Civil Affairs

by OrthodoxLily

Summary

Kiyoko is a civilian of Konohagakure who has dedicated herself to her work at Konoha's Civil Affairs Office. She's satisfied with her work and what she does for the village but everything changes on a typical Monday, with a rumor of a department transfer and a long, agonizing walk to The Director's office in lopsided high-heels.

Notes

Author's Note: Hey everyone! My name is OrthodoxLily and I originally began publishing this story on FF.net, but I was eager to also publish it here on AO3 so I can share with a larger reader-base. So yes, if you're reading this and think 'hey this is really similar/exactly the same as Civil Affairs on FF' that's because well...it is. As at this time there isn't an explicit content in Civil Affairs, this version is exactly the same as the one on FF. Regardless, I hope you enjoy!
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Secondary Authors Note Regarding Tags: PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU CONTINUE

My Valued Readers,

In later chapters I have received many upset reviews/comments/PMs regarding my lack of tags on some subjects which may trigger readers. The first time this happened, I did my best to accommodate my readers and altered my rating/tags appropriately. I admit that one was 100% my bad, I wasn't thinking and the truth is that keeping that particular content a 'surprise twist' was not necessary to the plot. I thought it was at the time, but when I considered it more, it really was an unnecessary flourish. However, I continuously get many comments about some other troubling content later in the story which I have NOT tagged.

I respect that there are many people who have had traumatic experiences, I understand your upset, and I would never wish you to be hurt by the content of my story. However, please understand, Before I posted this content without tagging I considered very carefully whether this 'plot twist' being a surprise was important to the depth and emotional impact to the story. I decided it was, so I did not tag the content. For future readers, please take it upon yourself to read this story with caution as I WILL NOT BE ALTERING THE TAGS OF THIS STORY FURTHER.

I believe that every twist and turn in a story should be unexpected. That's part of the glory of reading something new. When you get a novel at the bookstore, there are no tags that warn you what is inside, the summary doesn't usually cover it. And quite frankly, the author has a right to keep some things a secret or a twist. This doesn't mean I don't care that some people may be offended or hurt or triggered by my content...it just means that I would like to deliver my novel the way I, as an author, have a right to.

Above I have a 'Dark Themes' and 'Character Death' tag as well as have marked this story as 'Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings'. These are meant to warn you that anything, and I mean anything could happen and I would like you to consider this before reading. I have planned many dark things for this story...though I assure you the ending will be happy.

My love and respect forever, OrthodoxLily

Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 1 -<>- Before The Beginning

Atsuko had waited for big brother to be gone on a mission, a long one, before she ran away.

I woke up that morning, paying little attention to the empty twin bed across the room from mine and shuffled into our tiny kitchen. With only a small amount of counter space, chipping white cabinets, an old stove and loud fridge that was threatening to quit – it wasn't much of a kitchen. Big brother had been gone on a mission for the last three weeks and wasn't expected to return for three more. Where he had gone, he wasn't allowed to share.

I vaguely noted the fact that she was absent from the apartment, but that wasn't as uncommon as one might think. Ever since we had graduated from school, Atsuko always seemed to have somewhere
else to be. Big brother had guessed one night, while the two of us shared some take-out on our sagging brown couch, that Atsuko was just restless. She didn't have a job yet and suddenly she didn't have the obligation to go to school everyday either. She was anxious to test her limits and new-found freedom from obligation.

He said it was okay and that it was natural – but it wasn't something I personally understood.

We may be identical twins, but Atsuko and I were very, very different people.

I wasn't in the apartment much either, but that was because immediately following graduation I had applied for a position at Konohagakure's Civil Affairs Office. I had been successful and had earned a position in the Immigration Department. So, from 8 in the morning until 6 in the evening, 6 days a week, I was busy at my desk sifting through immigration applications. Sorting them, investigating them, approving them and, yes, often denying them. It was a good job and it paid well, giving me the opportunity to contribute to the cost of our apartment and groceries. It was new for me; big brother had taken care of us since we were very young and had never asked us to contribute financially. But it felt good to finally be able to help him out a bit.

Between the steady hours of my job, Atsuko's flighty behaviour and big brother's constant missions, the apartment was naturally empty. When there was someone there, it was usually me and I was usually alone. So I had paid no mind to her absence, going about my morning routine.

A cup of coffee, a quick shower and I was out the door on time, arriving at work 15 minutes early just as I did every day.

When I got home that night, there was no Atsuko. I assumed she was out with her friends. It wasn't unheard of for her to stay out late, spending big brother's hard-earned money at bars or going out to eat at nice restaurants with her friends. Atsuko had lots of friends, she was a lot better at making them then I was – but she also needed her friends more then I did. While my sister thrived on the constant attention of her peers, I was much more content to be overlooked. I did important work and I knew I was a decent person. That was all I needed.

So, I changed into my bed clothes doing a bit of reading by the dim lighting of my old, bedside lamp. I was lost in the book – a fantasy novel about a world where everyone could summon dragons. By the time I surfaced, it was close to midnight and when I glanced across the room, Atsuko's bed was still empty. That was odd. She never stayed out this late…no matter how much fun she was having. Atsuko once told me that nothing beat the feeling of sleeping in your own bed, so without fail she would come back to it. I marked my spot in the novel and put it aside.

Wondering if she was drunk and had fallen asleep on the couch, I was quick to go out and check the living room. It was empty.

Despite being in my nightgown, I left the apartment and went down to the lobby where the security guard, an elderly retired shinobi, was snoozing. He hadn't seen her since yesterday. My heart began to beat just a little bit faster and I was quick to return to my apartment and change into a pair of pants and a t-shirt.

I was all over Konohagakure, knocking on doors of her friends, checking the bars I knew she liked the most. The most recently she had been seen was yesterday night. With each failed attempt at finding her, my heart would beat just a little bit faster. I gave up shortly after dawn, resolving to go and report her as a missing person and hire a shinobi team to look for her. I didn't have a lot of money, but hopefully I had enough to pay for a search party.

Somehow, maybe exhaustion, I ended up sitting on Atsuko's saggy bed instead of my own, realizing
for the first time that she'd made it. Atsuko never made her bed. She was my twin, I should have noticed she was gone…I should have noticed the signs that something was wrong. My gaze drifted down to my feet and there, I noticed there was a corner of a page sticking out from underneath her bed. I picked it up and read it.

After reading the note, I felt many things.

Confusion, a little lonely, maybe a little angry but ultimately, relieved.

In Atsuko's familiar handwriting, there was a letter describing in a surprising amount of detail everything that had been going on with her since our graduation. Things I didn't know anything about. In short, my sister had fallen in love. With both my brother and I so busy, and Atsuko un成功ably able to obtain work despite her intelligence, she'd chosen to volunteer at the hospital. There, she had met a young man aspiring to become a doctor. They had grown closer and when he was finally accepted into a Medical Institute in another country (she smartly didn't mention which country), they had decided that they would move there together – as a married couple. She assured me that it had nothing to do with me and that she loved me; a similar note left for our beloved big brother, adding how much she appreciated all he did to raise us.

_I love you both so, so much. I'm happy and I want you to be happy too._

_I promise I'll come home to see you someday, when I know who I am and you can be proud of me._

_With love,_

_Atsuko_

While it was true that sixteen was considered legal age in Konohagakure for civilians, it was still too young to get married in my opinion. In big brother's opinion too, hence why she waited until he was gone to run off. Big brother was a skilled jonin, she and her new husband wouldn't have been able to make it out of the village if he had been around. It didn't take me long to figure out why she hadn't told me about what was going on. My sister and twin she may be, but the truth was I had never been able to keep anything from big brother. It wasn't because I couldn't lie, but I was loyal to him and would have felt the urge to tell him. Atsuko hadn't wanted to put me in that position. It was admirable, in a strange way…that still really hurt.

I went to work still that day, grasping desperately for some normalcy. I coasted through half of my day before realizing my productivity was limited my supervisor called me to her office. She asked why I wasn't at my best and I told her the truth, that my sister had left the village and that I had spent all night looking for her. Despite insisting I was fine to work, she had sent me home. Alone in my suddenly smaller family's apartment.

After that day I went back to my routine, suddenly noticing all the ways that Atsuko's absence affected my life. Despite staying out late, she would try to drag herself out of bed to chatter to me while I got ready for work. Mindless chatter to which I rarely contributed – but that was just how we were. Atsuko was the talkative one, I was the quiet one; it didn't mean that I wasn't listening…or that I wouldn't miss hearing her. Over the weeks immediately following it, I even came to miss her coming home drunk. She'd stagger in, slurring the end of a story she started telling me before she even entered the apartment, not realizing her error. Laughing, 'I knew you'd find that funny, sis! I knew you would!' She'd laugh. Maybe I would have if I'd heard the whole thing. I might have laughed with her…I don't think I ever did. I should have. Instead, I'd just stare over the top of whichever book I was reading at that time with a slightly raised eyebrow until she collapsed onto her bed, usually passing out with her shoes still on.
When big brother finally got home four weeks after, he immediately saw the letter that I had set out on the counter for him. It was a Sunday and he had come home about the time that I woke up. I came into the kitchen and he was pacing, still in his filthy, ripped jonin uniform. Dark, heavy circles were under his eyes and there appeared to still be some dried blood on his collar bone. When he came in, he had probably been staggering, but now he had renewed energy. He was like a caged tiger; he didn't know what to do, but he couldn't sit still – he felt like he had to do something. He bounced between saying that he was going to go after her and defeatedly realising how irrational that was; not only because she didn't want to be found but because it would ultimately be a waste of resources, as he'd have to track her down. She knew, in a strange way, why he was acting this way.

He felt abandoned. He'd raised her and she'd run away from him, without even trying to make him understand what she was feeling. She was out there somewhere and he couldn't protect her. It was a hopeless feeling that he wasn't used to and that made him frustrated.

He digested it, eventually. Sitting on the couch and staring at the letter in complete silence. I put my hand on his shoulder. I broke the silence by convincing him to go have a shower and get some sleep, although I knew he wouldn't be able to. Not for a few days anyway; the worry for her would plague his mind.

Atsuko's leaving, affected my already broken family deeply. Life continued, we weren't the sort of people to stay down.

Besides…she promised she'd come home. Someday. So all we had to do was make sure there was a home for her to come back to.

Little did we know how difficult a job that would be in the coming years.

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My mother had a weak constitution her entire life, barely surviving the birth of our older brother six years before us. Almost inevitably, she hadn't survived the birth of myself and Atsuko. Maybe one she could have survived, but twins was something her frail body couldn't handle.

Our father, a respected jonin in our village, was left to raise a six year old son and twin infants on his own. He did his best and the few memories I have of him are good. They're vague, but when I think back on those fuzzy memories I can feel a deep fondness for him…even if I only really remember what he looked like because of pictures. Mostly, I remember ribbons. It's a silly thing, but my father always made sure Atsuko and I had different coloured ribbons and he bought new ones for us all the time. We had so many, that we each had to keep a shoebox of them. We were five, when he was killed in action.

My big brother, Genma Shiranui, was eleven at the time and a genin. Since genin are classified as adults, even if they're very young, Genma was legally able to keep us in his custody. So long as he submitted to have his care of us monitored – if it wasn't sufficient, we would be taken away and made wards of the village. He had the option to give us up several times and there were many who encouraged it, but Genma refused to allow the remainder of the Shiranui family to fall apart. It must have been a hard decision for him, but it was a decision that he never faltered on.

We didn't have a lot, but he was able to keep us fed and clothed. He worked hard to reach chunin and jonin not long after, so he could support us and when we turned ten he revealed that he had been saving money to send us both to Koba Private Academy, a prestigious school for civilian girls. Atsuko, had an inkling to be a kunoichi several years before that, but big brother had talked her out of it, preferring us both in the village. You didn't have to be kunoichi to serve the village, was what he had said. I think I may have taken it more to heart then my sister, because hearing him say that
was what had first sparked my interest in the Civil Affairs Office. In school, Atsuko wowed her peers with her personality, earning rewards for starting initiatives and clubs, I was able to become one of the highest scoring students in my year. At sixteen, we were adults and graduated from Koba. With some stellar referrals from teachers, I easily made my way into my position at the Civil Affairs Office.

And I am happy there.

Solitary, quiet, little Kiyoko Shiranui. A civilian from Konohagakure, who was promised as a child that you didn't have to be a kunoichi to do important work for the village. The lustre, hasn't worn off. I still believe it. Births, deaths, city planning, economics, business licences, immigration, consumer protection, education standards, healthcare…all of these are things (and more) are handled by the Civil Affairs Office. I do indeed, consider what I do important. So, I do it with pride. I didn't think I could do any more to contribute to the village then I was already doing…but as it turns out I was wrong.

Surprisingly, there was more I could do.

It all started on a typical Monday, with a rumor of a department transfer and a long, agonizing walk to The Director's office in lopsided high-heels.
I heard Genma rustling around in our kitchen from where I was at the bathroom mirror. There was a bit of loud clicking and the sound of a hand banging plastic that indicated he was trying to get our old coffee machine to brew. The stupid thing had been poor quality when it was bought and had been on its last legs for about three years, but as if sensing our desperation it was refusing to die. It usually took some frustrated button pushing, unplugging and the odd slap, but it would eventually figure out how to make coffee again. Sure enough, I soon heard the sigh of relief that signalled he'd managed to get it working.

I hadn't thought to brew a pot of coffee. Genma had been gone on long-term missions a lot lately, so I had gotten into the habit of waiting until I got to work before I poured myself a cup. I liked coffee just fine, but it would be a waste to brew a whole pot for myself. At work, if I brewed a single pot it would be gone before I made it back to my desk. It was just more economic to save my coffee brewing for work when I was living by myself. Thankfully, my brother didn't seem to mind my lack of forethought.

I'd woken up rather early, going about my routine. Some morning stretches, then a shower and brushing my teeth. Living with my brother through my teenage years had forced me to learn how to dress in our bathroom, no matter how confined it was to do so. Mostly because my bedroom didn't have a door, just an archway, and both my brother and I didn't want him to risk seeing something he couldn't unsee. I usually had to perch my leg up on the closed toilet seat to maneuver pantyhose and depending on how tight the skirt was, I sometimes ended up having to brace against the sink to pull it up. I was in my typical outfit; a knee length black skirt, dark pantyhose, and dark blue kimono top.

I was just finishing my hair; pulling the chest length, brown locks back into a loose bun that rested on my neck. Since some of the strands were shorter, a few of them slipped out to frame my face. My features were angular and accented by my feminine, indigo eyes. I checked one last time to make sure there was no smudging or mistakes with my makeup, I gave one final tug on the hem of my shirt and left the bathroom.

We'd never had a kitchen table, there wasn't much need, so I wasn't surprised to find Genma sitting on the counter next to the coffee maker. He had a shinobi magazine of some kind and was leafing through it with a very bored expression, likely because he already knew the information inside. He had told me once that he usually just bought them for the weapon and gear reviews nowadays, since the articles were just common information.

At twenty-three years old, Genma had clearly established himself as a trusted Jonin of the village. While he could be considered rather unassuming in appearance, that was ultimately a strength for him and he excelled in his career. He was 5.9ft, had straight brown hair that fell to his chin and lazy brown eyes. He wasn't particularly strong looking, or intense but he wasn't scrawny either. As I said, unassuming. His colleagues however, from what I heard, knew that it wasn't a good idea to dismiss him. His biggest strength was in his composure. Unlike me, Genma had friends who would come over and drink with him from time to time (now that he didn't have young girls to watch over) and from what I'd overheard, Genma was unshakable. He never lost his head. This, was not surprising in the slightest to me not only because I was much the same way, but because I had spent most of my young life trying to be like my big brother. There wasn't a person in the world I admired more.

I did finally notice the presence of one of my brother's former teammates, Might Gai, on the couch.
"Good Morning, Kiyoko!" Came the booming welcome. He was seated on the couch but had swivelled his head to watch me when I emerged from the other room.

I liked Gai; mostly because I'd been around him a very long time and had been given an opportunity to…adjust to his eccentricities. Atsuko and I were seven when we were first introduced to Might Gai, over ten years ago, and ten years is an exceptional adjustment period. Besides, it was hard not to like someone who so genuinely enjoyed my elder brother's company. While my brother's other former teammate, Ebisu, only happened by when he needed something from Genma, Gai had become something of a fixture. He used to make up silly excuses to drop by, until after about a year Genma told him to drop the act and just come by to hang out if he wanted.

"Good Morning, Gai. How are you?" I asked in return, not stopping my momentum towards the door where my briefcase and high-heels were waiting for me.

"I'm very well! I've come to get Genma! We're going to go out for breakfast!" Gai said excitedly, springing up from the couch.

A quick glance at Genma, shirtless in his long pajama bottoms, a magazine on his lap and an unfilled coffee cup in his hand, informed me that if my brother was going out to breakfast he had been unaware of it until this moment. Cool headed he may be, but I noticed the corner of my brother's lip curve downward slightly.

"Oh?" I asked, slipping on my high heels. They were my only pair and they were second-hand. They used to belong to my mother, simple and black but clearly very well worn. They had small scuffs on the toes and there had been clear attempt to buffer them out over the years. Not to mention, if I wasn't careful, one of the lifts at the bottom of the heel would sometimes come off while I walked, leaving me with a lopsided gait. New heels however, were expensive, and I was trying to save my money.

"Is there a special occasion?" I followed up once I'd righted myself from pulling on my shoes.

"Not really!" Gai boomed, "Just an opportunity to spend time with an old friend!" He looked about to say more but stopped himself.

“Well, I hope you both have fun." I said sincerely, checking my bag to make sure I had my keys and money before flashing them both a small smile and yanking the door open.

I was only a few steps out in the hall when I heard Genma call out.

"Kiyo, you forgot something!" As I was turning around to enter the apartment again, I soon realized what he meant.

Gai had moved to stand at the exit and had a puzzled expression on his face. In his hand he was holding a small, square piece of black plastic, with three small pegs sticking out of one end. He must've seen it on the ground with his keen jonin eyes and moved to inspect it. She supposed to him, it would be a completely foreign object.

The lift from my heel. It had come off already.

I reached out and he handed it to me with a beaming smile, still watching with mild curiosity as I bent at the waist with my leg lifted so I could see the bottom of my foot and jammed the piece back where it belonged. Something about Gai's face lit up but I didn't have time to pay it any mind, I shouted out a quick thank you to them both and quickly bolted back through the door. The rush wasn't because I was late necessarily…but If I didn't get moving I would be late for being early.
When the village was first founded, everything pertaining to the village was handled by The Hokage. Konohagakure was, after all, a military city-state and while it was located within the Land of Fire it was independent. Due to the geographical location, it was important to have good relations with the Land of Fire, but co-operation was different from being governed by. Just because you were from Konohagakure, didn't mean that you were a citizen of the Land of Fire.

In the beginning, not only did the Hokage govern the military and international political affairs, but he was also responsible for birth certificates, immigration, death certificates and everything that happened in between. When the village was smaller, it was a more manageable task and the First Hokage had shouldered the burden well. But inevitably the village had grown and when the Second Hokage came into power, he was quick to find a more efficient way to manage the village's affairs. So, the Civil Affairs Office had been founded.

Originally, it had only handled births, deaths, business licensing and immigration (although Lord Second continued to be very involved in immigration). As it was rather small an office had been cleared for them on the third floor of the Hokage tower. However, as the village grew, so did the office. Now, more than six decades later, there were over fifteen different departments and the Civil Affairs Office took up four of the five floors in the tower. For the most part, Lord Hokage himself was uninvolved with most of the matters that kept the village running, his attention only being needed when something had run the gauntlet of the office and failed to be resolved. He was there for the big picture; the office was responsible for the brush strokes. As a result of this system, Lord Hokage was free to busy himself with the military and foreign policy matters that only he could do. It was a solid system and it worked.

I was relieved when I made it to my desk without losing my lift a second time. Considering it was more than five districts and three flights of stairs, I was actually a little impressed with my own luck. By all rights I should have lost it again at least once.

The Department of Immigration was located on the east side of the tower's fourth floor, one of the closest to the Hokage, as it was the department most likely to require his input. It was a simple office, with clean moss coloured walls and aged wood flooring. There were three rows of seven desks that sat facing the back window. A lone palm plant sat in the far back corner and the fluorescent lights beat down on the stacks of paperwork on each desk. All along the wall that divided our office from the Department of Children and Youth Services, were black filing cabinets. Two chunin were stationed on either side of the main entrance to the floor and down the hall that connected the five departments on this level, one could see two more at the entrance to The Director's office.

I sat down at my desk, smiling at the black haired woman seated next to me at her own. She hadn't begun working yet, but had two cups of coffee on her desk – one of which she pushed in my direction. I looked at her, a little puzzled, but grateful for the unexpected courtesy. I grabbed the cup with a nod of thanks.

"Social Services are negotiating with Finance over an increase in pension for veterans. The two sides tried to beat each other into the office so they could plan their debate. Both sides arrived at about 6 this morning and have been at it ever since. They ran out of coffee in both their departments so they started stealing from ours. I thought I should probably grab some while there was still something to grab." The young woman explained, leaning back in her chair and twirling a loose curl around her index finger.

At almost seventeen, I was young to work for the Civil Affairs Office. It wasn't that it was odd to see my age group in the workforce; legally the village classified you as an adult at sixteen. It was,
however, odd for someone my age to have this level of maturity in order to sit at a desk, day in and day out, and devote themselves to this type of work. Usually seventeen year-olds were doing manual labour, apprenticing in a trade or working in restaurants. A job like one obtained at the Civil Affairs Office wasn't usually obtained until someone was in their later years. I'll admit, I had a degree of pride in my accomplishment.

My ebony haired co-worker, Tamaki Miyajima, was the closest employee to me in age at only twenty and I had seniority – having been hired almost a year before her. Tamaki was relatively new to the office, but she was perceptive and so far had proven herself a joy to work with. We'd bonded, which has pleasantly surprised my big brother. I didn't connect with other people easily. It wasn't that I disliked them; it was just that I was reserved and most relationships felt forced and unnatural to me. The only ones that did feel natural were my relationships with Atsuko and Genma. When I reflected on it, Tamaki was my only friend that wasn't family.

Tamaki had long, curly black hair that she left down, fair skin and sharp green eyes. She had a feminine figure which was a contrast to my petite, compact one. She wore black dress pants, heels and a white button up shirt with long sleeves. Despite the attire, she was always cold so there was almost always a blue blanket draped over her shoulders like a shawl while in the office. This morning was no exception.

"How did you know that?" I questioned, bringing the cup to my lips to take a sip of the bitter liquid. I drank coffee more out of habit then necessity.

She tilted her head in the direction of the hallway, but I noticed what she was trying to tell me. Ah, the two guards at the main door. Now it made sense. Tamaki was good at getting information, which was why for the most part she was assigned to the final part of the immigration screening process. The interview.

The interviews had to be conducted in partners and while we were usually encouraged to select different people for each interview, I almost always selected Tamaki to help me with mine. I wasn't the only one who'd noticed her talent and often, Tamaki spent most of her workday in the interview rooms down on the first floor. She enjoyed the interviews too, so she didn't know how to say 'no' which meant her paperwork tended to pile up. I was guilty of taking a few files and adding them to my own on more than one occasion out of pity and I likely wasn't the only one. Tamaki was well-liked and would be a shame to see her quotas suffer because she was helping others with what was widely considered the hardest part of our job.

Even so, it was odd to see Tamaki actually on time for work – she was routinely five minutes late but The Director seemed to let it slide for the most part. I didn't have to say anything, she read my expression.

"Idate started at The Academy this morning. We had to be at the opening ceremony for 7:30." I felt the corner of my lip curl up slightly; I'm sure she had just loved that. Joke as I may that she was always late; usually Tamaki had a very good reason for it. A good reason in the form of a fussy eight-year old named, Idate. Tamaki often joked that ever since Idate came running into her life (cause the kid never walked…anywhere) she had forgotten what it was like to sleep in.

Idate Morino was the younger brother of Tamaki's busy, live-in boyfriend Ibiki. Of course, the arrangement hadn't started out that way. Originally, Tamaki had just been looking for employment. The recently orphaned Ibiki was searching for a nanny for his little brother, as much like mine he was often away for long periods of time on missions. Eventually, the two discovered they had a lot in common and after a few years become a couple. Tamaki had assumed much of the responsibility of caring for and raising Idate, providing him with the affection I was sure Ibiki had a hard time
communicating. I had no doubt the man cared but he wasn't exactly the type to freely express his emotions.

"So I guess you won't be late anymore, with Idate at school from 8 until 4." I commented, watching as Tamaki almost deflated at the thought.

"As hectic as it was, I'm going to miss him making me late for work in the morning...that's weird isn't it?" I shrugged in response; I had no way of knowing whether that was weird or normal. I had nothing to compare it to. After they became a couple, the two had decided it was weird for her to still be their paid nanny, so Ibiki had encouraged her to find employment. Then a few months ago, she was hired at the CAO.

"It's not him making you late that you'll miss." A middle-aged woman with brown hair commented as she walked past, having overheard the conversation. Saki, was one of the senior staff members in Immigration and was a classic example of it. The CAO used to have a strict dress code that stated all women working there needed to wear black skirt-suits and keep their hair in a tight bun. When our current Director took over and changed the dress code to include other types of business attire, the older ladies in the office hadn't taken advantage of it and continued to dress as they were used to. I supposed if you wore the same tacky suit for enough years you would get attached to it. "You'll just miss him. You suddenly have less opportunities to spend time with him; that can be rough. I felt that way when my eldest started going to school."

She didn't stop to talk anymore, she just carried on to her desk and sat down. Saki had three children; the eldest was planning to get married next year and the youngest was a year older than I was. She was nice but reserved. She would be retiring in less than two years, so she was content to just come to work everyday, do her paperwork and not get caught up in gossip or office politics. That was admirable in a place like this. Eventually, everyone got dragged into something in the CAO – it was virtually impossible not to. Recently, the only reason I had avoided it was the only person I ever talked to was Tamaki and she was too new at the office to get involved in anything too scandalous. She was still learning how things worked around here.

"What are we talking about?" The question and the sound of designer heels on the hardwood announced the arrival of Yuzuha Nara, our department's supervisor. At thirty years old, Yuzuha was 5.6ft with a medium build and had fair skin. Like many of the other members of the CAO who had been hired more than a few years ago, she still conformed to the old dress-code but since it was changed she had started 'dressing up' her outfit with colourful scarves. This month's flavour was a teal scarf with gold leaves embroidered on it that she said her sister-in-law had sewn for her. She had medium length, spikey black hair that seemed to have a mind of its own despite being fought into a bun and intense brown eyes. At her current age and with her talents, Yuzuha should have been an asset to the village as a kunoichi but due to some sort of clan politics I didn't understand, Yuzuha had been all but forbidden to study the ninja arts. Everything about her screamed that she was meant for the field of battle; but instead she was here.

Considering that, she had adjusted well over the years to her position.

"We're talking about how Tamaki is going to miss Idate now that he's in school." I informed her, watching as the supervisor 'ahhh'd in response.

"But it's not like he's my son!" Tamaki protested half-heartedly, slumping in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

"Isn't he?" Saki's voice echoed from closer to the back of the room where her desk was, still partially involved in the conversation but obviously not invested in it.
"He may as well be." Yuzuha confirmed, "You have been the one primarily raising him since he was, what? Three?"

"Two." Tamaki said before she could stop herself.

"That's six years of his life that you've been the closest thing that he's had to a parent." I pointed out, hoping that a little bit of logic would help the situation. Also, I found it fascinating. I had never fully considered the extent of her relationship with Idate before, but I supposed, when it was put this way, she really was his mother.

"He had Ibiki." Tamaki threw out half heartedly, to which I just stared at her. That was a weak argument.

"We're talking about the same Ibiki Morino, right?" Yuzuha said as she leaned against my desk, unafraid of speaking her mind, "because if it's the one I'm thinking of you'd find more paternal instinct in a bowl of ramen."

There was silence as both Saki and I waited for Tamaki's response to the rude comment. We were all thinking it; but it would be her who finally said it. I was used to Yuzuha's harsh and open analysis of others, especially shinobi. Yuzuha Nara noticed everything about everyone – even if they were skilled jonin.

After a few seconds, Tamaki began to laugh.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She agreed through her laughter. I watched her, a little confused at the reaction. Most people either told Yuzuha off or would wait until she was gone and start talking behind her back about how rude she was. No one had ever laughed before.

"Is there a reason you came by, Yuzuha?" Saki questioned as she made her way over to the filing cabinets, simultaneously leafing through a folder in her hands. Again, a part of the conversation but not necessarily invested in it. She had a point though. While it wasn't necessarily rare to see Yuzuha in the department, she was our boss after all, she was usually tucked away in her office taking care of her managerial duties.

"Not necessarily," the Nara woman shrugged, getting up from her leaning position, "The Director asked me a question I didn't really know how to answer. So, I came out here to see if I could get a fresh perspective. You helped a lot; thanks." She gave the three of us a soft smile.

"Well…I'd better get back then." She said with an almost lazy slur to her tone that I knew from experience came out when she was planning something. When she had finally turned the corner into the hallway and her footsteps faded, Tamaki quickly turned in her seat to look at Saki.

"What was that about?" She asked, also having noted Yuzuha's tone.

Saki ignored her and continued to go about her business even as the young woman stared her down. Saki knew something but as I had mentioned before, was determined not to get involved in gossip so was willfully refusing to participate. The thing about gossip was that usually the well-meaning people who were trying to avoid it, would end up being the people who heard firsthand what was going on.

I had learned that the hard way how detrimental secrets and gossip could be after only having been working at the CAO a week. On my first day my brother had warned me to keep my head down and not get involved in such things and, as was in my nature, I did what he had told me to do. But then I had stumbled onto the fact that the former Director was trying to cover up a major privacy breach. It
was a nightmare for me to have that knowledge and not know what to do with it. Surely, I needed to
tell someone but not just anyone. Like Inuzuka's prized hounds, the women in my department had
smelled that I was keeping a secret. When I refused to tell them what was going on; they started
rumors about me. I don't think it was intentionally malicious; I just think that they were trying to
guess what was going on out of concern, then people from different departments overheard the
speculations and it had evolved from there. By my second week here suddenly half the CAO thought
that my brother was beating me, I was about to be fired, I was jilted by a lover or I was pregnant. I
took the stares and whispers for about a month until I finally spoke with Yuzuha in private and
explained everything; I was in tears by the end. A rarity for me. Long story short, Yuzuha turned into
a full fledged mama-bear, the rumors stopped and within a week we had a new Director.

Everyone completely forgot the rumors; like they'd never heard them in the first place. I thought it
was rather magical that they forgot so quickly, but Yuzuha told me that they were only gossiping out
of boredom and once it was no longer relevant anymore there was no need to retain any of it. It was
pretty common for that to happen.

"Fine, fine. I'll tell you but keep your voice down! Don't spread it around either!" While I had been
thinking, Tamaki seemed to have worn the older woman down. Saki came up and got close to the
two of us, leaning in and bringing her voice to a panicked whisper.

"I forgot my bag last night and didn't realize until I got home, so after Ronin and I had our supper I
came back to get it. I didn't expect anyone to be here except for the guards, it was so late, but there
was a light on in The Director's office. I didn't mean to listen but it's so quiet in here when no one is
around that voices carry. I…might have overheard The Director talking with Yuzuha, Moemi and
Rika. They were discussing a transfer of some kind…" She said hurriedly. Moemi was the head of
the Children and Youth Services Department and Rika was the head of Registrations.

I was quiet. Transfers were rather common; I didn't understand what all the fuss was about. When
you were hired at the Civil Affairs Office you were simply classified as an employee of the office
and you were assigned to the department where they believed you would fit best or where they
needed the most help. Because of this, transfers happened all the time. If Immigration was short
handed but Registrations was running smoothly and Registrations had employees they knew could
assist in Immigration, they would get transferred. It was a well-known fact that anyone could be
transferred at any time.

"So what else is new?" Tamaki commented, a little dejected. She was probably disappointed that it
wasn't something more exciting.

"Here's what's new…Lord Hokage was there." Saki said quickly, eyes darting around as if she
expected ninja to descend upon her just for telling them.

That did catch mine and Tamaki's attention.

"Whatever this transferred person is going to be doing, they'll be reporting to The Director and Lord
Hokage on a regular basis! I hope it's not me! Sounds stressful…" Saki muttered, looking troubled.

Tamaki looked about to ask a question but there was a sudden parade of footsteps in the hallway,
signalling the arrival of most of the floors occupants. I glanced at the clock. 8:30. Gossiping aside, it
was time for work. As the rest of my colleagues flowed through the door, making their way to their
desks or the coffee maker (agitated groans following when they discovered we were out) I buried
myself in my work.

By my lunch break, I had completely forgotten about Lord Hokage and the mysterious transfer.
Now I'd gone and done it.

I didn't usually eat lunch; usually I'd make myself some tea or a second cup of coffee and use that to hold me over until I got home at night. Today, Tamaki convinced me to go out to eat lunch with her at a ramen stand nearby and when we were on our way back I noticed that my right shoe sounded… hollow? When I looked down, I discovered that I had lost the lift of my heel again and if the amount of dirt jammed into the now hollow heel was any indication, I had lost it sometime ago. There wasn't much chance of me finding it now.

I elected to just carry on my day as if I hadn't noticed and when I got home, find some sort of way to make a makeshift lift. That was, of course, easier said than done. Now that I had noticed that the lift was gone I was also noticing that my gait was a little lopsided and it was driving me insane.

Ignoring Tamaki's furrowed brow, I quickened my pace until I was speed walking all the way back to the office. My thought process was that, the sooner I sat down and got to work, the sooner I would forget about my missing lift. I was almost home free, having made it to the main entrance of my floor and just turning down the hallway when someone called my name.

"Kiyoko," the familiar voice said from behind me, "a moment of your time, please?"

I turned around to face Yuzuha, who was standing in the hallway behind me with a analytical expression. It had sounded like a question, but I knew it was an order. Tamaki, who had arrived just a moment after me, heard the exchange and I could see her staring questioningly at our boss. When it became apparent that Yuzuha wasn't going to elaborate, therefore it wasn't something meant for everyone to hear, Tamaki quietly dismissed herself. I watched as the older woman made her way down the hall towards Immigration, casting concerned glances over her shoulder.

"Shall we?" Yuzuha said, gesturing calmly down the hallway in the opposite direction Tamaki had gone – towards The Directors office.

I nodded stiffly and seeing that I understood, Yuzuha turned and made her way down the hallway. Her pace was uncharacteristically quick for a Nara. A clear indication that whatever was about to be discussed was something she wanted over with sooner rather than later.

I'd never been to The Director's office before. I had never caused any trouble and hadn't had any notable achievements that would attract The Director's attention. If I was praised for something, which did happen on occasion, it was usually done by Yuzuha in her little corner office in Immigration. I only vaguely knew what our director looked like and only because I had seen her from behind a few times while she walked by my department.

With each step my mind raced.

What could The Director want to see me for?

Then it occurred to me. A conversation from this morning that had fled my mind almost as soon as it had entered, as I tended to let my work take my full attention. Saki's words came back to me.

I might have overheard The Director talking with Yuzuha, Moemi and Rika. They were discussing a transfer of some kind… Whatever this transferred person is going to be doing, they'll be reporting to
The Director and Lord Hokage on a regular basis.

I felt a lump rise in my throat and I stared intently at Yuzuha's back as we walked, trying to sort through my thoughts.

No, I was stressing over nothing. It couldn't be me they were talking about – it just couldn't. I had only been working for the Civil Affairs office for just over a year, I was in no way prepared for a job of importance and they knew that. No, it couldn't be me or maybe Saki was mistaken. Maybe they were calling me for a transfer but just a normal transfer. Maybe Lord Hokage being there was just a coincidence and he had something else to discuss with The Director last night. Maybe the two things were completely unrelated.

Maybe…

Hopefully…

When Yuzuha stopped I had to catch myself as I had almost walked into her back. Embarrassingly, I got close enough to catch her natural earthy scent and if I'd stopped a centimetre closer my nose would have been touching her back. I shuffled backwards and hoped she hadn't noticed how distracted I had been, although I knew that was a futile thing to hope for. Yuzuha Nara noticed everything.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder and I saw a flicker of amusement in her brown eyes, although the rest of her face remained stoic. I took another step back, feeling mildly irked when it reminded me of the fact that my lift was gone.

"Your gait is a little…lopsided." Yuzuha commented, raising a dainty eyebrow, "you didn't fall or something did you?"

"No. It's just that my heel is broken…" I said, trailing off as the woman examined me from over her shoulder. She turned to look at me more directly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Is it your lift again?" She asked in surprise. When I had first begun working here I had lost my lift in the hallway when I wasn't paying attention. Once I realized it was gone, I began to retrace my steps and was forced to watch in horror as Yuzuha, at the time my new boss, slipped on it. She had fallen backwards, several employee files scattering all over the place. I stood there, staring at her on the ground, with a stricken look on my face. Naturally, she had investigated the source of the incident and handed the little piece of plastic back to me with a deadpan look on her face. I thought I was going to be fired but after a few moments, Yuzuha had chuckled lightly and gotten up like nothing had happened. Ever since that day, Yuzuha made a point of looking down as she walked and on more then one occasion since had been the person to return that part of my shoe to me.

"I just don't understand. Why don't you just replace them? They've been falling apart since you were first hired here…you even came to your interview in those. I remember thinking how ratty they looked." Yuzuha commented, which was something she'd said to me before but never so bluntly. Whatever was going on with the department heads and The Director must have stripped her of whatever filter she had left. Ever since the day my lift had put her on her ass in the hallway, Yuzuha would slip comments about 'shoe sales' and 'good shoe stores' into our conversations from time to time.

