that such a drastic change to the mission requires an immediate debriefing." Her tone was flat. "There could be important political implications."

"Oh, I would hate to be a bother," Kakashi lied blithely. "I don't want to trouble the Hokage."

"Of course not." She managed to keep her voice bland, but her face wasn't quite up to the task. Slight upturn on her lips, amusement in her eyes- Jiraiya's daughter was willing to go along with it, as he'd thought. "It is protocol to get that debriefing done as soon as possible, in case the information might affect future decisions. I believe that the Hokage is using this hour to contemplate the nature of waterfowl."

What?

"It's unfortunate, but this could be urgent enough that we need to disturb him." She stood, gathering up the materials that he had brought. She'd shut down any emotion in her eyes, but her mouth was still slightly curled. "Follow me, please," his new favorite office worker said.

Kakashi had a bounce in his step that he concealed when the door to the forbidden chamber was opened.

"Wha- Ah, Rejina-hime," the Sandaime greeted. "Has something- Oh." His voice went flat when he saw Kakashi.
He beamed. He resisted the urge to wave.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. However, Hatake-san's mission changed and the status needs to be increased from a B-rank," she said. She actually did sound apologetic. Her body language wasn't selling it, though. "According to the rules, he must debrief immediately with you. That's correct, isn't it?"

The Sandaime leveled Kakashi with a seriously unimpressed look. "It is correct."

Mission success. He had contrived to wiggle his way into the Hokage's office.

Rejina bowed, very politely and deeply. She took a step backwards toward the door.

"Oh, no," Hiruzen said. "You should stay. Your input could be invaluable." His tone was very dry, but the message was clear enough to Kakashi.

She froze for just a moment before recovering. Her poker face was admirable when she murmured, "Of course," and primly seated herself on a divan that appeared to be her particular spot. She picked up a notebook and golden pen from the side table next door.

"Very well." The Sandaime quietly shut a drawer in his desk, though he had hidden whatever he'd been doing before they entered the room. "Jounin Hatake, debrief."

He bowed. "Of course," Kakashi said. "But first- I'd like to argue my case for reinstatement to the ANBU black ops unit. I believe my mission today and all the B class missions I have been doing lately support my case."

The Sandaime very quietly said, "Oh, Kami."

Kakashi whipped the storage seal out of his pants pocket and pulled out an easel and his posterboards with a flourish. He set them in place and then caught the informational pamphlets just before they hit the ceiling. He gave one to Rejina with a bow. She took it with both hands and a dubious expression. The other, he limply dropped into the Hokage's waiting palm.

"I've prepared some materials to help convey my point." He fixed his eyes on the Hokage and hoped he looked exactly as manic as he wanted. He stretched his mouth into a grin that he knew would be reflected into his one visible eye. "I've had a lot of time to work on it, since it's been so difficult to schedule a meeting, and also because I have no meaningful work."

"Thank you." The Sandaime was resigned.

He darted to look at his other observer. She seemed to be doubting his rhetorical strategy. That was skepticism on her face, for sure.

"I should be reinstated into ANBU for two reasons," he began. "Firstly, I had an exemplary career in ANBU and my skills are still valuable there. Secondly, my skills and personality are not suited to the general mission pool, as evidenced by my poor reviews and other indicators."

Rejina cocked her head to the side.

'She looks like she's rooting for me. Pretty sure.'

"In ANBU, I had an unusually high mission success rate, and above-average mission completeness rate. Please review the chart on page 2, comparing my performance to that of the average ANBU operative." He waited a moment as pages flipped and two people looked at his beautiful graphics.
with varying levels of willingness. "On page 3, you'll see my overall statistics. I'd like to draw your
attention in particular to my performance as an ANBU captain. In my 7 year tenure as a captain, I
completed 98% of my missions without fatalities, and 70% without any injuries. Less than 30% of
my missions were considered extended, incomplete, or otherwise imperfect."

The Sandaime was squinting. After a moment, he unfolded his reading glasses and put them on. He
held the pamphlet nearly up to his face.

"If you'll look at page 4 and 5, you'll see that over time, my rate of perfect missions has been
increasing," Kakashi said, which was a thing he had not known until Rejina had criticized his
graphics and sent him to organize the facts better. "This indicates that I have not yet met my
potential as an ANBU operative and I would serve the village in that context."

"Persuasive," the Sandaime said. His tone was hard to read. "And as for your second point- you say
that you feel you are not integrating well into the general mission pool?"

He beamed, glad he was finally getting his audience. "Something like that. I've had a frankly
shocking number of complaints about my conduct from clients since being dropped to general
missions."

"Transferred, not dropped."

"I looked it up, and the average jounin receives 2 or less complaints per fiscal year." He squirmed a
bit. "In the last 3 months, I've had 47 complaints."

The damning thing was that he had not been purposefully sabotaging his missions. He was,
apparently, just fundamentally unlikable.

"Oh, dear," Hiruzen said. He did sound a bit amused. "That is certainly above average."

"Yes, well." He coughed. "I've also had 9% of my recent missions conclude in an unsatisfactory
way, such as exceeding the projected timeline or budget."

"That's not good," Hiruzen agreed genially. He leaned back in his chair.

...Something about this was less than ideal, but he wasn't sure what.

He fought on, keeping his professional, cheerful tone steady. "In conclusion, my talents are very
suited to ANBU work, and my personality defects are much more of a problem outside of
ANBU. Therefore, I should be transferred back immediately. Thank you very much." He bowed.

Rejina clapped.

"Thank you, that was enlightening." The Hokage coughed. "Fascinating. Well- done."

He tried not to fidget as he waited for the Hokage's judgment.

The Hokage blinked at him.

Kakashi managed a wavering smile.

"Well, then?" Hiruzen waved at him. "Your mission debriefing."

"Oh." He nodded. "That. Very important. I was escorting the Daimyo of Tea from Fire Country. It
was a perilous journey with a lot of looking at antiques, and when we reached Tea Country, the Daimyo asked me to take on another mission." He shrugged. "Although she is not Fire Country nobility, I did not feel that I could reject a reasonable request from such a highly-placed person. Due to the high stakes of this type of mission alteration for Konoha's reputation, I believe that B classification was no longer appropriate. Due to this second request, I was unable to return to Konoha within the allowed timeframe of the original mission, and technically could be said to have failed it."

"Oh, my," Hiruzen said mildly. He took his pipe out of the top drawer of his desk. "This sounds serious. What type of mission did the Tea Daimyo have you undertake?"

He mastered his desire to squirm. "She needed shinobi haste in order to disseminate information among her populace."

Hiruzen nodded very seriously. "That sounds important indeed. Was it about the antiques?"

"...Partly," Kakashi said. His shoulders were crawling up towards his ears. "But other parts of the missive were political in nature."

"Oh. So you were delivering classified information?"

"...It was aimed at the general populace of Tea Country."

The Sandaime nodded seriously. He was enjoying this. "Ah, so like a newspaper. Your secondary mission was delivering newspapers?"

To hell with it.

"More like a community bulletin."

Rejina made a sound.

He looked at her sharply. He could not tell what she was thinking. Her back was perfectly straight, her eyes glittering with amusement, her hands folded in her lap. She had decided not to take notes, then, for some reason.

"Understood. Is that all, then?"

Resentfully, Kakashi nodded. "I believe so, yes."

"Wonderful." He tapped the end of his pipe, as if trying to settle tobacco. "Rejina-hime, please retrieve the materials I asked you to prepare about the topic of Hatake-san and ANBU service."

What.

She shot him a guilty look as she stood to bow and hastened out of the office.

"While she does that, I'd like to assure you that I don't believe there will be any negative repercussions as a result of your mission in Tea," the Sandaime said. He lifted a piece of paper. "In fact, I have here a letter from the Daimyo in which she refers to you as-" he glanced at it- "a very nice and earnest young man."

He scowled. "She's very fast," he said grudgingly.

"It arrived before you did," Sandaime said helpfully. "Yesterday, in fact."
"An admirable woman," he managed through gritted teeth. "So organized."

"You're not doing too badly yourself." The Sandaime indicated his presentation. "You've learned much more engaging presentation skills since you were taken out of ANBU. I'm quite pleased by how your organizational skills have improved, so quickly."

He glowered.

When Rejina-hime came back in, she used his easel to hold her posterboard.

'She could have asked.'

...Was that why she had told him to buy an easel? She didn't have one of her own? Or did she just not want to carry it?

'I have a sinking feeling that she might have manipulated me. This is going to damage our friendship for sure.'

She cleared her throat and gave him a nervous glance. She covered that with a professional smile. "Thank you for that lovely presentation. I'd like to respond to a couple of points."

That was when she stepped forward to hand him a booklet. He took it numbly. The Sandaime took his solemnly.

"In order to adequately determine a path forward, it is necessary to provide you with the Hokage's reasonings and other variables that you may not have been able to consider. If you would both open your booklets to the first page…"

He flipped it open and lifted it halfway to his face to peer at it. It had supplementary information for the main presentation on the posterboard.

"The argument of the Hokage is this." She pointed to her first visual. "First- that you have exceeded the average guidelines for ANBU participation by a significant amount."

"Please look at the graph on the next page, if you would. Here you can see that the average shinobi is in ANBU for a limit of five years before retiring or taking several years of break. This has been the case since its creation more than sixty years ago. If you look at the next graph, you can see the large increase in mission fatalities after six years of uninterrupted service in ANBU. The numbers continue to rise, until about 8 years."

She looked in his general direction, but didn't make eye contact. "Most shinobi do not survive past eight years of uninterrupted ANBU service, due to the significant strain and constant on-call nature of the job."

'And I've had 9 years of uninterrupted service, meaning I am statistically due some tragedy. But… I think my time in ANBU was the least tragic and stressful of my career to date.'

"What of those that do?" The Hokage asked, steepling his fingers. He seemed to know damn well what the answer was.

Rejina couldn't even look at him now. "Early deaths due to substance abuse, utter inability to reintegrate into society, and intentional suicide."

He pursed his lips. Some of that was familiar.
"If we look at your current numbers of complaints and mission completion times, Hatake-san, it lines up with what we do know of shinobi that spend an excessive amount of time in the ANBU corps. It shows a decrease in ability to interact with others outside of an ANBU setting, which is potentially devastating for anyone's mental health and social interactions."

'Oh, damn. So I was supporting their argument.'

"Other signs could include inappropriate escalation of social interactions to violence, or fight or flight responses to average interactions or situations. Our findings showed that those who stayed in ANBU for so long no longer feel safe in their own homes and village, leading them to pursue combat-appropriate actions in a non-combat environment."

..He thought about the fact that he had nearly attacked his door when it had a note on it. He tried to recall other incidents, but it was hard to forget that he had considered throwing a knife at the civilian woman who was talking now.

'Oh, no. What if they're slightly correct?'

He narrowed his eye at her, not liking this self reflection one bit. She looked up. She looked unnerved.

Rejina hastily changed out the posterboard.

"We have found that those ANBU who took at least a year or several off before returning to ANBU assignment have much lower rates of fatalities than their cohorts, as well as healthier mental and emotional responses at home. Thus, while your particular assignment on ANBU has been much longer than should have been allowed, it is… possible, that after a few years of recovery and reintegration into the village and general shinobi population, that you would be able to pursue more ANBU work, given approval."

"As it stands now, statistically," she stressed, "you may present danger to yourself and others in Konoha without adjustment. The ANBU program does not emphasize the social or mental needs that are required for a person to remain functional and healthy." Then she nodded at him. "As to the matter of your skills improvement, which is undeniable-"

He nodded tensely. He wanted this to be over with.

She seemed to relax, just a bit. "Your reports also show that your improvement has been stagnant for the better part of five years. Your scores are very impressive, but it seems unlikely that you have already reached your full potential. Focusing on training could be the break that is required, while improving your abilities and potential for ANBU work."

She pointed to the relevant numbers and their drop-off points. He followed the movement, not appreciating the educational opportunity at all.

"Therefore, it would be the official recommendation of the Hokage Tower that you take the next few years to attempt to reintegrate into shinobi forces, focusing on training and rebuilding those social connections. You would need to repair your mental and physical health to a level necessary to resume any ANBU work, if that is indeed your goal. Working B-class missions allows you to maintain income and activity, while providing you time for the recovery necessary from a career of high-stress missions. This would provide you the best opportunity to serve Konoha without the unnecessary extra risks to your well-being and long term health."

"Sounds great," he said, feeling a black hole open up. Ah, this was no good. "Can I at least have A
"Of course," Sandaime said, as if he hadn't been barring that for months now. He blinked slowly. He looked utterly at ease. "As part of a team, of course. Who would you like to work with?"

Oh no, it had been another trap.

"I don't care," he said mutinously.

Some people were a lot less awful than others. But if he requested someone, then he'd be stuck with them forever, and they'd think he wanted to work together or something.

"We can make it work." It sounded like a threat, somehow, despite the smile the Sandaime wore.

"That's great," Kakashi said, hating his life and everyone he knew. He took a moment to look at Jiraiya's daughter, who was not nearly as fun as he had hoped and was therefore being demoted down his list of favorite office workers. "Wonderful."

Chapter End Notes

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She escorted Hatake out, but he followed her into her office.

‘Oh, no.’

“Saaa, you prepared a presentation against me?” He asked, sounding miffed even as he tried to drawl it out. “You made me do so much work, I thought you supported me.”

The absolute gall made her jaw drop. He was upset with her, for doing her job?

‘Don’t engage. Don’t argue. It only feeds his victim complex and gives him material..’

She reached deep, deep down for the emotional reserve to not tell him off. She didn’t have anything nice to say, so she ended up being stone silent.

Regina held her head high as she took a seat behind her desk, to make it absolutely crystal clear that she was working, at her job, and not available for whatever this was. She aimed for a neutral expression but suspected it was more flinty.

“I thought we were friends.”

She pursed her lips.

‘There is no way he thought that.’

“You did a very good job, even the Hokage said so.” She pointed out. “I also did my job. You’re certainly aware of that.”

“You could have just told me.” He went to sit on her couch, putting his feet on it. He had to know how much she fucking hated that. She wasn’t hiding it. He was poking at her.

She sat down at her desk, trying to ignore how he was grinding mud and god-knows-what on her nice couch. “You didn’t ask me what I thought. You just asked to meet with the Hokage.”

Scheduling wasn’t even really her job duty anymore, either. She had so much other work to do.

“But I did think your presentation was good.” She said, trying to put a positive spin on things. “I wouldn’t have said so if I didn’t.”

“You lie all the time.” He just sounded amused. “You seriously told me that the Hokage couldn’t meet me last week because he had an urgent appointment with a veterinarian and a weasel.”

She didn’t have a good response for that. The honest answer was that she was told to keep him away by any means possible and it was a lot more entertaining to baffle him with increasingly creative lies. She didn’t usually lie on her personal time or about work quality, it was a waste of energy as well as counterproductive.

“And that he has hair.”

“Neither of us know about that for sure.” She deflected. “Why are you still here, anyway? I don’t mean to insult you, but you are a genuinely horrible person and I have work to do.”

She gathered her very boring binders full of numbers and got out her pen and highlighters. “ I’d
rather get it over with if you don’t mind. I don’t have the free time to explain my personal ethics code to you right now.”

“I really don’t mind.” He leaned back on the couch. “As you made it so very clear in there, I’m supposed to be relaxing.”

“Is this punishment? Are you angry at me?” Regina asked, seriously confused.