I looked down and felt my face go hot. The truth was, I couldn't afford it. My salary working at the CAO was decent, in fact it was one of the better jobs a civilian could have but given the circumstances I was almost always short. Genma and I shared living expenses still as I was saving up money to meet my goal of owning a business and having a home. Every spare ryo that wasn't spent
on bills or food went into my secret savings stash and things like clothes and makeup were...easily overlooked. I just forgot about getting a new pair and by the time I remembered I'd already used the money elsewhere. Seeing that I wasn't going to respond, Yuzuha shrugged to herself and continued on while I followed, lost in my mind.

It wasn't something that I had fully understood until I started working here and began to talk to people who came from shinobi clans, like Yuzuha. Genma, had always prepared Atsuko and I for the possibility that someday he may never come home and he had always exposed us to the reality that what he did was very dangerous. We always knew, understood, and accepted that. After all, what choice did we have? But shortly after graduating and beginning my work at the CAO, I started to overhear conversations between some of my colleagues about the differences between certain missions. What Genma had told us, wasn't a lie – not even close – but he hadn't told us the entire truth. Unable to piece together everything I was hearing I went to the one person I knew I could ask without judgement; Yuzuha.

So, with a grim look on her face, she had explained it to me. All requested missions were analyzed by the Hokage and designated as either D, C, B, A or S ranked. The ranks generalized the skill level of the shinobi that would be needed to accomplish it and, to a degree, indicated the level of risk. A Jonin like Genma, would usually run anything from a B or A rank mission, occasionally dabbling in S rank (as they were usually left to special task forces or ANBU). Each ranking had a fixed rate of pay which was a portion of the flat-fee that the Hokage charged clients. Obviously, A rank and S rank paid the best. That part I had already known. The rest however had unsettled me a little more than it should have.

When analyzing these missions, they also would also have strategy specialists perform a 'mortality risk assessment' on it. On a mission with a calculated mortality risk of 51% or higher, a shinobi would receive a 'Hazard Bonus' which in the circles of shinobi wives was ominously called the 'Suicide Bonus'. If the ninja's chance of dying on that mission was greater than their chance of surviving, they would be paid the fixed-rate plus a hazard bonus calculated using the percentage given by the assessor. Example; if a shinobi was going on an A Rank mission, for which the payment was 2500 ryo, but the risk of dying was 60%, they would make an additional 1500 ryo. So live or die, he would make 4000 ryo for a single mission.

I found it to be a paltry amount to throw your life away for. When I learned of this, I confronted Genma and asked whether he often took missions that paid a hazard bonus. He'd gone quiet, clearly never expecting me to ever ask about something like that but had chosen to tell me the truth. My big brother and I did not keep secrets from one another, especially not after what happened with Atsuko who seemed to have hidden a lot from us. I learned that Genma had become notorious for only taking missions with a hazard bonus of 60% or higher, meaning if the mortality risk was lower than 60% he wouldn't typically touch it.

I had never questioned before how the preteen Genma had managed to support two little girls, keeping them fed, clothed and even saving up enough tuition to get them into one of the better schools. Now I knew how he'd managed and it made my stomach churn. I was reminded again just how much he had sacrificed to give the two of us a good life. After intermittent discussion taking place over several days, my brother and I came to an agreement that he wouldn't take those missions as often since it just wasn't required anymore. I had a job now and was able to contribute, so there was no need for him to put himself in even more danger just to maintain our standard of living. On occasion perhaps he would take them, I had no right to object, but I wanted him to understand that he was not obligated to take those missions to support me. For years all of his decisions had revolved around myself and Atsuko so now that it wasn't required, I wanted him to start doing things for himself. He'd earned it.
When we reached The Director's office, Yuzuha opened the door and stood to the side, having me walk in ahead of her.

I was greeted with the sight of The Director sitting behind her desk, her head resting on her folded hands. She was an older woman, with brown hair she kept back into a tight bun, brown eyes and square framed glasses. She appeared to be in deep thought, not even looking up as I entered. Three chairs were on the opposite side of her desk, facing her. The one to my immediate left was occupied by Moemi, the head of Children and Youth Services, who was sitting perfectly straight with her arms crossed over her chest – appearing rather tense. She was a woman about Yuzuha's age with straight orange hair she kept pulled into a high bun and big brown eyes. Both of the room's other occupants were dressed in the traditional, CAO skirt suit although Moemi's was black and The Director's was light grey. The middle chair and the one to my right were empty.

"Please have a seat, Miss Shiranui." The Director invited in a monotone voice, nothing giving away the nature of this conversation. I sat but couldn't totally hide my weariness at the entire situation; I was feeling very out of my element. Yuzuha took the seat to the right, forcing me to take the middle chair and be sandwiched between the room's other occupants which did nothing for my nerves. Whether they were meaning to or not I was seriously intimidated by the trio of older women.

It was minute before anyone spoke and during that time my eyes had caught sight of my employee record lying open on The Director's desk. I wasn't sure what to think but the whole situation was making me more and more unnerved by the second.

Finally, The Director spoke, shuffling the folders and files on her desk until she found a specific one.

"Please review this file." She said, passing me the folder. I couldn't stop the dumb expression on my face as I took it, feeling the eyes of the other three women burning into me. Feeling self-conscious I quietly flipped the folder open to examine its contents a little surprised by what I saw.

Inside the plain brown folder were several sheets of paper with personal information and several numbers that I assumed had something to do with budget. Peeking out from behind those I saw what appeared to be the top of a list of some sort with family names. It clearly was not an immigration file, so I was out of my element just looking at it and couldn't really make out what it was for certain. What I could distinguish, was the photo of a young boy – maybe six years old – with blond hair, blue eyes, whisker markings on his cheeks and a dejected expression.

I felt haunted just looking at it, a slight shiver threatening to travel down my spine as my eyes traced the facial markings.

I knew who that was.

Everyone knew who that was.

The Nine-Tailed Fox boy.

I decided I did not like where this conversation was going at all; my days were perfectly happy and fulfilling without having anything to do with the single-scariest person in the entire village. I'd like to keep it that way.

"Tell me what you see when you look at that picture." The Director suddenly said and I became even more aware of the three sets of eyes on me.

What kind of question was that? What did they mean by 'what did I see'? How did they expect me to respond to that…and is it best that I respond to it the way they want me to or should I just say exactly
what I was thinking? I hesitated and when it became obvious that they were willing to be patient, I took a deep breath and forced myself to look at the picture again.

What did I see?

Well… demon markings…I saw…a little face, still round with baby-fat and unkempt blond hair that had clearly never been brushed. In the photo I could just barely see that his frame was slight, too slight for his age. Despite the fact he was having his photo taken I could see a little smudge of dirt on one of his chubby little cheeks, demonstrating a clear lack of care.

Then there were his eyes; big blue pools that had a depth to them which held a very familiar feeling. Loneliness. That kid looked really, really lonely.

That kid.

That…kid.

"I see a little kid." I answered honestly, sliding the file back onto The Director's desk. How convincing that answer was to them after my long pause I wasn't certain. After all, that's what he was; a kid. A kid that contained the spirit of a demon fox that had murdered thousands of innocent people and destroyed half the village but still, a kid.

"You do realize that's the demon boy." Moemi said, her arms still crossed over her ample chest. She was looking at me with a furrowed brow and pursed lips, like I had said something particularly concerning. Out of nervousness, I flicked my eyes to Yuzuha whose expression was the complete opposite of her fellow department head. She had a ghost of a smirk on her face; which almost concerned me more. I finally looked at The Director, who seemed unaffected by my answer.

"Yes, I do realize that." I confirmed, eyes still flickering between my observers. At my response, Moemi made a strangled sounding sort of grunt that I didn't know how to interpret – but a look at her face showed that it had loosened to a more neutral expression then earlier. She almost looked surprised.

"So you're not scared…at all?" Yuzuha asked in a sceptical tone.

"You didn't ask me if I was scared," I pointed out, "you asked me what I saw. I see a kid."

"So you're scared of him?" The Director finally said and between the grilling of the other two women, I had almost forgotten she was there. I almost choked on the air in my throat when she asked.

"Yes…and no?" I said although it sounded more like a question. I was met with silence that was imploring me to explain.

"I am absolutely terrified of the demon fox…I would be stupid if I wasn't. But I meant what I said; I see a kid. I'm not terrified of him…I'm terrified of what's inside him." Maybe someday I would come to regret that point of view, after all, how could anyone remain uncorrupted with something like that inside of them? One day Naruto Uzumaki and the Nine-Tails would indeed become one. The entire village lived in fear, anticipating that day. Right now though, he was a kid.

"Your brother is a jonin, isn't he?" The Director confirmed, looking through my file which made me a little self-conscious. I wondered if that was something that appeared in my file or if it was something The Director did just happen to know about me.

"Yes?" I said, although my discomfort made the answer sound more like a question. Part of me was
trying to figure out what relevance that had to our conversation.

"People from ninja families do tend to be more tolerant." Yuzuha said over my head to Moemi, as if she was trying to make a sale.

There was a long silence that consumed the room following that comment, although mostly from confusion on my part.

"Fine." Moemi finally said; although what was 'fine' I wasn't sure and part of me really, really didn't want to know.

"Are you sure?" The Director asked the younger woman, "We haven't even spoken to the other one yet."

"No, she's fine." Moemi said, her voice hinting at a bit of impatience. The Director looked about to say more, but I'd had enough. Even my patience had its limits and I was getting tired of not understanding what was going on.

"Respectfully," I began, which earned me the attention of the others, "I would like to know what's going on and why I'm being asked all these questions."

To my surprise, it was Yuzuha who spoke.

"You'll remember this morning I mentioned The Director asked me a question I didn't know the answer to?"

I nodded, keeping my face straight. I had already figured out that Yuzuha's odd behavior this morning had something to do with what was going on.

"Well, Moemi here is having issues keeping a roof over the demon boy's head and having trouble with workers not wanting to take the casefile. So The Director reached out to the department heads to see if we had anyone with the attitude or character traits we felt might suit the position as the kid's caseworker. I wasn't going to recommend anyone, but I found out that Rika was the only one who was even trying to find someone and the only one she thought might work quit yesterday. I had it narrowed down between you and Tamaki." There was a brief pause in the explanation as Yuzuha adjusted her position in her seat so she was leaning forwards more.

"When I saw you this morning I knew you were the right fit. Tamaki has too much kid-drama going on as it is and she's good at being impartial, but I don't think she has the…perseverance you do." I blinked at the emphasis of the word perseverance. I was about to ask exactly what she meant when Moemi interrupted.

"I need someone who's not going to give up. This kid has gone through seven caseworkers and twelve foster homes. Short of taking the case myself, which I just don't have the time for; I can't seem to keep this kid looked after. Either the foster homes don't fit or the caseworker doesn't fit…or both. Lord Hokage has had enough; he's brought the hammer down and honestly? I don't blame him. He's giving us one more chance before all hell breaks loose and my department starts experiencing some massive changes. He even started talking about having me offer jobs to active shinobi." She said the last part with a hint of distaste that was hard to miss.

Part of the purpose of the Civil Affairs office was to advocate for the needs of civilians in a village that was run like a military dictatorship. One of the most important parts of The Director's job was to make sure the Hokage never forgot that we existed and that the things we needed in order to thrive were not overlooked since they were fundamentally different.
As an example, the village had needed some serious road upkeep for several years and the Hokage had needed to allocate some recently obtained revenue. Naturally, his first reaction was to use it to help with the expansion of several training grounds but our current director had reminded him of the state of the roads, creating a good case as to why that money should be used there instead. She won her case and Konoha's roads were resurfaced making everyone who travelled them infinitely happier.

In a village focused on ninja and run by ninja, it would be all too easy for the needs of the everyday people to be ignored, even by accident. The Civil Affairs office made sure we were heard.

The Civil Affairs office was by civilians for civilians and that was the point. There was even a time, a decade or so before I began working, when you couldn't even work for the office and have shinobi in your immediate family. So people like myself, Yuzuha and Tamaki couldn't even dream of working for the office as we were thought to be too bias and more likely to side with shinobi. That was, of course, overturned as it was an archaic rule that was seriously beginning to affect the size of the CAO's workforce.

Even so, the thought of shinobi, active shinobi, beginning to work in the CAO was disconcerting. Friends and family members were one thing, but you couldn't expect a shinobi to think like a civilian any more than you could expect the reverse. Allowing shinobi to take work in the CAO, even if it was irregular, shouldn't be allowed which I was sure was a viewpoint the Hokage shared. I hoped that his words had simply been an empty threat to remind Moemi that she needed to put a bit more effort into this particular situation. Empty or not, it seemed the threat had worked.

If it hadn't I wouldn't be sitting there.

"I also need someone who's not going to make all their decisions for the wrong reasons." Moemi mentioned after a few moments.

"Yuzuha said that since coming to work for her in immigration your outlook has been professional and impartial, kept separate from any personal feelings you may have on the cases you handle. This, for obvious reasons, is a mandatory trait for this position." The Director said, eying me carefully.

I had a feeling that this wasn't a job offer. I had a feeling I couldn't say no. Impartial to the plight of the demon fox boy I may be (or as impartial as they were going to get) but I really would rather not do this.

My thought was confirmed when Yuzuha stood up, straightening her skirt, and extending her hand so she could shake mine.

"I'm sad to see you go, Kiyoko." Yuzuha said with finalty and I panicked, hearing Moemi stand up on my other side.

"And I look forward to working with you, Miss Shiranui." I heard Moemi say.

I looked in fear and desperation at The Director, hoping she would stop this…or at least slow it down so I could take a second to think.

She didn't stop it, only adding her own final statement.

"You may not think of it this way, Miss Shiranui, but you're about to do something great for this village."
After the meeting, Yuzuha took it upon herself to escort me from the director's office while Moemi stayed behind. I was still a little numb by the recent development and I didn't look at anyone as we walked, keeping my eyes downcast. I wasn't sure how I felt. My stomach was in knots and I couldn't figure out whether it was because I was upset or nervous or passive or excited. Like with everything, the uncertainty had given me a flimsy mask of calm that thankfully no one seemed to be able to see through.

"Oh, what a surprise." I heard Yuzuha say, although her tone didn't really sound surprised. It was more like she was commenting on the weather.

Curious, I looked up and my brows drew together at what I saw.

There, standing at the main entrance to fourth floor with his hands in his pockets, was Genma. He was wearing his jonin uniform and his dark blue bandana was tied over his straight brown hair. He had been talking politely with the two chunin who were guarding the door, but he turned to face us as we approached. A long senbon was between his teeth and he raised his right hand in a silent wave once we were closer.

"Afternoon, Yuzuha. You wouldn't mind if I borrowed my sister for the rest of the day, would you?" Genma asked within seconds of us reaching him.

Normally I would have protested – my attendance was spotless and I preferred to keep it that way. But the numb feeling felt like it wasn't going to leave anytime soon and I needed the space to sort my head out. I knew the second I appeared in Immigration Tamaki and the others would be all over me asking what was going on. Maybe leaving a little early today was just what I needed.

"Sure." Yuzuha said dismissively before leaning in to my ear to whisper, "I'll get started packing up your desk."

I just nodded. It's not like it was a hard job, I didn't keep many personal things here so all she would have to do would be to re-distribute my case folders.

She gave me a light smile, nodded to Genma, and then continued down the hall towards Immigration.

Without exchanging any words, my brother ushered me outside and down the stairs that spiraled around the building. He had a pensive look on his face which told me that he had overheard what Yuzuha had said. That wasn't surprising. Even if he had been consciously trying not to overhear her he still probably would have.

As we reached ground level I finally broke the silence, which despite my brother's questioning gaze had still been rather comfortable.

"What's the occasion?" I asked, forcing myself to look at him. I was met with a questioning gaze that told me he was not about to be diverted from what he had overheard.

"Well...you're turning seventeen next week," he began slowly, "so Gai and I were going to take you out for a nice dinner to celebrate. The original plan was to take you on your birthday but I have a mission..." Something about his drawl gave me the impression that it had mostly been his green-clad
friend's idea. I knew my big brother loved me and he had his moments, but he wasn't particularly good at showing it. Gai on the other hand, was probably one of the most thoughtful young men I'd ever met.

"Gai's next mission isn't for another month so he offered to still take you but…" Genma's usually passive face suddenly morphed into a haunted expression, his eyes wide and the senbon dangling limply from his mouth. I didn't really understand his aversion.

Gai had been like a second brother to both myself and Atsuko for years; it wasn't like it would be the first time he would have taken me out somewhere. My brother had become a chunin before his two teammates mostly because he had been a few years older than them so there was a period of a year or so when he was frequently out of the village, but Gai and Ebisu were not. Without any clear discussion, Gai had just suddenly started being there when Genma couldn't. Which meant the sight of Gai and the Shiranui twins getting ice cream or curry together was quite common.

"What's with the face?" I inquired, watching as Genma sweatdropped and attempted to hide the expression by turning away from me. I think he started to chew the senbon in his mouth a little harder. He grumbled something between clenched teeth that I couldn't make out.

"What?" I emphasized, unable to make it out. He grumbled again but between refusing to look at me and the incessant chewing on the ninja tool in his mouth I couldn't understand a single word.

"Genma, seriously, what?" I asked in a deadpan, beginning to become frustrated but determined by my very nature not to show it. I was the calm, rational twin - even if my other half was missing. I stopped walking, which forced Genma to stop walking as well. He groaned in response to the sudden halt, turning to face me but still averting his eyes. The longer we stood there, the redder his face turned. I'd never saw Genma turn red. I guess there was a first for everything.

And was he...pouting?

"I don't want you to get mistaken for a couple." He finally said, his voice quick.

We both stood in silence in the middle of the street, the other people in the village flowing around us completely unaffected by the sudden shocked mood that had fallen. It didn't take me long to think of a response.

"Why on earth would anyone think that?" My tone suggested that I found Genma's statement rather stupid. I just couldn't comprehend myself and Gai as a couple, let alone actually being mistaken for one. The thought was equally foreign and ridiculous.

"W-well," Genma began, crossing his arms over his chest and still refusing to meet my now blank eyes, "you're not a kid anymore. You're a young lady. A pretty one. So naturally if people saw you alone with a man, they'd just assume..."

I raised an eyebrow.

"It just makes me uncomfortable, okay?" Genma said and I could see that the mere thought of people misinterpreting the relationship between myself and Gai as something romantic, was slowly starting to turn his face green. Between the red and green, I'd never seen big brother's face hold so much colour. "Genma, Kiyoko! There you are!" As if our discussion had summoned him, Gai was running towards us with a huge grin on his face. There was a few wrapped boxes under his one arm while the other was waving to get our attention. Although there was really no need - his booming voice had done the trick.
Nearby civilians sweatdropped at his sudden appearance and cleared a path, purposefully moving so that they could walk as far away as possible and spare themselves from his exuberance. I noticed the bespectacled face of Ebisu walking several steps behind Gai, crouching down with his hands in his pockets. He was trying to make himself as small as possible as if vainly hoping no one would notice him. You'd think by now he'd have been used to his teammates antics but then again, Ebisu was an arrogant duck who was very concerned with appearances. He had always been arrogant but he never used to be so concerned with what others thought; that seemed to have developed over the last four years. Genma had shared with me that he had no clue why but it wasn't a change he liked. As...unorthodox...as he might be, Gai was a wonderful person who didn't deserve to be scorned by those he considered friends.

"Did Genma already tell you?" Gai asked as he got closer, looking even more excited than usual. I think Gai was more excited for my birthday than I was. I raised a curious eyebrow when he shoved the wrapped boxes in Genma's arms. Genma seemed to have gotten over his fear of us being mistaken for a couple within the last few seconds and his face had returned to its usual passivity.

"He told me that we're going out to eat." I confirmed, watching as Gai nearly vibrated with excitement.

"Then what are we waiting for!? Let's gooooo!" Gai shouted, as he latched on to both mine and Genma's arms and bolted back the way we he had come, bypassing Ebisu who was still walking toward us.

XxX

Konjiki Renge was a Hyuuga Clan owned restaurant in the Imai District of the village. The Imai District was one of the more famous and wealthier districts in the village as it consisted mostly of old Senju estates and was the neighbouring district to the Hyuuga Compound. As the Senju had gone extinct in the paternal line several decades ago, the district's value had remained high for historical reasons. It was, after all, where both Hashirama and Tobirama Senju had lived.

The restaurant's building in particular, used to be part of the Senju Clan's main estate but the last remaining clan member, Tsunade Senju, had sold it to the Hyuuga a few years ago before leaving the village. The Hyuuga had decided it would be in poor taste to use it as part of their clan's ever-expanding compound given its history, so had instead endeavored to use the land for business opportunities. Despite the fact that the Akimichi's love for food made them on top of the game when it came to the restaurant business in Konoha, the Hyuuga had a finesse that made them strong competitors. Romantic, elegant and classy atmospheres were something that they were really good at.

Konjiki Renge was no exception.

I'd never been here until today, but it was a famed restaurant for romantic dates so I'd heard a lot about it from my co-workers. The lighting was dimmed, not so much that it was annoying but enough that it created a cozy atmosphere and the booths had tall walls that stopped voices from carrying. The architecture of the building was clearly that of a wealthy, old estate and there was intricate carving in the wood that was reminiscent of Hashirama Senju's wood-style techniques. On the walls were hand-painted murals of lotus flowers and cherry blossoms. Soothing music played in the background and the servers wore beautiful, dark purple kimono. It was overall probably one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been.

Once Ebisu had caught up, the four of us had enjoyed a meal together, paid for by Genma and Gai. Ebisu, I soon discovered, was being a freeloader for which the other two men teased him mercilessly throughout the meal. His rebuttal was that he was offering to pay for the drinks. Genma told him that was rather convenient for him, considering Ebisu was the only one who typically drank. Genma, Gai
and myself did not often consume alcohol and despite it being a special occasion that remained the
case. I was sitting on the inside of the booth, with my brother to my left and across from the two of
us sat my brother's two former teammates. I sat quietly with a small smile on my face while the three
men bickered and bantered, sipping my tea and thinking on what had transpired at work earlier that
day.

Following informing me that my job had now changed and I didn't have much say in the matter, they
really hadn't elaborated on exactly what I would be doing. I'd never worked for Children and Youth
Services Department before. Immigration was where my skill set and primary training was;
admittedly I had dabbled in Registrations before when they were short staffed but Immigration was
my forte. I didn't know anything about working with kids or being a caseworker for that department.
The three women had seemed confident that they had made the correct decision by choosing me but
I had my doubts.

I also need someone who isn't going to make all of their decisions for the wrong reasons.

That was what Moemi had said. But could I do that? Could I really remain impartial considering the
complexity of this case? It was easy to be impartial regarding immigration matters; I had no bias
regarding those people. But the Demon Fox was something that no matter how much I tried, I would
always have an opinion about. After all, the demon ravaging the village and destroying everything
six years ago was something I was very much alive for and had to witness. You can't live through
that and not have it affect you in some way.

I almost startled myself when a memory of my sister and I running towards the shelter, holding hands
with tears streaming down our faces came to mind. I had kept looking back, because Genma and Gai
had run in the opposite direction, but a neighbour kept forcing us to keep moving. I never thought I'd
see my big brother again, thought I wouldn't even be able to say goodbye, and with each new
crumbled building we passed, the terror and despair had grown heavier. It was a terrible feeling. One
I never wanted to experience again and that desire to not be so scared again...in turn ironically
produced fear. Fear of something that had been sealed away inside an innocent baby.

Genma noticed that I was mentally absent from the conversation and turned to address me, pulling
me from my thoughts.

"What did Yuzuha mean by saying she would pack up your desk?" He asked and I froze, having
completely forgotten that he'd overheard. Gai and Ebisu had been engaged in a comical exchange,
but Genma hadn't been quiet about his question so they'd overheard and gone silent. The booth was
still as all three young men, even Ebisu, stared me down questioningly.

I wasn't sure what to say or how to say it, so I was paralyzed for a moment.

"You didn't…" Ebisu hesitated, looking like he'd rather not ask but couldn't help himself, "get fired
did you?"

You could have heard a pin drop and my mouth twisted into a terrified expression at the mere
thought of losing my job. Assuming the worst by my reaction, or lack thereof, Genma lunged across
the table and grabbed Ebisu by his shirt collar.

"You idiot! Why'd you have to ask her like that?" Ebisu started sputtering apologies, waving his
arms in the air as Genma stared him down vengefully. "If she cries it's your fault."

He went on to mutter a list of terrible things he would do to him if I cried.

I was a little entranced by my brother's behaviour and because of that didn't rush to correct the
misunderstanding. Watching Genma quietly threaten to rip out his former teammates trachea and skip with it was too fascinating to interrupt. I felt eyes on me and noticed that it was Gai who was staring. Surprisingly, out of the three of them it was the most spirited member of the team who had remained silent, watching me closely and leaning back in his seat.

"I didn't get fired." I finally said. As soon as the words left my mouth Genma stilled, closed his eyes, released Ebisu and sat back down without another word. His teammate plunked back down into his seat, looking rather flustered after the attack. The silence that greeted me encouraged me to continue.

"In a weird way...I guess it's sort of a...promotion?" I said, although I questioned it the moment it came out of my mouth. Remembering what Saki had overheard, I continued, "I'm not sure but I think I might be reporting to Lord Hokage sometimes."

It took a moment before Ebisu piped up.

"Well that sounds interesting." He said, still eyeing Genma as he spoke, as if he expected him to strike at any mispronounced word.

"Yeah! Interesting!" Gai agreed, his natural excitement returning, "just what is it you'll be doing?"

"Oh...um...well...I'm getting transferred to Children and Youth Services. I'm going to be a caseworker." I wasn't sure how much more I should tell them. It hadn't occurred to me until just now that maybe I wasn't supposed to tell anyone what I was doing yet. All I knew was that I was starting first thing tomorrow.

"You don't like kids." Genma said, reaching for his tea and eyeing me with suspicion.

"It's not that I don't like children," I disagreed, "I just don't know anything about them."

And I had no desire to know anything about them. A few of the girls I'd attended Koba with already had babies and the mere thought of being a parent made the ends of my hair curl. I had no desire to be a parent and to be honest, I wasn't sure I ever would want to be one. Watching Tamaki had shown me that it was a lot of work that I wasn't sure I would ever even be ready for. I'd take mountains of paperwork and case files over taking care of a child any day.

"Exactly, what made Yuzuha think you would be a good caseworker? No offence, Kiyo, but it's not really playing to your previous experience." Genma said, still staring at me like he knew I was trying to avoid telling him something. Which, I was, but it was unsettling that it had barely taken him one sentence to figure it out.

I narrowed my indigo eyes at him hoping he wouldn't pursue the topic further.

"Why would you have to report to Lord Hokage over a child services matter?" Ebisu asked, picking up on Genma's probing and asking the next question.

I was quiet. Well, it wasn't like I'd been told not to tell anyone.

"My client is Naruto Uzumaki."

I was met with an uncomfortable silence.

XxX

I straightened my skirt, flattened my hair and left the bathroom, dressed in my typical work outfit. Genma was sitting on the counter in a pair of sweatpants, a magazine on his lap, an empty cup in one
hand and a piece of toast in the other. Our coffee maker was wheezing through trying to make a pot of coffee to his left.

He didn't look up as I moved towards the door and slid on my new shoes, buckling them around the ankle with a satisfied smile on my face.

Yes, new shoes.

One of the boxes Gai had been carting under his arm yesterday afternoon was his birthday present to me; a pair of dark green, high-heeled sandals. Apparently, Genma had done everything he could to convince him to buy the black pair instead but Gai wasn't having any of it. He insisted that I needed a 'youthful' colour. Honestly, I didn't mind the colour. It was nice to have a pair of sturdy work shoes and I'd made sure to thank Gai for his thoughtfulness. Suddenly, his reaction to my lift coming off yesterday morning made more sense.

The other two had contained gifts from my brother and Ebisu. My brother had gotten me several new fantasy and romance novels to read, Ebisu had gotten me a new briefcase that matched my new shoes. All were well thought out gifts that I was very appreciative of. With the sudden changes at work and all the attention that had been showered on me yesterday, I had almost forgotten. Almost. But in the end it had only ultimately served to remind me of what was missing. Who was missing.

My first birthday without Atsuko was less than a week away. August 1st.

It hurt. It occurred to me that in a few months, I would have gone a whole year without Atsuko in my life.

Did she think of me the way I thought of her? Did she miss me? Or was she able to forget me because her mind was totally occupied by the man she loved?

I...didn't even know his name. That bothered me more than it should have. Atsuko had abandoned me to be with this man and I didn't even know his name. Did Genma think that sometimes? Did he feel the same loneliness I felt or was what he felt different somehow? He was Atsuko's sibling and he had raised her but she was my twin. We shared everything.

A womb. A birthdate. Even a face. We were, after all, completely identical. To this day only Genma (and eventually Gai) had ever really been able to tell us apart and that was only because our personalities were quite different. When someone took the time to get to know us, the difference was quite obvious. However, if we were standing next to one another without saying anything no one would be able to tell which was which; not even Genma.

"Have a good day." Genma said, breaking into my thoughts. I had been lost in them, staring down at my new shoes with my briefcase in hand. I was quiet for a few moments before raising my eyes to meet his. I noticed that my elder brother seemed a little distracted, his narrowed eyes flicking all over the room and last night he had spent a considerable amount of time on the couch, glaring aimlessly out the window. I wondered whether it was because of the loneliness my coming birthday had brought with it or if it was because of my new job working with the demon kid. Or maybe it was something else. I wasn't sure what was wrong with him and frankly, I had no idea what I would do with that information, so I hadn't bothered to ask.

"Thank you." I sent him a weak smile. His words had many meanings; all of which were intended to bring me comfort.

I tugged the hem of my skirt one more time to make sure it was straight, gathered my things and opened the door.
I wasn't sure what I was expecting but I knew that somehow my life was going to change.
I walked in step with Moemi and The Director, trying to swallow my nervousness back down. My face was a calm mask, but inside I was terrified. A quick glance to my right and I gathered that The Director was long used to this sort of summons. To my left, I noticed that Moemi had a bead of sweat that had begun to form on her forehead. Just as I noticed it, she brought her sleeve up and quickly swiped it away. She was so fast if I hadn't been staring from the corner of my eye, I wouldn't have noticed.

In my hands, I held Naruto Uzumaki’s case file. That morning, I had barely walked through the door when Moemi had appeared in front of me, quickly dragging me into my new workspace. Suite 403. I had hoped if I showed up early enough, I would have time to go to Immigration to give Tamaki and Saki my side of what was going on. I didn't know what Yuzuha had told them or if she’d told them anything at all. It had occurred to me that yesterday afternoon I had been asked to The Director's office, disappeared for the rest of the day and Yuzuha had been cleaning out my desk. Without context, it didn't look good. Yikes.

The desk she showed me to looked much like my desk in Immigration, with the exception of a couple of chairs that were positioned opposite of where I would be sitting. In Immigration, we had interview rooms on the first floor that we used for the final stage of screening, when we met the applicants in person. It seemed in this department I would be meeting with members of the public at my desk, which probably explained why I had my own little filing cabinet. Unlike Immigration, I was assuming here it wasn't appropriate to keep mountains of people's personal information out in the open. I noticed that the few personal possessions I did have which were pencils, calligraphy brushes, ink and a little maneki-neko about the size of my fist, had been brought over. Yuzuha had clearly done what she said she would.

I had barely set my briefcase down next to the desk when I was whisked away again by both Moemi and The Director, who upon their appearance had shoved Uzumaki's case file in my hands.

At first I thought we were heading to The Director's office, but instead of veering left we'd gone right, back towards the main entrance to the fourth floor. There was only one place we could be going from here; up. There were a total of five floors in the tower and we were on the fourth which meant if we were going up there was only one place left to go. Lord Hokage's office.

"What did your brother think about your new job?" Moemi asked, likely trying to distract herself from her own nervousness. Moemi was familiar with Genma because he had led a few missions that her younger brother had been on back in his chunin days. They were barely acquaintances but they knew enough to respect one another as they had quite a bit in common when it came to raising their younger siblings.

When I thought back to yesterday afternoon, Genma had barely reacted to the news. The other jonin as well had been rather mum on the subject. There were no congratulations but there were also no concerns voiced. The thought of me working with the nine-tailed fox container visibly gave the three men a sense of unease but ultimately they had said nothing about it. Instead, the subject had been quickly changed to what we should have for dessert.

It had made me wonder...were jonin like those three even allowed to openly express their opinions about that kid? The Hokage was, after all, their employer and the nine-tails container was legally
classified as his ward. Not to mention there was the law that prohibited discussion of the fact that the boy was the nine-tailed fox container in all public places or with those who did not already know what he was. Obviously due to the nature of my new position Yuzuha, Moemi and The Director had been exempt from that law during our meeting yesterday.

It wasn't like I could fight my assignment to my new position and neither could anyone else, so I hadn't pushed the jonin to hear what they thought. If they had wanted me to know their feelings, they would have taken the chance and told me.

"I don't know." I answered honestly.

"Hm," Moemi mumbled, "I expected as much. Ninja, especially jonin, aren't allowed to express opinions about stuff like this. If you think the rules around us talking about it are strict..." She wisely trailed off and I noticed her eyes shift to scan the entire stairwell, like she was looking for something.

I imagined she was hinting that her brother was much the same way and she had just confirmed my earlier thoughts. No matter what Genma felt on the subject, if he wanted to continue to be at the top of the mission roster he would have to keep those feelings to himself.

No one was allowed to openly discuss the demon boy and even though discussions behind closed doors were more likely to be overlooked, I could see ninja not wanting to take the chance.

I had, for obvious reasons, never noticed the ANBU Black Ops before but my brother had on occasion mentioned that they were 'lurking around' when we were at festivals or public events. They reported directly to Lord Hokage and from what Genma had told me, they didn't omit anything in their reports. A discussion had in the presence of ANBU, be it out in the open or behind closed doors, was a discussion that would be passed on to Lord Hokage.

The Director had remained silent the entire way and when we reached the Hokage's floor, simply nodded to the chunin guarding the entrance. They nodded in return and opened the door. I'd never been to the fifth floor before but the layout was pretty straightforward. A hallway went halfway around the building and in the middle there was a open office space that belonged to The Hokage. While it primarily had only the Hokage's desk in it, he had been known to bring spares in for chunin to sit at - usually on days when he had a lot of missions to assign or reports to receive for D or C rank missions.

When we went through the entrance to his office it was empty save for his desk positioned at the back, near a large rear window. Lord Hokage was sitting in his traditional robes, his hat was to his side resting on the desk and there were two shinobi standing on either of his sides. Both were just completely in black ninja garb, with grey vests and had white animal masks on their faces. Were these ANBU Black Ops? I'd never seen them before. I'd have stopped walking in surprise if it weren't for the gentle hand on my back that The Director had placed there, silently urging me forward.

The three of us walked up until we were standing directly in front of his desk and bowed in unison.

"Lord Hokage," The Director began, "this is Kiyoko Shiranui. She's offered to be the caseworker in charge of Uzumaki's file. It is the belief of myself and Ms Osuka that she would be a good fit for the position."

I realized that until that moment I hadn't known what Moemi's last name was not that it surprised me. If it didn't hold relevance to my work and everyday life, why would I know? Just like before this moment with two ANBU glaring me down from behind their masks, I'd never had much reason to pay them any mind. I had to suppress an annoyed twitch though at the wording of The Director's
introduction. I hadn't 'offered' to do anything and she knew it. It was like they were trying to play up that maybe I'd felt bad for him or something, but the truth was that I was primarily indifferent. I hoped she wasn't trying to give Lord Hokage some false impression of who I was and what I was capable of doing.

I was going to be a caseworker. That was it. Getting emotionally involved wasn't something I would or could do; quite frankly being openly emotional wasn't really in my nature to begin with.

I was better at introversion.

"Have you had a chance to review Naruto's case file?" The Hokage asked, clearly preferring to get to the point. He was The Hokage after all. It was likely that at this very moment he had a dozen other things he needed to be doing. I made note of the fact that he addressed him simply as 'Naruto', hinting that he did have quite a bit of familiarity with the child.

"No, I have not." I responded, noticing shortly after that The Director winced slightly. With that answer I had unintentionally told The Hokage that her previous statement had been a lie. I didn't feel sorry for it, it had been her decision not to tell him the truth, not mine. I hadn't started the day with the intention of trying to lie to the Hokage - if we were supposed to be working together on this everyone needed to be on the same page. That meant telling each other the truth.

The Hokage was puffing on his pipe, a stony expression on his face, which kept us in tense silence for an unnecessary length of time.

"Naruto Uzumaki is a special boy and important to this village, whether it's citizens choose to acknowledge it or not." He finally said. "He should be treated like a hero...instead he is shunned and most people can't even bring themselves to treat him like a human being."

He was met with stunned silence. On either of my sides I felt The Director and Moemi shifting uncomfortably, feeling the weight of his words.

"Of course he's a human being." I said before I could stop myself, not being able to hide the acidity of my tone.

"So you're not scared of him?" The elderly Third asked, his curiosity evident.

What was with everyone and that particular question?

"I didn't say that. I'm scared of him...but in much the same way I'm scared of you and what you're capable of, Lord Hokage." My tone was very frank. I heard Moemi suck in air through her teeth as if I had said something wrong. One of the ANBU shifted their weight from one foot to another, which I'm sure was as close to a reaction as you could get from one of them.

I didn't see what the big deal was. There was nothing wrong with admitting you had a healthy fear of ninja and everything that they could do. I could barely open a jar of pickles but I knew for a fact that should he feel inclined to do so, Gai could bench-press an apartment complex. If a jonin was able to do something like that, then The Hokage was most certainly capable of the same level of destruction as a Nine-Tailed Fox demon. The only thing that kept him from doing so was his sanity which, with his age and how few vacation days he probably got, was probably degrading with each passing minute. You would be stupid not to be a little bit scared of something with that potential for destruction. I was a lot of things, but I'd like to think stupid wasn't among them.

To my shock, he chuckled. He sobered soon after, sucking on his pipe for a long moment before continuing.
"I want you to understand one thing," The Hokage began, his aged voice distinctly hard, "in regards to Naruto Uzumaki this village has failed. It won't anymore. You and I are going to make sure of that, Kiyoko Shiranui."

The feeling of dread began to grow in the pit of my stomach. I remembered what Moemi had said yesterday during our meeting. The Hokage was making it very clear that from today going forward, Konohagakure failing to provide for Naruto Uzumaki was not going to be tolerated.

And, somehow, that responsibility had been dropped directly into my lap.

Yikes.

XxX

After a lengthy conversation with The Hokage that felt like I was being threatened, all of us were finally dismissed. The Director didn't even wait for Moemi and I before almost running back to her office, obviously in a hurry to get back to whatever it was The Director of Civil Affairs did.

Moemi was trying to usher me back to our department as quickly as possible, eager to get away from the fifth floor which had begun to fill with rookie genin who were boistrus and had a habit of getting into scuffles when their sensei's weren't caring. Skirts and heels weren't very good protection against errant kunai, so it was best for us to flee to the safety of the fourth floor with due haste. Unlike my brother and Gai, there were an awful lot of jonin who probably wouldn't lift a finger to help a civilian who wandered into their student's way.

Ironic, considering one of their primary duties was supposed to be to protect the village and it citizens. A lot of ninja often got the impression that civilians were cowards or lesser in someway or they simply disregarded civilians because they became involved with growing stronger for personal reasons, not caring about the fundamentals of why ninja even existed. It was my belief that many ninja had lost sight of what was most important about what they did. But maybe civilians were just as much to blame for this apathy towards each other. After all; when was the last time ninja were shown any gratitude for what they did for us? The bond between civilians and ninja was a broken one - so broken no one seemed to even realize it.

The relationship between kunoichi and civilian women was the worst. Many kunoichi viewed civilian women as uppity, spineless types who were only good at looking pretty and spreading their legs. The stigma was that every civilian woman's goal was to settle down and be kept by their spouse without doing anything for themselves; everything they did geared towards finding someone to take care of them. Many of them seemed to think that we couldn't think or do anything for ourselves. They called us derogatory names like 'Skirts', 'Leg-Spreaders' or 'Wife-Bait'. The average civilian woman's outlook on kunoichi was not much brighter. Amongst us, kunoichi had the reputation (usually unfounded) of being pretentious in their dealings with civilians despite being crude and lacking femininity. To my knowledge, there weren't any derogatory terms for kunoichi. Which was maybe because the word itself when uttered from civilian lips usually caused a sour expression. It had a similar effect to something slanderous.

I wasn't sure why there was so much animosity between the two groups of women but part of me thought it was envy. By choosing to be a kunoichi or a civilian, both sides chose a path that meant that there were some things they just couldn't do. By choosing to be a civilian, a woman gave up the ability to have a level of strength, importance and a camaraderie that only kunoichi could have. The status of a kunoichi was, after all, something that was inherently admired no matter where you went; except apparently by civilian women of Konohagakure.

On the opposite side, by choosing to be a kunoichi, they gave up a life devoted to relative peace and
with the nature of their lifestyle, relationships were harder to maintain. I imagine Kunoichi didn't really have many close friends and even if they did, when would they get the time to spend with them?

Even if you chose the lifestyle that suited your personality and desires best, there would always be a part of you that wondered what it would be like had you chosen differently and eventually, you may even begin to resent it. Therefore resenting those who were experiencing what you could not. People were odd that way.

I wasn't exactly in a unique position, there were a lot of people that were civilians that had ninja in their immediate families and would be able to see both sides like I did. Yuzuha, Tamaki and Moemi who I could name right off the top of my head. There were many, many more. But I think maybe, because I was so often in my own mind, I was among the few who actually thought about this attitude and how concerning it was. I was also probably one of the few who actually had some concern with the way things were.

I couldn't help but let my mind wander back to The Director's behaviour in The Hokage's office, unable to decide whether I found her cowardly, a little dumb or a little brave. As much as I didn't want to think that way about my superior; it was pretty cowardly of her to attempt to give Lord Hokage the impression that she had everything under control, when she clearly didn't, instead of just telling him the truth. It was also a mixture of bravery and idiocy that she had thought she even could lie to him about it. I wasn't sure whether answering the Hokage's question earlier truthfully was a good decision. Maybe I should have lied to him and pretended I had volunteered out of the goodness of my heart…

I shivered at the mere thought of lying. I wasn't a liar and I was definitely never going to try and lie to The Hokage, of all people.

Honesty was always the best policy. It wasn't always the path of least resistance, but in my opinion that you couldn't go wrong with the truth.

Moemi deflated in relief when we finally arrived back in the Children and Youth Services Department. It had sprung to life since we had originally been here that morning, almost all of the desks filled with CAO employees reviewing case files and filling out forms. A few rows over, one caseworker was speaking with a middle aged woman who was sitting in one of her 'guest' chairs while a little boy sulked next to her.

Unsure what to do from there, I made my way around my desk and sat down. Moemi remained standing next to my desk with her arms crossed.

"Okay, right, so..." Moemi began as if she had to turn a crank to get her brain working again, "training. I need to get you some training."

Obviously this had been a sudden development for her as well. I imagined that she had never dreamed that her department would have been unable to satisfy the needs of one little boy. She looked around for a moment with a desperate look on her face and after a few minutes, she sighed.

"I'm sorry," she apologized with a sheepish expression, "I didn't think I'd get this far. I thought for sure we wouldn't be able to find anyone so when Yuzuha said she had two potential employees I wasn't sure what to think. I was still sceptical even when you walked in but you were so calm throughout the meeting...I was so relieved. But I am also very, very unprepared."

"I'll need to work out some way to get you some basic training but everyone is busy today with appointments - you'll learn that keeping your appointments with families is very important. Until I
I opened Uzumaki's file and began trying to make sense of the obscure documents inside; they may as well have been in another language. The picture of him was pretty straightforward, so I moved that aside and flipped it over so I could just see the white back of the photograph. I didn't need those little blue eyes staring at me on top of everyone else's while I struggled to understand his information. The next sheet may as well have been written in code although I think it had something to do with money as I did see the ryo symbol. Maybe it was the budget for him? If so, that was a lot of zeros. I saw a name on that sheet that I vaguely recognized as a woman from the Finances department who I'd dealt with once or twice. Okay so, that must have been budget then. Having decided, I flipped that page over and moved it to the side. The next sheet was personal details; name, age, birthday, blood type etc. Well, that was relatively simple. The next was a handwritten sheet that appeared to be a list of surnames with several columns of numbers next to them that hadn't been labeled. It seemed to have been written by several different people...perhaps the seven caseworkers that came before me.

I was still pondering this, when there was a disruption from the front of the room.

"Where is she!?" A feminine voice yelled from the entrance to the department. The room went dead silent, I would be surprised if anyone was daring to breath. I continued to look down, staring at the open case file absently. Whatever was going on, I was pretty sure I didn't want to look up.

No one was daring to respond and I heard thunderous footsteps pass by my desk, heading towards the center of the room. I was, unfortunately, one of the closest desks to the entrance and even though this clearly angered individual had bypassed me I was still in a bad spot.

Deciding that I'd have to look up at some point, I swallowed, closed the folder and raised my eyes to look at the middle of the room. I wasn't sure what to expect but I was still appalled by what I saw.

A middle aged woman with a weathered face, mousy brown hair fought into a ponytail and hard grey eyes was glaring at all the caseworkers who were closest to her. The workers at their desks were leaning away from her, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the livid woman as they could without running away. It seemed no one was spared from her ire. She wore a simple navy dress and had a white apron on over top of it; she looked like an aged, civilian housewife. In fact I didn't doubt that she was an aged civilian housewife. What was most appalling about the sight wasn't the uncouth anger or the screaming, it was that she had her arm firmly latched around the wrist of a little boy whom she was pulling all over the room.

A very familiar little boy, with blond hair and big blue eyes. While the woman's grip clearly looked painful, he wasn't crying or struggling - he was just allowing himself to be dragged limply. He reminded me of a hare, dead and dangling from a wolf's jaws. I felt my chest clench a little despite myself at the defeated look on his face.

"Where is she!? Where's Hanako? She told me that this was going to be dealt with yesterday!" The woman raged and I almost felt bad for her. Once you got past the fact that she was absolutely livid, you'd notice that she was clearly suffering from a lack of sleep and had a few too many wrinkles for her age. She looked ragged and stressed.
"Um," one of the other caseworkers began timidly, "sh-she q-quit."

"She what!?" The woman visibly erupted and finally let go of the boys wrist so that she could bring her hands up to clutch the sides of her head. The little boy stumbled at suddenly being released and landed with a thump on his butt, but I seemed to have been one of the few people who paid him any mind. For the most part, his presence was being willfully ignored.

"I-I'll go get Moemi." The same caseworker stuttered out, jumping up from her desk and almost running out of the room.

The woman looked about ready snap and she began visibly shaking, potentially from an adrenaline rush her rage had sparked. The kid remained on the floor, staring down like he wasn't even awake. Who knew, maybe he'd retreated inside his mind to escape everything that was going on. I knew what that was like.

Yikes. Well, this wasn't good. Someone had to do something.

It took me only a split second to make my decision.

I stood up, tugged the hem of my kimono top, took a deep breath and began walking towards the distressed woman. The other caseworkers sat completely still and I could feel dozens of terrified eyes following my every movement. After that display, it hadn't taken me long to get an idea of what was going on.

This woman must be Uzumaki's most recent foster parent and she must have been promised some sort of resolution which was quickly forgotten about as soon as the kid's previous caseworker hit the road. I had not been informed of this and I wondered if Moemi even knew about the promise this Hanako had made and apparently failed to keep. Regardless of what was going on in the past, this was my job now so I guess I had better start doing it.

With every step I had to ignore the fact that I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea how to be a caseworker still; I hadn't even had basic training. I also had a feeling dealing with Uzumaki's case was far from basic.

As I got closer, the woman looked up and began to glare in my direction; like I was approaching a wounded animal huddling in a corner. Her eyes held a great deal of distrust. When I was standing directly beside her I made the decision that I had to pretend I knew exactly what I was doing, or I was only going to make things worse. I couldn't let her smell my weakness...or fear.

Fear because by going to stand beside her I had unintentionally maneuvered myself between her and the demon boy. My throat started to close up and I did my best to swallow subtly, hoping she wouldn't notice my discomfort.

"My name is Kiyoko. I'm Uzumaki's new caseworker...why don't you come sit down?" I asked in a polite tone, gesturing towards my two empty guest chairs. The woman stared for another few moments before sighing and going towards my desk.

The kid didn't move so I nudged him with my foot, receiving a blank stare from him. Genma had been right, I didn't know anything about children but they were just little people...right? So all I had to do was talk to him like he was a person. Even if he was a little person with a demon inside him that could snap at any moment. Just, treat him like a person. That was easy enough...right?

"You too." I said, "come sit down." He blinked slowly at me, almost like he couldn't believe what I had said but in another moment he stood up and went to my desk. I followed hot on his heels,
locking eyes with one of my new co-workers and doing my best to mime that I wanted tea made. It took her a second, but the older red-head eventually nodded and took off towards the kitchenette at the back of the room, casting concerned looks back at me over her shoulder.

I had no idea what I was doing...I couldn't let anyone know. That would just escalate things.

I sat down and watched as the mysterious woman lowered herself into the chair slowly, bracing herself on the armrests like her entire body was falling apart. Who knows, maybe it was, after watching the demon kid for...I wasn't sure how long. It probably was in the folder somewhere but I still wasn't sure what I was looking at. Oh, this was going to be rough.

I tried to keep my face as expressionless as possible, even as Uzumaki hauled his small body up into the second chair and the tired woman flinched away from him.

There was long silence and it occurred to me that the rest of the staff were watching the goings on with bated breath. I could hear the clinking that indicated that red head was doing as I had asked, thankfully, and was brewing a pot of tea at the back of the room.

"So you're the flavor of the month, huh?" The woman finally growled, crossing her arms over her chest and narrowing her eyes at me. She was analysing me, watching my every move and micro-expression.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that," I responded flatly, "my intention is to maintain this position for as long as I'm needed."

She scoffed.

"That's what they all say, then they make arrangements and promises they can't keep and run away."

Yikes.

How she'd managed to do it so quickly I wasn't sure, but the red head appeared at my desk with a forced smile, a pot of tea and two cups. She gently put them down in between the woman and I being mindful of the case files on my desk. Without being asked she poured us each a cup.

I forced myself to look at the kid and actually meet his eyes. He had been watching the tea being poured with a longing expression on his face.

"Do you want tea?" I asked him.

There was a stunned silence before the boy sullenly nodded, moving his eyes to look back at the floor soon after, like he'd done something wrong.

"Would you mind?" I asked the red head, "and I'd also like sugar, please."

She appeared too stunned to argue so she nodded dumbly and went back to the kitchenette, returning moments later with another cup and a little bowl of sugar. She poured the kid a cup and I thanked her. I quickly dumped some sugar into my tea and, noticing the kid's expression, began to pour a little in his as well.

"Tell me when." I said to him and he looked baffled but did after a few seconds stutter out a little 'when'. It was the first time I'd heard him speak and his voice was...tiny. I wasn't sure how else to describe it - it was like he was scared to speak. I...kind of knew what that felt like. There was a time when Atsuko always spoke for me, or we spoke in unison, so I wasn't used to having an independent voice. Obviously, when I started working at CAO and got used to doing things on my own, I'd had
to grow out of that rather quickly. Somehow I got the feeling that his feeble nature was for a different reason although I wasn't entirely sure what that was.

Still pondering this, I sipped my tea.

"So...Kiyoko...was it?" The woman began, watching me closely.

I just nodded at her, keeping my expression schooled.

"Hanako promised me over a month ago that she'd find somewhere else for him to go. I came in here the day before yesterday looking for an update and she told me someone would be by to collect him last night. No one showed. Then this morning, I wake up and he's painted my entire living room floor in orange and green...of all the colours!" I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, my thoughts unintentionally travelling to my brother's more flamboyant teammate. Apparently he wasn't the only one who thought orange and green was a nice combination. Maybe someday I'd tell him.

"I've spent all morning on my hands and knees cleaning it up! This isn't the first time he's done something like this and I'm sick and tired of it! Now I want him gone just like was promised!" By the time she had finished he seemed to have worked herself up again and seemed to have been panting in rage, her eyes bugging out.

"Ms Sazaki, please try to calm down." Came a timid voice to my left and I realized that the red head hadn't left. I had to give her credit, everyone else seemed to be hiding behind their desks bracing for an explosion but she was hovering around my desk. Which was something at least.

At the quiet urging from the other caseworker, the woman seemed to think for a moment before sipping her tea. While she was occupied with that, the red head subtly moved her hand down to shuffle through Uzumaki's paperwork, pointing at the bottom of the list I had been examining earlier. At the bottom of the list was the name Mitsuko Sazaki and underneath that there was a blank space that had yesterday's date on it, but no name. So Hanako had bluffe, it seemed. She hadn't been able to find anyone - otherwise that space wouldn't be blank.

...honesty was the best policy?

"Unfortunately it looks like she was unable to find a suitable home." The woman's hands began shaking at my response and I felt the red head shift nervously. I didn't give Ms Sazaki time to explode again before I continued.

"I would like to ask you to do me a favor, Ms Sazaki. I'm new in this position, if you could only give me a week I will make sure I find a new home for him." I tried to sound confident in my ability to do so, but secretly I doubted myself. How on earth was I supposed to find the demon kid a new place to live in one week?

I couldn't possibly ask this worn out woman to give me any more then one week, so I was going to have to make it work.

She glared me down for a moment before standing up and extending her hand for a handshake.

"Fine. One week."

Yikes.
Friday, July 27th, 1460: Seven Days

"What!?" Tamaki's exclamation bounced around the street, startling it's few occupants. The sun had set a few hours ago and Tamaki had appeared at my apartment with the intention of taking me out to dinner. She told Genma, who had been in the process of packing for his mission tomorrow, that it was to celebrate my coming birthday but I knew better. She was going to bait me with food and then probe me for as much information as she could get.

She took me to Ichiraku's, a small ramen stand less than a single district away from the Hokage tower. It was a preferred haunt of ours as it was close to work, had reasonable prices, was usually quiet and the food was good. Not to mention Mr Ichiraku was a kind, mild-mannered man with a heart of gold who enjoyed the company of his customers.

"Tamaki, calm down." I said flatly, eyeing Mr Ichiraku who was looking over his shoulder at the noise, a bowl that he had been cleaning limp in his hands. She'd caught me just as I'd shoved a bunch of noodles in my face, so the sentence came out rather garbled. Thankfully she got the jist and smacked a hand over her mouth, crouching down on her stool.

"Sorry...I just can't believe it. I mean, I'm happy you didn't lose your job but to be put in charge of that kid..." The end came out like a whisper, her eyes darting around nervously. She hesitated for a moment, but then grabbed her chopsticks and began to eat her own meal - still casting anxious glances around her. From what I had experienced today in Lord Hokage's office, it occured to me that the threat of ANBU descending upon us if we said something wrong was a very real possibility. Which was probably the reason Tamaki was being very careful with her wording: I had forgotten until that moment that Ibiki was an ANBU interrogator. As talkative as she may be, Tamaki knew where to draw the line.

I shrugged.

"Well, believe it." I began sardonically, "It's not going to be an easy job that's for sure. Already I have an unreasonable deadline; I have to find a new place for him to live in one week." I put my chopsticks to the side and leaned back slightly, eyes tracing Ichiraku's sign. How in the hell was I supposed to do that?

"Yeah, sounds to me like that poor woman was at her wits end. How on earth did you get her to agree to another week?" She said through mouthfuls of noodles, swallowing loudly. When Moemi had finally arrived in the department, panting like she had been sprinting, and saw me politely guiding the woman out, she had asked the same question.

"By feigning confidence and pretending I knew what I was doing." I said in a deadpan, quite sure my face looked blank. At the time it had seemed like a good idea but now I wasn't so sure.

"Pffft. You? Feigning confidence?" Tamaki laughed, "that's one of the things I like the most about you, Kiyoko. You always seem so damn confident. The idea of you having to fake it is pretty funny. I guess you finally got brought down to everyone else's level." She continued to chuckle as she poured herself a cup of sake.

I glared at her out of the corner of my eye at the back-handed compliment. How was I supposed to
respond to something like that? I wondered if I should tell her that in truth my confidence was always faked but ultimately I just decided to ignore her and change the subject.

"It's past 8 o'clock, shouldn't you be at home with Idate?" I asked, choosing that moment to resume my meal. I'd have thought she'd be excited to spend some time with him since he wasn't going to be around as much anymore. You know, do 'not-his-mom-mom-stuff' like ask him how his day was, make him dinner and help him with his homework. Not that Tamaki was good at cooking nor would be able to him figure out kunai 'F, Z & J's trajectory.

A dark cloud suddenly appeared over her head and she draped herself over the counter, if it weren't for the fact she hadn't had a single sip of her sake yet I would have assumed she was drunk. Her long black hair draped over her face, giving her an air of despair that seemed to come from nowhere. I looked to see if she'd knocked over her sake or something.

"He asked if he could stay over at a friend's house tonight…" her expression was almost tortured, "and I couldn't say no…he was so cute when he asked. He doesn't need or want to be with me anymore." She grumbled the last part.

"I'm sure that's not true; he's just being a kid." I hoped my response had been correct. Kids did stuff like that when they were growing up, right? "Wait...he has friend's already? He's only been in The Academy a single day." Today would have only been his second day as a student, yesterday having been an introductory half-day. It took me weeks to even talk to someone when I had started school and even then it had been with Atsuko at my side.

She seemed to lighten a bit at the thought, looking quite proud.

"Well, yeah, of course he does! That's my Idate for you! He makes friends so easily!" She boasted, seeming to have gotten over her funk just as quickly as it came. She took a sip of her sake and I couldn't figure out if with her current mood she needed more sake or less. I guess I'd find out soon enough.

"Unlike the other Morino I know…" I began, which the thought of him brought another question to the forefront of my mind, "why aren't you using this as an opportunity to spend time with Ibiki?"

Couples usually wanted to spend time with one another, right? That was a thing.

"You know I'm starting to get the impression you don't want me around...what with you asking all these questions about where else I should be." Tamaki said with a suspicious tone, taking another sip of her sake and looking at me from the corner of her eye. "But if you really must know, he left for a mission last night. It was unexpected."

"Fair enough." Came my response, ignoring her earlier dig at how I didn't want her around. The truth was I was happy for her company, but I didn't want her to waste her time on me when it was better used elsewhere - like with her family. I'd feel guilty if I found out she was catering to me when Idate needed her or when she finally had time to spend with the person she loved.

There was a brief silence as I finished eating and Tamaki sipped her sake.

"Remind me again why he can't just stay at the orphanage?" Tamaki finally asked, leaning on the counter and resting her head in the palm of her hand. She used her free hand to pour more sake.

"There's too many reasons to count. Mainly it's because there's just too many other kids there and he, well, he needs special attention." I responded. There were more reasons then I even cared to think about, lest they give me a headache. Naruto Uzumaki being raised in an orphanage was a recipe for
disaster, even as broken as things were right now it was still the better option.

"Special attention, huh? That's one way of putting it." Tamaki stated bluntly, looking down at her sake for a long moment, seeming to go into deep thought.

"I know there's not a lot I can do for you in Immigration," she finally began with a distant, sad expression, "but I want you to know that if you need me for anything, I'll be there."

"Where'd that come from?" Was my response, not understanding her sudden melancholy.

My lack of understanding caused a vein to bulge in her forehead and she glared at me in return. Meanwhile, I was getting whiplash from her sudden mood swings.

"I'm just saying don't be afraid to reach out for help, Kiyoko. You're always so confident and I know you're the type that's comfortable doing things on your own but...well, this particular job is going to be really rough. I just don't want you to burn-out or something." She explained, downing the rest of her current cup of sake. "And no one would blame you if you decide you need to take a breather once and awhile."

I couldn't help feeling a little irked at the last part.

"I'm not going to take it easy. It sounds like when it comes to this kid that's all anyone has been doing. I'm going to give this everything I have, my one-hundred percent, just like anything else." I paused, "Who knows? Maybe this is a challenge I need."

XxX

One week.

Well, one week starting yesterday, so I now officially had six days left.

Six days to find a new and hopefully permanent home for Naruto Uzumaki.

I had said goodbye to Genma this morning, who had left on his mission with Ebisu. My older brother had stared me down throughout the majority of my morning routine before telling me to 'be careful' just before he left. If I had any doubts that my new position made him uncomfortable, those were dispelled. He was very uneasy at the thought but as I had already discovered, he wasn't really allowed to show it. It was odd that he was telling me to be careful as he was the one with the most dangerous career.

I had to suppress a weary sigh when I arrived at the Children and Youth Services Department, my briefcase clenched tightly in my hands. Even with Tamaki offering her support, she had been correct last night. Realistically, there really wasn't much she could do to help me working in Immigration, unless The Hokage suddenly decided to send the kid to live elsewhere. Which I'm sure would make quite a few citizens of the village happy. I had a feeling Moemi was going to make herself as preoccupied as she possibly could in order to ensure she didn't have to involved.

Which left me alone. Which thankfully is something I'm comfortable with.

I approached my desk and in a rare moment of agitation, threw myself down in my seat. This proved to have been the wrong thing to do.

A sharp pain shot into the left cheek of my buttocks and I jumped back up with a screech. In hindsight I was thankful that the department was empty because of what followed. In my rush to stand, I somehow caught my heel on the chair leg and spilled sideways onto the ground. I lay there
for a moment on the wood floor, disoriented, and after a few moments, grew humiliated. From my position on the ground I flicked my eyes to the entrance, terrified that my scream would have drawn the attention of some of the chunin guards. After a few moments of no one arriving to check on me, I sighed and moved to investigate the source of my predicament, still sitting on the floor.

On the seat of my chair was a rock, round, smooth and small enough that it would fit in the center of my hand. There wasn't anything particularly remarkable about it. It was just a grey, rock.

Baffled, I stood up and adjusted my clothing, making sure my loose bun was still in place after the tumble. It was. Then I picked up...the rock and without much thought placed it on the corner of my desk. I wasn't really sure what to do with it; maybe I'd wait until my next lunch break and drop it outside?

I stared at it for a few moments before deciding that it being on my chair was nothing more than bad luck and decided to move on with my day. Let's ignore the rock. I took my seat and resolved to have some progress done on the case before the day was up, training or no training.

I opened up the file full of completely foreign documents again and tried to decide where to start. I shifted the paperwork until the sheet with all the foster homes came up again. I could try revisiting the families on the list and see if any of them would be willing to take him again. It was a shot in the dark but it was something and I wasn't entirely sure where we got the names for new foster homes. Once I'd exhausted the old ones, maybe then I could look into how to find new ones.

I grabbed my pencil, absently underlining the first name on the list.

I grabbed a piece of blank paper from the corner of my desk, opposite of the rock, and wrote at the top in bold script;

Saturday, July 28th 1460: Six Days

Just as I had expected, the original foster homes were a complete bust.

I'd sent a polite letter to each one, outlining that I wanted to 'discuss' Naruto Uzumaki with them, expecting the letters to be either ignored by the former foster parents or left until the last minute. By the sixth letter, my wrist was sore but excluding Ms Sazaki, I had eleven letters to write.

To my surprise, within an hour I had responses from all eleven of them, some of them a little kinder than others, but all giving me the impression that they would chew their own arms off rather than discuss Uzumaki. One person just wrote 'NO' in big bold ink in the center of the page and didn't even bother to put it in an envelope. I wasn't sure which parent it was but the letters added up to eleven.

Since that had taken a lot less time than I had originally anticipated, I spent another few hours drumming my fingers on my desk and casting curious glances at my new co-workers. While Moemi was clearly dragging her feet on my training, since I had yet to hear anything more about that, I could at least try to learn from observation.

I watched the redhead from the day before get up from her desk and walk back to a filing cabinet that was along the back wall, she retrieved a folder, walked back to her desk and opened it up. She was running her finger along a paper that was in the newly retrieved folder and then after a few moments, wrote something in what looked to be the case file of a child. I straightened my back in my seat so I could see the page she had been running her finger down.

It was an alphabetized list of some kind; an alphabetized list with what looked like names.
I looked down at the stack of rejection letters, the big inky NO on the top of the pile reinforcing my resolve.

I stood up and forced myself to go towards her, which thankfully wasn't a long walk as there was only a single, unoccupied desk in between us. She noticed me as soon as I got up and was already staring at me questioningly by the time I got to the edge of her desk.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I began, "but I wondered what you were doing."

She was quiet for a minute and I started to internally scold myself for my bluntness, the socially awkward part of me rearing its ugly head. I had been too forceful and pushy. What if she became angry and wouldn't answer my question or lied to me so I would do something wrong? What if she thought I was just being nosy? I had to tell myself I was being ridiculous; that was as far from rational as I could get. There was no way I had offended her to that magnitude with a single sentence.

I was reminded of what Tamaki had said the night before about how I was confident all the time. Was that a good misconception for people to have about me? I wasn't sure. It couldn't be farther from the truth.

Despite the turmoil in my mind, I'm sure my face remained in it's usual, unshakable mask. Considering Genma's expression was similar, it must be a Shiranui trait. I couldn't really remember my father well enough to remember what he was like but he seemed similar enough in the few photos we had of him. I supposed there were worse traits a family could have. Like demon whisker markings or like...pink hair, for example.

The woman finally threw a quick glance around her before responding.

"Choosing a few potential foster homes for a new case of mine." She told me, shifting the papers so I could more clearly see the alphabetized papers. It seemed she had a folder full of C names from what I assumed was a much larger list.

"Oh." I said simply, not sure where to go from there. I hadn't planned that far ahead; actually I hadn't really planned at all. I didn't know enough about what I was doing to plan ahead. "Um, thank you." I dismissed myself from the conversation as abruptly as I'd started it and instead of going back to my desk went back to the filing cabinet I'd watched her pull the file from. I opened the top drawer, making note of the A, B and C dividers. There were two rows of each section, one on the left and one on the right. I reached for the one on the right and was stopped by a gentle voice.

"The ones on the right are already assigned." I jumped slightly and turned towards the voice and discovered that the redhead had followed me back to the cabinet. "You'll want to grab one's from the left. Only take one folder at a time. It's a department rule." She informed me putting her folder back in the C section, before pulling a folder from the A section and pushing the cabinet closed.

She gestured forward with a small smile and without another word we went back to my desk. On our way back I glanced at her desk and noticed that the surface was bare, whatever she had been working on already put away. When we reached it, she scraped one of my guest chairs around so that it was next to mine and placed the folder down next to Uzumaki's open case file.

"I'm Rumi Ichiya." She told me, tucking a loose strand of her long red hair behind her ear. Most of it was pulled back in a low ponytail, but much like me quite a bit of it escaped to frame her face. She was older than me, probably closer to Yuzuha's age, though her features were soft enough that she could be mistaken for younger. Her golden eyes twinkled a bit at the greeting and for the first time I noticed that her face seemed to have a very tranquil element to it.
"Kiyoko Shiranui."

"A pleasure." With a peaceful nod, she turned her attention to the paperwork.

The rest of my day was spent with Rumi going over the potential foster families with me and showing me how to read the documents. By the end of it, I had five foster homes that I felt confident in as they were recently immigrated to the village and sent off letters asking them if they would be able to meet with me.

When the end of my work day came, I left feeling like I had made some progress.

Which had been all I had been asking for.

XxX

Monday, July 30th 1460: Four Days

Yesterday had been Sunday, the one day of the week when the Civil Affairs Office was closed. Despite that, the countdown clock for me to get results had kept ticking and I had felt every tick-tock like a needle in the base of my spine.

I usually enjoyed my Sundays. If Genma was home the two of us would often sit on the couch together in peaceful silence, quietly enjoying one another's company. I would read a novel and he would clean his ninja tools, read magazines or fiddle with a little radio that hadn't worked properly since our dad was alive. The thing either didn't work at all or picked up irregular radio signals that sounded like they were coming from the moon or something. On occasion, Genma might manage to get a radio station from one of the small villages near Konohagakure, but for some reason he could never seem to get the local station. When she was around, Atsuko often said that it was haunted which, when we were little, had terrified me and given me nightmares.

Without Genma home, I'd spent the day reading and pacing the apartment. I couldn't get into the novel I'd chosen, not because I didn't enjoy the book but because I felt restless with my approaching deadline and the fact that Sunday had to fall right in the middle of the timeframe. By the time 6 o'clock rolled around, I had somehow worried myself ragged and went to bed immediately after eating a cup of instant ramen.

This morning, I woke up feeling especially groggy and by the time I made it to my desk, I'd completely forgotten the incident that took place on Saturday morning.

This proved to be a mistake.

As I went to sit down, I felt something sharp poke into the right cheek of my buttocks and sprung up with a squeak. Thankfully, due to exhaustion, I'd been moving a little slower than the other morning so it hadn't hurt the same and I hadn't ended up on the floor. I looked down and saw a little pink rock that sparkled slightly, with a sharp edge on it.

I snatched it up and dropped it on the corner of my desk next to the rock from Saturday, which I realized I had forgotten to get rid of.

Bad luck.

I told myself that even though my mind re-iterated that there was no way a rock could coincidentally end up on my chair. That being said, if it was someone doing it on purpose, maybe to be vindictive, they could have done something a lot more harmful - like place a tack on my seat or smear grease on the floor near my chair so I'd fall. Not something that was just a minor annoyance like putting a little
rock on my chair. Although I'd discovered yesterday that the first rock incident had left a tiny bruise. I realized that I was doing the equivalent of wishing bad things on myself and redirected my train of thought quickly.

I glanced around to make sure the room was empty and when I determined that I was in the clear, pulled a face.

I could allow myself that once and awhile.

As soon as my face went back to normal, Rumi walked through the entrance to the department. From working with her the other day I'd learned that Rumi came from an all-civilian family that had immigrated here when she was little. She had married a Konoha-born civilian man named Jin, who from the sounds of it was a complete flake. Not that it was a polite thing to think but I couldn't really come up with a better, more kind, description from what she'd told me. For what it was worth, he sounded like a nice flake. They had a couple of sons who were eight and ten, whose names escaped me.

She nodded to me and went to her desk. Shortly behind her was someone I barely recognized from the department carrying a sack that I assumed contained mail. When they arrived at my desk they fished out a bundle of letters addressed to me and bound together. I nodded my thanks when I received them. If I was lucky, these were the responses from the foster families.

If I was even luckier, one of them would be suitable and agree to take on Naruto.

XxX

Wednesday, August 1st 1460: Two Days

The letters the day before yesterday had been responses. Three had been positive responses, who were interested in taking on a child. I had deceptively not told them which child, instead arranging to go and meet with each of the three in person yesterday. My thought was that it would be harder to say no to me in person. It had taken the half day and the meetings did not go as I had hoped, although the results were not necessarily surprising.

The first had asked me to leave politely and I had complied, still hopeful that the other meetings would go more smoothly.

The second was much like the first, but I fought just a little bit harder to be heard. They had to ask me to leave three times and had to take my cup of tea away from me before I conceded.

When I met with the third family I was more desperate, this was my last shot and I had metaphorically dug my heels in when they started yelling at me to leave. I stubbornly kept my voice calm, my face straight and continued to plead my case. I then had to literally dig my heels in when the husband manhandled me out of their two bedroom apartment, throwing my briefcase out after me. It was not one of my finer moments, but it wasn't one of theirs either. I planned on letting Moemi know what had transpired before the day was out. After that, I didn't feel that those two would be suited to care for any child and their application needed to be revised.

My pantyhose had torn and I had done something to my ankle after being thrown from the last apartment. Worse for wear and with no other options, I had been forced to limp my way back to the Civil Affairs Office. I'm sure I was a rather pathetic sight.

I had thought because they were new to the village, all moving here within the last five years, that the story of Naruto Uzumaki wouldn't have reached them. Perhaps due to the laws it hadn't, at least not
in full detail, but they had still learned to hate him regardless. Unfortunately, hating Naruto Uzumaki was part of the village's culture.

That wasn't fair. That was just so unfair.

Maybe it was because I was suddenly out of options and was despairing in response, but I had a moment of sadness that I struggled to conceal. Was that really what the village I loved had become? Was holding onto all that hatred and fear something that had become so much a part of Konohagakure's culture that even those who had just arrived here learned to behave that way? I mean, I wasn't exempt, I was scared of the kid but that didn't mean I wanted complete strangers to hate him.

It was...sad.

When I finally reached the fourth floor I went to Moemi's little office to speak with her but she wasn't there, so I returned to my department and my desk. It was around lunch time, so for the most part the department was empty.

I went to sit down, felt a sharp pain in my butt and hopped up immediately. Not at all surprised by what I saw in the middle of my seat as this had happened to me every day since I took this job. It had happened to me yesterday morning as well.

Another rock. This one was a rare blue colour and was rather square shaped.

In a rare moment of anger I snatched up and slammed this rock down on the corner of my desk next to the three others. Yesterday, one that was black and had some green jade-like flecks in it had joined the others. I was getting quite the collection. I glanced around to make sure no one was watching and slipped a hand behind me to rub my throbbing rump. The rock today had been particularly pointy with it's square shape and sharp edges.

I was not a stupid woman; I needed to stop falling for that.

I finally sat down with a sigh and rested my head in my arms. I wasn't defeated, not yet. I still had a day and a half left.

But...I sure was beginning to feel defeated.

I knew it wasn't going to be easy. In fact I knew from the moment I started this that it would probably be the hardest thing I'd ever tried to do in my young career. I wasn't even naive enough to say 'well, I didn't know that it was going to be this hard' because I had known. I'd known all along that this was an impossible task.

No, not impossible, I reminded myself. Just next-to impossible.

This could still be done. I just needed to work harder and smarter. There was a way to do this I just needed to think outside the box. Maybe what I had been doing wrong this whole time was treating this case how I would if it was any other child. Not that I had had any training on what was customary, something I had tried to talk to Moemi about every day. But I had been doing my best to use my observations and the tools traditionally available to a caseworker to handle this situation.

Seven was the number of caseworkers he'd had before. Seven times someone had tried to handle Naruto Uzumaki as if his situation was conventional when he was really as unorthodox as they came.

Seven times the conventional system in Konohagakure had failed.
Maybe, just maybe, something unconventional was just what was needed in order to keep a roof over Naruto Uzumaki's head. I was willing to do that. I was willing to try something new but I had one very big problem.

How was I supposed to do something outside the box...when I wasn't even entirely sure what normally went into it?

As I pondered this, I felt a hand rest on the top on my lowered head, like someone would do to a small child who was crying. Taken aback at the sudden feeling, I immediately raised my head which forced this person to remove their hand. As I did that, I heard a small chuckle and I made sure to keep my gaze passive. Even so, I was rather relieved.