‘He can’t possibly be using his actual human company to punish people. Is this… just how he is as a person? How sad for him. And everyone around him. Particularly me.’

“Only a little bit. I think I saw your points.” He rubbed his feet against the upholstery. “I respect you much more for it.” He looked up to make eye contact. “But I don’t like you.” His toes were on her couch.

She could feel her ancestors screaming. Her maternal grandmother would have despised. Her paternal grandmother would have ruthlessly torn his psyche to shreds until he fled, shinobi or not.

“That’s nice for you.” She replied. She squinted at her files, willing herself back into work mode.

He didn’t seem to have any intention of leaving soon, so she dug into her files.

“So that’s, like, 200000 ryo missing from T&I, 10000 from Corrections, another 300000 from ANBU…” she added, marking them all down next to the other departments and talking to herself in English. “Christ, that’s a lot of money missing.”

“Anou, Hatake-san, just for scale, how much would you say 300,000,000 ryo is? Like, in a context. Any. How much of anything would that buy?” She asked, pulling at her hair in a ponytail. She was about to start stress-braiding it any second.

‘I think that’s, like, the pay rate for about 300 S-rank missions.’

“What are you talking about?” He gave her a weird look. “Don’t you know?”

“No.” She said tersely, sorting out the parts in her hair. “I’m sorry, Japanese is only my third language, and I’m not very good at it. I’ve only lived in the Elemental nations for about 8 months total. I regret to inform you that not all the vagaries of existence here are known to me.”

“It’s a really really big amount. Enough to buy a good chunk of Konoha.” He said, reverting to boredom. He stared up at the ceiling and rubbed his feet back and forth on the couch arm.

Regina refused to bow to the whims of yet another white-haired terrorist. She was already stuck with Jiraiya, so she focused intensely on her work. Dammit, he was probably already getting what he wanted, just by being here and making her more stressed.

‘Wait- if those are the real numbers, as compared to the rest…’ she whistled softly. “Huh.”

“What’s it for?” He asked, leaning over. He actually looked interested, which meant she had to escape immediately. She didn’t want him ruining her work out of spite or something.

She snatched her papers away from his spidery hands. “Just budget stuff. You’d be bored. Don’t worry about it. Please, continue to rest. You look overworked.”

Then she took all those papers and went into the Hokage’s office with them.
“So we’re missing that much money.” The Hokage sounded mildly ill.

“It’s about 15% of your yearly total budget expenditures, altogether.” She noted, handing over her math for him to check. “If we’re counting ‘missing money’ as an outgo, it’s your second biggest individual expenditure behind shinobi payroll.”

“So where is it going?” he asked, rubbing at his temples. “All of the departments want more funding, all the time. I did not think they had this much.”

“I don’t know, sir.” Regina answered honestly. “But since it doesn’t seem to be making it into their actual in-office budgets, I’d say it’s disappearing before that. Who distributes that money?”

He made a gesture out to the office area behind the closed door. “We do.”

“Shit.” Regina said, passionately. “Hokage-sama, I don’t think something on this level is a mistake. It almost has to be intentional.”

He stared at his desk for a moment.

“Whoever is doing it has to have noticed that I’m going through all the receipts, though.” She said, thinking out loud. “It might just be best to adjust the budget going forward. Unfortunately, that means more work for you to check and stamp them.”

He shook his head. “I already have so much work, Rejina-hime. This is important, however.” The Sandaime leaned back in his desk and got out his pipe, shoving the tobacco inside and lighting it.

He took a few puffs, before he looked at her.

“Do you think you might be ready to assume a few of your duties of office, Rejina-hime? You know what numbers should be there, and you already have been approving small budget items.”

“I would be pleased to help,” Regina hesitated. “But I think my office needs more security before adding any potentially classified functions to my position. Like the seals you and my father use. As of right now, literally anyone can get in at any time.”

“Hatake is in there right now, isn’t he?” Sandaime asked, amused.

She blinked. “Probably. He might have decided to live on my office couch to punish me for doing my job and betraying his friendship.”

He hummed to himself. “Tomorrow, I have a free hour. Keep it free. I’ll begin teaching you a little about seals, and you can start to make your own. But tonight I’ll have them done on your office.”

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.” She bowed.

When she returned, Hatake was still on her couch, reading porn.

Honestly, it pissed her off that he was continuing to harass her when he didn’t even need anything from her, and that (admittedly, not his fault) Jiraiya hadn’t even bothered to give her her own copy.

‘I absolutely refuse to pay for a book about me. But Hatake- Hatake who purposefully attempted to drive me insane for weeks, who is destroying my furniture- he got a free copy. For what? Did he sell his life rights?’
“You keep reading that in front of me- are you ever going to tell me what he wrote about me or not?” She leveled a stare at him. He froze.

“Hatake-san, I deserve to know if my character is hot.”

His one eye was wide. The book snapped shut.

She was on a roll now, what the hell. “Also- are there actual sex scenes like in Icha Icha Beach Party, or is it just kissing in flowers again like with the movie?” Regina demanded. The absolute nerve of reading that in her office, on her couch. With his filthy shoes on it. “If you won’t leave my office, you should at least have the manners to answer basic questions about things you’re comfortable reading in my presence. No one else will tell me why they think kissing is the same thing as sex, or what ahegao is. Even context clues have failed me.”

His eye widened further- she could see a blush rising high on his slightly exposed cheekbone, his shoulders stiffened- and he poofed.

‘Huh. So that’s how you get rid of him.’

It hadn’t been what she’d intended, but it had worked twice for her now.

‘If that’s what works, I won’t complain.’

Regina left her latest lecture from Danzou-shishou and booked it to the Yamanaka clan complex.

The kids were outside in the training area- evidently having some sort of monitored brawl. Sasuke had Naruto in a headlock.

But Ino had her legs around Sasuke’s neck, hanging down and punching Naruto in the leg.

‘This is weird.’

“Ah, Yuina-san!” She called, catching sight of her friend at a table nearby. “Are they… alright?”

Yuina-san looked at them, over her shoulder.

“They’re fine,” she dismissed with a smile. “Inoichi won’t let them hurt themselves. How was your meeting?”

“It was good, thank you for asking.” Regina looked over at her boys. They didn’t seem distressed at all. Naruto was attempting to bite anything within reach, though.

“Time!” A man called out, and Regina looked. Oh. Inoichi-san. She could have guessed.

The children collapsed in a pile, and gave each other exhausted high fives.

“They get along fairly well.” Yuina-san said, reaching for a drink and beckoning Regina to take a seat. “Would you like anything to drink? Beer, chuuhai?”

“A chuuhai would be lovely, thank you. Green apple, please.” Regina let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding, and felt stress flow out of her muscles. “Were the boys any trouble?”
“None at all!” Yuina-san reassured her, turning around to beckon her husband and order them more drinks. He went off happily enough. “They’ve just been playing- earlier they watched a movie and made you some drawings. Shinobi children have a lot of energy, however- so we have to let them work it out somehow. It builds good team dynamics.”

The children started to pull themselves off the ground- then chattered about something and raced inside.

“That makes sense.” Regina admitted. “They do seem to get very worked up- more so than I would have thought children did.”

Yuina-san shrugged, but somehow looked elegant anyway. “They’re trained to do so. It is very effective. The most difficult part is channeling that energy into useful actions, and not harming each other. They have to learn to train together- and that means fighting. But they also have to be aware not to harm one another.”

‘Probably better to monitor them, then.’ Regina agreed. Yuina-san’s husband came back with their drinks, and they all sipped in companionable silence as the kids also came back outside with juice packets. After they finished, they went to practice kunai throwing at the other edge of the garden.

‘This doesn’t seem so bad, sometimes.’ She sipped at her grape-flavored drink. ‘I don’t love what they’re being trained to do, but I feel like they’re in good hands.’