Yuzuha Nara, the head of Immigration, was standing on the other side of my desk and staring at me with a vaguely amused expression. The hand I had knocked from my head had returned to her side and was now resting on her hip.

I felt my chest clench a little and I realized for the first time that I had actually missed the older woman. Something about her steady presence calmed me and for a brief moment, I forgot the failures from this morning that had me so despairing.

"Hey, Kiyo!" I heard a familiar voice exclaim and Tamaki appeared, stepping around from behind Yuzuha so she was visible. "Looks like you're having a rough day." There was a bit of a tone to her voice that almost sounded like she was saying 'I told you so'. I ignored it.

"Yuzuha...Tamaki...what are you doing here?" I asked instead, looking between the two women. Tamaki scoffed.

"See," she said to Yuzuha, "I told you we shouldn't have bothered. Leave it to this one to get so involved in her work that she forgets her own birthday." Despite her harsh tone, there was a smile on her face that implied that she was teasing me.

I noticed for the first time that she was holding a tiny plate with a small, white cake that was just big enough to feed the three of us. It wasn't anything special or fancy, but I felt my cheeks heat up regardless and I looked around to make sure no one was watching.

"Hey, hey, it's not every day that a girl turns seventeen." Yuzuha scolded lightly, "You owe it to your self to remember your own birthday. You can't always trust us to do it for you."

She was right. I had forgotten. With everyone celebrating the week before and my new assignment I had completely pushed the fact that I was soon to be turning seventeen out of my mind. It just hadn't held any importance especially since this year was going to be my first birthday without Atsuko at my side. This time last year, the two of us had shared an almost identical cake with Genma on our old brown couch. I hadn't realized at the time how much I would come to cherish that simple memory.

As I stared at the cake, a bittersweet feeling overwhelmed me.

"Thank you." I said to them after a moment and I received understanding smiles in return.

"What's with the rocks?" Tamaki asked, having noticed the growing pile on my desk.

"Don't ask." I replied bluntly. She looked confused but nodded.

Within moments they'd sat down at my guest chairs and had used a small knife to divide the cake
into thirds. As we picked away at the cake, Yuzuha took it upon herself to inform me of all the interesting developments that had occurred in Immigration since I had left.

"And then," Yuzuha began with an exasperated tone, "there's the sudden rush of refugee claimants coming from The Land of Snow. Their daimyo was assassinated and there was a major upheaval in their social structure, landing them with a tyrant for a leader. We're not the only hidden village they've come to; Lord Hokage sent reports to me this morning claiming that Kumogakure and Iwagakure are also getting them. For such a small, frozen piece of land it had a lot of inhabitants who feel threatened by the new leadership."

"Yeah, well, unlike us, I heard Iwagakure isn't even entertaining the idea of letting them in. I was told they're all getting turned away at the gates by guards without the chance to even talk to anyone." Tamaki added before popping a small piece of cake into her mouth.

"Oh? Is that an official report or something you overheard that you aren't technically allowed to share?" Yuzuha asked the other woman dryly, which made Tamaki choke on her cake and blush.

"I-I may have overheard that last night when Ibiki had his drinking buddies over. It's not like I was specifically told not to say anything..." She responded, but I knew that if Tamaki had been able to overhear the jonin's conversation then chances were she was right. If it was something no one was supposed to know, it wouldn't have been discussed around Ibiki Morino's kitchen table with sake involved.

Yuzuha hummed and leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Anyway, I don't care about what Iwagakure or Kumogakure are doing. If this situation isn't handled correctly, we could be looking at a big mess for us, which is all I care about. I have to admit I feel for them though and their claims that they're in danger do have some merit. I was looking at our immigration statistics last night. Konohagakure hasn't even come close to meeting their annual restrictions for the past five consecutive years..." Yuzuha began to trail off.

Tamaki looked a little confused, being a little more new to her job. Thankfully, she wasn't afraid to ask questions.

"Wait, what? What do you mean 'annual restrictions'?" She asked, looking intrigued.

"How can I put this?" Yuzuha questioned herself aloud before continuing, "In order to keep the economy stable without banning immigrants altogether, a numerical restriction is calculated using several variables and then placed on how many immigrants can safely be accepted into the village per annum."

"Okay, I get it now." Tamaki stated but she clearly still had questions, "but what exactly does that mean for us?"

Having spent the last year working Immigration I knew where Yuzuha was going with her statement and before I could stop myself I cut in.

"That means Konohagakure could potentially support a sudden influx of refugees in the village without causing too much damage to it's economy or infrastructure. Over the last five years, the village could have potentially supported a higher population then it had been given. In other words, the space is already here and ready to be used, within moderation." I said, feeling almost soothed to be talking about Immigration matters again.

Tamaki nodded in understanding, digesting this new aspect of what it was she did. Screening
immigrants, approving applications and assisting with transitioning was only part of the job. When you pulled back the curtain, there was a lot more going on in order to make sure things ran smoothly.

"So, you're thinking about accepting their claims then?" I asked, watching Yuzuha carefully. Accepting refugee claimants was a lot of hard work. First, you had to hire ninja to investigate and make sure that these people were in danger, which was the key factor that gave them legitimate refugee status. Then, if their claims held validity, they were given express entry which was like the standard immigration process but completed ten times faster. Interviews, paperwork and screening all had to be done in less than a quarter of the time they normally were. Then there was the hardest part; transitioning. Once all the formalities were done, someone had to be responsible for making sure they had temporary housing and clothing so that they could get their fresh start.

"We're looking at at least 550 refugees." Tamaki said, leaning back in her seat and matching Yuzuha's position, "housing them all is going to be a bitch."

Five-hundred and fifty didn't seem like such a large amount, but on average Konohagakure only admitted that many people per year though their standard immigration process. For obvious reasons, Konoha's immigration standards were very strict. It was, after all, a 'hidden village'. Yuzuha was considering pushing to accept that amount plus the same amount or more in refugees. That was a lot of new people to suddenly dump into the village; it would be like introducing a shark to a fish tank. It was a tough decision and Yuzuha was paid to make them.

"Housing them would be easier if I could convince Lord Hokage and The Director to keep that abandoned apartment complex in the Sakata District." Yuzuha seemed rather displeased about something, as if re-playing an earlier conversation on the matter. "Sure it's not a nice place by any stretch of the imagination; I get their point that it's a bit of an eyesore. But I need it. Unfortunately, besides using it for temporary housing, I can't come up with a convincing argument to keep it. They're not going to keep the building on a whim just because I might need it for a year for refugees that they don't even want me to let in."

Suddenly, I had an idea that was wonderfully unconventional.

"What shape is this apartment building in exactly?"
Thursday, August 2nd, 1460: One Day

I nodded at the chunin guards as I entered the fourth floor of the Hokage Tower, making my way towards my department with a straight face.

I had one day left. Everything had to be resolved today. I was sure by the end of it or maybe sooner, I would be hearing from Ms Sazaki. A meeting that I wasn't really looking forward to but it wasn't like I had a choice.

Besides, hopefully this encounter would go more smoothly then the first as by the time the woman arrived I was hoping to have good news for her. I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corner of my lips at the remembrance of yesterday's conversation with Yuzuha and Tamaki. What had started as a meeting between friends to quietly celebrate a birthday had turned into the unconventional opportunity I'd been looking for. It still wasn't going to be the path of least resistance but it was the most promising idea I'd had yet.

It was going to be a lot of work and I didn't have a lot of time to do it, but I was determined.

Thankfully, I wasn't alone. Comfortable with working alone I may be, but I would be a fool to turn down the kind of help I was being offered. Having Yuzuha and Tamaki as my partners in this endeavor was an unexpected twist, but not an unwelcome one.

Our goal was to save 126 Harumi Place in the Sakata District from being demolished and by doing so obtain a permanent home for Naruto Uzumaki and a secure place for the refugees Yuzuha hoped to bring in as well.

My wonderfully unconventional idea was this;

First, I had to figure out just how Uzumaki was going to be cared for while living without an adult in the household. He was only six although from what little I had seen he was accustomed to being left to his own devices. I'd spent the entire afternoon yesterday and most of the night thinking about that and I had ideas. I had so many ideas, that I'd had to begin a little journal.

It was small brown journal with cheap binding but nice parchment paper for calligraphy and writing inside. Across the front I had stuck a piece of scotch tape and simply written 'Uzumaki'. Some pages had nothing but slanted paragraphs, key words in bold font and random business names which I'm sure wouldn't make sense to anyone but me. It was more like a memory prompt for me than anything. But others, hidden amidst the chaos in surprising chronology, were detailed entries of everything I had experienced while handling the demon boy's case so far. It was a dangerous book to keep, since while re-reading it I had realized my personal opinion on the entire affair, shone through occasionally. Well, more than occasionally. I resolved to burn the book when this was all over.

I may not have been a liar but having a ninja for a brother had taught me that most of the things in your head should stay there. Never put what you think in writing. Written in those pages I had fully disclosed of my thoughts regarding how I could manage to make living alone a feasible alternative for the kid. As well as my personal opinions on the matter. I had to admit it would be a stretch. I was a fully employed adult and I didn't even live alone. But with no orphanage, no foster homes and certainly no prospective adoptive parents; what other option was there?
The allowance given to the foster homes each month to house Uzumaki was most likely more than enough to pay for his electricity, clothing, food and a cleaning service. Hopefully, we wouldn't need to pay rent because we would be able to convince The Hokage to buy the building. That took care of Naruto's basic necessities. It wouldn't be a life of plenty but it would suffice. As for supervision, The Hokage likely had ANBU monitoring him anyway, so they would be able to keep him out of any life threatening trouble until he started school in a year.

This would, of course, be combined with whatever supervision that I could provide him as his caseworker. I had no intention of being his nanny or anything, but caseworkers were supposed to check in at least once a week. Since he was living alone, I could probably justify bumping it up to six times a week. Once a day during the work week. I still needed to maintain a certain distance from the boy in order to effectively do my job and I figured a few two-hour visits during the week were safe enough.

Second, I had to help Yuzuha convince Lord Hokage, The Director and The Elder Council that purchasing the building as property of the village was a solid investment. Thus saving it from being torn down. We had less than a day to do that in order to meet my own deadline but I was hoping that luck would be on our side.

When I had asked about the exact condition of the building, Yuzuha had stated that while the building was almost as old as Lord Third and wasn't very aesthetically pleasing, it was still safe to live in. Probably. She did mention she couldn't be certain about that because it hadn't been inspected yet, but she said it was pretty safe to assume.

Still, it had been enough to give me hope. It's not like I had any other ideas.

After explaining my interest in the building to the two other women yesterday, Yuzuha had lit up at the prospect. This was as much an opportunity for her as it was for me and we could easily turn it into an 'I scratch your back, you scratch mine' deal.

The Council was very opposed to the idea of admitting the refugees from The Land of Snow, as was The Director. Meanwhile, Lord Hokage was a neutral party and when he was on the fence that meant he would simply agree with the majority. The majority in this case was not in favor. Because of this, her argument of using it for temporary housing for future refugees was falling on deaf ears.

It all came down to strategy.

The Director and The Elder Council did not want refugees in the village.

The Director mostly didn't want them because whenever there was a large population of new immigrants it made the existing citizens of the village uneasy. They would inevitably worry about job security and people assumed that adding refugees somehow detracted from wealth that was meant to be spent towards other things, like street maintenance and healthcare. It wasn't true, as the funding came from a pool of money that was saved up over several years for just such a purpose. True or not, it was what people believed and there would always be civil unrest in response. Protests, riots and people violating laws, such as not allowing the newcomers into shops or using discriminatory hiring practices, would become a regular occurrence. These laws were traditionally monitored and enforced by the CAO, which when the village was not in an uproar was usually a manageable task.

While it would be nice to hire ninja to enforce such bylaws and deal with unrest The Hokage would only provide the manpower when it was specifically requested. Assistance from ninja was requested on a case-to-case basis. From my experience, this often turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. Several hours of paperwork was nothing but a hassle, especially when the end result was a handful of eleven-year old genin who didn't have any idea why enforcing such laws were important.
In fact, their obvious disinterest was usually less threatening and would only make the situation worse. No shopkeeper took a pissy civil servant with a clipboard and three indifferent rookie genin seriously. After all, why should they listen to you when the ninja you hired aren't even listening?

I recalled the last time the village had erupted into civil unrest.

After I'd been at the CAO for a month I'd had to wade through a mass of people more than once when Planning and Infrastructure Department had convinced The Hokage to approve an initiative that resulted in the demolishing of nearly three streets in the Namui District. The village had bought every building out from under the owners who were primarily elderly and so the act had been thought of as an abuse of authority. I had to admit it hadn't sat well with me either but I wasn't allowed to have opinions on such things. Planning and Infrastructure were not enemies you wanted to have since they were responsible for utilities as well as planning.

Walking through the protesters was easy. They were polite and despite the odd chant that would rouse me from my paperwork around lunchtime, they were rather quiet. The rioters that came later were jarring. The yelling, screaming and throwing things like broken glass shards or rocks, was impossible to walk though. The day I had dared to walk through it had been with Genna and his friend, Aoba Yamashiro, who had suddenly decided they had business on the fifth floor of the tower about the same time I had left for work. It wasn't surprising that the only people who seemed to show up for work were those who had ninja in the family, like me and Yuzuha. By the time the work day ended, I had found out a group of jonin had 'volunteered' to clear the rioters. I discovered that day that you didn't have to do the hours of paperwork if they volunteered.

But, except in circumstances like that, the ninja were primarily absent.

Without the convenient support of the village's ninja to assist with enforcement, the inevitable reaction of Konoha's citizens would put The Director into 'damage control' mode and most of her time would be spent handling such matters. It left her little time for other duties and as such, if she could avoid inviting such chaos into her village she would.

The Elder Council on the other hand were the advocates for ninja and knew ninja business, which usually meant they fell into the category of those who didn't fully understand how the refugee process worked, but thought they did. Their primary arguments were usually that the village could be using the allotted money elsewhere, that Konoha could not economically survive the influx or that the Civil Affairs Office would not handle the workload in its current state. Of course they never pushed the last one too hard because if they did The Director might pounce on the opportunity to ask for a bigger budget so she could hire more employees. To be fair, their opposition was usually due to a lack of education on such matters which was understandable. They were ninja and they were educated on military matters, not civilian matters. Of course with Konoha's government structure, lack of understanding unfortunately didn't mean that their opinion could be overlooked as they were Lord Hokage's appointed officials.

If the above parties simply agreed to let Yuzuha salvage the building for temporary housing, they were then making it easier for her to prove that the village could support and sustain the refugees. This would ultimately work against them.

As per a law originally passed by Lord Second; during peacetime if someone from the CAO could give solid proof that refugees could safely be sustained, the Hokage would approve the initiative. Say yes to the building, say yes to the refugees. This was something that The Council and The Director did not want to happen.

But with Yuzuha and I working together, she stood more of a chance. There was only one thing that The Elder Council and The Director wanted to deal with less than refugees and that was Naruto
Uzumaki.

If I could provide a convincing argument that this building was the answer to our Uzumaki housing concerns it might just be enough to change their minds; refugees or not. In fact, I was relying on the assumption that their desire to shove Uzumaki in a corner and forget about him, was greater than their desire to keep refugees out of the village. In order to present my argument, I would have to provide proof that the idea was feasible and not some pipe dream. Not only that, I would have to show them the documented proof that the traditional methods of caring for him were not working. With all the rejection letters I'd gotten that proved to be the easier task. Honestly, it had started out as a vague idea, but the more I had thought about it, the more viable it became.

If executed correctly; it could work. It could be the answer to all our problems. What was the saying; two birds with one stone?

Clearly, Yuzuha had thought so as well. Before she had left work last night, she had re-appeared at my desk and told me that she had arranged for us to meet with a building inspector and an appraiser first thing this morning. 'I'll come by your desk tomorrow and we can head out together. Bring a camera.' She'd told me, already half out the door. She'd left so fast I hadn't had the chance to tell her that I didn't own a camera.

This morning, I remembered to check my seat for rocks before I sat down.

At first I was pleasantly surprised to discover my seat was rockless.

Then I was suspicious.

I kept my face blank and looked around the room slowly, eyes searching for anything out of the ordinary. I didn't see anything.

I was being paranoid. It was fine. There's no rock on my seat, I should just be happy about that and sit down. It's fine.

"Just enjoy your rockless day." I muttered to myself, sitting down, but my eyes darted behind me instinctively.

"Enjoy your what?" A harsh voice asked almost as soon as my butt touched the chair and I jumped a little, eyes moving to where it had come from.

Tamaki was standing on the other side of my desk with a perturbed look on her face, something big, rectangular and brown shoved under her left arm. A long, brown leather strap connected to the mystery object and went over her opposite shoulder. I realized after a long moment that it was a camera. I could see the stand folded up and leaning against the archway. After seeing me jump, I saw the older woman grimaced even more. I didn't often see Tamaki upset, but when she was upset it was hard to miss. She had this way of pursing her lips and looking like a storm cloud that I found remarkable. It was like she could independently dim the lighting around her person.

"I said rockless day." I said more clearly, fighting a blush as I dreaded her asking exactly what having a 'rockless day' meant. I was a little humiliated by the whole situation since after day two it had become agonizingly predictable. Four days of falling for it was just too much.

For reasons I didn't understand, Tamaki blushed and suddenly looked embarrassed.

"Oh. Rockless. Sorry, I thought you said something else." Tamaki explained vaguely, suddenly refusing to meet my eyes.
There was silence for a long moment.

"What on earth did you think I said?" I asked, completely baffled. There weren't a lot of words that sounded like rockless let alone words that would make one of my closer friends look at me with her storm-cloud face.

"Nothing, it's nothing. I was just lost in my own world, thinking about something else that I was irritated about and I imagined that you said something else. It's nothing really." Tamaki said with a finality that told me that she would rather walk across hot coals then continue this conversation.

I was intrigued.

What rhymes with rockless?

"Lockless?" I couldn't help but ask in a monotone voice and almost instantly Tamaki's storm cloud face came back.

"No."

"Sockless?"

"No."

"Monogamous?"

"That doesn't even rhyme."

"Caucus?"

Tamaki flinched.

"Kiyoko, I'm serious. Drop it." She said firmly and I bit the inside of my cheek.

I wasn't dropping it; I was just going to postpone it until our next trip to Ichiraku's and Tamaki's next bottle of sake.

"Come to think of it, why are we enjoying a rockless day?" Tamaki asked and it was my turn to grimace. I quickly realized what I'd done and moved my face back into its usual passive mask but it was too late, Tamaki had already seen it. Her eyes widened and a cheshire smile slowly crept onto her face.

"Did Kiyoko Shiranui actually just pull a face?" She asked with a tone that told me she was sinfully delighted at the prospect.

She looked about to continue teasing me but was interrupted by the sound of heels clicking towards us. As expected, Yuzuha appeared in the entranceway.

"Alright, squad." She began almost immediately with a stern look on her face, "ready to go? We've got a lot to do in the next six hours."

"Alright, squad." She began almost immediately with a stern look on her face, "ready to go? We've got a lot to do in the next six hours."

"I just need to grab my journal." I said quickly, mostly to remind myself not to forget it more than anything. Before I had left last night, I had stored the Uzumaki journal in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet, hidden under layers of other manila folders full of blank paper. I didn't have any other case files other than Uzumaki's but it felt weird having an empty filing cabinet so I'd improvised. I needed manila folders and I needed blank paper, when put together they looked like case files and made my filing cabinet look less empty. It was also the only drawer of the filing cabinet that locked
and I kept the key stored away safely in my briefcase. It wasn't like it would keep prying ninja out but I was more concerned about nosy co-workers than prying ninja at this point. Uzumaki's case file was also in there but at this time I found the journal I'd compiled more valuable, not to mention travel sized.

I was in and out of the bottom drawer in a flash, locking it again and making sure I tucked the key away in its proper place. I had remained sitting and had bent at the waist to reach the bottom drawer and as I was on my way up I noticed that there was...something on the handle of the top drawer. Curious and forgetting I had an audience; I bravely swiped my hand across the strange substance.

I pulled my hand back and stared at it for a moment, moving my thumb to smear the substance around in my palm. It was...dust? I looked back at the top drawer and the way it was smeared it looked like...dried mud? It hadn't been there yesterday.

I stared at the handle with a blank look on my face.

Then I yanked the drawer open.

That turned out to be a mistake.

A lot of different things happened all at once.

Something brown and slimy sprung from the drawer onto my face. I panicked and flew backwards, falling out of my chair with an indignant screech. In the background I heard accompanying squeals from Tamaki, who I'm sure, was startled more by my sudden reaction than anything else. Yuzuha was silent and I couldn't see her but after a year of working for her I could picture the questioning look on her face. I heard my chair clack to the ground beside me, its balance destroyed by my sudden fall. When I fell I had twisted and was lying on my stomach, my hands out in an attempt to brace myself that had been futile. When my eyes came back into focus I was able to actually see the cause for this ruckus.

On the floor in front of me was a brown toad, about the size of my fist. It stared at me and I stared back. It blinked, I blinked. Then it moved one of its little arms up and I had a moment of mixed emotions where I was terrified it was going to jump at me but at the same time found it rather cute. In a mucusy, icky sort of way.

Even so I did my best to lean as far away from it as possible. I didn't want it on my face.

Alerted by the commotion, I heard the quick footsteps of what I assumed were the chunin guards. I let my head drop against the floor in humiliation and tried to make myself look as small as possible.

"We're fine." I heard Yuzuha's voice say with a hint of amusement.

The footsteps retreated almost immediately, although a little more slowly than they had come. I imagined they hadn't been surprised that there hadn't been any real danger; this wasn't the first time there had been a false alarm and it wouldn't be the last. I remember once when I was moonlighting in Registrations, someone had moved a bunch of old scrolls and a mouse had popped out. I had been startled, but not nearly to the extent of several of the others. I had been amazed with how swiftly a bunch of old ladies in their sixties could hop up onto their desks. The chorus of screams had drawn in, not only the guards from the main entrance, but The Director's as well. To their credit, the two young chunin had done their best to hide their annoyance, caught the mouse and thrown it out the window. I thought that had been a little harsh but then again, these were ninja we were talking about - assigned to guard a bunch of civil servants or not.
"What's with the toad?" Tamaki asked as she watched me cautiously move to stand up, I was worried if I moved too suddenly the toad would pounce. I could see that Tamaki was still visibly flustered, her cheeks scarlet and blotchy. It was good to know I wasn't alone in my humiliation.

Meanwhile, Yuzuha was standing off to the side with a look that said she was thoroughly entertained. A smirk was beginning to pull at the corners of her lips and her brown eyes were widened and bright. If I hadn't known better, I would have assumed she was responsible for the prank but Yuzuha wasn't the pranking sort. It had a lot of planning, which she liked, but there was also a lot of work. She had enough work as it was, she wasn't about to add to it.

That didn't mean that she couldn't find the fact that I had been assaulted by a toad and my reaction to said assault hilarious.

I stood for a moment and stared down at the toad. I blinked, it blinked. There was a long silence before Yuzuha finally moved, scooped the toad up in her hand and moved towards the window at the back of the room. It took me a moment to realize what she was doing.

"Don't throw it out." I said suddenly, which stopped her halfway across the room. She looked at me over her shoulder, frozen and with an eyebrow raised questioningly. I scrambled around and found an empty, rinsed instant ramen cup in Rumi's trash can. I shook the cup and realizing what I meant, Yuzuha reluctantly came back and plopped the toad in the cup. I put my hand on the top, set it down on my desk and slid a file folder on top to keep it from jumping out.

I wasn't sure where I was going to release it but I didn't want to drop it out the fourth floor window. I doubted it had ended up in my filing cabinet of its own initiative.

"I wonder how it got in here." Tamaki questioned aloud as all three of us stared at the cup. The toad seemed as if it was content with its current situation and didn't appear to be attempting escape.

"Well, as much as I'd like to stand around and question how a toad got into Kiyoko's case files that will have to wait. If we want to get all this done by six o'clock we'd better get moving. The inspector is probably there already." Yuzuha said with urgency and it was enough to get my mind off of the recent toad incident.

"Call me stupid but why exactly did I have to steal this camera from Shared Services? There wasn't anyone there so I couldn't sign it out." Tamaki asked, rubbing the shoulder that the strap was digging into. The camera did not look light. They were amazing inventions but honestly I wouldn't be very interested in them until they found a way to make them...smaller. Not to mention the stand, the film and all the other equipment was a pain to carry.

"You didn't steal it from Shared Services." Yuzuha emphasized, "You borrowed it. It's not like they'll notice it gone anyway..." The last part was muttered quietly but I heard my former supervisor nonetheless. I had to fight a smile that was tugging on the corner of my lip.

Shared Services was exactly what it sounded like. They were the department responsible for monitoring all the equipment, tools and materials that the CAO shared amongst all the departments. There was a check-in, check out system that was laughably inaccurate mostly due to the fact that the department's employees were older than Lord Hokage and could barely remember what day it was. That wasn't their only job of course; Shared Services was also tasked with creating all of the different forms that were used throughout the office. They were much better at that aspect of their job.

"Our goal is to meet with Lord Hokage, The Director and The Elder Council at 6 o'clock. I imagine Yuzuha wants pictures of the building to use as proofs during the presentation." I added, knowing where Yuzuha's train of thought had been.
"How are you going to get the film developed in time?" Tamaki asked, a little more familiar with cameras and their intricacies than me. I awaited Yuzuha's answer; would the pictures even develop in time? Just how long did that take?

"We'll take the pictures of the key areas of the building as soon as we get there then I'll send you, Tamaki, to get them developed. There's a place in the Kamotsu District that can do the developing. Remind me to give you the address. It shouldn't take more than a few hours to have them develop all the pictures. I already warned the owner ahead of time and he's aware it's a rush order. He's agreed to prioritize our photographs as long as we get there before 11." Yuzuha was in planning mode; her voice had become stern and robotic as a result.

I listened intently, waiting to see what she had devised.

"Kiyoko and I will meet with the inspector and the appraiser. I've scheduled them one right after the other. Kiyoko, you focus on taking notes about anything that will help your case, let me worry about the immigration aspect." I realized she was reminding me because my mind was trained to automatically think about the immigration aspect. Right, all I had to think about was how this building was going to help Uzumaki. Yuzuha would worry about the refugees. "Then we'll split up. I've arranged for a genin team to meet me at the gate with another camera, they'll escort me to the refugee camp out near Tomita Village. I'll take pictures of the state of the camp."

The Land of Snow refugees were a relatively new problem within the last few months but it's not like it had never happened before. When I had been first trained, Yuzuha had shown me some old case files that contained pictures of the camps from a decade ago.

There had been an influx of people fleeing from The Land of Iron, coming with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The daimyo of The Land of Fire had allowed them to squat on his lands, but refused to help them for political reasons. The people of the land similarly often refused to trade with them, offer services or employment. Konoha similarly refused to process them, unwilling to anger The Land of Iron whose land was traditionally neutral ground for the hidden villages. They had been there for almost two years before the daimyo had conceded to begin processing them as citizens and they had lived in horrid conditions during that time. Disease, lice and other vermin had run rampant. The people, especially the children, were emaciated due to living in poverty and filth for so long.

Obviously, Yuzuha didn't want it to get to that point but was going to do her best to take photos that demonstrated that staying in the camps was not a solution for those people.

"While I'm doing that, Kiyoko, you can start arranging for a cleaning service and getting some solid ideas about supervision for the kid. Tamaki, if you finish with the photos you can probably meet up and help her. Once I return to the village I'll get my photos developed and we'll all meet in my office at 4:30. If everything goes well, we'll have a few hours to prepare for the meeting with Lord Hokage." She explained while Tamaki and I both nodded along.

"That's a good plan and all," Tamaki said after there was a moment of silence, "and don't get me wrong: I'm game. But what if this place turns out to be a total bust? What do we do then?"

There was a long pause as Yuzuha and I digested that, eyeing each other carefully, seeing which of us would respond. The building not being suitable was within the realm of possibility, but for Yuzuha and I this was our only option. Maybe we were getting too excited. Maybe we were getting our hopes up but…

"It's the only plan we have," I said with sudden conviction, "it has to work. We'll make it work."

I noticed that they both looked at me levelly, before nodding in agreement.
"Well alright then." Tamaki said, "Let's go."

Without any further conversation the two older women turned and left the department, leaving me hesitating by my desk for a moment. I couldn't help feeling like with having our plan all laid out before us, I was forgetting something important. I took a single step toward the door and then stopped.

Ah, that was it.

I quickly ripped a blank piece of parchment from the journal and jotted a note with the nearest pencil I could find, which ended up accidentally ripping through the paper.

Rumi,

If Ms Sazaki comes by, tell her I'll be back around 4:00 and will speak with her then.

- Kiyoko

I folded it neatly so it was private, but still clearly a note addressed to her, moved towards her desk and put it down so she would easily see it.

Then I took a deep breath.

"Kiyoko, let's go!" I heard Tamaki's voice drift from wherever she was standing. It sounded like she and Yuzuha might have already made it to the fourth floor entrance.

This was it.

XxX

"I think Yuzuha should wait until after we present the physical aspects of the building, the appraisal and the room we chose for Uzumaki to say anything about the refugees." I said to Tamaki as I leafed through the photographs that we had taken of the building.

It was around 4:30 and we had only just arrived back at the tower, which was just as empty as when we had been there earlier in the morning. Most of the departments arrived by 8 and left by 4 o'clock; Immigration, Children & Youth Services and Healthcare were the exceptions.

"No doubt that's already the plan. I'm sure Yuzuha's going to use the Uzumaki thing to nab the building. Then once she has something in writing shell say by the way, since we have the space now..." Tamaki said the last part in her best imitation of the Nara's calculating voice. "She'll try to pretend it's a convenient coincidence and not something she was planning the whole time. Of course everyone will know the truth so I don't know why she plays coy like that. She might as well just come out and say haha I outsmarted you, deal with it."

The building was rough but just like Yuzuha and I had hoped, was salvageable.

The Sakata District was one of the oldest in the village and had only begun getting refurbished by the property owners within the last five years. Once it had begun to get refurbished the process had run quickly, new buildings replacing old ones almost overnight. Most of the buildings were now new or updated, with the exception of a few old apartment complexes that people had begun to regard as eyesores. Unable to keep up with the rest of the district's sudden renewal and keep the rent affordable, many of the landholders of said apartments had decided to sell.

126 Harumi Place was no exception.
The owner had other business ventures they would rather invest their money in so instead of refurbishing the old building, they were choosing to sell it. The inspector had given it a clean bill of health, with the exception of the odd cosmetic issue here and there. When we met with the appraiser, they had given a fair assessment of the building's value which was surprisingly a bigger price tag then the current owner's asking price. That would be a huge bonus when trying to convince the village to buy the building.

Tamaki had taken very flattering pictures of the apartment complex and if it weren't for the fact she was so good at subtle interrogation, I'd say she missed her calling. I had chosen a small, outward facing studio apartment on the top floor as my ideal for Uzumaki. Since it was abandoned but still had some furniture, I had done my best to stage it for the photos.

It was in decent shape, certainly not the most horrible apartment in the building. Actually it was one of the better ones. Being a studio apartment it also wasn't too big, so it wouldn't be a hassle for someone to clean in a few hours or less. Cosmetic upkeep would also be cheap.

Once we all parted ways, I began making my way around the village and speaking with the different cleaning services I had found in the business registry yesterday and written in my Uzumaki journal. Once a week, no I'd even take once every two weeks, after all how much dirt could one little six year old generate? As we discussed it, I would eventually have to reveal who the service was for and then get the door slammed in my face.

It wasn't until Tamaki showed up, her first task completed, that we managed to find someone and it had been a complete fluke. Tamaki was more conspicuous than I was and when she found out I'd had doors slammed in my face began to cause a scene in the middle of the street. After a few moments of her ranting, a woman that appeared to be a few years older than Yuzuha approached us. She informed us that she had overheard most of what was going on as a result of Tamaki's loud protests. She stated that she wasn't a professional cleaner, but she lived in the Sakata District and would be willing to clean the apartment once a week.

I had stared at her dumbly for a few moments, before reiterating that she would be cleaning Naruto Uzumaki's apartment.

She responded that she was an ex-kunoichi who was the current late-night bartender at Akkinomi. This statement implied that she'd done far scarier things then cleaning a demon boy's apartment. Forget being a kunoichi, Akkinomi was the most dangerous bar in Konoha to the point that civilians detoured around it for several blocks. Even some jonin refused to drink there. Genma had once said that he'd only go drinking at Akkinomi the day he decided he was no longer attached to all his appendages and wouldn't mind losing a few.

She informed me that she would be fine as long as I made sure the kid wasn't there when she came to clean. I was ecstatic at my change in fortunes and hoping she was serious I was quick to write down her name and mailing address in my little journal. I shook her hand, still praying that it wasn't a joke, and told her I'd be in contact to make further arrangements.

She nodded her head, turned and left without another word.

Tamaki and I had stared after her blankly for a long moment before moving on to the next thing on my list.

"I can't believe after all that fuss someone just walked right up to us and offered." Tamaki said suddenly, her thoughts clearly going where mine had. Both of us were still a little in shock, even though it had been at least a few hours since.
"Well, she only walked up to us after you shouted to the entire district what was going on." I said bluntly. I wasn't mad but I didn't understand how she could be so loud. It must be exhausting.

"Hey," Tamaki began, "I got the job done. Just goes to show you should work with me more often."

I stopped walking for a moment, looking at her with a slightly puzzled expression. Where did that come from?

"Tamaki...I only work with you."

It was true. Back in Immigration, Tamaki had been my preferred partner for interviews and projects. It hadn't been a secret to anyone. Tamaki suddenly looked embarrassed and refused to meet my eyes. The more I stared at her, trying to figure out what she had meant, the more I noticed that she appeared to be growing more gloomy by the second.

"Yeah well, you don't. Not anymore." She muttered and it almost seemed like she was pouting.

It occurred to me that she might be trying to say that she missed me. She might be trying to say that she didn't like that we weren't going to be working together anymore. Did it really bother her that much? I thought briefly about asking directly but decided not to almost as soon as I opened my mouth.

"Does this have something to do with the rockless day thing?" I asked instead.

Tamaki choked on air and her face went beat red.

"No, that was something completely different! I already said it had nothing to do with you." She spluttered, "Would you leave it alone!"

She may have been flustered but that meant she wasn't sad anymore which had was my goal all along.

I began walking again and made my way to the opening of the Children and Youth Services Department. Once we got there, I stuck my head through the archway and scanned the room. I saw Rumi with her head bent over her desk, clearly working on something. I didn't see Ms Sazaki and so I decided that since she wasn't there, that was a good thing and to leave it at that.

I retreated back into the hallway and made my way to Yuzuha's office, hoping she was already there so we could begin our final preparations.

XxX

Meeting with The Hokage, The Elder Council and The Director had been challenging but also somehow strangely invigorating. What I thought would be a dry presentation on why Yuzuha and I needed an old building to be purchased and how we planned on using that building had actually been a lively debate.

I'd never had to debate in my job before but it was…exciting.

I would bring up a point and then a member of the council would try telling me why what I wanted to do wasn't feasible. Then I would show them proof that, no, what I wanted to do was feasible because I was already in the process of doing it.

Like hiring a cleaning service. Like my already thoroughly planned supervision schedule. Like my already planned and allocated budget.
All I needed was that building.

Just like Tamaki and I had suspected, getting everyone to reach a decision on keeping the building by using Uzumaki alone had been rather easy. All things considered. Then before the ink was dry on the contract that had been laid out before them, Yuzuha had pulled several boards with photographs of the refugee camp near Tomita out of nowhere.

Before she even began, The Hokage had looked at both Tamaki and I and dismissed us. I had hesitated but the look on Yuzuha's face told me she had suspected this all along. She was ready to face them all alone and get this done sooner rather than later.

I had done my part, not only for Uzumaki, but for Yuzuha and the refugees as well.

In a strange, roundabout sort of way, I realized that Naruto Uzumaki was actually to thank for all of this. He was the reason we were able to save the building at all. Over five hundred people were about to owe the little demon boy for their fresh start in life and none of them would ever know it. They may even, in a few months or a few years following their arrival, come to hate him too.

There was suddenly a bitter taste in the back of my throat that lingered.

I hadn't been until that moment but suddenly I was very, very tired. Since my presentation boards were wedged behind where Yuzuha was standing and I wouldn't be able to grab them without disrupting her, I decided I would just leave them there. I had no further use for them anyway.

I hadn't won the war but I'd won a battle.

I tried to hide the fact that my shoulders were beginning to slump and turned to quietly make my way out of Lord Hokage's office. Just as I reached the door, I felt like I was being watched and glanced back. The Hokage was staring at me with a knowing, pleased expression from underneath the rim of his large hat. He nodded to me respectfully.

I blinked, not sure if I had actually saw Lord Hokage nod at me.

Whether I was hallucinating or not, I decided it would be rude not to nod back, so I did.

He sent me a fatherly smiled that sent a shiver down my spine.

I felt my eyes widen and unsure what else to do I fled the room, refusing to look back until I heard Tamaki close the door behind us. I wasn't sure if The Hokage smiling at me was a good thing or not. People were hard to understand and maybe he was the sort who smiled when he was displeased. No, that wouldn't make sense. He wouldn't be displeased with me for doing my job, would he? I mean I know it wasn't a foster home but…

I decided there was no point in worrying about it now.

It was done.

Tamaki and I didn't say much to one another on the way down the stairs. As we walked passed the fourth floor on the outside staircase, I remembered that my briefcase was still at my desk. I had chosen to leave it behind this morning. I also had my brown Uzumaki journal shoved in the crook of my arm and with all the detailed information inside it; I would need to lock it away in my filing cabinet again.