It was a few days later that there was a new meeting slot in the docket accompanying a golden folder, and a weird hush over the office.

Nakamura-san gave Regina an odd look as she handed Keiko-san the budget approvals and denials for the month. She could tell she wasn’t meant to see it- but something about it knotted her stomach.

‘Whatever this is, it’s probably connected and very bad for me.’ Regina thought as she went in to the Hokage’s office for the meeting. It was at 9:30 am, less than an hour after her working hours started, and was budgeted for an entire hour and a half. Whatever it was, it had to be serious.

When the Council members, clan heads, and Danzou-shishou arrived, she knew it was bad. Yamanaka-san looked her way once, then looked away.

‘Very bad for me. Ten points to me for logic, likely minus ten million points for my safety and happiness.’

The beginnings of the meeting took a solid fifteen minutes. After that, it seemed like there was awkwardness in the air. Eventually, Akimichi-san cleared his throat.

“Hokage-sama.” Akimichi-san said politely, after bowing yet again. “After much talking, the other clan heads and I wish to raise an… issue that has come to our attention.”

“Of course.” Sandaime-sama said, sounding genial. Regina tried not to hold her breath. The mood in this room was distinctly off. It was putting her on edge. “It is the right of the clans to bring their questions and concerns to their Kage.”

“Well-said, as ever.” Akimichi-san swallowed, then straightened out his chest. He set his shoulders high. “We are concerned with a continued trend of nepotism in Konoha.”
Regina felt her face burn. She could see the blow coming—she had noted it herself with contempt upon receiving this job she hadn’t actually wanted or bid for. But predicting it didn’t mean that she didn’t want to crawl into a hole and die. She stared resolutely at the notepad and pen. She took a note.

“Jiraiya-hime’s appointment to a created position is merely the most glaring of these.” Akimichi-san said, evidently gaining some steam. “While some of these appointments have been beneficial to Konoha, including the Hokage Council—”

‘Whose members are at least knowledgeable of, if not complicit in, the murder of almost an entire clan.’ She thought bitterly. Acid was rising in her mouth. Being named at one of these things was never a good thing. She was their poster child for nepotism—that would explain the way some of the parents had been looking at her at the pickup lately. That gossip must have been making the rounds.

“-others, such as your overly favorable treatment of your students, have been decidedly against Konoha’s best interests.”

There was a murmur of agreement around the room.

“Tsunade-hime and Jiraiya-san have been essentially derelict of duty for more than ten years. Your other student, Orochimaru-san, was allowed to harm many Konoha citizens before he fled the city. He is still at large.”

She kept waiting for the body blow. There was more coming her way, she could feel it. Regina continued to take notes. The only way out of this for her was to be as competent as possible.

‘There’s no way I can ever tell anyone this job was basically a massive joke on Tsunade’s part. Or that I didn’t want it. I’d be ungrateful on top of everything, or inflaming tensions.’

“Jiraiya-san hid a daughter from Konoha for most of her life—she is no shinobi.” Akimichi-san said, sounding slightly more gentle at the end of the sentence.

‘To be fair, I don’t believe he’s doing this to hurt me in specific. No one cares enough about me one way or the other. I’m merely a symptom of a larger problem.’

“There are also questions as to why she avoided military service— a profession that we find fulfilling, but that we know to be dangerous. Why is she allowed to resume life in Konoha, in such an elevated position, without fulfilling prior requirements?”

This was going to be hell—and not just for her. Regina took a moment to thank Jiraiya for not leaving her in that post office to die and claiming her. He was doubtless going to regret it, if he didn’t already.

And Tsunade—she had stuck her neck out. Helping Regina was coming back to haunt her within a year.

‘I… can’t even think of a solution to this. There isn’t one.’

She took notes on the specific complaints, trying not to feel singled out. She had been. But it would be unprofessional to react personally to a professional complaint.

When Regina looked up at the Hokage, he looked shaken to the core. He was fumbling with his hands, obviously wanting to go for his pipe and then restraining himself.
The room was very quiet.

The Hokage looked resigned and exhausted. He swallowed.

“I see. Are there any other specific concerns or examples that the clan heads and Council wish to present at this time?”

“Not at this time, no.” Akimichi-san bowed again. “Thank you for hearing our concerns.”

“Thank you for bringing them.” The Hokage sounded authoritative again, snapping back into some form of normalcy. “Is there anything else my office can do for you?”

“No.” The clan heads and Council gathered, bowed, and left. Regina held the door for them, even as she felt the anger, humiliation, and frustration claw at her insides.

She bowed over and over again in front of people who obviously thought she had no right to be there.

They all left.

Regina went back to her office- covered in neat stacks of files. The new personnel requisitions orders had been next on her to-do list.

It felt hollow to pretend she had any business doing them now.

‘But the only way out of this mess is forward. I can’t pack it up and go home.’ She eyed her homework from Danzou-shishou. It was yet another carefully compiled file on an influential person in the Land of Iron.

‘He came in there with them. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had angled for it. It has a lot more legitimacy if one of the beneficiaries of the nepotism is the one to start advocating against it. Or he could just be doing it for appearance’s sake, once they’d made it known that was what they were doing. He got out clean.’

She wanted to throw the file away. Regina willed her hands not to curl into fists.

“Jiraiya-hime.”

The voice behind her almost made her startle, she was too keyed up. She turned around.

Akimichi-san was standing just outside her doorway.

‘He left. Did he just turn around to come back in?’ She bowed.

“Akimichi-san. My apologies, what can I do for you?” She gestured to the inside of her office.

“Please.” He followed her in, and shut the door. They both stood there. He looked almost a little uncomfortable.

“Akimichi-san, is there something I can do?” She asked.

Regina didn’t really want to do something for him, or anyone else, right now. But it was her job. Her job that she hadn’t earned.

Even if she did have much more relevant education, that wasn’t why she was hired. No one had
cared whether she was qualified.

‘I doubt anyone would have complained if I’d been a shinobi.’ She tried not to be bitter. The ones that they’d specifically complained about were easy targets. The Sandaime’s students weren’t around to defend themselves to a one. She was brand-new here and had no allies. No friends.

“No.”

‘Then why the absolute fuck are you here, obviously wanting to talk to me, after throwing me to the wolves in public? I am so fucked. This job, this citizenship, is all that’s keeping me safe. It’s all in jeopardy now.’

She swallowed more acid and smiled tightly.

“I just wanted to let you know that that wasn’t about you.” He said slowly, but not unkindly. “You are merely a beneficiary of a problematic system of behavior.”

“Thank you, Akimichi-san.” She bowed crisply. “I understand. Thank you for your efforts to make Konoha a better place.”

‘You have good points. I wish they weren’t true, but they are.’

And wasn’t that a bolt through her heart. All her life she’d had to be so good just to get into the room, and when she finally found herself in a position vaguely similar to her goals, it wasn’t as a result of her work.

They were still just standing there in silence.

“Thank you again.” She bowed lowly, and noted that he flinched a bit. “For your candor and your concerns. If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

He bowed back. “I certainly will. Thank you, Jiraiya-hime.” He paused. “Though, if you would be willing and able, a summary of your duties and achievements might help you at this time.”

She didn’t even know what to say to that, except the polite. “Thank you again, Akamichi-san. I will take that under advisement.”

‘I don’t report to them. They know that. They can only ask- but should I do it anyway? This will tank my personal and professional reputation for a long time if I don’t resolve it.’

She escorted him out of the building a second time, bowing and keeping as pleasant a smile on her face as possible.

Regina noted that not a single one of her formerly-friendly coworkers so much as looked in her direction when she came back up the sets of stairs and back into her office.

‘My door is still open.’

Better to leave it that way. If she closed it, who knows what they’d say she did in there after that meeting. It was going to be gossip regardless.