"I'm going to go in. I need to get my briefcase." I told Tamaki, who was already quite a few steps lower than me.
She stopped where she was and looked back, her brows drawing together. It was well past 8 o'clock and it was getting dark. While there were guards on the doors to the fourth floor, they may as well have been faceless mannequins for all the protective presence they offered. It was still unsettling to enter the empty tower by yourself and no one liked doing it.

"I can come with you." She offered.

"No, it's fine. You said Idate had his first test today, right? I'm sure you want to hear how he did." At his age and given he hadn't been in the Academy long, I was sure whatever test he had been given had been easy enough but it was exciting news nonetheless.

"Okay. If you're sure…" She replied, although I could tell she was a little torn. My reminder about Idate being eagerly awaiting her return had made her eyes brighten and I could tell that was where she wanted to be. On the other hand, she didn't want to leave me to go into the dark scary fourth floor by myself.

I just nodded, waved and turned to enter.

The guards didn't seem very surprised to see me and didn't seem to really care about my presence in general.

I speed walked to my department a little surprised to see a dim light on.

Was someone working late? No one worked this late.

Except me. And Yuzuha. And Tamaki. And The Director. Apparently.

I decided that more people worked late then I had originally believed.

I wasn't sure who I expected to find but what I did find had me stopping dead in the archway that led to the department. I clenched the door frame with one hand, preventing myself from either moving backwards or forwards. I wasn't sure what to do; I had a sudden fight or flight reaction that I had to pacify.

There, sitting in one of my guest chairs with his head resting on my desk, was Naruto Uzumaki.

And he was fast asleep.
His presence at my desk, sleeping or not, had startled me more than I would ever admit aloud. But here, alone in the darkened Children and Youth Services Department, with only myself and the sleeping demon container as company, I was free to react as I pleased.

That reaction was to be alarmed.

I panicked. I was scared. Who could blame me?

What was he doing here? I hadn't seen Ms Sazaki at four and so I'd assumed she was giving me until tomorrow morning or Rumi would come find me if she arrived. Maybe the woman had been here and even though it was after four, Rumi hadn't realized that she could come get me. I thought back to my note;

If Ms Sazaki comes by, tell her I'll be back around 4:00 and will speak with her then.

Again, I was not a stupid woman, but I realized only then that my note hadn't specified that I would be in the office and available after four. It hadn't clearly said that I wanted her to come get me if the woman appeared. In my haste to get started, I may have generated another problem for myself.

I may not have been a stupid woman by default, but I had learned over the last week or so that I was capable of very stupid things.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Of course the woman had dumped the nine-tails kid here. The agreement had been seven days; no more and no less. Mitsuko Sazaki wasn't about to keep him for a spare night out of the goodness of her own heart, not with how haggard and exhausted she was. It was naive for me to have even entertained the thought. The fact that he was left here should not have been a surprise.

I clung to the entryway almost in desperation, willing myself to get over my fear and approach the sleeping child. I couldn't get myself to move forward. I was careful that the only indication of my fear was the slight shaking of my knees, which I couldn't control no matter how hard I tried. My face was a practiced, impartial mask.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, staring at him and willing myself to calm down, but after a few long minutes the shaking stopped as my mind and body adjusted to his presence.

When that happened, I was finally able to think more clearly.
I stared at his tiny form, taking in the position he had fallen asleep in. It looked like sleep had unexpectedly overtaken him. He appeared to have been sitting in one of the guest chairs and then he had fallen forward, his head making contact with the desk. His face was turned to the side and his chubby cheek was pressed against the tabletop. It was covered in drool which was also cascading down onto the desk, forming a small pool.

He looked like a sleeping child.

No, I had to remind myself, he was a sleeping child.

What did I do?

Should I just leave him to sleep there? No, I couldn't do that. Even if I did manage to get all the way home without turning back to check on him I wouldn't be able to sleep. Something about leaving Uzumaki to sleep in the abandoned fourth floor did not sit right with me.

Should I take him to 126 Harumi Place for the night? No, I couldn't do that either. While the apartment I'd chosen for Uzumaki had a few leftover pieces of furniture, one of which was a bed, they were probably far from hygienic. Tamaki had sent a letter to the woman we'd met in the street this afternoon and, to our surprise, she had responded immediately. She had offered to go clean the apartment tonight before her shift at Akkinomi so it could be ready by tomorrow. One of her conditions had been that she would never have to see Uzumaki so I couldn't risk running into her and breaching our verbal agreement before even a day had passed. Luck had been on our side when we met her and I didn't want to risk losing her. I'd had enough doors slammed in my face to last me a lifetime.

Not only that but the inspector had pointed out that the current owner had the utilities shut off since the building wasn't in current use. Taking care of Uzumaki in a dirty apartment with no electricity or water was not a pleasing prospect. That was another thing; Lord Hokage was sending a couple of chunin to the current owner tonight to have the paperwork signed so the village could officially take possession of the building. This would come as a surprise to the owner, since they weren't expecting it and it would likely take them most of the night to be persuaded that this offer was legitimate and sign the release. If I went there with Uzumaki before that happened, I would be trespassing.

I had been certain the good news that I had found somewhere else for him to live, complete with photographs as proof, would have been enough to have Ms Sazaki keep him until tomorrow morning should I have met with her. At least that had been my plan.

Well, I still wasn't sure what I should do but one thing I knew for certain; I couldn't stand here all night.

I glanced around the room for a clock, noticing that it was now going on 9:30. At least thirty minutes had passed since I had come in to get my briefcase. If I didn't hurry and come to a decision, the chunin would wander in to check on me and I would have an unwelcome audience.

I swallowed and took a few cautious steps forward.

I still wasn't sure what I was going to do when the boy was awake but I had to do something.

When I was close enough, I began to lean down to shake his shoulder but I couldn't get my hand to touch him. It stopped just over his shoulder and hovered, shaking slightly. I stayed like that for a few long moments, trying to will my hand forward, until it became apparent that I was not going to be able to touch him. I couldn't. I just couldn't.
I may see him as a kid but I knew what was inside him was dangerous and that scared me. I had learned a long time ago that being scared was only human; it was natural to be scared of something that could and would kill you.

When we were little, Atsuko used to tease me by telling me that our father's old radio was haunted. The thought would absolutely terrify me. I would go to bed at night and lie there awake, scared and jumping at every little noise. After a few hours of that, I would finally stress myself to the point that I would cry and run to Genma's room, curling up on the end of his bed with my blanket and pillow. After that happening almost every night for two weeks, Genma had finally told me something that I had never forgotten;

It's okay to be scared. Everyone gets scared sometimes, no matter who they are. I get scared, my sensei gets scared - I'm sure there's even something that scares Lord Hokage. What's important is how you behave when you're scared. You need to learn to master and control it so you can continue to get things done. That's what courage is.

Remembering that, I pulled my hand back and sighed. I may not be able to touch him but there were other ways to wake him up. After all, I needed to control my fear so I could get things done. I was good at that; getting things done, that is.

I awkwardly raised my left foot, wobbling slightly due to having poor balance and nudged him in the stomach with the tip of my sandal.

He twitched slightly, but didn't wake up.

I nudged him again.

"Hey, you." I said for good measure, my voice a little stern. When I put my foot back down and re-established my balance, I put my hands on my hips and made sure to keep my face a passive mask. I was going for an impassive 'schoolteacher who caught their student sleeping in class' sort of look.

The boy startled awake and went from a dead sleep to standing nearly three feet away from me on the other side of my desk. How he had moved away from me so quickly I wasn't sure but I was a little impressed. Also a little perturbed; he was acting as if I was something scary. His little blue eyes were wide and terrified, staring up at me both startled and distrustful. His little arms were crossed in a protective manner over his midsection and he was breathing heavily. I was a little stern but I hadn't meant to be scary.

Did other children find me scary too? Or was it just him? I hadn't been around enough of them to notice. Maybe it was just Uzumaki but there was also the possibility that I had this effect on all children.

Even though it was dark in the room, I noticed that the kid began to shake slightly, like I had been doing only minutes before him.

Or...maybe it was just Uzumaki.

I wasn't completely ignorant, I had no doubt he had been mistreated by adults in the past who had lashed out in hatred or fear. Adults who obviously hadn't had the same talk about 'courage' with their big brothers. I was scared of him, but that only meant I would be even more careful about controlling my behaviour. The last thing I would do is lash out and try to hurt him. I wouldn't do anything to provoke what seemed like a contained and dormant demon. Attacking or even yelling at him seemed like something stupid. I may have been prone to doing stupid things lately but nothing that stupid.
In a way, his reaction reminded me of what people always said about the wolves that lived in the forest just outside the village. I'd never been outside the village personally, but I'd had friends in Koba who would go out to some of the gambling towns nearby on school holidays. Every time someone talked about leaving the village, inevitably someone would pipe up and say;

Respect the wolves but don't run in terror. Remember, they're more scared of you than you are of them.

I had always been skeptical. They were rumored to be almost bigger than the Inuzuka's hounds and combined with giant fangs, I believed that they wouldn't or shouldn't fear anything.

Just like one would assume that a boy with a demon contained inside them wouldn't fear anything.

"U-Um," The boy began, breaking my train of thought, "I'm sorry."

Just like the other day his voice was timid and I noticed as soon as he had gotten over his fright, he'd moved his eyes so they wouldn't meet my own. I was a little baffled. What was he sorry for? He was a six-year-old boy and I'm sure he wasn't here of his own volition. I was likely more to blame for his presence here than anyone else as it had been my absent-minded neglect of Ms Sazaki that had lead to this.

For a reason I didn't understand, his apology had caused a small twinge in my chest. It wasn't quite a pain, but it wasn't like it felt good either. To be honest it felt a little like indigestion; a persistent ache. I chose to do my best to ignore it.

"Don't be sorry," I told him simply, keeping my face straight, "just tell me why you're sleeping at my desk."

"Ms Sazaki sent me." He told me.

I thought so. But something about the way he had said it didn't sit right with me.

"What do you mean sent you?" I was quick to ask in response, emphasizing the word sent. It was the one that had stuck out to me the most when he said it.

"This morning she said I couldn't live there anymore so she told me to come here." He explained, sounding very much like the child that every now and then I had to remind myself he was. The way he said it was very matter of fact and he didn't seem to be upset nor find anything wrong with the fact that he had essentially been told to 'hit the road'. That annoying ache grew and I had to fight for a moment to keep my face straight.

"So, Ms Sazaki didn't come with you?" I reiterated.

He shook his head, confirming my suspicion. Of course Rumi didn't see Ms Sazaki today, the woman hadn't even bothered to show up. I suddenly decided that I wasn't entirely to blame for this situation. I was aware she was at the end of her rope, but the woman could have at least escorted him to the office today. Maybe if she had I'd have known he was here. Still, I wasn't going to waste my time being upset with a woman I likely would never see again.

"When did you get here?" I asked.

He shrugged. Typical. I may not know a lot about kids but even I knew that they weren't very good with dates or time. That's what their parents or guardians were for; keeping track of time. I hadn't been an adult until a year ago and still admittedly had a fresh memory of childhood. It had taken me until I was thirteen to discover the wonders of the calendar and pocket watch. Even though I hadn't
seen her in almost a year, I had a feeling Atsuko still hadn't discovered them.

I was quiet after that for a few moments, staring at him as he slowly began to calm down.

To be honest it was because I wasn't sure what to ask him next. While I mulled that over in my head, he surprised me by asking me a question.

"Did you like them?" It was sudden and I raised an eyebrow.

His eyes flicked to the corner of my desk, to where my small collection of rocks was sitting.

I was more than a little shocked as it occurred to me that they weren't a prank or someone attempting to be vindictive. Those rocks had been...gifts? Gifts from Naruto Uzumaki? My chest hurt more and I swallowed in a vain attempt at alleviating the ache. What was I supposed to say to that? I was paralyzed with uncertainty at the situation I suddenly found myself in.

He didn't give me very long to respond, the light in his little blue eyes dimming slightly.

"Oh, I thought so. I heard a guy in the market say that girls liked 'big rocks' but the ones he was selling were a lot sparklier. I don't know what he was talking about though because all of his sparkly rocks were really tiny. They weren't big at all. I looked for bigger ones but the ones I found weren't sparkly enough. I thought they were pretty though..." He said glumly. Diamonds. The man he had saw was probably a jeweler trying to sell diamonds but of course to an errant six year old, he wouldn't see the difference in value between a pretty rock he found on the ground and something like that.

After a moment, he seemed to remember something and looked a little happier, "but that's why I got you the jumpy thing instead. Did you like that one? The guy with the brown hair said that girls like pets but the one he had was really big and had a long tail and it made a weird chattery noise so I didn't think you'd want it at your desk." I wasn't sure which 'guy with the brown hair' he was talking about but it sounded like he was trying to sell a monkey. There were two licensed monkey vendors at the market that the kid could have stumbled across. The kid had been right, I had no desire to have a monkey at my desk. Though I didn't really want a toad either.

A... 'jumpy thing' as he had called it.

Naruto Uzumaki had gotten me a toad for a gift. I continued to stare, not trusting myself to do or say anything. My eyes went to the ramen cup on my desk, still with the case folder resting on top. I assumed my slimy captive was still there and I had admittedly forgotten all about it with everything that had happened today.

"Why did you want to get me a gift?" I finally chose to ask him. It completely astounded me that he had, for whatever reason, wanted to get me a gift. What on earth made him want to do that? I'd only met the kid once and I had done my best to be indifferent to his presence.

He blushed, his pudgy, whiskered cheeks growing a little red as he again refused to meet my eyes. He was being bashful now? I was even more stunned.

"Because...well...because you talked to me. And you gave me tea. You didn't ignore me. All Ms Sazaki does is ignore me...except when she's yelling at me. Same with the others. And, you're the first suit-lady that even looked at me. All the others wouldn't even look at me it was like they didn't want me to exist." He was perceptive, for a six-year-old, as I'm sure that's exactly what his caseworkers had been thinking. I assumed that by 'suit-ladies' he meant the caseworkers he'd had before. I wasn't sure I liked being called a suit-lady, mostly because it was very close to being called
a 'Skirt' but I recognized that the error was innocent. There was no way he was aware of the derogatory term for civilian women. Not to mention he was right; most CAO employees wore the standard skirt suit. I was one of the few that didn't.

"Thank you for the gifts, Uzumaki." I finally chose to say, fighting to keep my face straight. I wasn't sure which expression was fighting to make itself visible, but it wasn't welcome. I decided to thank him because, well, it was rude not to thank someone for a gift. I had been raised better than that and it occurred to me that I was probably one of the few examples of good manners he was going to be getting from here on out. "But...try not to put them on my chair anymore." I added quickly.

I was met with a glowing smile in response. My chest clenched again and I fought back a strangled sound that started to build in my throat. I swear, this kid was killing me.

"And no more um, pets, please." I chose to say when my first stipulation had been received kindly.

"Why not?" He asked, tilting his head. The question was innocent.

I couldn't just say because I didn't want an icky, slimy toad living in my filing cabinet. Well, I could, and I thought about it but something was holding me back. He had finally stopped shivering completely and wasn't acting timid. I don't know why I really didn't want to see the timidity resurface but...but I just didn't.

"Well, because..." I looked down at the ramen cup again and gestured to it, coming up with something on the fly, "because Gama-chan's going to start missing his friends and family at the pond. As much fun as he had hanging out here all day this isn't where he belongs. In fact, we should probably take him back to wherever you found him."

A thoughtful look came over the boy's face.

"Gama-chan has a family?" He said, adopting the random name I had made up without question.

"Uh, well yeah." I mean, I didn't know for sure. Female toads could produce 30,000 eggs in their lifetime, so it was a safe bet he had at least one relative in whatever puddle the kid found him in. Did toads miss their family like humans did? Probably not. But I couldn't admit that now. "Most people and animals have a family of some kind. In fact, toads usually have big families. They can have hundreds of siblings." I said, unable to stop the random fact from spewing forward.

The kid seemed to digest this for a long moment and I wondered if I had made him sad by mentioning family.

Suddenly, he looked up and gave me another big smile.

"Okay, I'll take Gama-chan home to see his brothers and sisters then!" He exclaimed and automatically began to move towards the desk. Realizing what he was doing I went and snapped up the ramen cup, putting my hand over the top to keep Gama-chan inside.

The kid looked at me, with a slightly puzzled expression.

"You can't take him back tonight." I told him. I didn't want him out wandering around in the middle of the night. It just didn't sit right with me, "We'll take him back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" The boy asked, eyes squinting and looking confused. He looked around and seemed to be realizing for the first time that it was nighttime.

Yeah, tomorrow. Which brought me back to my original question about just what exactly I was
going to do with the kid tonight.

I swallowed uncomfortably as a feeling of fear began to slowly creep back into the forefront of my mind. It wasn't until that moment that I realized that I hadn't been afraid for the last bit of my conversation with the kid. It was like through speaking with him, I had forgotten I had ever been afraid at all. I might even go so far as to say there was a part of me that forgot just who exactly he was and what was inside him. How could I possibly have forgotten that?

Because he's a kid first and a demon container second, I told myself. Which gave me a sense of clarity that made the growing fear easier to chase away again.

What's important is how you behave when you're scared. You need to learn to master and control it so you can continue to get things done. That's what courage is.

Courage. Well, I certainly had something I needed to get done. I had been given one job; keep a roof over Uzumaki's head. It looked like, for tonight, I was going to have to compromise so I could do that job. Fear of the demon container, albeit well-contained, be damned.

Without another word I went around to where my briefcase was and struggled to pick it up as I was still attempting to keep my hand over the ramen cup. I took a deep breath.

"Well, come on." I said bluntly, turning and walking towards the door.

"Where are we going?" Uzumaki asked, following me very slowly and quite a few paces behind.

"To my place. I think sleeping on my couch is probably more comfortable then sleeping on my desk." I said, although each word was a struggle. I wasn't sure this was a smart idea, but it was the only one I had that was remotely operable.

I didn't look at him. I just kept walking. I heard his footsteps pick up speed and was startled by a sudden weight that pulled on the hem of my skirt. My head snapped down and I stared at the top of a blond head. The boy had the hem of my skirt clenched in one of his tiny hands and was, again, refusing to meet my eyes.

Well, I didn't want him to get lost and I wasn't about to hold his hand, I still didn't think I could touch him skin to skin. Besides, I was still awkwardly holding Gama-chan's ramen cup and my briefcase, so my hands were a little occupied. I couldn't pry him off if I wanted to. I decided if he wanted to hold on to the hem of my skirt then I would let him. So, without saying anything, I kept walking.

Unaware that the entire exchange had been observed and noted.

A small smile bloomed underneath the rim of a large, triangular hat.
The Ballad of Gama-Chan

Well, it was done. Naruto Uzumaki was in my apartment. It had, unfortunately, been unavoidable given the circumstances.

So was the toad, the recently dubbed 'Gama-chan' whom I was equally uncomfortable with having under the same roof as me. I pitied the little thing, but I also didn't want its slimy self anywhere near me if it could be averted.


As I was still processing the fact that the demon kid was in my apartment, I was suddenly stirred back to the present. There was a low grumbling that indicated the kid was hungry and it occurred to me that I didn't have anything to eat in the house.

Well, I might have something but with me so busy and Genma away all the time our cupboards were typically bare. That was one of the reasons we ate take-out so much, even though I was a decent cook. Every time I went out and bought groceries, I'd find out Genma had a mission the next day and most of the food would go bad before he even returned. There was simply never any need for fresh food at our apartment.

Now however I had a six-year-old kid, whose last meal was likely eight hours ago, standing in the middle of my apartment. And he was hungry.

He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to since his stomach was doing all the talking for him. I realized I hadn't eaten anything either, but it wasn't the first time my work had kept me so preoccupied that I forgot to eat. That happened rather often. I was used to it and my body had yet to demand nutrients so, for now, I just needed to worry about somehow feeding Uzumaki.

When we had arrived, I had the kid reach into my briefcase and retrieve my key, instructing him on how to open the door since my hands were occupied. It hadn't occurred to me that opening a locked door to a six-year-old might as well have been algebra. First the key was upside down, then he was turning it the wrong way, then he took it out and tried to put it in the wrong way again. It was an embarrassing, drawn-out affair as I talked him through how to hold the key and which way to turn it. It had taken all my patience and I was rather proud of myself for my self-control. Once he managed to get the door open I had quickly ushered him in and closed the door.

While in the hallway I had made a conscious attempt to hide my sense of urgency from the kid; I wanted to get him into my apartment before someone saw him. I wasn't sure how my neighbours would react if they saw him and I would rather not find out.

The Kamotsu District was among the oldest districts in the village and one that Atsuko had called the 'Cozy District' when she was still around. The buildings were clearly older, but the inhabitants did their best to keep it aesthetic and none of the homes or businesses were particularly large. Just like Atsuko had described they were cozy, mostly because along with the small size the citizens that lived there had a warm, welcoming approach to being neighbourly. They were typically working-class families who had learned a long time ago that having a strong community was a good way to offset a small paycheck.

Whether that warmth would extend to the demon container or not, I wasn't sure. It was more than
likely a hard no. Especially since the population of the district was pro-dominantly civilian with the occasional ninja who had been born to a civilian family, much like Genma.

Although I wasn’t sure why our family didn’t count as a ninja family because the men of the Shiranui family had been shinobi for the last four generations, despite having married civilian women and having civilian siblings. Except for one male per generation, the Shiranui family was primarily female and none had ever chosen to be kunoichi. They also, being women, had married into other families and so had failed to carry on the Shiranui name even if they’d had ninja children.

There was a hierarchy and class system amongst ninja that I didn’t understand and I accepted that I probably would never understand because it was what I classified as 'ninja business' like the type that The Elder Council handled. Ebisu had tried to explain it to me once when I’d been foolish enough to ask but all I really got out of his explanation was that some ninja considered Genma lesser because he came from a 'civilian' family. Once I heard that I had stopped listening, quietly angered by the fact that anyone would consider my big brother lesser than them because of some stupid class system that was decided by genetics.

I was roused from my thoughts when Uzumaki’s stomach growled again and I couldn’t help but sigh. I dropped my briefcase next to the door and moved to the counter, putting Gama-chan’s cup down. I reached under the tap, cupping water in my hands and sprinkled it on the toad who seemed to perk up a bit. I was able to find a scrap of cellophane and quickly made a cover, poking a few holes in it. It probably wasn’t healthy to keep the unfortunate thing in a cup for so long, but I reassured myself that tomorrow we’d be taking him back to where he belonged. It was better than him getting loose and lost in my apartment.

"Let me see if we have anything for you to eat." I said over my shoulder, hoping that the kid wasn’t picky. He would be lucky if I even found something. He was standing in the middle of the apartment floor looking around with a curious expression. Despite the growling stomach, he seemed to be willfully ignoring his hunger in favour of taking in every detail of my apartment. For this reason, he didn’t respond to me verbally.

I started going through the cupboards which, sure enough, were bare. I didn’t bother to check the fridge. I knew off the top of my head that all I had in there was half a carton of milk, three eggs, a single carrot and a few bottles of Genma’s favourite sake. Of all those things, I wasn’t sure why I had a single carrot and to be honest I didn’t remember buying it.

In the third cupboard I checked, I found a lone cup of instant ramen.

Well, it was something. Instant ramen and a glass of milk would have to do.

I took out the cup of ramen and put it on the counter, peeling the plastic wrap from around it. I balled up the plastic and moved over towards my trash can, throwing it out. As I turned to move back towards the counter, I jumped at the flash of yellow. Uzumaki had appeared at the counter and was standing on the tips of his toes so his eyes were level with the countertop.

"What are you doing?" He asked, big blue eyes taking in the sight before him with interest.

"Making instant ramen." I responded simply, approaching him with some caution.

"How do you do that?" He asked. He was full of questions, wasn’t he?

"Well, if you want I’ll show you how." I offered levelly, coming up to the counter and grabbing my kettle.
"What's that?" He asked.

"It's a kettle. I'm going to put water in and boil it." I explained, trying my best to head off any future questions. As I said that I stuck the kettle under the tap and filled it. He watched with fascination as I then moved it over to the opposite counter, unplugged the half-dead coffee machine since there was only one working outlet, and plugged the kettle into the wall.

"Can I help?" He asked suddenly. I felt a single eyebrow lift questioningly. He wanted to help... make instant ramen?

"Um, sure." I said a little confused as there really wasn't much left to do. "You can press that button." I told him, gesturing to the red button that would turn the kettle on. He smiled broadly and got up as close to the counter as he could, stretching his small arm in an attempt to reach the button. Where the kettle was I noted that he couldn't quite reach. I watched him struggled to reach it, his eyes closed with effort for a few agonizing moments before I slid the kettle towards him so he could reach. A look of triumph lit up his face when he succeeded and his eyes widened as he watched the kettle like he was expecting it to do something amazing.

After a minute or so of it appearing to not do anything, he sent me a scathing look that surprised me.

"It's not doing anything." He said, his voice a little indignant.

"Yes, it is. It's boiling. It'll just take some time that's all." I explained, although he made me doubt myself a little bit and I checked to make sure the kettle was making the faint, rumbling sound that meant it was working. It would be embarrassing if he was right and the thing was broken.

"Oh." He responded simply, resting his chin on the edge of the counter and continuing to stare at it. Was he seriously just going to watch the kettle boil?

Well, if he wanted to…

I realized I had forgotten to take my shoes off and went back to the door, bracing against the wall and lifting my leg. It only took me a moment to undo the buckles and slide them off. But doing that took just long enough that by the time I returned, the kettle had boiled. Uzumaki was still there with his chin on the counter, watching the steam that had started to flow out of the top.

I reached over and unplugged the kettle from the wall, went over to the cup of ramen and poured the water in. All the while wide blue eyes watched me curiously.

"What happens now?" He asked me as I sat the kettle down.

"We wait." I said flatly.

"Again?" He asked.

"Yes." I responded.

"For how long?" He inquired and I heard his stomach rumble again. It seemed he was finally paying attention to it and he was getting a little testy as a result. Still, it wasn't any different then sitting next to Tamaki when we had a late lunch. Their way of whining was remarkably similar.

"Five minutes." I told him.

"Oh." He said, but his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "how long is that?"
Of course he didn't know how to tell time yet. I held back another sigh and thought about how I could explain how long he had to wait without having to teach him how to tell time right then and there. Then I remembered something. I opened the cupboard again, reached up into the top shelf and felt around, smiling when I discovered it was still there. I pulled down a dusty, wind-up cooking timer. I did my best to brush the dust off. I had become very good over the years at using my internal clock for cooking be it instant ramen or a time-consuming dish, so I hadn't needed it.

I faced it towards Uzumaki. The timer could only time up to half an hour but I only needed it to time five minutes so that was okay.

"Watch," I said which immediately drew his attention from his noisy stomach back to me, "when making instant ramen, I turn the dial to here." The notches were in five-minute increments, so I had him watch as I turned it to the first notch. I pointed at the first notch for extra emphasis. "Now when it rings, I'll know enough time has passed."

He reached his hands out towards me and, realizing what he was asking, I complied and handed him the timer. To my surprise, he plunked down on the ground and stared at the timer as the needle made its slow progress backwards.

Was that normal for kids? Didn't they have better things to do then wait for instant ramen to cook? Like didn't they usually get distracted and go play or get up to mischief or something?

On second thought I'd rather he didn't get up to mischief.

Come to think of it I probably had better things to do too. With that in mind I went to my room and grabbed my nightgown, then went into the bathroom to change. When I emerged, Uzumaki was still where I left him on the floor in my kitchen. I stopped and stared at him for a long moment while he watched the timer intently.

Suddenly, the timer dinged. The boy sprung up running towards me and shoving the timer in my hands. I hadn't been expecting it so I fumbled with it but I got the message and made my way back over to the counter.

I ripped the lid off, dug a pair of chopsticks from the drawer, and handed him the Styrofoam cup. He didn't seem to care that I didn't have a kitchen table because he simply wandered back to the center of the room and sat down on the floor. I followed behind him with a glass I had filled with milk and when he chose his place on the ground I set it down next to him. He stared at the cup for a bit, before shoving a bunch of noodles into his mouth.

There was an aura of contentment that sprung up around him and almost seemed to fill the room as he ate. Well, I had managed to feed him. That was a start.

XxX

Last night had gone surprisingly well. I hadn't gotten any sleep due to the anxiety of having the nine-tails kid in my apartment, but still it went well. I'd set him up on my ragged brown couch with a pillow and a blanket, worried that he might argue about going to sleep. According to Tamaki, kids did that. But he must have been exhausted because as soon as I got the couch arranged he climbed on top of it and fell asleep. I was learning quickly that the kid really wasn't picky about when and where he did things.

I had discovered that when Ms Sazaki had kicked him out he hadn't brought anything with him since most of his clothes were shared with another boy in the house. Ms Sazaki had told him that if he took them then he was stealing. He informed me that he didn't want to steal, because stealing was wrong,
so he had just come to the office with what he had on him at the time. Which meant he didn't have a change of clothes or pajamas. Which meant I would have to get him some. Last night, however, he'd had to sleep in his clothes.

I considered the easy transition to bedtime as a win and went to bed myself but had laid awake the entire night listening to his even breathing in the other room. I'd almost dozed off a couple times but my subconscious would startle me awake within moments. I couldn't help it. I just couldn't sleep while sharing quarters with him. I wondered if lack of sleep was what had turned Mitsuko Sazaki into a raving lunatic who wouldn't even let a six-year-old she was kicking out take a pair of pajamas with him. I could give her the benefit of a doubt but personally I couldn't imagine ever being that sleep deprived.

He was still asleep on the couch when I decided to get up, since I wasn't doing very well with the whole sleep thing myself. I had a shower, changed my clothes and was fighting with the old, wheezing coffeemaker when Uzumaki opened his eyes. I didn't hear him get up, but he suddenly materialized beside me which was getting less startling everytime he did it. For once I didn't jump. I just stared at him blandly.

"You hungry?" I asked, keeping my voice monotone.

He looked bashful and nodded reluctantly. I didn't understand his reluctance to tell me he was hungry. It wasn't like it was a bother to make him something to eat it's just that I really didn't have much in the apartment. I remembered the eggs in the fridge and set about making him one for breakfast, all the while big blue eyes watched my every movement. Eggs, like instant ramen, weren't all that hard to make. Just a pan, a little butter and you break the egg into it once it was hot enough. Easy.

He watched me break the first egg into the pan then, like last night, asked if he could help. I let him help me by breaking the second egg. He didn't do very well and got several little fragments of shell in the yolk but looked very proud of himself. I decided that would be my egg.

When they were done, I put them on plates, poured us both a glass of milk and we moved to sit in the middle of the floor. It was then, Uzumaki began telling me all about his dreams last night. Apparently, he'd had a dream about Gama-chan and informed me that Gama-chan was a famous hero where he came from and that there was a princess toad trapped at the pond that he needed to return and rescue. It was a childish, fanciful sort of story that reminded me of an old-fashioned love ballad. Secretly, I thought it was rather cute.

Even though it was a dream, Uzumaki seemed to have convinced himself that it was the truth and was even more determined to return the toad to its home as soon as possible.

"Well, where did you get him from?" I asked, sipping my milk.

"A pond." He told me simply, sipping his also.

Well that didn't help. There were countless ponds in the village.

"Well," I began, "what was around the pond?"

"I don't know." He told me, "buildings and there was a really big hill."

Surprisingly enough, that did narrow it down. Most ponds in the village were out in the back hills, so they were surrounded by trees or marshland.

"Was it big and did it have a bridge or maybe a dock?" I asked in the most childish terms I could
"It had a dock and big stairs too!" He said, nodding.

It sounded like it wasn't a pond at all. It sounded like he was describing the Kawarama River which flowed through most of the village, later being replaced by the narrower Itama River. The Senju brothers that were Lord First and Lord Second had been humble enough not to name anything after themselves, but that hadn't stopped them from naming the rivers after their deceased younger brothers. I supposed after one had their face carved in a mountain you could afford to be humble about having something named after you. Most parts of the river were narrow enough to have bridges, but there was only one part of the river that was wide enough to have a dock. It was in the Izuna District which was, ironically enough, named after the infamous Madara Uchiha's deceased brother. It was one of the many districts that bordered the Uchiha compound and until recently, had also been primarily owned by them.

Except for the odd business the Uchiha maintained ownership of, it was now mostly residential homes which were owned by the Yamanaka Clan and rented out. It had been sold almost two decades ago but the fact that any land with an Uchiha namesake had to be sold still made the Uchiha's hair curl. I thought they were lucky the Hyuuga hadn't bought it to be spiteful. They hated to be reminded about the land they lost and had even asked that the Yamanaka change the name of the district several times. The Yamanaka refused for historical reasons, saying that the names of every district held historical importance and that they needed to remain as they were. A petition went to The Elder Council, The Director and Lord Hokage who ultimately sided with the Yamanaka. The Uchiha, two decades later, still had a stick up their asses about the entire affair.

"Okay, I think I know where his home is now." I informed Uzumaki, taking his now empty plate and putting it in the sink along with my own dishes. Without being asked, the boy followed me with his empty glass and placed it gently into the sink, having to stand on the tips of his toes to do so.

Since I didn't have spare clothes or a toothbrush for him, I decided we may as well just head out as we were. I picked up Gama-chan's ramen cup and made my way to the door, ushering Uzumaki out into the hallway and down the stairs as quickly as I could.

It didn't occur to me that I had forgotten to lock the door until much later.

XxX

"Is this the place?" I asked the kid, eying the short dock at the end of the pathway. We had already climbed down the long stone stairs and I realized I probably should have asked before I climbed all the way down. The sun was still rising and painting the sky in hues of orange, pink and purple.

"Mhm." He mumbled in confirmation.

"Well, okay then. Time to take Gama-chan home." I said simply and knelt on my knees so that Uzumaki could reach into the cup and retrieve the toad. I certainly wasn't about to touch it.

Once he grabbed the toad, the kid ran towards the edge of the water with me following closely behind. He held the toad in his cupped hands for a few long moments, staring down at it.

"Alright, Gama-chan..." He said to the toad softly and I watched in quiet fascination at the exchange as small tears formed at the corners of his eyes. The toad appeared to be staring back at him too, as if having a silent conversation with him. It was kind of...sweet. Even though he had intended the toad to be a 'pet' for me the kid almost seemed to be attached to the 'jumpy thing' as he had called it. I began to wonder how long the kid had carted it around before sticking it in my filing cabinet. I
wasn't sure, but maybe kids got attached to things easily?

"GO SAVE THE PRINCESS!" Uzumaki suddenly yelled and holding the toad in his right hand chucked it out into the center of the river, as if throwing a ball. I swear I heard the toad scream as it flew into the sunrise.

I was absolutely aghast.

Which then slowly turned to hilarity. He threw it. Oh, my lord, he threw it. He threw it into the sunrise. I had to fight the laugh that was threatening to bubble forth, realizing that this was hardly the time nor place. I shouldn't laugh when he was crying, no matter how funny that was. It was so hard to keep the laughter back that I had to bring my hand up over my mouth, accidentally dropping the empty ramen cup in the process.

Uzumaki had turned around, with snot running from his nose and wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"He was a good pet." He sobbed and I had no idea what to do. I couldn't handle sad adults let alone sad children, especially when the visual of the toad flying screaming into the sunrise kept resurfacing and threatening to make me laugh.

He continued to cry as I struggled to come up with what I should do. I couldn't just stand there and let him cry like that; demon container or not that wasn't a very nice thing to do.

My body moved on its own and I was suddenly in front of him, kneeling again so that my eyes would be level with his. I understood that trying to hold back a laugh had left a faint, but still noticeable smile on my lips. I raised my hand; it froze and shook just like last night. But this time I willed it forward and finally forced it to touch the top of his head, my fingers buried in shining golden locks.

"There, there." I said while patting his head, aware that it sounded robotic and I still had that lingering smile on my face. I'm sure I looked the opposite of comforting. I was probably closer to creepy.

He stilled and I worried he was about to erupt into larger tears with how much I had just failed at being comforting. I had a moment of internal panic.

Finally, he looked up at me. His tears had dried, but the rims of his eyes were still red and puffy from his crying. Big blue orbs looked up at me almost shocked; an expression I'm sure I shared. I was a little amazed I'd willed myself to touch him.

But the more I spent time with him, the more I was beginning to realize that pushing the reality that he was the demon container to the back of my mind was becoming easier. Because he was a child first. He looked like one and acted like one, at least to the best of my knowledge. If the nine-tails was corrupting his mind, it was being awfully subtle about it.

When I looked into those eyes, I didn't see the darkness that I expected. There was loneliness, pain and yes, I think deep inside there was a little anger. But there was no unbridled evil of the nine-tails apparent. Not yet, anyway. One day they might be one and the same, but right now Naruto Uzumaki was just a child.

A child who got attached to a pet toad and made up fantastical stories about it. A child who had compassion, enough so that he'd felt bad when I told him that he'd taken the creature away from its home and family.
I couldn't hate him. Even if I tried.

In the years to come, I could even see myself growing complacent and maybe even...forgetting my
fear of him.

It was a thought. A thought that I had mixed emotions about, since I couldn't afford to forget that this
was just an assignment. This was my job.

When I came out of my own mind, I realized that the boy still hadn't reacted to my attempt at
comfort. Instead he was staring at me with a thoughtful look.

I stood up brushing the dirt off my skirt as best I could.