‘If I want to survive this, I’ll need to be the best not-kage they’ve ever fucking seen. I need to be ruthlessly competent. I can’t make any mistakes at all.’

She sat in her desk, opened the requisitions report, and started working. When she finished that pile, she started on the next. Regina double, then triple-checked every single thing she read or
wrote.

When she brought papers out or in to the general office, she ignored the glances and just smiled as pleasantly as possible.

‘None of these people are my friends.’

She stamped a refusal on a slightly extraneous request with a measured amount of force.

‘I can’t trust a single one of them.’

Regina added a note as to the reason for refusal into her logs.

‘No one is coming to save me from any of this fallout. I have to do it myself.’

And when she ran out of work to do, she memorized everything in the files Danzou-shishou had provided. She wasn’t going to be caught slipping.

The Hokage didn’t summon her for the rest of the day. She spent her afternoon drafting term limits for active duty for ANBU personnel based on the research she’d had to do for Hatake, and then took another look at the problem of Jounin overwork.
Chapter 31

She dreaded the dawn and the aftermath of the meeting the day before- but today was also the day that they’d be moving into their new house, sooo…

‘It’s a real mixed bag. On one hand, I am now a symbol of nepotism or corruption for the village. On the other hand, I move into an ostentatious, customized, and gated castle today with my two very adorable carpet sharks.’

She eyed the now-moving piles of blankets to her right and left. They had to be kept apart to prevent night fighting.

‘But as of today, separate bedrooms for all.’

Regina took one last lingering morning shower and onsen before meeting the boys in the kitchen. Ikemoto-san, their new housekeeper-cum-parental figure and cook, had already made a full breakfast.

She gave Regina a tired look before gesturing to a placing that included absolutely no fish.

“Thank you very much, Ikemoto-san.” Regina bowed lightly, before kneeling on the floor and getting it all down. “Is there anything else you think we need to prepare before moving to the house today?”

Ikemoto Yua obviously thought about it for a moment- the way she tilted her head in the morning light made the streaks in her hair glint like strands of silver.

“You ordered the supplies I asked for?” She asked, mulling over something. “I believe that the futon were delivered, as were many things from the land of Iron. Your father…” she pursed her lips, “sent along some things, I was told.”

‘Sounds like him. Wonder how suspect those things were to pucker her face like that. She’s only worked for us for less than a week- I hope he doesn’t chase her away immediately.’

Regina eyed the retired Chuunin that she’d hired. It was early in the stages of their working relationship- she’d hired her based on her honesty and competency, as well as the fact that she didn’t seem to have any of the weird bitterness towards one or both of her sons that other people in the village did.

‘And how the hell did that happen? The Hokage refuses to tell me, but people have weirdly angry feelings about an eight year old.’

The woman evaluated her back.

“Are your sons still in bed?” She asked, an eyebrow lightly lifting. Regina got the distinct feeling that she was being judged for her three months of parenting ability.

“Perhaps I should check.” She eye-smiled and stood up, walking back to the bedroom.

The boys were starting to rustle around for lost socks in their beds like truffle pigs, little hands and feet and knees making odd moving bumps under the ocean of blankets.

She watched as their sock quest inevitably started a small conflict- Naruto went too far over to
Sasuke’s side (of her bed), and got accidentally kicked in the face.

“Ouch! Teme!” Naruto dove with his little claws out-

‘Thank god I made the esthetician clean and trim his nails. He can’t do nearly as much damage.’

And Regina separated them, sliding her arms under Naruto’s tummy and lifting him up. Sasuke disentangled himself from the blankets and came out ready to throw hands, but paused with wide eyes.

“Good morning.” She said, still holding Naruto like a naughty dog. He went limp.

“Good morning.” They echoed back, looking rightfully ashamed.

She set Naruto down, but he didn’t move away- instead leaning into her leg.

Sasuke huffed. He looked pretty grumpy, actually.

“Well, Ikemoto-san already made breakfast and it’s getting cold.” She tapped Naruto’s shoulder. “So you both should probably get dressed. Is your homework done?”

“My is.” Sasuke glared at Naruto.

“My too!” Naruto chirped, before rushing off to grab his clothes.

Sasuke said something too fast and low for her to catch, but it made Naruto skitter away from him.

‘Uh. Should I ask him to repeat that?’

Naruto didn’t say anything back, and the fight seemed to be over, so she didn’t ask for clarification. It was probably better to let whatever that was die?

‘I’m beginning to suspect parenting is a never-ending process of pretending I know what I’m doing and hoping I haven’t made a series of horrible mistakes.’

But they got dressed and came to breakfast quickly, so she let it go.

Regina ate her breakfast with a building amount of trepidation. She had to go out in public again- drop off the boys at school with all the clan mothers, go to work with all her coworkers (who had been whispering about her all day yesterday)- leaving early to get all their stuff moved into the new house- and then have her bi-weekly meeting with shishou (who had been involved in that shitshow and not warned her), and then go to tea ceremony class.

‘Everything is hard.’

Before she opened the door out of the genkan, she closed her eyes. She visualized her spine, made of steel- the presences that people like Mifune-sama or Tsunade-hime had- and then pushed out into the world with her two kids right behind her.

‘I can’t let them see me blink. I’ve never felt so exposed in all my life, but I can’t say anything. Just… survive. Eventually they’ll forget when new gossip drops, and I can crawl away with some dignity.’

The other mothers stared at her when she dropped the boys off at school. Regina gamely pretended
not to notice, smiling at waving at the boys until they were in the building and greeting each woman individually.

She noted the evaluative glances, and the way Yamanaka Yuina smiled a little too tightly and did not go past normal pleasantries.

It was relatively easy to pretend none of that bothered her- she hadn’t known most of them to start with. But it hurt a little bit, and didn’t bode well at all.

Regina went to the new house to do her fitness routine. It was quiet and cool and farther away from the crowds.

She’d made the fourth floor into her own yoga/dance studio, which was a ridiculous extravagance. But it felt nice, and it was private.

Regina did her stretches and old ballet warm-ups, plies and tendus.

‘I don’t have pointe shoes again yet.’ she reminded herself. ‘I’ll have to do demi-pointe.’

At least she had socks, so she could do a couple of pirouettes- as ugly as they were with her being more than three years out of practice.

She practiced for as long as she could- taking a cold and bracing shower in the adjoining shower room and rushing to get dressed in her work clothes. Then she practically flew down the flights of stairs to the connection on the second floor, over, and down to the main floor and out of the house.

Regina noted the genin team moving her new massive bed frame and did her best to look dignified.

One of the preteens glared resolutely at the intricately carved wooden post he was carrying and started up the stairs.

‘Uh. I’ll see if I can throw the Japanese equivalent of a pizza party for that team. I think they’ve been working on the house the whole time.’

Doing manual labor for contractors probably didn’t give them those good ninja feelings they’d suffered through the Academy for.

She smiled apologetically and made the mental note for later, then swept out the door.

She arrived to work in a breeze of perfume and still-drying hair, which was slightly off-color for Japanese standards.

But nobody seemed to be clocking her hair in their quests to avoid eye contact with her. Keiko walked right back into the staff room, Mizumoto-san suddenly looked incredibly busy with no paperwork on his desk.

‘Ouch. I already figured, but it still hurts. Even Keiko- I thought we were friendly.’

Regina silently took her necessary papers off of Keiko’s conspicuously deserted desk and out of her box. She ignored the seated line of gawkers waiting outside the Hokage’s office and walked into her own, calmly closing the door behind her.

She worked alone for at least an hour, and began to feel nervous bile build up as she gradually finished her current pile of paperwork.
She just stared at the last paper for several minutes before even trying to evaluate the report and recommendations.

‘I really don’t want to go back out there to drop these off.’

She swallowed and looked up at her closed door. But the Hokage would need briefings on those papers at some point. And it was against both her pride and current strategy to combat the rumors to take too long to do her job.