"Okay well, we have a lot more to do today. We'd better get to it." I told him, ushering him back up
the hill and to the street. If he was going to be staying at the apartment at 126 Harumi tonight, he was
going to need some things. Like clothes, a toothbrush, food…

As I made my mental list, ignoring the fact that Uzumaki had once again latched onto the hem of my
skirt with his tiny hand, I was unaware of the fact that the entire exchange had been witnessed. I had
no idea that I was about to be the main feature of a very detailed ANBU report.
I stared at the green toad hanging in front of my face. I blinked. It didn't. I would have been alarmed if it did blink mostly because it was a wallet. A wallet that held remarkable resemblance to Gama-chan, the hero toad that Uzumaki had chucked into the Kawarama River an hour ago, but a wallet regardless.

I had gone inside a shop to purchase basic things like toiletries, blankets and towels for Uzumaki's apartment. I had left him outside the shop, partly because I wasn't sure how the shopkeeper would react to his presence and partly because he was a kid and buying toiletries was a boring affair. I didn't want him getting bored and wandering off to cause mischief in the shop, so I'd made him promise not to move and left him at the front entrance. I was working fast, mostly because I assumed his attention span could easily wane and he would wander off on me if I took too long. I bought two full size towels, one nice blanket, toilet paper, a toothbrush, all the soap he could ever want, a toothbrush, toothpaste...the list might as well have been endless.

The shop was small, and I had chosen them for their affordability more than anything. I had a strict budget for all of Uzumaki's things that I would have to adhere to and this particular shop was famous for their deals. I had struggled under the awkward weight of the shopping baskets for a few minutes before a chunin around my age offered to help me carry them up to the counter. He was average height and build, with tanned skin, brown eyes and hair in a ponytail. The only real distinguishing feature was the scar across his nose. I thanked him vigorously for his thoughtfulness, my face still flushed from managing the weight of my purchases on my own. We began talking and it came out that I was helping 'a friend' move into a new apartment and had more shopping to do after this. Since that was the case he offered to take them to the apartment for me if I gave him the address.

I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

When we got up to the counter I quickly jotted down the address and the apartment number, handing it to him once he had the two large, brown paper shopping bags in his arms. He wasn't struggling with the weight, but the bags were large and awkward, so I did my best to give him verbal directions just in case he wasn't able to see my note.

The cashier at the store told me that she wasn't surprised he had offered to help me after he had left; apparently, he lived nearby and was in her shop often. He was notorious for being kind-hearted. I told her there were worse things to be notorious for, which made her giggle and reply that there certainly was.

That was the reason I had been looking at the more frivolous items in the store to begin with. The woman had mentioned that every time the nameless chunin came in he would look at this one wallet hanging on the rack near the till, but as it wasn't a necessary purchase, he would never buy it. It seemed he was frugal. A man after my own heart.

Still, I wanted to repay him somehow, so I made the decision to buy the wallet with my own money and have the cashier give it to him when he next came in. I picked up the one she had mentioned, but as I went to turn came face to face with a toad.

More specifically a toad wallet hanging on the same rack.

I had a feeling that Gama-chan was a joke the universe had chosen to throw at me when I least
expected just to see if it could stir things up a bit. The suddenness of the wallet's appearance in my face caused me to choke back a laugh, making a strangled sound. Every time I saw a toad now all I could picture was Gama-chan flying into the sunrise. I think that would forever threaten to make me laugh; I just couldn't help it. I would never be able to forget it.

I couldn't help it, I reached up and grabbed the Gama-chan wallet off the rack too. No matter how frugal I was, I really couldn't miss the opportunity.

Using some paper the cashier leant me, I quickly wrote a thank you note and stuck it inside the wallet for the chunin. Then I purchased both wallets, entrusting the one for the chunin into the care of the cashier, before saying my thanks and exiting back onto the street.

At first, I didn't see Uzumaki and a small part of me panicked. Had I taken too long? Had he run off? But I saw him eventually, my eyes scanning the entire street until I caught sight of him. Like the child he was, he had decided to play in the dirt next to one of the buildings across the street. There was a narrow, shaded alleyway and I could see his small form in the shadow, drawing in the dirt with a stick.

"There you are, Suit Lady!" He exclaimed. When he saw me approaching, he sprung up and dropped the stick. He was filthy, and I had to force my face into a passive mask to hide a grimace. It occurred to me that I had never actually introduced myself to him, so it seemed he had decided to call me 'Suit Lady'. "You were taking forever! I thought you'd never come back!" He informed me, genuinely looking concerned at the prospect of me never returning.

I felt that weird indigestion feeling again. Since he had been loitering in an alleyway, no one seemed to have noticed that he was out shopping with me. It was also early in the morning and the streets were rather empty, so there were less nosy people to begin with.

"My name is Miss Shiranui." I informed him stoically, trying not to show how much being called a 'suit lady' made me want to cringe. "Call me that instead of Suit Lady, please."

"Okay, Su- I mean Miss Shiranui!" He said with a bright smile. I felt a smile start to tug at the edge of my mouth and had to force it away. Keep it cool, Kiyoko. You are the master of the passive Shiranui visage.

Now that I had his toiletries and basic items looked after that left only two things on my list. Clothing and food. For now, with my budget, I could probably get him a few sets of clothes and a pair of pajamas, then get him more clothing as time went on. I was planning on teaching him to buy food on his own, mostly because depending on how much he ate I might not always be available to replenish his groceries for him. That would, however mean I would have to teach him about money - a daunting task that I didn't necessarily look forward to. That was part of the reason I had been able to mentally convince myself to purchase the Gama-chan wallet.

As for furniture, that was already being handled by the one and only Tamaki Miyajima. It came out in conversation yesterday, although I had known before but forgotten, that an old flame of hers was the proud new owner of a furniture store in the Namui District. She had been confident that she would be able to get a decent bed, kitchen table and chairs for cheap. She also said that she would be able to cajole the young gentleman into delivering them by noon today despite the short notice. She even said she might be able to persuade him into taking and disposing of the old furniture that was already in the apartment.

I wasn't entirely certain what she had meant by 'cajole and persuade' but I had a rough idea since she had undone the first few buttons of her blouse as she said it. How her quietly possessive boyfriend would feel about her method of persuasion I didn't know and didn't want to find out. I just hoped he...
didn't blame me.

"Next we have to get you some clothes." I informed him, slipping the wallet underneath my arm so I could reach into my kimono top and pull out the envelope of money I had for Naruto. Yesterday before our meeting with Lord Hokage, I'd had Finance pull a decent amount of ryo from Uzumaki's budget for necessary items, clothing and food. I'd have to save all my receipts, so I could account for where I had spent the money, but it wasn't nearly the full amount available for Uzumaki. Before we left the area of this shop I wanted to count what was left and get a rough idea of how it would be allocated.

"What's that?" The boy suddenly exclaimed, having noticed the wallet. I stopped and took it out from underneath my arm again to hold it so he could see.

"It's a wallet." I said simply.

"It's a Gama-chan!" He said, his eyes brightening. Obviously, he had also noticed the resemblance as well. He seemed determined to begin referring to the wallet as a living being. I moved it up slightly and his head followed. I moved it to the left and his head swiveled to follow.

He was enraptured by the wallet and I decided since I had his attention, now was as good a time as any to start our money lesson. I wasn't teacher material, but I had a feeling I was going to have to get creative to teach a six-year-old about the fundamentals of money and its importance. I didn't want him buying diamonds or monkeys after all.

I puzzled for a moment over how I could do this. When Atsuko and I were little, Genma had taught us how to tie ribbons into our hair by telling us a story about rabbits running from a wolf cub. It was an effective tool, because with the story we had learned quickly and retained what he had taught us. One thing I'd figured out from watching Uzumaki already was that retention wasn't his strong suit. He was clearly going to need a story or a tool to help him remember what I wanted.

I moved Gama-chan down again and the kid's bright eyes followed, a huge grin on his face.

Suddenly, I felt an idea surface. A wonderfully unconventional idea.

I think Uzumaki had been right; Gama-chan really was a hero. He was about to make this a whole lot easier for me or at least I hoped he would. It was worth a try.

"This, as you know," I said in a very professional tone, "is Gama-chan."

Since we were still in the shadow of the alleyway I decided to take the time and kneel down again, holding Gama-chan reborn in the palm of my right hand so it's beady eyes were facing him.

"Gama-chan is happiest and healthiest when he is fat, just like any other animal." I said matter of factly, watching as the boy's face took on a thoughtful expression. I was amazed that he was even listening to me - I felt like a lunatic. I hoped no one saw or overheard me, that would be mortifying.

"But he's all flat." The kid pointed at Gama-chan's deflated being, which was resting limply in my hand.

Good, I thought, he was playing right into my hands. This might just work.

"Right, so you have to feed him." I was a little proud of myself for what I personally considered to be a rather clever teaching method even if it did make me feel like a total loon. I began searching for the envelope of ryo from Uzumaki's budget in my top again, anticipating his next question.
"But what do you feed him?" He asked innocently.

"This." I told him, pulling out the envelope with my free hand and extending it towards him. "You feed Gama-chan money. In fact, it's the only thing he eats."

He looked between the toad wallet and the money for a few moments before he hesitantly reached forward and took Gama-chan, then he opened it up and pulled one of the paper ryo out of the envelope that I still held in my hand. He stared at it with a puzzled expression, glanced at me and then put the ryo into the toad-wallet's mouth. He then held it up in front of his face and stared at it closely.

"It's not getting fatter." He mumbled dejectedly. With one paper ryo in his belly I wasn't surprised, and I had to force myself not to face palm. Remember Kiyoko, I had to remind myself, he's only six. I wouldn't have understood either at that age.

"Well then, you have to feed him until there's no ryo left." I told him bluntly, my facial expression straight. "The fatter he is, the happier he is."

I pushed the envelope back towards him, watching as he began to understand and began filling the wallet with ryo, until Gama-chan was full. His mouth still closed, but the difference in size was noticeable. I took one look at the flattened envelope, which now only had my receipts inside, before folding it up and tucking it away again in my top.

Gama-chan was now huge and perfectly round, so much so that the kid had to hold it with both hands. He smiled in triumph at the wallet before extending it back towards me, but I declined it with a wave.

"No." I said, which caused him to frown in confusion, "He's yours to take care of. Think of him like...like a pet." I finished lamely, feeling stupid for suggesting it.

Thankfully, Uzumaki didn't seem to think it was lame at all. In fact, the idea that his wallet was a pet had him absolutely elated, he even began petting it.

"Now," I said, standing up and brushing off my now dusty black skirt, "I'm about to show you the coolest thing about Gama-chan."

XxX

So far, he was getting it; for which I was thankful.

Referring to Gama-chan as a pet that needed to be coddled and cared for had translated to 'be careful what you spend your money on' just like I had hoped. I had purchased his clothing, occasionally offering him limited choices of 'either this one or this one'. The kid had a natural gravitation between orange, dark green and navy blue. The outfits he had designed very much looked like something a six-year-old had put together without supervision. Well, he'd had supervision. It just really didn't look like it. I hadn't wanted to discourage him from making decisions, so no matter how much I internally cringed at the mixture of colours I hadn't interfered. If he picked the orange shirt, it went in the basket. If he picked the green cargo pants, they went in the basket.

When we went up to the till, since I was fairly certain he didn't know how to count money, I had paid. But I had let him hold Gama-chan and had instructed him which of the ryo to hand me, forcing him to participate a little. My hope was that he would understand that everything obviously cost money, which would have to come out of Gama-chan which would make Gama-chan emaciated if he wasn't careful. It was my way of trying to slowly introduce the topic. He had watched the
exchange of me giving the cashier the money with a concerned and thoughtful expression. When we left the store, he appeared to weigh his wallet quietly and then sent me a dirty look which I met with a level expression.

I stopped in the street, the two plastic bags of clothes in either hand and waited to hear what he was thinking. I wanted to see if my wonderfully unconventional idea was working.

"You took Gama-chan's food. He's not as fat now." He accused, and I was almost taken aback with how betrayed he sounded. I had to force myself not to sweatdrop; I had been expecting him to say something, but I hadn't expected a blatant accusation that I was killing his wallet.

"Well, I had to." I explained, "I needed to pay the cashier for your clothes."

His blue eyes narrowed to slits as he stared up at me, appearing to attempt to process this new information.

"Why?" He finally asked. Ah, the return of the 'why' questions.

"You need clothes. But even if you really need them, if I took them without paying than that would be stealing. You told me yourself that stealing is wrong last night, remember?" I tried to be as thorough as possible, because I didn't want to answer a million other questions if it could be avoided.

He turned Gama-chan in his hands so that he could stare into its beady glass eyes. He didn't say anything, he was just continuing to look thoughtful, so I decided I should take the opportunity to continue.

"That's why it's important that you only spend that money on things you really need. Like food." I wasn't going to encourage him to purchase clothes unless I was present for the time being. As a child, his ability to distinguish between what he wanted and what he needed was naturally impaired. My main concern was teaching him how to buy food because I wasn't certain I would always be there to make sure he was fed.

He 'hmmm'd in response, still clearly thinking about it.

"Okay," He finally said, "how do I do that?"

At that exact moment his stomach growled, and I had to hide my shock; I'd only just fed him a few hours ago. He was hungry again already?

I looked around, temporarily setting down one of the bags and bringing my hand up to my chin to think. I had been choosing our clothing stores just by following the sale signs and for that reason I wasn't entirely certain where we were. I had been so absorbed in finding the best deals on children's clothing, that I really hadn't been paying attention. If there wasn't a big wall and gate, I probably would have wandered out of the village altogether.

I took in the state of the buildings, the types of buildings and the signage looking for any indication of where we had ended up. The Hokage tower was visible in the distance, probably about three or so districts away. The Yumehara Teahouse, the largest and most prominent tea house in the village, was just down the street from where we were standing. The plum coloured awning and white apple blossom wall mural just inside the door was very distinct and unmistakable. That meant I was in the Mita District and was not far from my apartment complex in the Kamotsu District. I was barely three streets over from it.

This ended up being perfect because I had been planning on going to The Asai Grocery near my apartment to purchase his groceries. If we hadn't walked all the way to the Izuna District this
morning, that would have been where we'd have gone first. Since we had gone full circle, albeit unintentionally, this would line up perfectly with what I had intended.

"I'll show you, let's go." After getting my bearings I chose to veer through the closest alleyway that connected this street with the one adjacent to it. The sooner we got to the grocery store the better. I could give him a crash course on purchasing foods and which foods he should purchase before taking him to his apartment. I was aware he was hungry, but most restaurants and food stands were not keen on serving him and even though it was close to my apartment, I didn't want him inside it more than necessary. Maybe there was a restaurant in the Sakata District, closer to his apartment.

It was just after noon when we reached The Asai Grocery, the only grocery shop I trusted to take Uzumaki into to purchase his food. It was across the street from my apartment building and if I looked up to the third floor, I would be able to see the simple black curtains of my bedroom window.

The Asai Grocery was run by Mr and Mrs Asai, an elderly civilian couple who had four children and twelve grandchildren. The shop itself was quite tiny, but it's compacted shelves held almost every foodstuff you could possibly want. Above the door, there was a big red banner with the name 'ASAI' on it and underneath in white lettering it said, 'open 24 hours'.

It wasn't necessarily open 24 hours so much as it was that Mr and Mrs Asai's home was attached to the store and so they were readily available at a moment's notice. More than once I had come by early in the morning for eggs when Genma unexpectedly returned and had been served by Mrs Asai still in her nightgown. A white paper sign with neat, bold writing was posted on the oak door that connected the shop and what I knew to be their kitchen saying, 'if we're not in the shop, please knock'.

I wasn't entirely sure how they would react to me bringing the nine-tails kid into their store, but I had chosen to come to 'The Asai family for a reason and that reason was that I knew their need to sell produce would outweigh any flimsy hatred they had of the boy. I knew for a fact that they hadn't lost any loved ones in the attack, so any dislike they had for him would purely be on principle. Which was an easier sort of hate to overlook when you had a good enough motivator.

They weren't necessarily greedy people but the Asai's would do anything to sell, sell, sell. Hence the 24-hour availability which had made them extremely popular amongst single ninja, who didn't have a spouse or clan to keep their fridges stocked. Being able to do some quick grocery shopping after returning from a month-long mission, no matter the time of day or night, was a convenience they highly valued. The fact that some of them had to go out of their way to the Kamotsu District, which wasn't a highly popular district for ninja to live in, to get that convenience didn't seem to bother any of them.

Still not entirely sure what to expect, I ushered the kid into the shop and quickly glanced around for a basket. I figured one basket would be enough for now, and I put the bags of already purchased clothing into the basket to make carrying everything easier. I glanced down at the boy, who was holding Gama-chan under his arm and looking around at the shelves lined with various foods.

"So," I began, "It's your choice. We'll buy whatever you want." Within reason, of course, but there didn't seem to be much need to say it aloud. So far, his desires had been rather simple. He scrunched up his face in what appeared to be deep thought and began walking slowly down the aisle, head swiveling left and right. I watched him for a few minutes as he turned and made his way back towards me, still scanning the narrow wooden shelves. After the third time he reached me and turned back, I put my basket down, crossing my arms over my chest as I continued to watch. He knew there were other aisles, right?

I was about to prod him into checking another aisle, because we weren't making any progress where
we were, when my view of him was suddenly blocked.

As soon as the golden spikes were hidden from my view I had an uncharacteristic moment of panic. My heart jumped into my throat and without even caring who was in front of me I suddenly started desperately trying to look around them, a grimace on my face. As the seconds ticked by I became more agitated at the separation and there was a brief moment where I was ready to push or shove this person out of the way. The panic had come so swiftly and was such an unfamiliar feeling, that it took me a moment to recognize that I was panicking and when I did, I froze in response.

What was I panicking for? I needed to calm down. This wasn't like me.

I carefully began cultivating a neutral expression, concentrating on every muscle in my face and making sure it was forced back into the correct position. I was so focused on doing that, that it took me a few moments to realize that my unexpected visitor wasn't a stranger and was even trying to get my attention.

"-yoko? Kiyoko?...Miss Shiranui?" My eyes finally fixated on the person in front of me, who had begun to lean down and wave his hand quietly in front of my face. He appeared very concerned by my lack of observation. He didn't appear to have noticed that he had stepped between myself and my charge, which lead me to believe that separating me from Naruto had not been an intentional maneuver. When I identified who it was, the last ounce of panic disappeared because I was fully aware that this person was not a threat.

Raido Namiashi was one of my brother's more recent teammates, having served alongside him as an elite bodyguard of Lord Fourth seven or so years ago. While the team of three had only served Lord Third for a few years afterwards before returning to regular jonin duties, the three had remained close and had an obvious preference for one another when choosing five-man cells. While it was clear that Gai was the former teammate he was closest with, Raido was a clear second, since they had grown close after realizing they both lived in the Kamotsu District.

Raido, like my brother, was an unassuming man of average build, with dark eyes and short brown hair. He was more stern and methodical then Genma, but that never seemed to impair their friendship, which had only grown stronger as the two men aged. Raido also had become very comfortable amongst the Shiranui household, most likely because Atsuko and I were among the few civilians that never cringed away from the large scar on the side of his face.

I realized that he must've been calling my name for some time if he resorted to calling me 'Miss Shiranui'. After seven or so years, such formalities really weren't necessary.

"I'm sorry, Raido." I apologized immediately when I came to my senses, "I didn't see you there. I was a bit...startled."

I was fully aware of how flat my voice sounded. I wasn't about to admit that I hadn't been startled so much as I had been prepared to pounce at a perceived threat. Namely him, since I'd failed to recognize him immediately. It still puzzled me. Why on earth would I react like that?

What had come over me?

"It's fine. You looked like you were deep in thought." He dismissed my apology, choosing instead to continue what I assumed he had appeared for, "did you hear my question?"

Admittedly, I hadn't. As much as I could enjoy Raido's company from time to time, I figured the sooner I ended this encounter and got back to Naruto the better.
…I meant Uzumaki. The sooner I got back to Uzumaki the better.

Even then my eyes were trailing along the top of the jonin's shoulder, attempting to catch sight of the kid's golden mop of hair beyond. He didn't appear to have circled back to me again and it wasn't best to leave him unsupervised in the shop.

"No, I didn't. You're right I was...lost in thought." Even as the lie slipped between my teeth I had to stop myself from grimacing. I supposed it wasn't entirely a lie, but it wasn't exactly the truth either. As much as I didn't like being dishonest in any form, the truth was that friend or not the jonin had no business knowing what had been going through my mind just seconds ago. Maybe if I had acted on impulse and pushed him I'd have more to answer for, but that was not the case.

"I asked if you just came from home?" I blinked at him, my face straight. I couldn't comprehend why he had spent so long trying to get my attention, just to ask such a trivial question. I felt my brow furrow slowly and I stared at his own neutral expression, attempting to ferret out exactly why he was asking. Most ninja, friends with your older brother or not, did not typically ask you trivial questions. Everything they did, by nature, usually had some underlying purpose or explanation. No matter how intense my stare grew, his face remained impassive and I recognized that he wasn't intending to elaborate. We could have stood there all night and he wouldn't have caved.

Getting Uzumaki back in my line of sight was more important than having a fruitless staring contest with the man.

"No, I've been out all morning. Since just before dawn. I have some...errands to run. For work." I noticed a slight twitch of his lower lip that gave me the impression that my answer may have concerned him.

"Oh, alright then. I was just curious." He responded, almost jovially and if anything, I believed less now that the question had simply been trivial. Raido was good-natured but not that good-natured. "Do you still have more errands to run?"

I stared at him briefly before responding, still silently imploring him to elaborate. I knew he wouldn't, but I couldn't help but try. It didn't work.

"A few." I told him shortly.

"Yeah, well take your time." He said, again with an uncharacteristic cheer that made me suspicious. "You know, Kiyoko, you just don't go out enough. Maybe dine out tonight or go get a drink with Morino's woman. Something. You've got to live a little."

I felt a frown threatening to spread across my face. Instead, the corner of my lip twitched. His behavior was making me...uneasy. All my brother's friends had made comments about me needing to 'go out' more except for Raido. In contrast, Raido was always vocal about how he found my quiet personality agreeable. This was mostly because his two kunoichi sisters were particularly abrasive and would torment him daily. He didn't wait for a response, he just turned and made his way to the till. I noticed for the first time that he was carrying a basket with a few fruits and vegetables in it, which meant he likely had come across me by chance at the shop. He hadn't planned the encounter. So, what was he up to? Why the sudden behavior change? Why asking so many not-so-trivial but disguised-as-trivial questions?

He stopped near the end of the aisle and looked at me over his shoulder.

"Oh, Uzumaki is about three aisles over." He pointed lazily to what would be my right and then kept going.
It didn't really surprise me that he knew what my 'errands' had been today. Even if Genma hadn't told him about my new job, there was no shortage of ways for him to hear about it. The only thing that kept ninja from being the best gossips in Konoha was their complete lack of interest in anything not pertaining directly to themselves or Lord Hokage. While I'm sure every ninja in the village ranked chunin or higher had learned through observation that Uzumaki had gotten a new caseworker, few probably cared enough to spread the knowledge any further.

I muttered a thank you but he was already turning back towards where I knew the till was.

"Hey, Miss Shiranui!" I was just beginning to head down the aisle, basket in hand, when I heard the voice of my charge call from the direction Raido had pointed. It took me a few moments to reach the kid and when I did I found him sitting in an aisle, pulling instant ramen containers from the shelf. He was stacking them into towers, squinting at each one before sorting them by what appeared to be flavour.

"I want these!" He told me and I stared blankly at the four little towers of Styrofoam cups.

He must've pulled two-dozen from the self. He didn't need that many and I was hesitant to just fill the basket with instant ramen.

"Why do you want these?" I asked, not entirely sure what answer I was expecting.

"I know how to make these. You showed me, remember?" He told me simply and I bit the corner of my lip. I supposed he had a point. I was certainly willing to invest some time into teaching him how to make certain foods, but he was only six and even if I did teach him, I couldn't trust him alone with a stove. It just wasn't safe. A kettle on the other hand? That idea had some merit. Tamaki had said something about getting a toaster for the apartment yesterday when she went after the furniture. So maybe I could get him some bread to go with that ramen. Some butter, jam and milk. Maybe some baby carrots too because all he would have to do was wash them - he needed something fresh. Some apples too? A list began to form in my head and I decided I would show him how to buy the ramen, so he knew how to read price tags and count the money, but I would also pick up some of the basics for him too. That way he wouldn't just have instant ramen.

I couldn't in good conscious let his cupboards be as bare as mine were.

I was an adult, I had many ways of getting food. He was a child, which meant he didn't have the same food-foraging expertise.

"Okay," I conceded, "but we don't need that many. Which flavour is it you want the most? Or do you just want a few of each?"

"Flavour?" He asked, catching me off guard.

"Yes, flavour. You've sorted them by flavour. Which flavour do you like best?" I asked carefully, trying to remember which flavour I'd had at home. It was probably chicken. Genma wasn't a picky eater but he preferred chicken flavoured instant ramen when he had to have it. When the two of us were home together, I would usually either try and make something decent or order fresh take out. The instant ramen was more for when I was home alone or for when Genma got home in the middle of the night and needed something quick.

"I don't know." He told me, looking confused, "I sorted them by colour. See, red, blue, yellow and green."

It took me a moment to process what he had said.
It couldn't be...?

No.

I slowly knelt on the ground beside him, setting the basket down. We were taking up most of the aisle, but the shop wasn't busy and currently I couldn't have cared less. I picked up the nearest ramen cup to me, a chicken flavoured one with blue packaging and held it towards him.

"Uzumaki," I said to get his attention as it had already begun to wander. His head snapped to look at me again. "What does this say?"

I pointed my finger at the lettering, doing my best to also hide the picture of the chicken printed on the cup.

He bit his lip as he scrutinized the lettering and after a few moments, he suddenly snapped his head away from me and buried it in his shirt. I heard him mumble something, but I couldn't make out what he said.

"What?" I prompted, leaning towards him.

There were more muffled words.

"Excuse me?" I asked with a bland tone, staring at the top of his head.

His response was still muffled, but clearly growing more irritated judging by the pitch and volume.

"Hey, look at me when you speak." I finally said, reaching forward and nudging his shoulder with the tips of my fingers.

I didn't feel the fear I had felt yesterday at the thought of touching him with the bare skin of my hand. In fact, I'd been so intent on getting an answer from him, it hadn't even occurred to me that I should be afraid. All I'd felt was a small tug of unease that disappeared as soon as it surfaced. I didn't have time to ponder it though, because I was determined to get an audible answer to my question.

He looked at me with trepidation and I was surprised with how red his little face was. Small tears were forming in the corners of his eyes. He was frustrated and even a little scared at the prospect of having to read it to me.

"I don't know!" He finally exclaimed, clearly irritated, his little hands fisting in the hem of his shirt. He wasn't yelling but he wasn't being quiet either and now that I had my answer, I had the sense to be self-conscious. I glanced around to make sure no one had witnessed our little scene.

"Do you...do you know how to read?" I asked him quietly. Most children his age couldn't read a novel, I was fully aware of that, but at six, almost seven, he should have been able to at least read the word 'CHICKEN' in bold black font. Or would have at the very least been able to recognize some of the characters. Something. Anything.

I needed to add making sure the kid knew how to read to my list. If he was going to live as a civilian, not being able to read at this age wouldn't be concerning. Civilian school focuses on mathematics, language, history and other such subjects. The Ninja Academy on the other hand, focused on the historical knowledge and specialized skills needed by a ninja. While there was some work on mathematics, being able to read and write with at least some proficiency was an unspoken prerequisite for The Ninja Academy.

This presented a problem but one that, thankfully, I had time to work on. Registration for Uzumaki to
enter The Academy wouldn't be until March next year.

It was probably good that I had noticed so soon.

"Can you count?" I inquired bluntly.

"Yes! I can count!" The kid responded a bit offended at the thought that I had considered he couldn't. He didn't realize how much of a miracle it was that he could count, considering he wasn't anywhere close to being literate.

"Count my fingers." I told him, putting the ramen cup down and held up my fisted hand in front of his face.

He let out a great sigh that surprised me, giving me a narrow-eyed stare and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Humor me, kid." I coaxed.

He conceded by finally nodding and began to count my fingers as I held them up. He managed to get to ten, but when my fingers went back to fists and I went to start over he couldn't think of what came next.

Well, I could work with him being able to count to ten.

"Who taught you that?" I asked quietly, not wanting to undermine his accomplishment.

Not having someone devoting at least a few hours a day to teaching him meant that it was impressive he had figured out the concept of counting at all. By all rights, he should have only been capable of one-to-one correspondence; which was being able to recognize when something was equivalent to something else, but not necessarily being able to produce a numerical value for it. Like being able to understand that you had the same amount of fingers on both your hands, but not having a number for it. Which meant someone had to have worked with him, at least a little bit.

"That old man." He told me, and it took me a moment to process the statement.

"Do you mean, Lord Hokage?" I asked, a little disbelieving that he had just called The Hokage 'that old man'. I mean, yes, he was an old man. But you couldn't just call him that. Not aloud anyway.

"Ugggh," he exclaimed, "why do all the grown-ups call him that?" This comment, of course, confirmed that he had, indeed, meant Lord Third. I wasn't about to go into why it was important that everyone, not just grown-ups, respect Lord Hokage's title so I decided to let it slide for now.

I was a little surprised that someone with as little free time as Lord Third had taken a few minutes out of his day to attempt to teach the kid how to count. I hoped that meant that he was aware that the boy wasn't even close to literate and would hopefully be an ally when I started endeavoring to change that.

For now, since he could count to ten, I decided that we would just focus on how to buy ramen.

I began to stand up.

"You can put five of each colour into the basket. Use your fingers to count if you have to. If you get stuck just wait for me because I'll be right back." I told him, flattening my skirt when I reached my full height. With one more quick glance at him, making sure he was doing as I instructed, I began moving around the store as quickly as possible and picking up the other things I had thought of.
When I turned the corner again, arms full of various foods, he was putting the last chicken ramen in the basket. A quick glance and I realized he had successfully followed my instructions.

"Perfect." I stated. "Now I'm going to show you what you do next."

Since my arms were full, I did my best to motion to the basket and watched as he picked it up. Thankfully, a basket full of instant ramen and already purchased clothing wasn't particularly heavy and seemed to be a weight he could manage.

He followed me to the till and I smiled at Mrs Asai, who was staring back at me with what I deemed to be a rather unimpressed expression. Thankfully, she plastered on a phony retail smile soon after even though she kept casting furtive glances at the kid. I could handle that, provided she didn't ban me from the store after this.

I then proceeded to instruct the kid on how to purchase his ramen, which took an excruciating amount of time for all involved. After a few minutes Mrs Asai even pitched in and helped me communicate which ryo were the ones he wanted to use, likely eager to get the both of us out of her store.

When we left, the kid had an accomplished grin plastered on his face and insisted on carrying his grocery bag full of ramen all on his own.

XxX

That had probably been the longest day of my entire short life.

When we arrived at his apartment around 3 o'clock, it was cleaned and full of new furniture just like I had planned for it to be. The kettle and toaster Tamaki had promised were there, along with some folded up brown shopping bags on the counter. I recognized them as the bags I had asked the random chunin I'd met in the first shop to bring over, which meant either the cleaner or Tamaki must have thought to put the items away for me. I instructed the kid to help me put away the groceries and then, as I was putting away his clothes informed him that this was now his home.

He had needed to process that idea for a long moment; but the elation had been clear as soon as he realized what I had meant. He had been into everything. He jumped on the bed, looked under the bed and yelled out the window. He was poking around in the closets, the cupboards, the fridge...he even tried to poke his head into the stove. Thankfully, I discovered that someone had put a child safety lock on the stove and I realized I probably had Yuzuha to thank for the forethought.

There had been a calendar on the kitchen table that I realized must have been an afterthought on someone's part because it was one of those free, promotional calendars that restaurants give away. That particular one was from the Yumehara Teahouse, each photograph being a picture of a beautiful woman in a traditional kimono. I flipped through it once to double check that all the pictures were appropriate. They were. I hadn't been expecting them to be inappropriate, since the Yumehara family were rather conservative and would never condone promotions that sexually objectified the women that worked for them, but I'd felt the urge to double check.

Once I determined it was safe, I had used the calendar to show him what days of the week I would be coming to check on him (which would be all but Sunday) and encouraged him to place an 'X' when he went to bed every night. I also did my best to mark important days on the calendar with a circle. The most recent one was next week, on Thursday. Every time he bought something, he was supposed to get a receipt and put it in Gama-chan, then once a month (next Thursday this month) I was going to look through the receipts and make sure Gama-chan was full. I'm not sure he fully understood what I was talking about, but I was going to be seeing him six days a week, so I figured
it was okay if he didn't understand right away.

I helped him make a cup of ramen, then showed him how to make some toast, encourage him to eat an apple and told him to go to bed when the sun went down. There wasn't much more I could do, so I made sure he locked the door behind me and assured him I'd be back tomorrow morning.

It was now 5 o'clock, the calendar had me thinking and I had stopped at The Yumehara Teahouse on the way home. While they specialized in tea, they had diversified over the years to offer a very nice lunch and dinner menu. My server, Izo, was the owner's twelve-year-old daughter, a current Koba Academy student, and was a serene child that I got along with quite well. She was the youngest of eight children and the only girl. Her father and all seven of her older brothers were ninja. It shocked many that Akira Yumehara owned a teahouse, since he was an abrasive jonin of impressive stature who looked like he would sooner wrestle a bear than enjoy sipping tea. Surprisingly, he had a passion for unique tea blends and offering people award winning customer service.

Since the tea house was quiet, we'd had a chance to speak leisurely about how school was, how her brothers were and tea. Simple things, but they helped me take my mind off Naruto's sad, falling face when I had left him alone at his apartment.

No...not Naruto...Uzumaki's sad face.

After paying and saying my thanks to Izo for the delicious meal, I left and ducked through the alleyways to get back to my apartment, my head down.

Genma hadn't given me an estimated date of return when last I saw him but usually his missions would be over around this time and he would be on his way back. I would likely be seeing him within the next few days if he wasn't going to be home later tonight.

When I got to the street just outside my building, I stood there for a moment and pondered whether I should stop at The Asai Grocery again and pick something up just in case Genma came home. I was still standing there in indecision, when a flicker of movement caught the corner of my eye.

My attention was drawn up to my bedroom window on the third floor, where the light was on. I specifically remembered turning the light off this morning. Was Genma home? If he was home, why would he turn my bedroom light on? Why was he even in my room? Genma never went in my room and he certainly didn't go in without asking. He told me once that now that I was a young lady he was scared about what he might find. It had been meant as a joke but there was a kernel of truth in the statement. There was a flicker of movement again as a shadowy figure passed by the window, then a split second later another went by in the same direction.

There were multiple people in my room.

And I had a feeling none of them were Genma.

I started running towards the apartment, not sure what I would find as I climbed the first and second flights of stairs in record time. When I reached the top of the third flight I was panting, and I had to stop for a moment to catch my breath. When I recovered I turned the corner and made my way down the hallway at a run.

There were three or four ninja in the hallway directly outside my apartment and my breath caught when I saw the four-pointed star with crest of the Uchiha clan embedded in the middle on their flak jackets. The Konoha Military Police were in my apartment.

I staggered, my pace slowing significantly at the sight.
I couldn't help but fear the worst.

Where was Genma?
I was shaking quietly despite myself.

At first I had been fine, but the longer I stood there with my eyes glued to the familiar Konoha Military Police uniform, the more rattled I became.

Why were they here? Where was Genma? Was he okay? Had he...had he done something?

I was doing my best to metaphorically reboot the rational part of my brain, desperately hoping that my logical mind would kick-on and soothe me. There was a reasonable explanation for this; there was no reason for me to assume a worst case scenario. But beyond that thought, I was consumed with fear and I could do nothing but quietly shake with wide eyes, staring at the group of ninja outside my door.

Raido was suddenly in front of me and he seemed to purposefully move so he could block my line of sight. He reached forward and I felt his hands firmly grasp my upper arms. The grip was not so tight that it hurt but it was enough to show me that he was demanding my attention.

"Kiyoko..." He began slowly and I noticed he was keeping his voice to a gentle whisper, "calm down."

Something about the way he said it halted the shaking immediately. I couldn't put my finger on it but he sounded almost like...like he knew something. And like what he knew wasn't nearly as bad as what I had imagined. That was comforting to me in a strange sort of way.

My rational mind was given an opening and it came forward with a vengence.

Genma was still on his mission and I knew that he was completely loyal to Konoha. He was a former bodyguard for The Hokage after all and was probably considered high on the least likely to betray Konoha list. I was sure such a list existed somewhere amongst the mountains of Lord Third's paperwork. So that meant it was unlikely that they were here to arrest Genma.

Similarly, if Genma had been KIA or was even simply MIA, I would have been sent a 'Widow Letter'. Widow Letter was, of course, a slang term for the official statement Lord Hokage sent to the families of those who were killed. What the formal name for them was I couldn't remember, it was called an 'Acknowledgment of Honorable Service' or something to that effect.

Despite being called a Widow Letter by the general populace, it didn't just go to spouses. It was given to the closest living relative of the deceased; so I knew very well that until such time as Genma got married and had children I would be the one to receive his letter. Genma had been the one to receive our father's but he had hid it in the picture frame of our family photograph. It seemed like a suitable place since that way all three of us would know where it was if we wanted or needed it.

Widow Letters were, however, delivered by ninja courier. Not by the Military Police, although they had been known to accompany the messenger if it was one of their own. It was an Uchiha Clan thing.