So Regina steeled herself, read the last report on police trainee evaluations, and wrote in her notes. She stood up and straightened all her folders so that they looked neat and tidy, then left the safety of her office.

Everyone was still studiously avoiding interaction with her- but for Nito-san, who worked under the Jounin Commander. He was sneering at her.

Regina didn’t bother to do more than glance at him. Glaring him down wasn’t likely to be a good strategy when everyone else seemed to be avoiding her at best.

She went to stand by Keiko-san’s desk and waited.

The woman didn’t look up.

‘She knows I’m here, for sure.’ Regina felt her eyes start to roll, but got them back down. ‘This is some petty high-school bullshit. Just think happy thoughts, Regina.’

After a long few minutes, Keiko looked up with a off-putting blank look on her face. But there was a downward pull to the corners of her mouth.

‘I’m sure you think that played off great.’ Regina tried to keep a vacuously pleasant look on her face. ‘I’m content to let you do that, just take this shit so I can go.’

“Hokage-sama won’t be able to see you today.” Keiko said in a clipped tone. “He’s very busy.”

‘I didn’t ask.’

Regina held out the papers. “Thank you for checking the schedule. If I am needed, I will be working in my office.”

Keiko’s jaw clenched a little bit.

“Of course.” She snatched the papers away from Regina’s hands. “Thank you.”

Regina just looked at her for a moment, then turned on her heel and went back into her office. Behind her, she heard her name- but in sotto. It was definitely a comment at her expense.

She gritted her teeth, smiled again for the benefit of anyone watching, and walked back into her office.

‘Eventually they’ll get bored, probably. I just have to last them out.’

Barely a minute or two later, someone knocked on the door.

She thought about it.
‘I… really don’t want to. But I guess it is my job.’

“Jiraiya-hime.”

She knew that clipped tenor. ‘Hatake.’

“Yes?” She asked politely.

The door edged open about an inch. “Can I come in?”

“I’m sure you can.” She said, trying not to sound like a dick about it.

He took that the way he always did, which mostly meant that since she hadn’t actually protested he was going to pretend he was invited.

He slid in the doorway and shut the door behind him.

Regina put her elbows on the desk and crossed her fingers. Whatever this was, she wasn’t in the mental space to play mind games today.

He looked at her and turned his head slowly back towards the door.

“Did you need something, Hatake-san?” She asked, more to be polite than anything. He was only holding one file- probably a mission report.

His head rotated back so slowly that it was disconcerting.

‘Please. Continue to move at a glacial pace, you know how much I love that.’ She bit back the snark. It wasn’t helpful. He wasn’t even being particularly weird or invasive, he didn’t deserve it. Regina was adult enough to admit that she was anxious about how everyone else would continue to treat her more than anything else.

“Yeese.” He blinked once. Twice. “What’s going on out there?”

She blinked. That was definitely not what she had anticipated. Did he not hear local gossip? She’d even gotten a stink-eye from a civilian this morning when she was walking the kids to school. It wasn’t like it was only shinobi.

‘Who am I kidding, he doesn’t seem the type to socialize enough to get that hot goss.’

“What do you mean?” She asked, turning it over in her head. He might not even be talking about the suddenly-unfriendly undercurrent in the office. Regina didn’t want to disclose embarrassing info he wasn’t even asking about. That would be a major miscalculation.

He looked at her, and his eye narrowed a little bit.

“How everyone in the office is staring kunai at you?” He hedged, inching farther into the room. Regina gestured to the chair in front of her desk, because his hand was hovering above it.

‘Might as well respond when he’s using some actual manners. This is actually the nicest he’s ever been to me, I think.’

He slunk down into the chair. His knee bounced a little bit.

‘Is he nervous, or just pretending to be nervous to get me off balance for some reason? That or maybe it’s a different reaction to something else.’ Her head was starting to hurt.
“There are some…” she breathed in slowly, trying to think of the best way to phrase it. It wasn’t like there wasn’t some merit. She didn’t think he’d immediately rat her out if she complained, but she honestly didn’t know him that well.

‘We really don’t have that kind of relationship. It’s fairly adversarial, if anything.’

“Complaints that have been lodged regarding myself and my position.” She settled. She looked at him.

He blinked. “What kinds of complaints?”

“Does it matter?” She asked, feeling vulnerable but mostly managing to keep the defensive tone out of her voice. What she could see of his face looked serious, so she relented. “Of course.” She sighed, running her hands through her hair to re-tie it. “The clan heads lodged a complaint yesterday regarding nepotism in the village- my created position and hiring were among them.”

It wasn’t like he couldn’t find out on his own, anyway.

“Among.”

She straightened her spine and put her hands down flat on the desk. “Yes. Among. There were others, but I am evidently the most blatant.” She made eye contact. “Do you have any other questions?”

“Not about how you do your job?” His eye seemed almost amused, but his tone was steely.

She shrugged. “To be fair, no one but the Hokage seems to know what I do. So it follows that there are no positive or negative assessments of my work performance.” Regina looked down at her folders for her current projects and grimaced.

‘Not that it’s somehow reduced the amount of work I do, or how hard I’m going to work on it. It’s only made the process more unpleasant.’

“All right, then.” His eye closed into one of his fake eye-smiles. “Good to know.”

She just stared at him. The silence stretched on.

“Well, is there anything else I can do for you, Hatake-san?” She asked.

He appeared to think about it, scratching his chin over his mask. “Nope. Thank you.” Then he stood up, bowed a little bit, and then hesitated. “Jiraiya-hime, do you like dogs?”

‘That’s a weird non sequitur. This is obviously a trap. What’s the set up? What does he possibly hope to gain with such an inane question?’ Oh no. The headache was getting worse.

“I have absolutely no idea what a dog is.” She said, with a sympathetic grimace inspired by the shock of pain behind her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

‘I have no idea if that was the right answer, but I can’t think of anything else.’

Hatake suddenly looked distressed- his eye widened, and his head shrunk into his shoulders. She could see him open and close his mouth, and then he slipped out the door again.
Regina left at the beginning of her lunch, regardless of the fact that the Hokage hadn’t called her in all morning.

‘I wonder how long that’s going to last. I usually spend at least half of the day in the high-level meetings. Maybe he’s deciding to distance himself from me?’

She contemplated that as she set out on the ten-minute walk to her new home. The path took her through the street market, where several people glared at her as she passed by. When she stopped into the home goods store to buy matching sets of towels, the clerk ignored her.

‘This is going to get real old, real quick.’

Regina cleared her throat lightly and smiled as sunnily as possible. The clerk looked at her, huffed out her nose, and lifted her head.

“Yes.” She said, sounding distinctly unhelpful. “Welcome to our store.”

“Thank you.” Regina tried to sound friendly. “I’d like to purchase these towels, please.” She set the overfilled basket on the counter.

The clerk rang them up, punching numbers into the old cash register with punctuated disdain.

‘Come on, it might have nothing to do with me.’ Regina coached herself. ‘I hated retail and customer service. Just be polite and get out.’

The woman gave her the bags with a soulless kind of glare, and didn’t walk her to the door, which was more typical here.

“Goodbye.” The woman said, putting her nose back down into a magazine.

‘Hey, that wasn’t so bad.’ Regina tried to hype herself up as she readjusted the bags in her arms. ‘Probably wasn’t about me at all.’

“Out of the way, princess.” someone sneered, as they bumped her hard and kept walking.

She looked out into the street. It was basically empty. The man had kept walking, and was now in the middle of the road.

‘Yeah, he went out of his way to do that. Never mind the fake positivity, let’s just get today over with.’

Regina stalked back to her apartment and let the friendly facade drop, noting that people started to part in front of her like the sea.

She arrived at her newly-finished and furnished home and breathed in the smell of fresh pine and cleaner.

‘Oh, that’s therapeutic.’ She closed her eyes for a moment. ‘It smells safe in here.’

Regina put the bags on the step of the genkan and put away her outside shoes, and put on her slippers.

She walked through the house- the waiting room was lovely and traditional, as promised.
‘I’ll stop in the kitchen to see Ikemoto-san, then get these towels in the wash so they can be put up in all the bathrooms.’

Ikemoto-san was happily stocking the pantry judging by the clattering. Boxes were neatly stacked by the double doors.

“Is everything going okay in here?” Regina asked, with a genuine smile this time. The kitchen looked good- the black marble floor glimmered in the sunlight, and contrasted nicely with the white and grey marble on the kitchen island.

Ikemoto-san popped out of the pantry with a toothsome smile. “The kitchen is lovely, Rejina-hime. Everything is going well.”

“And your rooms, do you like them?” Regina put down the bags by the door. “If they’re not sufficient, let me know.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Rejina-hime. They’re fine- it’s quite a bit of private space.”

‘To be honest, I gave her about as much space as I gave myself with my master bedroom and private bath. I didn’t want to be an ass.’

“Thank you for moving in with us.” Regina thanked her for what seemed like the millionth time. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s more convenient.” Ikemoto-san waved her lightly wrinkled hands at her. “Besides, I lived alone and my apartment was old.”

Regina didn’t know what to say to that, exactly. It seemed rude to agree or disagree.

“We appreciate it, regardless.” She said instead.

Ikemoto-san smiled, and fully emerged from the pantry. “Rejina-hime, have you looked at all the rooms yet?”

“No.” Regina shook her head. “I planned to do that now.”

“Let us go look together.” Ikemoto-san walked past her and back into the hallway, and Regina picked up all of her bags again. She eyed the bags. “Laundry room first?”

“Over here, I think.” Regina gestured to the door next to the kitchen. “Next to the dressing room and shower/bath, and the pathway to the onsen.”

“Ohh.” Something glinted in Ikemoto-san’s eyes.

“You can obviously use them whenever you wish.” Regina offered. “Though I might like some time alone in them sometimes.”

Ikemoto-san hummed.

The laundry room was really basically a hallway with the washing machine at the end, and the double doors to the dressing room. Regina put the bags by the washer, and then opened the french doors into the next room.
It was a soft, velvety room filled with furniture she’d had to import.

‘It’s expensive to not be a fan of furniture on the floor.’ She thought wryly, looking at the chaise lounge and comfy chair.

The long vanity had three places for stools and a wall-length mirror, so that they all could use it. The floor was a very luxurious carpet over wood floors, because reasons.

‘Dammnnn, we did a good job designing this.’ She complimented herself, knowing damn well that she and Jiraiya were cribbing off well-known onsen design and the series of hgtv shows she’d binged in her own universe.

The bath room was also in marble- there was the full bath in the corner inlaid into the floor, an open shower, and an enclosed toilet. The shelves were lifted and drilled into the study insulated walls.

If she opened the opaque windows, she could see directly out into the traditional-style garden several teams of genin had labored to plant. The runoff from the natural hot spring formed the basis for the water feature, like a little stream winding through the moss and stones.

‘Yum. I am going to bathe in this one alllll the time.’

The onsen looked exactly how Jiraiya had designed it- and the sauna was prepped and ready. The coals obviously weren’t lit or drenched, but she could do that herself later.

“Quite nice.” Ikemoto-san said evaluatively. “Did you design this?”

“I helped my father.” Regina replied, musing over how long she’d have to spend out here today. Not long, probably. “Shall we look upstairs?”

The rooms were where she’d had more input. The sunken kotatsu looked nice in the living room, and the windowseat also looked out into the same back garden. The toilet upstairs, unlike the one by the welcoming room, was European-style. Or American-style. She had never studied toilet science.

‘I never did get an answer on how the hell they have these. I thought it would just be the squatting ones.’

But to be frank, every time she asked even a cursory question regarding things she knew had never been invented in Japan she just got a massive headache. No one knew why. Or how. Iron had them and they’d been imported. But Iron didn’t have trade with outside countries until she’d come. The cultural exchange program had failed.

Also, it was the early 1800s or something. America was barely a country at this point in time, how were there televisions? And movies?

She shook her head. Dangerous thoughts- questions with no answers.

“This room is nice…” Ikemoto-sensei said carefully.

Regina forced herself to pay attention.

‘Oh. It’s the library. Weird to see one empty.’
“I have not ordered all the books I need to fill it as of yet.” She said blandly. “Some are on their way, and some are in the boxes downstairs.”

“Ah.” Now that that was resolved, Ikemoto-san seemed to harbor no more interest for the room. She turned around and opened the doors to Regina’s private office and study.

The walls were also lined with shelves, lowering only for the large windows that looked out in the direction of Konoha. The desk in the center had been carved specifically for her by a tradesperson in Konoha working with some of the dying Hashirama trees in the forest.

‘Poetic, that. I’m sure that’s why Dad did it.’

But there was also very little in here to look at, so they moved on quickly. They climbed up the winding stairs to the third floor.

Sasuke and Naruto’s rooms were side by side, and she peeked in. It looked like their chosen bedding sets and decor had been dropped off earlier and washed- she’d let them decorate how they pleased. They were old enough to make their own beds.

“They will be very happy. I’m sure.” Ikemoto-san said, sounding pleased. “Good rooms.” She gestured to the one opposite. “Whose is that?”

“Father’s.” Regina said, lightly opening the door. Boxes were piled up in the center of the room, blocking off the route to the nice bed she’d bought for him.

“He’ll be fine.” Ikemoto-san said dismissively. “We will finish his room after we all move in. Jiraiya-sama rarely visits Konoha.”

“Fair enough.” Regina closed the door with a click.

The guest room was also going to be left for later- she didn’t know why she’d added one at all except for some lingering sense of Midwestern manners.

‘If we don’t have a use for it, I’ll let the boys stretch in there or something. We’ll make it work.’

Her room was way at the end of the hallway. She opened the door with a little bit more of a relish, excited to see her plans realized.

A massive four-post bed with gauzy curtains was the first thing she could see. She stepped onto the soft, cushy carpet and went to the walk-in closet.

‘Glorious, glorious. There is a god and he loves me at least a little.’

It was even bigger than she’d imagined- she could store so many outfits in here, even her massive kimono surplus.

“Oh! My bathroom.” She had almost forgotten, somehow.

She almost pranced across the room to the other set of french doors and swung them wide open. Regina could hear Ikemoto-san choke back a small laugh.

‘Oh, don’t tell me you’ve never wanted a powder room.’

The bath was massive for one person, next to a lacquered wood vanity and yet another chaise
lounge with an end table.

The evaluative hum behind her made her smirk. Maybe Ikemoto-san had just never considered the possibilities.

‘Do other people not design the houses of their dreams for fun?’ She wondered, fingering the silvered tap on the bathtub. ‘Maybe not.’

She tabled the thought for later and left the room. “The only things left are my dance studio and showers upstairs, and the fifth floor.”

“What is on the fifth floor?” Ikemoto-san looked bemused and a bit shocked.

Regina shrugged. “Nothing. I wanted four floors and the builder said that was unlucky. He was already upset about having red roof tiles and what I chose as the clan insignia, so I left it alone.”

“True. Four is a very unlucky number.” Ikemoto-san pursed her lips in amusement. “And you have tempted fate into burning your house down in making it red.”

“The roof tiles.” Regina corrected lightly, staring at her bed. It looked so soft.

Ikemoto-san took it like a champ, barely registering it. “Yes. But what did he find so objectionable regarding your clan insignia?”

Regina looked at her. “Did you notice it on the gate or the tiles?”

Ikemoto-san seemed to think. “I… don’t believe so. It was the only home in the area.”