But Genma wasn't an Uchiha.

I thought it was better to be safe than sorry, so there was no harm in asking.
"What's going on?" I asked, "Is Genma okay?"

Raido released me and slowly adjusted back to his full height, as he'd had to bend slightly to hold my arms. At 5.0ft, 5.2ft with heels, I was not a tall woman.

"I don't know for sure about Genma because he hasn't reported in from his mission yet." In a strange way, that was a relief because it meant that whatever was going on likely had nothing to do with my brother. Which meant that it had everything to do with me. I was less concerned about me because I knew for certain I hadn't done anything wrong.

I nodded in response but waited for him to continue.

"Well, when Genma went on his mission he asked me to keep an eye on you." I nodded again, it wasn't uncommon for my brother to request that his friends check in on me. Even if he hadn't specifically asked, I had no doubts that when he happened to be in the area Raido's eyes would have drifted up to our apartment out of habit. "Earlier, when I was getting my groceries I noticed some movement in your bedroom window. I thought it was you but immediately after, I saw you at Asai's and when I asked you, you mentioned that you'd been out all day. I was concerned so I decided to look into it."

A home invader. This morning when I left with Uzumaki I had forgotten to lock the door. It was my own fault.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked levelly although even as it left my mouth I realized I already knew the answer. Raido knew I understood as well, simply raising an eyebrow in return.

If there had indeed been a home invader and I had decided to investigate it on my own, I ran the risk of being harmed. Even if they were a simple thief attempting to steal from me, if I caught them in the act, their fight or flight response would kick in. When someone was in that state of mind, there was no predicting what they would do. They could have attacked me.

There was also a less likely but still plausible chance that this mystery invader was an enemy of Genma's. In which case I would have been killed without hesitation. Even if I had been accompanied by the jonin back to my apartment, in the later scenario I would have only served as a liability and distracted him from engaging the enemy. When he analyzed all possibilities, Raido decided it was best to ward me away from the apartment and investigate on his own until he knew for certain what was going on.

"I hoped to have this all sorted out before you came home," The jonin confessed, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the police force officers, "but the Police Force are dragging their feet. They say that they can't let anyone in until they track down whoever is responsible. They don't want their crime scene contaminated."

"Why can't I go in? I can help them figure out what was stolen much better when I can actually see my apartment." I informed him. If they wanted to know what had been taken, I was the best person to ask. Not that Genma and I had much worth stealing.

Raido sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Kiyoko...nothing was stolen." He replied.

I was quiet for a long moment before speaking.

"How do you know that?" Raido was a close friend but he wouldn't have been able to recognize whether something had been stolen or not. He and Genma were close, but not close enough for him
to have an intimate knowledge of the items in our apartment.

"Because well...let's just say it's a little obvious that whoever broke in wasn't after your stuff. Your place is a mess, but it doesn't look like they were looking for anything in particular. They had a...different purpose." He looked uncomfortable mentioning it, refusing to meet my eyes.

Raido had moved now so he was leaning up against the wall, no longer blocking my view of the apartment doorway. The door was wide open, and the police force ninja had moved back inside. I could still see the corner of a flak jacket in the doorframe. What had been done to my apartment? Why?

"Do you have somewhere to go tonight?" Raido asked and I felt my brows knit together.

"Yes." The voice that answered the jonin's question wasn't mine. It was gruff and had come from behind me, startling me. My head snapped back so quickly that it was almost painful and I was surprised to see Ibiki Morino standing at the top of the stairwell.

The truth was that I had never actually met Ibiki in person but his imposing height, lightly tanned skin, short crop of black hair and brooding expression were unmistakable. The man also had a distinct, diagonal scar that spanned the right side of his face. He was dressed in casual black which indicated to me that wherever he had just left from, it had been unexpected.

Most ninja over the rank of chunin rarely went anywhere without a flak jacket of some kind: Genma once told me that after enough years of service flak jackets became like a second skin. Ninja tended to feel naked without them, even if they were just going down the street for groceries. There were few exceptions; one of which was when they were in the safety of their own homes.

I also noticed that he had a small paper shopping bag clenched in his left hand, the top of the bag being crinkled by his fingers just enough that I couldn't make out the name of the pharmacy. The symbol and lettering wasn't familiar to me so wherever it was, it wasn't anywhere near the Kamotsu District.

"Morino? What are you doing here?" Raido was equally surprised at the other man's appearance.

"Police Force isn't being quiet about the fact that they're looking for someone. I overheard them banging on doors in the Namui District. I'm sure by now even the dead know what's happening." He pinned his gaze on me and continued with an irritated tone, "The woman would torment me to an early grave if she found out I knew what happened and didn't come check on you."

I assumed by 'the woman' he meant Tamaki.

"As much as I appreciate the offer, I still don't understand why I can't stay in my apartment." Was my only response. I was confident that given some time I could negotiate with the police force. It was a trashed apartment - surely if I didn't touch anything, and they took some pictures it would be fine. It was going overboard to tell me I couldn't stay there.

"No, no. I agree with them. It's best if you don't go in there." Raido urged, looking like he was even ready to grab me if I started moving toward the door.

"I can't even get clothes?" I asked, a little taken aback at the thought. Even if my apartment had been burned to the ground I still would have intended to go to work tomorrow. I certainly didn't want to turn up at the office in dirty, wrinkled clothes.

That stopped the jonin and he seemed to be weighing his options. I could almost see the gears turning as he processed whether he valued keeping me away from the apartment over having the
decency to let me get a change of clothes.

"I suppose I could go get some for you." He finally offered, attempting to look for a compromise.

"If you want to tell Genma that you were rummaging through his sister's panty drawer be my guest, " Ibiki cut in, causing the other man to flush a brilliant shade of red and then purple - likely at the thought of being strangled by his former teammate. "But getting a change of clothes isn't necessary. I'm sure Tamaki has something in that bottomless pit she calls a closet that you could wear."

I didn't want to point out that the other woman and I physically had very little in common. She was 5.7ft, had a generous bust and an equally generous buttocks. Compared to her I was a twig and would likely look like a child wearing my mother's blouse if I had to resort to borrowing. However, besides the obvious cosmetic factor, which ultimately wasn't that important, I didn't have an argument. I wouldn't look my best, but I supposed I could borrow clothes from Tamaki.

Ibiki was eyeing Raido in a manner that told me he was also in agreement that I shouldn't be going into the apartment. What was so awful that they didn't want me to see? What was it that they seemed to think I couldn't handle?

I glanced at the empty door frame to my apartment one more time and as I did so suddenly felt...drained.

I didn't want to fight anymore. I'd had a very, very long day and I was ready for it to be over. I needed to pick my battles.

"Fine."

XxX

I'd never actually been to the Morino household, although I'd heard it described by Tamaki with enough detail that I had recognized it as we approached in the night.

According to her, the house was among the oldest in the village and had been passed down through the generations of the Morino ninja family, finally being inherited by Ibiki following his parent's untimely deaths. At almost 100 years old it's age was apparent, but it had been maintained so it had a quiet class instead of looking run down like I would have expected.

Despite its age, the house was very much ahead of its time architecturally. While it appeared to be derived from the minka architecture, having a wraparound veranda and being slightly raised off the ground, Tamaki had told me it was three stories. This was confirmed as I approached, and the building seemed to loom ominously over the food stalls and shops that lined the road below. It was a large property and around its entirety there was a six-foot wooden fence, clearly built to provide the house owners with some privacy from the bustling district.

The Saiten District, now famous for holding spring festivals, had developed with the Morino property at the heart. Tamaki had told me that back when the Morino House had first been built, this area had been considered the outskirts of the village, but slowly it had been consumed by the evolving Konoha.

Ibiki walked up to the tall gate and pulled it open, standing to the side so I could enter the property first. Once inside, I was in awe. Tamaki had made a point of telling me that she didn't have a green thumb but when Idate was little she had spent a great deal of time tending to the property's garden. Her descriptions hadn't done it justice - it was gorgeous. The front garden had beautiful stone walkways and rounded flower beds with an eclectic mix of flowers from lilies to carnations. To the
left of the walkway, not far from the veranda, there was a koi pond with a small rock fountain that trickled soothingly.

In the darkness, I felt a low breeze sweep through the front yard and I heard wooden chimes clinking from the veranda in response. It was then I noticed that the tall fence not only provided privacy, but the sounds from the surrounding district were muted. I barely heard anything going on beyond the wooden wall.

I realized I had stopped moving and Ibiki was looming behind me, just as imposing as his home had appeared from the street. I could almost feel his impatience seeping through his skin - the last thing he wanted to do was stand in his front yard all night. I began moving again, making my way up onto the veranda and towards the large oak door. It wasn't locked and with a quick glance at the jonin to make sure it was okay, I pulled the door open.

Once inside, I began taking off my shoes and allowed my eyes to roam the large entranceway. I immediately noticed that the walls were made of drywall, not washi like I had expected. They had been painted in muted, soothing shades of brown and beige. The floors were polished hardwood and there was an elegant area rug that took up most of the entranceway. There were archways opposite the front door, but from where I was standing I couldn't see where they lead. There only appeared to be dimness in the hallways beyond.

Ibiki had entered behind me and was also removing his shoes with a balance that I envied, not needing to brace himself against the wall or even bend down.

"I'm home." He said in a calm tone, not raising his voice. I learned quickly why. There was no need to, something about the old home seemed to take his voice and carry it, the sound echoing around the entranceway. There was an immediate response in the form of hurried footsteps, indicating someone was running towards us.

From the dim beyond one of the mystery arches, a figure emerged. A figure I was very happy to see. "Did you get it?" She asked hurriedly. Her green eyes were wide and slightly panicked, trained on Ibiki's every movement and for that reason she didn't seem to have noticed me yet.

This was the first time I'd saw Tamaki in her 'at home clothes'. Even when we went out to eat after work, she would usually wear her blouse and dress pants. Her long black hair had been pulled back into a low ponytail and she wasn't wearing any make-up. She was dressed in a pair of black crop pants and a blue t-shirt. She had a white bib apron and socks, which caused her to slide slightly across the floor. She looked like a young housewife which was something I had to take a moment to adjust to. I wasn't used to apron-wearing Tamaki.

"Yes. I got it." Ibiki told her with disinterest, both handing her the crinkled paper bag and proceeding to walk past her at the same time. "But if you ask me he doesn't need it."

His tone indicated to me that the couple was in the midst of disagreeing on something and I was going to be forced to bear witness to the altercation. I'd heard Tamaki's point of view on hers and Ibiki's arguments many times in the past. From what she described they argued often and it was usually because Ibiki was being a 'fat-headed ninja jerkface'.

I didn't think I would ever find another human being that I wanted to share my life with, but if I did I hoped we didn't argue nearly as much as Tamaki and Ibiki did. To be honest, it sounded exhausting.

"He is sick. He needs medicine, Ibiki. When you're sick you need medicine." Came Tamaki's sharp retort, her sentences halting as if her patience was being grated for the umpteenth time that night. She
still didn't appear to notice me.

"He doesn't need medicine. It's a cold. It will pass. He'll have to learn to live with colds; along with all the other boo-boo's that you won't be there to kiss better, Tamaki. He's going to be a ninja." Ibiki's tone was mocking and disgusted when he said 'boo-boo's'.

I wasn't sure I wanted to stand there while this escalated.

"Um," I tried to begin softly but was ignored, purposefully on Ibiki's part but Tamaki's eyes were fixed on the jonin and it was obvious to me she couldn't hear or see anything else. She was clearly livid which made sense to me when it became clear what this argument was about.

Tamaki had confided in me only yesterday during our walk through the village that ever since Idate had entered the Academy, Ibiki had been purposefully pushing Tamaki away from mothering his brother. At first it had been subtle enough, but over the last few days he had become more obvious and blunt about his intentions. As soon as Tamaki figured out what he was doing she'd become upset, then willfully defiant, and as a result the two had added a fight regarding Idate's upbringing to their daily routine. I had a feeling this argument wasn't so much about medicine and colds as it was about Ibiki trying to get Tamaki to ignore her maternal instincts - at least as far as Idate was concerned.

"Fair enough, but right now he is a child." Tamaki snapped, sounding aghast at the thought of leaving the kid to suffer with a cold. To be honest, if it was just a cold, I was tempted to agree with Ibiki.

Growing up I'd had to learn to weather plenty of illnesses by myself - there was nothing wrong with learning to continue with your life when you were sick. It was what I considered an 'adult skill' and one that you could start learning as a child safely. The sooner you learned that the world wouldn't stop because you were a little uncomfortable the better.

While she tended to let her emotions guide her judgement Tamaki was a reasonable woman who should have been able to infer the logic behind Ibiki's argument. But I had a feeling that right now she was too upset to debate. It was more likely at this point she was simply disagreeing for the sake of disagreeing, not wanting to listen to anything Ibiki had to say. As far as she was concerned, he was trying to separate her from her maternal duties which made him an enemy whose judgement she couldn't trust.

"Um…" I began again, even more hesitant than before if that was possible.

Ibiki t'ched and at first I believed that my presence was still being ignored. I was mistaken.

"Whatever, I got the medicine," He tossed over his shoulder as he seemed to dismiss himself from the conversation, exiting out into the hallway. "You have a guest Tamaki, so quit your nagging."

"Nagging!? Why you…" Tamaki began as the man walked away and I heard the bag in her hands begin to rip due to the tightness of her grip. "Wait a minute…did you just say…guest…?"

I watched as she turned to face me for the first time, her face a slack mask of surprise and confusion. There was a long silence as she stared at me and I stared back.

She blinked.

"Oh, Kiyoko, when did you get here?" She asked lightly, as if trying to pretend she hadn't just emerged from an argument with her boyfriend mere seconds ago.
"I've been here the whole time." I informed her bluntly, keeping my expression level.

"Oh...I see." I noticed that she flushed at the confirmation that I had witnessed the entire verbal battle between herself and the jonin. I knew Tamaki had said they fought often but she never elaborated as to how long their typical altercation was. Somehow, I had a feeling that it had been cut short.

"He has a point, you know." I informed her and she went even redder, although I suspected it was for a different reason.

"Do you want some tea?" She spat out, obviously trying to distract me.

Even though her tone was less than inviting I chose to accept. I didn't really have much choice in the matter.

Two hours later, I was still sipping a cup of tea that had long since gone cold.

The Morino's dining table was antique and clearly made for large family gatherings or parties. There was seating for eighteen people but with only Tamaki and I seated, the dining room had a lonely feeling. There were old tapestries lining the walls giving it a cool, formal aura but the longer I sat there, the more I could see the small influences that made it obvious Tamaki lived there. A neat vase of freshly picked flowers in the center of the table and warm colored placemats were small touches added a much-needed warmth.

So far, our conversation had been lengthy and entirely about the strangeness of what could have happened to my apartment and why all involved seemed to think it was none of my business. Tamaki had, of course, agreed with Ibiki's assessment of the situation and had informed me that I was more than welcome to stay for however long I needed.

I had changed into a pair of Tamaki's long sleeved, flannel pajamas which as I had predicted were large on me. Where Ibiki had disappeared to I wasn't certain, but I made note that I hadn't seen him since we had arrived. Tamaki too had disappeared for a few moments and had returned changed into a short nightdress with a long, thick bathrobe.

"Ugh, it just gets me that they wouldn't even let you know what happened. They should have told you something!" Tamaki finished, leaning back in her chair. It wasn't the first time she had said this in our conversation, but she seemed to feel the need to repeat herself.

I was suddenly weary of the subject, especially since after two hours we had just begun to repeat ourselves. We hadn't had any new insights.

"I don't really want to talk about it anymore. There's nothing more I can do, anyway. At least not tonight."

Tamaki was quiet for a moment before releasing a long sigh.

"Yeah, I feel ya, I guess." She grumbled eventually, "You're right. Nothing we can do...as usual..."

We lapsed into silence as we both chose to stare into our tea cups, the room grew heavy and sullen for several long minutes. Somewhere in the background, an analog clock ticked away. I vaguely wondered what time it was but at the same time didn't particularly care.

Even as emotionally exhausted as I was, in the safety of the Morino household I was getting a second wind and I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to sleep anytime soon.

"So, how'd your day with the Uzumaki kid go?" Tamaki finally broke the silence, "Did the furniture
turn up alright? It wasn't much but it was the best I could do with that budget...bosom or no bosom.

My thoughts were quickly turned from my own misfortunes to Uzumaki, who just a few short hours ago I was purposefully trying to push from my mind. It seemed to me that he was now the least of my worries.

"Dismal." I said in a deadpan, "He's completely illiterate and can't tell time. He can count to ten, which I suppose is something I can work with."

"Wait what do you mean by completely illiterate?" Tamaki asked, having picked up on my overemphasis.

"I mean completely. He doesn't appear to be able to read anything...I didn't have an opportunity to test it but it's unlikely he even knows how to read and write his own name." I rested my head in my hand and went back to staring into the green depths of my tea.

I'd been purposefully trying not to think about it because I knew it would keep me awake all night trying to produce a solution or ideas on how to teach him. But with everything that had happened tonight the damage was done, and I may as well take the time to run this newest discovery by Tamaki.

I'd never had to spend time around children, let along teach one to read and write. My ebony-haired friend on the other end had raised Idate and before her CAO days was a full-time nanny. Since he had recently been able to enter the Ninja Academy, I figured it was reasonable to assume that Tamaki had taught Idate how to read and write. Hopefully, she would have some ideas.

"You're kidding me," She began in obvious disbelief, "not even his own name? Well, that's going to have to change. No way that kid is going to be able to go to a civilian school."

Despite the obvious emphasis on 'that kid' there wasn't any vitriol in her tone, just an insinuation of what she meant. I understood her concern - it was the very thing that plagued my mind. Naruto Uzumaki would have to be a ninja if there was going to be any hope of him keeping the nine-tails at bay. If he couldn't make the cut to enter The Ninja Academy, that would be a huge barrier towards keeping not only his but the village's future secure.

"I don't know how to teach him. Any ideas?" I inquired softly, letting her know for the first time that I was beginning to feel a little in-over-my-head. For once time was on my side, but my skill-set really didn't lay in teaching.

"I have some but to be honest I'm not the most patient when it comes to stuff like that. Short of reading Idate to sleep every night and doing some flash-card work, Ibiki actually did most of his early education." Tamaki said, although it appeared she was loath to admit it to me.

I tried to hide the fact that my facial expression was threatening to move from neutral to hopeless. I hadn't expected that idea to be a bust.

As I did that, Tamaki stood quickly, held up a finger in a signal to wait and hurried out of the room. She was gone for a few moments and I heard some mild thumping from somewhere else in the house. When she finally emerged, she was carrying a medium-sized cardboard box that said 'IDATE 4/8' on the side in bold characters. Completely disregarding the fine placemats, she set the box down with a thump.

"What does the 4/8 stand for?" I asked as I watched her begin to pick at the tape sealing the box.

"Fourth box out of eight. Those boxes are mostly all his 'baby stuff' but this one is full of early
readers and beginner books. I think there might be some flashcards for numbers and time in here too...I kind of forget to be honest. I packed this thing almost three years ago." She continued to rip at the tape, peeling it off the top as it screeched faintly in protest.

I stood up and made my way over to stand next to her, watching as she unfolded the top and started to pull out stacks of small books, setting them in neat piles on the dining table.

"You can have them if you think they'll help. They were just collecting dust in one of the closets. There's too many. I swear this place probably has closets I still don't know exist. I found a closet I didn't know existed inside the kitchen pantry a few weeks ago." Tamaki was still counting and thumbing through the books as she spoke.

"Really? I can have them for Uzumaki?" I asked cautiously, ignoring her rambling about closets for the time being. Perhaps asking Tamaki hadn't been a complete bust. There was no guarantee that I would be successful in using the books but not having to search for the age-appropriate materials would certainly be a plus.

"Of course." She sent me a small, crooked smile.

There was a silence between us as we both took another few moments to look through the stacks.

"A closet inside the kitchen pantry?" I finally breached the silence, "Seriously?"

"Oh yeah, there's a false wall in there." Tamaki said with a lighthearted chuckle, "Don't get me started on the hidden room in the linen closet. Or the secret panel I found in the shower. Which reminds me...don't lean on the wall while you're taking a shower. I climbed in there hungover one morning, leant on it, was swallowed by the panel and was stuck in the walls for three hours. I don't know what Ibiki's ancestors were doing in this house and frankly I'm terrified to ask."

Somehow, I felt that was wise on her part.

XxX

Breakfast with the Morino household was an interesting affair.

Tamaki was fluttering about in her standard dress pants and blouse, but she had tied her apron on over top. This was for practicality I discovered, as before I had even considered waking up that morning she had been awake and making what I considered to be an elaborate breakfast. It was just a traditional breakfast of steamed rice and pickled vegetables, but to me (who didn't normally eat breakfast at all) it was quite the feast. It appeared that on top of serving the rest of us breakfast, she was also simultaneously cleaning and packing bento.

I had offered my help but had been viciously forced into the chair to Ibiki's left. At first, I was concerned she wasn't eating with how much she was moving around, but on occasion I would blink and she would be standing across from me, devouring some rice. Then I would blink again and she would be back in the kitchen, asking if we wanted more to eat.

Ibiki was fully dressed in his uniform and was sitting at the head of the eighteen-person table. He primarily kept to himself, having only uttered a few polite 'yes pleases' and 'no thank-yous' when Tamaki would stop her fluttering to ask whether he wanted more coffee or more food. He had a pile of scrolls next to him and throughout the meal was sifting through them and holding different ones in front of his face while he read. I assumed they were mission briefings or low-level intelligence that he could have in the presence of his family. It certainly didn't look like pleasure reading as whenever he would shift between scrolls and I'd catch a glimpse of his hardened frown.
Considering their row last night, I had expected the man to be cordial with Tamaki but nothing more. I was surprised. While his attention clearly occupied, there didn't seem to be any indication that he was angry with her. Which was an attitude that Tamaki appeared to share: the way the two were behaving it was like they had never fought in the first place.

To my left was Idate who had obviously already recovered from his cold and had decided to play a game of 121 questions with me. I didn't know a person could be asked so many questions in one sitting. Just like with Ibiki, I'd never met him before, but I'd heard enough about him that I felt like I did. What Tamaki failed to mention, although I felt it was because she hadn't noticed, was that Idate had inherited her personality. He was spunky, vibrant and could be a little moody. Sudden mood swings were one of Tamaki's specialties and it appeared to have caught on. The boy's attitude had changed at least three times between waking up and sitting down at the table for breakfast.

After almost an hour of this circus Tamaki called a morning routine, she finally emerged from the kitchen for what I discovered would be the last time. She was balancing two neatly boxed bento under her one arm and had a pot of freshly brewed coffee in her opposite hand. She rounded the table, pouring Ibiki another cup of coffee as she passed (receiving an absent but genuine 'thank you' in return) and finally settled into the seat across from me. She set the bento down next to her, sighed and picked up her chopsticks.

Idate wasted no time switching his inquiries to someone else.

"What's for lunch?" He asked curiously, his mouth still full.

I couldn't believe it. How could he be thinking about lunch when he was still eating breakfast?

"Idate, don't talk with your mouth full." Ibiki's voice floated from around the scroll he had his nose buried in.

Idate took a moment and swallowed but wasn't deterred.

"What's for lunch, Tamaki?" He asked again, now his mouth absent of any food.

"Well, I made; salted salmon, rice, there's some sweet peppers in there too..." She was looking upwards, as if she was physically searching her memory. She was holding a clump of what was now cold rice a few inches from her mouth as she responded, and I watched while she did it agonizingly. Couldn't she just eat her breakfast? If Tamaki didn't eat soon I was going to be tempted to force feed her. Was this what her mornings were always like? Is this what having a traditional family and a child was like? It was so...demanding.

"There's no broccoli this time, right?" He asked, interrupting her.

Tamaki started for a moment before her face went blank. Somehow, I got the feeling this was a recurring subject between the two.

"No, there is broccoli, Idate. I know you don't like it but it's important for your health. Broccoli is good for you." She appeared to be attempting to explain with a tone that indicated this wasn't the first time.

"You're lying," Idate accused his mood flipping to what felt like a brewing storm, "That's just a lie that grown-ups tell kids. It's not that great."

"Idate..." Tamaki began, although her voice lacked conviction. She sounded like she knew she was supposed to be scolding him but just couldn't bring herself to do it properly. It was like she didn't care to have the argument anymore. "I don't understand where this attitude is coming from. I'm not
During this exchange, I was focused on the fact that Tamaki had put her chopsticks back down without even taking a bite. The fact that she had yet to sit and eat properly was beginning to distract me.

I was so distracted that I failed to keep the look of shock off my face with what happened next.

"I don't have to listen to you. You're just a skirt." The little boy said smugly, crossing his arms and glaring at Tamaki, clearly very pleased with being able to use the (hopefully new) term in his vocabulary.

I couldn't immediately retrieve my stony Shiranui visage, instead I sat there with my mouth slightly agape and my indigo eyes widened. My chopsticks hung loosely in my hand. I couldn't believe what I just heard; he couldn't possibly understand the gravity of what he had just said.

Tamaki's face was fluctuating between shocked, angered and absolutely horrified. Her mouth was opening and closing as she seemed to struggle between trying to come to terms with what she'd just heard and formulate a response. She looked a bit like a fish. Not that I blamed her; I wouldn't know how to respond in this situation either.

I was, not for the first time, suddenly very thankful I didn't have children and it was not my responsibility to respond to this behavior.

The word itself was innocent but the meaning behind it was something an eight-year-old couldn't possibly understand. While he'd probably meant for it to give him an air of superiority, I found it hard to believe that he'd purposefully meant to suggest that the woman who raised him was a useless slut. I supposed it made sense that when a child got a new word in their vocabulary they'd want to use it: but that was hardly an appropriate term to be thrown around the breakfast table.

I felt a cold shiver suddenly run up my spine and the temperature dropped significantly to my left. Ibiki, abruptly stood up, abandoning his half-finished food and still open scrolls.

"Let's go, Idate." He said with a stern tone, "I'm taking you to school now. We're going to have a chat on the way."

"What?" The boy began in confusion, not seeming to understand that he had done or said anything wrong. "But school isn't for another hour."

"Let's Go." Ibiki emphasized again, his expression hardened.

Idate finally seemed to realize that he was in trouble, his eyes darting to Tamaki pleadingly who in turn refused to meet them. Instead she wordlessly picked up his bento and went back to the kitchen with it, her face blank.

It looked like Idate wasn't going to be having broccoli for lunch. In fact, he wasn't going to be getting anything at all.

At that point I realized I was still sitting there with a shocked expression, so I schooled it back into my usual passive one.

Tamaki didn't return to the dining room until a few minutes after I heard the door slam, which indicated that Ibiki had finally ushered the sulking Idate out onto the street. During that time I was left to sit there awkwardly for several minutes, staring down at my half-finished rice and cold coffee. When she finally returned, she plonked down into her seat, sighed heavily and rested her head in her
"I'm sorry you had to hear that, Kiyoko." She muttered, "He's a good kid...really. He's never said anything like that before. Ibiki certainly has never said it and his friends don't say stuff like that when they hang around here either. I don't know where he heard that."

I wasn't offended. I did wonder who thought it was okay to say something like that around a child who had clearly been raised by a civilian woman. It was clear that this was something he had picked up at the academy though. I could sense that Tamaki really didn't want to talk about it further - at least not right now, anyway. So instead of voicing my suspicions I chose to imply what had been bothering me all morning.

"Don't apologize to me," I told her, "just eat your breakfast. Please. You've gone to eat and put down the same clump of rice at least three times."

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips and I sipped my coffee as she went to begin her meal. She'd just begun to open her mouth when there was a knock on the door.

She sighed at the interruption and was about to put her chopsticks down again when I stood up.

"I'll get it." I said quickly, "Just eat. At this rate you're going to wither away."

Despite my deadpan attempt at a joke, I was serious. After witnessing the chaos that was Tamaki's typical morning I began to wonder when exactly she got the chance to eat. Now I was beginning to understand why she asked me on dinner dates or wanted to go out to lunch with me so frequently. From what I had witnessed so far it was the only chance she had to have an uninterrupted meal. Then again, maybe Tamaki was like me and had adapted to barely feel the pangs of hunger.

Either way, it was unsettling for me to see her not be able to sit down and enjoy a meal in her own home.

I made my way back towards the entrance, making sure to straighten and tug my skirt as I went. No matter who was at the door, I didn't want to answer it with my skirt hiked up. Thankfully, there hadn't been any need to borrow clothing from Tamaki as I had learned this morning that she had washed my clothes.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by a tall form with short brown hair and a white porcelain monkey mask.

"I'm looking for Kiyoko Shiranui." The monotone voice asked as soon as the door was fully opened.

I'd barely had time to take in the rest of the visitor's appearance, which only consisted of a black trench coat.

"That's me." I responded, wondering if the ANBU appearing at the Morino household had something to do with my apartment being trashed. They were the eyes, ears and arms of Lord Hokage. Given my new position as Uzumaki's caseworker, it wasn't impossible that Lord Hokage wanted to speak with me. Perhaps he was worried that I wouldn't be able to perform my duties effectively after what happened? Maybe he was thought I wasn't going to keep to my commitments to see Uzumaki this week? I, of course, had every intention of following through with them but it was reasonable for him to be skeptical.

"Come with me." He commanded, turning and moving towards the gate without waiting for an answer.

"You could at least say please." I heard a shrill voice behind me and I looked over my shoulder to
see Tamaki standing there, a grain of rice on her cheek and a frown on her face. She seemed to have regained a bit of her usual vigor and was staring at the ANBU's back with crossed arms, tapping her foot on the ground. "Honestly, common courtesy is dead nowadays. Where did all the gentleman go?"

I didn't bother to point out that he was ANBU and they weren't usually supposed to talk to anyone period let alone use their manners. The assessment was a little unfair, I'm sure when the mask was off he was a perfect gentleman.

"Move it, Shiranui." The ANBU said in response, a little less monotone and a little more gruff.

Apparently, Tamaki had managed to get under his skin. Go figure.

I nodded.

"Tamaki, you have rice on your face." I pointed out as I bent down to grab my shoes, sliding them on and fastening them as quickly as possible. Tamaki went a little red and proceeded to rub her cheeks with the corner of her sleeve, which occupied her attention while I grabbed my briefcase.

With that now in hand, I stood there quietly for a moment, watching as Tamaki still desperately rubbed at her face. The grain of rice was now long gone, but it seemed that she hadn't realized that yet.

"Tamaki..." I said after a few moments of silence, watching as the woman abruptly stopped her ministrations in response, "Thank you."

Her gaze softened, and she mumbled a response that sounded like it may have been a 'don't mention it'. It only took her a moment to get over her embarrassment at being thanked.

"Don't worry about those books." She informed me, "I'll drop them off at your desk when I get in this morning. I'll probably be a little late though...Ibiki forgot his lunch and knowing him he won't come back to get it himself."

"Thanks again."

"Would you stop thanking me and go already. It feels like that ANBU's about to pick you up and carry you there." She said, glancing at the ANBU from the corner of her eye. He wasn't, and she knew that. She probably couldn't help herself; it wasn't often a civilian got the opportunity to tease an ANBU and get away with it. He'd already shown he had a short fuse. Which made him an absolute delight for someone like Tamaki to toy with.

Even though I knew she was kidding, the idea of being carried to Lord Hokage's office was mortifying and enough to finally get me to leave.

When I reached the gate that lead out to the street, briefcase clenched in my hands, I glanced back once.

When I did, I caught my friend's concerned and knowing expression. An expression that she had obviously been trying to hide.

XxX

The worried look on Tamaki's face haunted my memory all the way to the Hokage Tower.
It occurred to me that last night after I had gone to bed, it was likely Ibiki had told Tamaki about what had happened to my apartment.

I had a wave of bitterness at the thought; why was it that everyone else could know what went on in my apartment yesterday except me? I did my best to show the world that I was strong and capable. I thought I was doing a respectable job of it but apparently not.

It didn't take me long to squash the contentious thoughts and force them from my mind. I shouldn't take the good intentions of those around me negatively. That wasn't right. Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit frustrated. Even though it was an irrational thought, I was starting to feel like everyone else in the village knew what had happened.

On our way up to the Hokage's floor, the ANBU had allowed me a moment to drop my briefcase off at my desk in the currently empty Children and Youth Services department.

When we arrived at Lord Hokage's office, the ANBU stood to the side and tilted his masked head at me. He was silently encouraging me to knock. ANBU apparently didn't knock, in fact I wasn't even sure they usually used the stairs. Or the door even. I had a feeling they usually just climbed in through Lord Third's window since when I thought about it, I'd never actually seen the ANBU using the stairs that went past the office. Regular forces ninja? Sure. ANBU? Never.

I glanced left and right at the two regular guards, but it seemed like I was being ignored because I had an ANBU escort.

I did as silently instructed and knocked lightly on the door, a couple of quiet taps that I was confident were heard. Growing up in a place like Konoha, with people around every corner who could hear a pin drop, one learned that they didn't need to be loud to be heard. Some people, like Tamaki or Atsuko, disregarded this lesson in favor of being the loud, vibrant personalities they naturally were. Others, like me, embraced the encouraged reserve.

"Enter." Came the familiar voice of the Third Hokage.

I never thought I would ever find anything about Lord Hokage to be familiar but after that long meeting a few days ago, my ears had become attuned to the sound of his voice.

I did as instructed, coming to stand in front of The Hokage and bowing quickly in greeting. I made sure to maintain my passive expression, especially after I realized that I had been so busy stewing over the apartment incident that I had forgotten to prepare something to say.

Well, being honest had worked well so far.

The elderly Lord Third didn't waste time.

"Miss Shiranui, it has come to my attention that yesterday afternoon your home was broken into. I hope you're doing well and this incident hasn't caused you too much distress." He said, taking a moment to puff on his pipe, "I had assigned your brother to temporary duty on the border. I sent word to have him recalled to the village a little early. With what that has happened I thought he may like to be home with you."

I did my best to stifle my relief. It was comforting to know that Genma would be home soon and I would have his support in dealing with the latest fiasco. It was also good because that meant I didn't have to explain what was going on. I had hoped that should Genma return Raido or one of his friends would let him know what had happened but to be honest having the Hokage send a formal letter was better. He'd have more time to prepare himself.
It was obvious to me however that Lord Third was giving our family a courtesy; I doubted he typically called ninja home in these circumstances. Not being around your family in times of celebration and crisis was, unfortunately, an occupational hazard for a ninja. My brief stint in the Registrations office had taught me that most shinobi were rarely even present for the birth of their children.

"It has also come to my attention that by assigning you to care for Naruto Uzumaki, even in a professional capacity, I unwittingly provoked this incident."

It took me a moment to digest what he was saying and then I started. Someone broke into my apartment...because of Naruto?

I mean...Uzumaki...

I wasn't stupid. I was aware that Uzumaki was hated by most of the village and that any interaction with him could be misinterpreted and used as fuel for that hatred. I had been expecting some dirty looks, maybe some gossip but I hadn't expected someone to be bold enough to break into my apartment and...well, goodness knows what they did. I wasn't fully aware of what the extent of the damage was yet.

Raido's words came back to me.

"Your place is a mess but it doesn't look like they were looking for anything in particular. They had a...different purpose."

A different purpose alright. I could only begin to imagine what they had done to my apartment to communicate their displeasure with my new position. Displeasure for what I had been doing for Uzumaki.

I felt my face flush a little in indignance. Complete strangers...upset with me...for doing my job. How in the hell was that anyone else's business? What made them think they had the right?

"I, of course, thank you for all of your hard work. I admire the strength, innovation and determination that you have displayed." He said, taking another long puff from his pipe. "With your efforts, Uzumaki's life has improved more in the last week then it has in the last six years and for that I will be always be grateful...as will he."

I couldn't or rather didn't want to understand where he was going with this. Why was he thanking me right now? Why did he sound like...like he was...?

"You are a citizen of Konoha and you have a right to feel safe in your own home. I may be Hokage, but I am first and foremost a ninja, and one of a ninja's priorities is to protect and see to the safety of those who live in the village he serves. It is a duty that I have always taken very seriously." He continued, his eyes hidden from me underneath the wide brim of his signature hat.

I had a feeling I knew where he was going with this and I didn't know how to react. Even with all the chaos and change that my life had gone through in the brief time since I became Naruto Uzumaki's caseworker, I had never felt so...helpless. Was there even anything I could say? Or was I doomed to stand here in wordless shock while he...

"For this reason, I have decided that it would be best if ninja are assigned to meet Naruto's needs going forward. I have already spoken to The Director and she has already stated that you may return to your former position. I apologize again for everything that has happened, Miss Shiranui." He said my name with a finality that told me I was now dismissed.
He did.

He just fired me.

I was stunned.

I heard light footsteps behind me and glancing over my shoulder saw that one of the regular guards had come into the office and was gesturing to lead me out of the room.

I was fired and dismissed for my own safety?

I turned and began to follow the chunin in a daze, I kept my eyes glued to the wooden panels of the floor, struggling to comprehend what had just happened. While my face remained in what I knew to be a passive mask, I'd begun to wring my hands together in front of me in distress.

Then, as quickly as I had been escorted in, I was escorted out.

Suddenly, it was just me standing outside the Hokage's closed door, staring into space while the two chunin guards successfully ignored my presence. It took my mind several long minutes to reboot while I breathed deeply and consciously attempted to stop myself from ringing my hands.

I'd been fired. No, not fired, just transferred. Reassigned.