“It’s the no sign.” Regina traced it in the air. A circle with a slash. “I didn’t know what to pick- and then I remembered that it’s always on Father’s… works.” She finished grimly. “I thought the meaning was funny. Our clan motto is ‘no.’”

‘To be honest, I kept thinking about toads, but couldn’t make it work. And I don’t actually want to live in a house with a toad on it.’

There was silence.

“Anyway, is there anything else you need for me to do?” Regina asked. “If not, I have things I should unpack.”

Ikemoto-san seemed to gather herself. “Ah, no.”

“Wonderful!” Regina said, following her to the door. “Please let me know if that changes.”

Ikemoto-san assured her that she would, and went back downstairs.

Regina immediately pulled out the small stack of storage seals with her wardrobe and began putting things away.
Ikemoto-san left at three to go get the boys from school (she’d insisted, and Regina didn’t have the will to fight it out).

Regina noted that the boys arrived at their new home when a series of small excited shrieks rose up through the floor, and there were thunderous noises as they ran up the stairs.

“The television!” She heard Naruto yell. Then there was more running. “What’s this room?”

“The library.” Sasuke sounded like he was about to wind up into one of his know-it-all spiels.

‘Oh no. Naruto hates those. The portents of conflict have arisen.’

Regina walked out of the room and jogged down the stairs. True to form, they were squaring up and posturing.

“You know my rules about not fighting.” She said blandly. “Do you two want to see your bedrooms instead?”

Their eyes went wide, and they nearly knocked her over as they ran past her and up the stairs.

She followed them up, just in time to see Naruto tear up and fling himself onto his bed.

“I love it.” He said into the mattress, hugging the pillow tight.

“Good.” She paused in the doorway and looked over to Sasuke, who was walking through his room and evaluating everything with his sharp little eyes. “Sasuke?”

“It’s good.” he said quietly, opening a drawer. “But a bit blank.”

“You can decorate it however you like.” She suggested. “The stuff you picked out is in those boxes.”

He grunted and then picked up his sheets.

Naruto was still wiggling on his bed.

“Your sheets and blankets are already washed, you should put them on before bed.” She warned. “You want to sleep in here tonight, right?”

He bounced right off the mattress and onto the floor, throwing the sheets onto the bed with abandon.

“How much homework do you have?” She asked, leaning against the doorjamb.

“None.” Sasuke replied. “I got mine done during lunch.” He looked over in the direction of Naruto’s room.

“None!” Naruto said, giving her a smile.

“Liar.” Sasuke muttered.

“What?”

“Naruto, do you really have no homework?” She asked, not wanting to accuse him. That would be
shitty.

He nodded. “I’ve been getting it all done.”

“I’ve been doing it.” Sasuke snapped quietly, into his sheets. He flapped open the sheet set with unnecessary force.

“This seems like a major problem.’

“... not even in class.” Sasuke grumbled. There was something she missed there, but it was a good place to start.

“Sasuke, could you come help me in my room?” She asked as casually as possible. “You’re really good at organizing things.”

He came happily enough, but looked back to crinkle his nose in the direction of Naruto’s room. There was a loud tearing noise that sounded like packaging.

“We may need to vacuum after him once he’s done... cleaning.” Sasuke said primly, before walking down the hallway. “Which one is yours, kaa-chan?”

“The one at the end of the hallway.” She gestured. “The big doors, easy to find.”

“What are the other two?” He asked, examining the hallway.

“Ojiichan’s room, a guest bedroom, and the bathroom- right there.” She pointed. “It’s only a toilet and sink. There are showers on the fourth floor and an onsen with a shower and bath on the first floor- but there’s a toilet on the first through fourth floors.”

“What’s the fifth floor? I saw a top floor.” Sasuke waited for her to open the door.

“That makes sense. I doubt he was raised to barge into his parents’ room. I get the distinct impression that the Uchiha were incredible sticklers for manners after my own heart.”

She opened the doors obligingly, and watched as his eyes went a bit wide.

“The fifth floor is nothing right now.” Regina said honestly. “It’s just a room. I don’t know what to do with it yet.”

He hummed. “And what are the doors in here?”

“You’re nosy.” She huffed with amusement, and ruffled his hair. “I like it. The door over there is to a big closet, the one on the left is my private bath room.”

He looked up at her.

“Yeah, you want to see it, before I never let you or Naruto in there again?” She offered. “One-time only offer.”

He was curious enough to go.

“It’s just a bath and a nice couch.” He said disbelievingly.

“It is a private comfortable space where I can spend my time alone bathing for hours or reading books or doing my makeup, hair, and skincare.” She pointed out. “Separate from the rest of the house.”
He hummed. It sounded less judging this time.

“I like it. That’s what matters.” She said with confidence. Then she gestured to the chaise lounge. “Sit?”

He did, and smiled a little bit when he felt the soft cushions.

There wasn’t really a great segue into this conversation.

“So, I hear you’re doing Naruto’s homework.” She said, sitting down on her stool. “Why is that?”

He looked down at the floor immediately. She could see his cheeks were turning red.

‘Didn’t he realize I could hear him?’

“You’re a really good big brother.” She complimented. “And I know you’re good at school. Did he ask you for help?”

He shook his head.

‘To be fair, I didn’t really think Naruto would get over his resentment of not being as good at things and Sasuke’s tendency to be… a bit of a know it all… enough to ask.’

“Were you trying to help him yourself?” She asked, puzzling it out. Sasuke was perceptive to things. It was likely he had noted something was wrong and tried to fix it.

He nodded.

“Can you tell me why?” She asked. “I’m not mad. But I do have to make sure Naruto is doing his own homework. Shinobi training isn’t something he can fake. It’s dangerous.”

“I know.” he looked up at her. His posture was a little defensive. “I just wanted to help. I know you can’t help with everything because you’re busy and your Japanese isn’t perfect yet.”

‘Ah. Makes sense. He assumed he was the next authority because I couldn’t do it and there wasn’t someone else available.’

Except…

“Why not Ebisu-sensei?” She asked. “Naruto has a tutor for a reason. I’m glad you helped him, that was a good thought. But Iruka-sensei or Mizuki-sensei or Ebisu-sensei should be the ones helping him.”

“They’ve tried.” Sasuke sounded a bit bitter. “And Ebisu-sensei is already busy with all his other training and his old homework.”

‘Well, shit.’

“So this is only his new homework.” She mused. “Is he having problems understanding?”

He grimaced. “I don’t know.” he bit out. “Does it matter?”

She recognized that tone.
“I’m sorry, Sasuke.” She moved to sit next to him on the lounge. “You deserve your own special attention, but I have to figure this out to help Naruto. Thank you for telling me.” She reached out to lightly squeeze his hand. “How is training with Gai-sensei going? He told me the other day that you’re really fast.”

He lit up at that. “I am! Gai-sensei says I could be really good at taijutsu if I keep practicing. He has me practicing push-ups and other stuff to get strong.”

“That’s great!” And it was. “Are you learning any flexibility or anything?”

“Gai-sensei says that’s not his specialty.” Sasuke said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’ll need to find someone else to help with that.”

‘Huh. A thought occurs.’

“I know something about flexibility.” She said slowly. “If you or Naruto would like to learn.”

He looked her up and down.

“I did a sport for most of my life that required it.” She said primly. “I stopped for a few years, but I still have the flexibility. If you want to watch me sometime and decide, you can.”

He considered that.

“Anyway, while I do appreciate your help, I think maybe you should get your bedroom ready instead.” Regina posited. “We should be eating dinner soon, and I have chadou lessons tonight. Ikemoto-san will make sure the two of you are in bed by nine, as usual.”

Sasuke nodded, slipping off the lounge and looking around the room again.

“Just taking it all in.” He said, evaluating the vanity. “Since I’ll never see it again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” She laughed, before chasing him out. “You don’t even want it.”

He grinned at her before rushing back down the hallway and into his room.

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