Still...something about the whole thing hurt my pride. I'd worked hard. I'd done a good job. It just didn't seem fair that I was transferred, regardless of whether it was for my own safety or not. I certainly hadn't expected it and it had all happened so fast. As quickly as I'd gotten the position it was whisked away from me and I wasn't entirely sure where to go from here.

I suppose logically, I could just continue like it never happened. I would go back to my desk in Immigration, next to Tamaki, and spend my days perusing case files, rejecting, approving, helping with settlement...

I'd be lying if I said that the idea didn't appeal to me. I liked immigration work. I was suited for it.

"No offence, Kiyo, but it's not really playing to your previous experience."

Genma's words from the other day floated back to me. He was right, I wasn't suited for working with children. I didn't know anything about them. I had doubted myself every other minute ever since the Nine-Tailed Fox boy's case had been dropped in my lap. That likely wouldn't change.

I'd admitted myself that I didn't know what I was doing. I was just pretending to know what I was doing. It occurred to me that Moemi still hadn't formally provided me with any caseworker training.

I supposed it was back to Immigration for me.

I was just about to leave the area in front of the door, no doubt relieving the guards who had begun to stare me down to make me move, when I remembered something.

Something I couldn't believe I'd forgotten.

I immediately spun back around and knocked on the door, barely waiting for the acknowledgment before I walked back in. I approached where the elderly man was sitting behind his desk and waited for the door to click shut behind me.

Lord Third looked intrigued at my return to his office but chose to silently puff on his pipe in raise his eyebrow. He was inviting me to speak.
"Lord Hokage," I began slowly, "I fully understand why you want to remove me from my position however I am formally refusing the transfer back to Immigration."

I was met with a long, slightly stunned silence. I don't think I was allowed to refuse. But I just did.

"I can't leave any task unfinished - it's just not in my nature. There's so much that I had planned and not only that..." I trailed off, thinking of all the things I still had to do.

I still needed to come up with a solution to work towards improving his early education and preparing him for the academy. I needed to teach him how to tell time and how to manage his money. It couldn't hurt to work on his manners either. He was a smart kid and he deserved a chance. Demon container or not he was a child who deserved to have someone try for him.

I remembered that first meeting with Lord Third, when he'd told me that the village had failed Naruto Uzumaki and how he had said with such conviction, that we weren't going to do it again. Maybe it was arrogance for me to think it but I had decided that I was going to try for this kid like no one had before and Hokage or not that old guy didn't have the right to tell me that I couldn't.

He couldn't make me stand on a rug and then pull it out from under me.

Now I realized why my pride had felt so hurt earlier; he was convincing me, no, ordering me to give up. To fail. All because there was a very slim chance that some coward who didn't know how to mind their own business might harm me for my trouble.

No. I refused. I had pledged that the village wasn't going to fail that kid again and while I had been uncertain in my abilities at the time, I had accepted the challenge and meant it.

"Well?" Came the Hokage's imploring tone and I realized that I had accidentally paused.

"Not only that but I just remembered something I'd forgotten. Last night I promised him that I would be back to check on him. I even helped him mark his calendar." I made a point of looking into his eyes, hoping to convey my sincere desire to continue as Uzumaki's caseworker.

No...as Naruto's caseworker.

"Lord Hokage, don't make me a liar."

After all, being honest had worked out well for me so far.
I sat cross-legged in the center of my apartment floor, eyes tracing the walls and what little furniture we had.

I had managed to convince Lord Hokage to allow me to continue in my position as Uzumaki's caseworker. That had been easy, which indicated to me that the old man was reluctant for me to be transferred as well. I was invested in what I was doing, probably more invested than I ever had been in anything before. I was naturally determined and liked to think I had a solid work ethic, but never had I felt so attached to a task I'd been given. It had only taken five minutes of discussion for me to win him back over and have my position reinstated. In a way, the entire incident this morning was refreshing. Because it had reminded me that Lord Hokage was on Naruto's side and, by extension, on my side.

After that, I'd gone to visit Naruto just like I had assured him the day before. I'd stopped at my desk along the way and taken the books Tamaki had given me with the intention of leaving them with him. I didn't want to keep them at my desk and putting them in the closet at the kid's apartment seemed like a good idea. Hopefully, when I figured out how to teach him, that would end up being a convenient place. While I was there I made sure he put an 'X' on the date, weighed Gama-chan, made sure he'd eaten something and inspected the apartment to make sure nothing had happened to it overnight.

With the exception of an empty ramen cup on the table it was fine. I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Still, giving the small studio apartment a once-over seemed like the right thing to do. Tomorrow was Sunday, my day off, so I made sure he was aware that he wouldn't see me until the day after. As I was leaving, I emphasized the importance of him locking the door behind me and in exchange for this kernel of wisdom, a tiny hand had held out a sparkling white rock.

I'd been uncertain what to do, so I had accepted the gift with a wavering 'why, thank you' and left as quickly as possible.

It was lunchtime when I made it back to the Children and Youth Services department. I sat down at my desk and after staring at it for a few moments, put the new rock in the ever-growing pile on the corner of my desk. I'd need to get a bowl or a container for them. I toyed for a moment with the idea of getting rid of them but came to the conclusion that it wouldn't feel right.

They were gifts. You shouldn't discard gifts.

I had forgotten to eat lunch and instead of being concerned with that took out my official 'Uzumaki Journal' from my filing cabinet. Admittedly, I flinched in anticipation when I opened the drawer but thankfully there were no new pets. I made a revised checklist of all the new tasks I had discovered. The one that was concerning me the most was how I would go about teaching the kid to read and I spent the rest of the day thinking on it. With unfortunately very little progress.
Tamaki had appeared near the end of the day and informed me that I was welcome to stay at the Morino's again and after brief contemplation I had tentatively declined the offer. Her offer had prompted me to consider my, decidedly few, options which had driven me to make the decision to go back to my apartment. Whether the police force liked it or not. If they caught me, I figured I had the right to remind them that it was where I lived. At this point they should have been able to gather all the information they needed.

I'd finally managed to get the courage to defy the police force and break into my own apartment, which truthfully had been an easy feet. Clearly, they hadn't expected me to defy them and I still wanted to investigate the state of my apartment on my own.

I didn't realize how foolish this desire really was until it was far too late.

All I did was walk up to the unlocked, unguarded door, rip off the yellow tape and turn the handle. To be honest, after all the hype, it was a little anticlimactic. Not that I had been hoping for something grander.

The door was only open a crack when I was hit with a disturbing odor.

It was rancid, thick, metallic and, well, it smelled like death. Now, I had never experienced that scent in reality but I could imagine that it smelled quite a bit like this.

It was more than a little alarming and I had hesitated in fully opening the door.

I finally steeled my nerve and forced the door opened, not able to fully prepare myself for the full extent of the odor. It was overwhelming and my eyes began to involuntarily water and bile slowly rose in my throat. I was quick to bring my sleeve up to my nose and mouth, but the damage was already done. I would remember that scent forever. The apartment had been shut up with no air circulation and it was the middle of summer, when Konoha was at its hottest, which had only served to make it fester.

I had been wrong.

It didn't smell like death. It smelled like death warmed over.

Our already dingy, white walls had been smeared with a rusty, brownish substance that I was slowly able to determine was blood that had dried. In some cases it had just appeared to be smeared without purpose but the more I stared, the more I was able to make out hastily written messages. The characters appeared to have ran and some of it had been smudged, but I could make out 'their blood's on your hands.'

I took a cautious step forward into the apartment which soon proved not cautious enough, as when I went to take another, my foot met with resistance. I'd stepped in a puddle of a thick, sticky browney-red substance - almost like half dried glue. I stared at it for a long moment, unable to comprehend it at first. It was blood too. The density appeared to have prevented it from drying entirely.

I gagged against my sleeve and for the first time felt a hint of regret for not doing what I was told. I should have just gone home with Tamaki. One thing was for certain; there was no way I could sleep here tonight. I don't think I would ever be able to sleep here again.

Where did all this blood come from?

I rationalized that it couldn't be human blood. There was just too much of it. It likely belonged to a poor farm animal like a pig, goat or a cow. Consistent with that thought, I noticed a few tin paint buckets laying haphazardly around the apartment. Since they looked like paint cans, it was
reasonable to assume that the perpetrators hadn't looked out of place when carrying them through the street.

I forced myself to look around more, realizing that I was in too deep to back out now and since I was here I may as well survey all the damage.

I had to swallow hard to clear my throat, several times, since each swallow was met with the urge to vomit.

I moved further into the room, almost choking with every sticky movement. The floor was covered in smeared pools of the thick, half-dried blood. I could see the dried imprints of many different sandal prints, most of which I assumed were from the police force. They made a big deal about me ruining evidence but then proceeded to trample through it on their own. I was beginning to understand that 'evidence' had just been a well-intentioned excuse to keep me from seeing this disaster.

I could see the stuffing from our brown couch torn out of its casing and strewn all around the room; clumps of the yellowed cotton could be found on the floor and kitchen counter. Our kitchen drawers had been torn off their sliders and were on the floor along with all of our silverware and cooking utensils. I cautiously stepped over a large wooden spoon, that I'd forgotten we owned, which was buried in a pool of tacky blood.

As I did so, I heard a loud crunch and lifted up my foot to stare down at the small shard of glass that had caused the sound. This drew my attention the what almost seemed to be an endless sea of broken ceramic, which I recognized as the scattered remains of what little dishware Genma and I owned. It hadn't been valuable stuff; since we typically ate out of cardboard takeout containers. There hadn't been much point investing in nice dinnerware. Still, something about seeing it splayed out and destroyed caused a lump to form in my chest.

Ironically, the only thing that appeared to be untouched was the coffeemaker. I wasn't sure why, of all the things in the world, it was spared. It barely even worked...

I noticed that Genma's bedroom door was closed and I briefly wondered if that meant the invaders hadn't touched it or if the police force members had closed it for his privacy. I realized in that moment that I hadn't seen the inside of Genma's bedroom since I was eight years old and if it wasn't obvious, I wouldn't be able to tell if something was out of place. I was still concerned though and toyed with the idea of going in. Genma's room was where we kept all of our valuables and sentimental items; like our parents wedding rings, the ribbons my father gave me and his radio. Not to mention our very few and highly treasured family photographs.

I dismissed the idea soon.

Something about going into Genma's room, despite him being my big brother, felt foreboding even in circumstances like these. Hopefully it wouldn't be long before Genma arrived home and he would be able to check on our important items.

I moved further into the apartment and went through the archway into my room. Compared to the living room, it seemed to be only half destroyed. They'd torn all my clothes out of the dresser and piled them on the floor, along with my bed sheets, but the mattress hadn't been destroyed like the couch. I flushed a little in humiliation at the sight of my underwear and bras sprinkled from one end of the room to the other. I hoped there weren't any missing.

I didn't really have anything besides my bed, a nightstand and a dresser. There were more smeared messages on the wall but since they weren't 'fresh' anymore I really couldn't distinguish the characters. It was disturbing more by principal then by content, since it was written in blood.
I had to stare for a long time before I noticed that my clothing wasn’t just on the floor. There were bloody hand and finger prints all over them.

Something about that sight hit me hard; more than the blood, the messages, the ripped couch and broken dishes. I forced my sleeve closer to my face, to the point that I was almost crushing my own nose, as if hoping the slight pain would keep me grounded.

The room started to spin.

Surprisingly, for the first time since I’d heard about what happened, I had the sense to feel violated. I started to shake.

While I had been struggling to force down bile the entire time, for the first time I came very close to vomiting. My arm fell away from my face as I buckled down, finally overwhelmed by the combination of sights and the putrid odor. My hands braced themselves against my upper thighs and I began to heave. I stayed in that position, choking and panting for several long minutes, continuing to be assaulted by the scent of the apartment. Thankfully, nothing came up but after the episode I had to stand there for several more minutes to catch my breath.

I continued to shake.

After that ordeal I was exhausted.

That was how I ended up sitting cross-legged in the middle of my apartment floor, in the only clean spot, looking utterly drained and defeated. Every now and then I would begin to involuntarily shake but it would eventually fade away again. Like ocean tides, my shivering would grow and then ebb in a steady pattern.

I wasn’t sure how long I had been there but I assumed it was close to 9 o’clock when I heard the front door creak open slowly. I didn’t look at the newcomer, giving them a chance to get their bearings and adjust to the horror.

The person didn’t take long before they moved to stand behind me, then gingerly sat down. I felt hands slip under my upper arms and lift me up like a child, pulling me to sit in a lap.

"I’m sorry." Genma apologized bluntly, "This whole thing sucks."

I couldn’t see his face but I could still picture his blank expression and could feel his chin resting on the top of my head.

When we were children and would fuss or have tantrums, Genma used to do this with Atsuko and I. I wasn’t sure whether it had something to do with us being twins or not, but whenever one of us had a fit the other one would always inevitably join in. Every time Atsuko cried...I would cry too, even if I didn’t know why she was crying. Whenever these incidents happened, Genma would literally hold whichever one of us had started it in his lap, no matter how hard we struggled, and reach his free arm out to capture the other one. He’d pin us both in place until we calmed down and began to see reason.

Genma had always reasoned with us. He never shouted or got angry; to be honest I don't ever remember him scolding us either. He would just reason with us, like we were adults.

I hadn't necessarily been fussing but I appreciated the gesture regardless. It was familiar and comforting to me; I noticed soon after that the waves of shaking had stopped.
"Welcome home." I retorted blandly.

He scoffed lightly in response.

"We're moving." He said after several long moments.

"Figured."

We sat like that a bit longer before we finally decided to move, standing up in unison. My nose had, unfortunately, become accustomed to the smell. While Genma was trying to hide it, I could tell that even he was still struggling with the sheer potency of the scent of warmed, caked on animal blood. It was sad that I had been here long enough to have gotten used to it in any capacity.

Now that I could see him, I noticed that he was still in his full uniform and had dark circles under his eyes. His uniform was dirty, but not ripped or torn which indicated that while he'd had plenty of sleepless nights he probably hadn't seen any action on the border. Or at least not challenging action. When he received the message, he'd probably come straight home. Chances are he'd only arrived in the village within the last few hours and had decided to check on the damage. I don't think he'd expected to find me here: he'd probably assumed that I would stay away like I was told.

Wordlessly, Genma moved to enter his room and emerged a few minutes later with a couple of small boxes. The one on the bottom was unlabelled, but the one on top had a small piece of scotch tape with a quickly scribbled 'twins' on it. Those were the boxes I had been concerned about before and I was relieved to see that they appeared untouched.

Genma nodded to me, silently letting me know that it was time to leave, and continued quickly towards the door. He passed through the kitchen and scooped up the coffeemaker under his free arm. I followed closely behind and reached into the cupboard to discover my thankfully ignored jar of money that I had been saving.

Then we left, with no intention of ever coming back.

XxX

Genma later explained that he had been back for almost an hour and during that time he had arranged for us to stay with Gai.

Our apartment complex was a few streets north of the Yumehara Teahouse, as we were on the edge of the Kamotsu District. Despite being a bachelor, Gai had an immaculate two bedroom apartment in the Mita District a few streets south of that same notable teahouse. This meant that it wasn't a long walk to Gai's, which I was thankful for because the blast of fresh air I'd gotten when we left had reminded me that sleep was a necessity my body had no issues demanding.

When we arrived, Genma didn't get the chance to knock. Immediately Gai had flung the door open and quickly pulled us both in, shouting incoherently the entire time. Or at least incoherently as far as I was concerned; my older brother was nodding animatedly and I had a feeling he was able to understand. While that went on behind me, I tuned them out in favor of observing my new surroundings.

It occurred to me that in all the time I had known him, I had never had a purpose or reason to visit Might Gai's apartment. I was a little shocked by its appearance to be honest.

I was shocked because it was exceedingly normal looking and I had been expecting something more...eclectic.
His apartment had polished wood floors, clean white walls and while the accents were a tasteful dark green the furniture was modern and either black or grey in color. Hanging throughout the apartment with no particular pattern in mind were pictures of Gai and a man I assumed to be his father. I also spotted quite a few pictures of Gai and my brother at various ages, as well as a few with what appeared to be their entire genin team.

His kitchen had black cupboards and an island, grey granite countertops and a black wood, four-person dining set. The appliances were all matching and couldn't be more than a few years old. It was also pristine. Not a speck of dust, grim or dirt to be seen anywhere. In fact if it weren't for the small collection of tortoise magnets stuck to the fridge, I would suspect he didn't actually live there.

The living room was much the same; clean to the point that it sparkled. There was a dark green, oval area rug that took up most of the floor space underneath the couch and coffee table. The couch was simple and slate grey, with pillows on either end that matched the rug. The coffee table was black wood and with the exception of a neatly potted cactus in the middle, it was absent of clutter. He didn't have any electronics, but I did notice a meticulously organized bookshelf that took up a large portion of the wall.

"Kiyoko!" Gai boomed, forcing my eyes to focus on him instead of my surroundings. "We've decided that you'll have the spare bedroom. It's all ready for you!"

"Uh, okay. But what about you, Genma?" I asked, looking at him curiously.

"I'm going to take the couch. Gai's couch is wide and plenty comfortable - I'll be fine." He said automatically, preemptively answering my potential follow-up questions.

My face slackened at the thought; no matter how comfortable Gai's couch was, it wasn't fair that Genma had to sleep on it after a long mission while I got to sleep in a bed.

"I could always go stay at Tamaki's instead." I mentioned. She had already invited me to stay the night at the Morino household. Even though I had turned her down, I'm sure she would still welcome me if I showed up on her doorstep.

"It's too late for that, Kiyo. She's probably already in bed. If you want to go back to staying there tomorrow that's fine but for tonight you may as well stay here." It didn't surprise me that Genma already knew that I had stayed at the Morino household the previous night. Again; ninja would be the village's best gossips if they had any interest.

I didn't really have a response to that so I remained silent.

Gai, who had been watching our exchange quietly, started gesturing wildly to the guest room door with a large, sparkling smile. I sent him a strained but grateful look and made my way towards the guest room, the man following close behind with a bright smile.

As I entered the room, Gai flicked on the light and I was able to see the guest room in all its glory. It had the same color and design scheme as the rest of the apartment, although it was clear to me that despite how cleanly it was, Gai used it for storage. He'd set up what looked like a temporary cot in one corner, with forest green sheets and a matching pillow. Neatly organized towers of boxes lined the room and he seemed to have rearranged them in order to fit the cot inside.

Once I was done looking around I turned to Gai, who to my surprise was looking between me and the cot with a tentative expression. He obviously was concerned it wouldn't be good enough. That was Gai for you; heart of gold and pushed himself to do everything at 120%.
"Looks comfortable, Gai. Thank you." I told him, doing my best to curve my lips sincerely. I was sincerely grateful, but after the day I'd just had smiling was a little bit more difficult than usual. Not that smiling was second nature to me in the first place.

He visibly relaxed.

"Wonderful!" He exclaimed, "I did not have a lot of time but I'd hoped you would approve."

"Good night, Gai." I said with a nod before turning towards the door and shouting in the direction I assumed Genma was, "Night, big brother!"

I heard a garbled 'mrryaah' from the other room, which I decided to take as both a confirmation and a 'likewise'.

Gai nodded one more time before turning and leaving the room, closing the door behind him softly. I stood there for a few moments more, collecting myself. I wasn't sure whether I fully processed what I had seen today and I wasn't sure if I ever would. I made the conscious decision to not think about it and just move forward with my life. If I didn't get some sleep, I would be no good for anything.

I still had a list of Naruto problems as long as my arm that I had to handle. Now that Genma was back, it occurred to me that he may have some advice on teaching the kid how to read and write. While I vaguely remembered our father reading Atsuko and I to bed every night, I also remembered Genma taking over and helping us with our literacy homework when we started going to school. That being said, I went to civilian school where they focused on teaching those sorts of things. My love of literature came from my teachers at Koba Academy more then it came from my family.

Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

My head suddenly started to throb violently and I reached a cool hand upwards to place it on my forehead. It relieved the pain a little bit, but not entirely.

I needed to stop thinking and go to sleep.

While I strongly believed in the motto 'Why leave for tomorrow what you could do today?' I was also aware that if I didn't stop thinking about the Uzumaki caseload it may eventually begin to affect my health. Tamaki's words from Ichiraku's came back to me and I realized that she had been correct in assuming that this case would cause me to burn out if I wasn't careful. I needed to give my mind a break, as much as I was loathe to admit it.

I slowly began undressing, sliding my clothes off and folding them neatly. Gai's apartment building had a laundromat for residents downstairs. On the way over Genma and I had decided that I would wash my outfit there, since I discovered that my clothes in the apartment had been ruined. He'd given me a spare shirt of his from his backpack to sleep in, which thankfully ended up looking like an oversized dress on my much smaller form. If I paired it with my black tights, which thankfully didn't have any holes or runs in them, I would be able to get away with wearing the outfit down to the laundromat in the morning. If I went early enough, I would be able to avoid any prying eyes.

Once I was changed, I flicked the light off and climbed into the cot staring blankly into the darkness above me for several minutes. From beyond the closed door, I could make out the fact that Genma and Gai were still awake and talking. They were hushed, so I couldn't distinguish what they were saying even if I strained.

Eventually, the indistinguishable voices of the two men became white noise which lulled me gently to sleep.
I was fiddling with our coffeemaker and Genma was still pretending to be asleep when our host came wandering into his apartment on his hands. I was caught a little off guard and took the opportunity to stare with a slightly raised eyebrow.

I was up rather early, since I'd been trying to beat Gai's neighbors to the laundromat, and was a little surprised to see that he had been up long before I was. At least I hadn't seen or heard him leave so I assumed he had been up long before I was. Then again, this was Gai we were talking about, Mr. 120%, I should have known better.

In one swift movement he bounced up onto his feet, flashing me a wide sparkling smile and thumbs up. I could see that out of respect for Genma he was physically trying to restrain his regular exuberance. I didn't know why he was bothering; it was obvious to even me that Genma wasn't really asleep. He'd probably been awake as soon as he heard me get out of bed.

Still, the show of consideration for his friend was sweet.

I felt my lip curve into a slight smile, mouthed a 'good morning', then went back to what I had been doing. I flicked the switch on the coffeemaker a couple of times, gave the plastic cover a light smack and, when that didn't work, unplugged it. I waited about thirty seconds and then plugged it back in. I hit the button, it made a little chuffing noise, but other than that it didn't show any signs of working.

The damned thing…

I was beginning to wonder whether the silly thing really hadn't survived the home invaders and simply looked untouched. Not that it had ever been the most co-operative kitchen appliance but Genma and I were frugal. We wouldn't replace it as long as it worked, even if it only worked sometimes.

During this time, Gai had taken a full carton of eggs from the fridge and was cracking them open in a blender that he had retrieved from...somewhere. He had slowed what I assumed to be his morning routine in favour of watching me complete mine. After watching me go through the motions for about three minutes and almost completing what appeared to be the most disgusting smoothie I'd ever seen, Gai reached over casually and gave the coffeemaker a single, rough slap.

'WHACK!'

I had been too stunned to flinch.

My eyes darted between Gai's retreating hand, his stony expression and the brand new dent in the lid of the coffeemaker.

The coffeemaker whirred of its own volition, which was a noise I was pretty sure coffeemakers weren't supposed to make, and then began spitting out the blessed brown liquid with obvious strain into the pot.

I had a moment of elation which soon turned sour when the appliance stopped after only a single ounce of coffee. I stared at the nearly empty pot for a moment, sighed quietly and then grabbed a nearby tea mug. I poured the coffee in and then put the pot back on the maker.

I hit the red button again.

It spluttered but then began working with little difficulty; dents and all.
"Did you want this, Gai?" I asked quietly, looking at the sip of nearly black liquid that the green clad jonin had literally managed to beat out of the coffeemaker. As far as I was concerned, he'd earned it.

Several different things happened all at once and far too quickly for me to react appropriately to each of them. I just wasn't fast enough.

Gai reached forward and snatched it out of my hands with a 'why thank you, Kiyoko!' and threw it back like one would a shot of strong alcohol. From behind me, I heard a distressed gargle come from my elder brother who came flying over the back of the couch towards his former teammate. In response to my brother's sudden lunge, I squeaked in surprise and tumbled backwards, landing on the ground.

From that position, I was able to clearly see the events that unfolded next, almost as if they were happening in slow motion - although I remained incapable of responding to them.

Gai's eyes rolled back in his head and he began to vibrate in one place. His hand reached out and caught my brother mid-lunge and tossed him back across the room. I couldn't tear my horrified eyes away from Gai, so I didn't see what happened to Genma, but I did hear him collide with something hard. Then I blinked and Gai was gone, leaving the front door flung wide open behind him.

"Dammit," Genma complained somewhere to my left although I was still frozen and didn't look at him, "I'm going to be all day with this."

"Sorry," I said blandly, still not fully understanding what just happened and recognizing that while irritated, he wasn't irritated at me.

"Nah, don't worry about it. No way you could have known - not that I'd blame you even if you did. Idiot should know better by now." My brother grumbled, coming at a leisurely pace to stand over me and extending a hand towards me. I accepted it and allowed him to pull me into an upright position.

"Are you okay?" I asked, remembering the loud thump that had come from the general direction he'd been tossed in, "You hit pretty hard there."

"Trust me, that was nothing. Gai wasn't even paying attention to me just now let alone trying to hurt me." He reassured, turning to look at the empty tea cup on the counter. "His mind already runs a mile a minute. Add even a drop of caffeine and he can barely remember where or who he is; he may as well be on steroids."

It suddenly made more sense why Gai was well stocked with traditional tea cups but didn't have any coffee mugs. I had found it odd. Ever since the caffeinated beverage had become popular almost two decades ago most families had switched over to the large handled mug for their everyday morning glassware. They usually reserved the traditional tea cups for, well, tea so it had stood out to me when I'd discovered that Gai didn't have coffee mugs. In this day and age everyone drank coffee. Everyone had a coffee mug…except for Might Gai apparently.

"What do we do?" I asked, feeling more than a little responsible for what happened. With the way he'd tossed Genma across the room like he was made of paper there probably wasn't much I could do. That being said, I could at least offer.

My brother crossed his arm and I saw the corner of his lips curl upward into a small smirk.

"You can go about your day. Don't worry about Gai - he'll run out of steam eventually."

XxX
"Hey, Kiyoko! Didn't expect to see you way out here!" I was immediately drawn away from the large '50% Off' sign in the store window to the familiar voice behind me, who I turned to face.

Yuzuha Nara was making her way towards me, dressed in very unfamiliar casual attire and waving. I was used to her standard black skirt suit, bun and heels so like with Tamaki it took me a moment to adjust to what I was seeing.

Instead of fighting her medium length, unruly black hair into a bun she had simply pulled it back into a spiky ponytail. Several strands fell out of the style to frame her face; she was wearing light makeup and long dangling earrings. She had on a pair of black cropped pants and a light green top with short sleeves that I recognized as having the Nara Clan symbol on the shoulder. A simple, brown leather purse was slung over her shoulder and there was a pair of grey, flat sandals on her feet.

While she was normally rather stern, Yuzuha appeared to be uncharacteristically jovial and even had a twisted grin like a child who'd just gotten away with something.

Behind her, looking rather put-out, was a man that I recognized with very little difficulty. The long, bristling red hair, large build and distinct purple facial markings were unmistakable. Choza Akimichi had been Genma's sensei for many years and even after he had become a chunin, the man had remained one of my brother's confidants. Personally, I hadn't seen him in at least four years. It wasn't on purpose, as I knew for a fact my brother still met and trained with the Akimichi Clan Head often. It was simply that our paths rarely crossed.

The closer the woman got to me, the less she waved until she was standing directly in front of me motionless. By the time she did so her face had fallen back into her regular stern expression and she pinned me with her sharp brown gaze.

"Well?" She began, a hand rising up to hold her chin in thought as her eyes roamed my form curiously, "what are you doing way out here in the Harashi District?"

"I'm in the Harashi District?" I questioned with a blank face, taking a moment to look around. With all of my clothes destroyed in the raid on my home, I had chosen to use my day off in order to shop for new ones. I couldn't rewash the same outfit forever: even I wasn't that frugal. Still, I had become distracted following the sale signs and it appeared I had accidentally wandered all the way to the other side of the village.

I supposed there were worse districts to wander into.

The Harashi District was the district that bordered the Nara Clan compound on the edge of the village and for that reason most of the buildings were owned by the deer-herding clan and rented out. It was probably one of the cleaner districts in the village and primarily consisted of middle-class shinobi families who paid rent to the Nara Clan. Now that I knew which district I was in, it was no surprise to see Yuzuha there.

"Typical. Probably following the sales and lost track, huh?" She finally seemed to decide without me having to provide a direct answer.

"Pretty much." I agreed bluntly.

"Not like you to go shopping for clothes." She commented, "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Not really. I just have to replace my wardrobe."

"Oh! The police force knocked on our door that night but we had no information for them so
Shikaku sent them away. I hadn't realized until Tamaki said something yesterday that it had been your apartment that had been ransacked. I was in Tomita Village for most of the day so didn't get a chance to check on you either. Are you alright?" I wasn't surprised that Tamaki had told Yuzuha what had happened. I was surprised to hear that the police force had expanded their search for the perpetrator all the way to the Nara Clan compound.

"I'm fine. I wasn't home or anything."

"I'm glad you're okay. Do you need a place to stay? I'm sure my brother wouldn't mind if you needed somewhere to sleep for a few days. In fact, Yoshino would probably love having you. You're pretty cute - you'd be fun for her to dress up." Yoshino was Yuzuha's abrasive, sister-in-law whom she had formed a close bond with. I probably heard more about Yoshino on a daily basis then I did about Shikaku, Yuzuha's older brother.

There was just over a year in age difference between the two siblings, Shikaku being born July 15th and Yuzuha being born July 17th the following year. For this reason, the siblings had been raised almost as if they were the same age by their parents - their birthday celebrations were even conjoined. This had resulted in Yuzuha rarely being able to see Shikaku as the older brother he actually was, let alone give him the respect one tended to give an elder sibling.

Instead, I had discovered by listening to Yuzuha, she had become accustomed to getting her way as far as Shikaku was concerned. Once he had gotten married, she had found a partner in bullying the laid-back man in the form of his new bride, Yoshino. While Shikaku had fully expected his new wife to want his sister out of their family home, Yoshino had (to his horror) taken a liking to Yuzuha and insisted that her sister-in-law remain to help her run the household.

She claimed that managing the Nara Clan Head's household was too much work on her own and that she needed the support. Shikaku had been unable to refuse and Yuzuha, with nowhere else to go and delighted at the prospect, hadn't refused. Ever since, the poor man had spent all of his days tormented by the two overbearing women.

"It's fine. Genma's made arrangements for now. We'll probably start looking at new apartments soon." I explained.

It was at that moment something clicked and recognition bloomed across Choza's face.

"You're one of Genma's sisters?" He began, blinking a few times, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you at first. I hadn't seen either of you in a long time. Last time I saw you, you only came up to my knee."

Apparently it had been even longer than four years. While I had never necessarily been tall I'd been the same height since I was fourteen which at least brought me up to the man's chest.

"When was the last time you ate something?" Yuzuha inquired suddenly, looking me up and down as if examining some exotic creature. I was quiet, mostly because I couldn't remember when I had last eaten. I realized that the last time I had eaten was when I'd had breakfast at Tamaki's yesterday morning.

In response to this thought, my stomach growled.

"I had a feeling. You wouldn't believe it Choza," She turned her attention to the Akimichi Clan head and crossed her arms, effectively cutting me out of the conversation, "this one must filter-feed or something. She can never remember to eat."

Yuzuha did this from time to time. She'd have an open conversation with someone in front of me
about something I had or hadn't done. Not eating was typically what she took issue with. Before I had Tamaki to pull me away from my desk at lunchtime, Yuzuha (being my supervisor) had caught on to the fact that I had a habit of getting absorbed in my work and missing meals. It very obviously irked her. When outright ordering me to go eat hadn't worked, the woman had chosen to get creative with her methods.

When there wasn't another person available she would instead have this conversation with thin air. It was her way of scolding me for not taking better care of myself, which was sweet in a way because it reminded me that Yuzuha was concerned about me in more than just a professional capacity.

I was long used to her antics, so I just watched the conversation unfold with a blank expression on my face.

Choza went red and spluttered, his mouth dropping open in shock, likely horrified at the thought of missing even a single meal.

"What?" He exclaimed, "No way! You need to eat, Little Shiranui!"

The exclamation caused the corners of my lips to upturn slightly. When Atsuko was still around, Choza had never been able to tell us apart so he had resorted to calling us 'Little Shiranui' whenever he needed to address us. While I'm sure he'd heard through the grapevine that Konohagakure was now down a Shiranui twin, he probably wasn't able to distinguish which one was missing. Even if someone had directly told him, the chances of him remembering which one was still in the village were pretty slim.

"I have an idea!" Yuzuha told the two of us suddenly, her lips slowly growing back into the twisted grin she'd had on her face earlier. "Choza here was just treating me to a meal at one of his clan's new restaurants. Why don't you join us?"

"Uh, I couldn't possibly impose." I was quick to respond. I'd never been comfortable with someone else paying for my meals, let alone someone I barely knew on a personal level.

It was Choza who spoke up.

"It's not imposing. If anyone is imposing its Yuzuha. Trust me; she's unashamed enough for the both of you. This'll be the third meal she's suckered out of me this week and she's already well fed. You on the other hand look like you could use a good meal! Consider yourself formally invited, Little Shiranui!" he chuckled as he said the last part, ignoring the sharp glare that the tall, black-haired woman threw at him for implying anything in regards to her weight.

Akimichi didn't typically make comments on people's weight or size; it would be rather hypocritical of them, so I had a feeling that this was just well-intentioned banter between the two. Yuzuha confirmed this by crossing her arms again and letting out a clearly un-invested huff in his general direction.

It took several minutes and a few more embarrassing stomach growls before the two finally convinced me to accept the offer.

The new restaurant Yuzuha had mentioned was in the Harashi District and was only a few streets over from where I had encountered them. It didn't look very big or fancy, but it had a cozy feeling that set me at ease as soon as we entered. The entrance was small and low to the ground. Both Choza and Yuzuha had to duck to enter the establishment while at 5 feet I was just barely unhindered. The short curtain in the entrance brushed the top of my head. Recognition dawned on the faces of the staff, who immediately came forward to greet the Akimichi Clan head. Within moments we were
escorted to a four-person booth in the far corner of the establishment.

Choza wasn't there for very long before he got into an animated discussion with one of the servers about dumplings and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Yuzuha and I sitting together in silence. Yuzuha was perusing the menu leisurely, looking very much like the cat that ate the canary.

"Feel free to order whatever you want and as much as you want. Choza recently bought this place so today he's testing the menu out to see what he wants to keep, remove or if there is something that just needs improving. He acts like it's a big pain when I come along but don't worry, that's just a thing we do. He and I have been doing this for almost...damn...10 years now? Give or take a few months..." She folded her menu back up and leaned back in her seat, a smile ghosting across her face.

"He used to bring my wimpy brother and Inoichi but they just couldn't keep up with him. One day, as a sort of prank, the two of them convinced me to go with Choza instead. They didn't expect me to be able to keep up with him - let alone for the two of us to have an absolute blast together. Afterwards eating out became a shared hobby of ours." Her head tilted slightly and I noticed that her eyes were out of focus, like she was caught in a memory.

"Now he invites me everytime the Akimichi take over a new place or he has a grand opening. I bring Shikaku leftovers. Sometimes. When I'm feeling generous." She seemed to be internally laughing at the thought, her grin growing wider the longer she explained.

"I noticed that you seem close." I mentioned, still doing my best to focus on the menu. There were a lot of options and all of them sounded either very interesting or unique. I was still looking for something relatively normal when Yuzuha continued.

"Hm, yeah, I suppose. Of my brother's merry band of misfits I was always the closest to Choza, since we may as well have been raised together. I spent almost as much time with Choza as I did Shikaku. I was supposed to marry his brother after all." The comment and the casual way she had said, caused me to pause and peer over the top of my menu.

As far as I knew, at thirty-one years old, Yuzuha didn't have and had never been in a relationship. I had always considered her a kindred spirit in that way, since much like myself she appeared to have little interest in the males species. For this reason, I was intrigued by the information that she had been engaged at one time.

"I can feel that intense look of yours from over here, Kiyoko." Yuzuha said, moving so she could lean on the table with her head in her hand.

"Just a little surprised." I confessed with a muted tone. Yuzuha was strong and invested in her work which to me gave her an untouchable aura. I had always assumed men felt the same way, if they were not more intimidated by her than I was. Perhaps it was wrong of me, since there were plenty of strong women who got married, but for that very reason I didn't really see her as the marrying type.

She hmm'd for a moment, as if making a decision.

"With the way I think now, I can't really see myself being married either. The clans can still be archaic about stuff like marriage and contracts, so I'd been betrothed my entire childhood. I'd been told since I could walk that I was going to marry Chosuke so it became normal. I never questioned it. Which I should have, by the way. I was a smart kid. I'm a little disappointed in myself to be honest." I hadn't been expecting her to elaborate and had a moment of stunned silence in response to the fact that she had even bothered.

A thought occurred to me suddenly and I slowly placed my menu down on the tabletop.
"Is that why you weren't allowed to study at the Ninja Academy?" I inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"You catch on quick," Yuzuha scoffed and for the first time since I'd met her I was able to detect a lingering bitterness in her tone, "Yeah, our parents didn't want to risk me getting killed before we got married. For some reason they all seemed to think that I wouldn't make it to marrying age if I became a kunoichi. It's a little ironic considering Chosuke ended up being the one killed in action at fourteen. Such a double standard."

I was quiet for a moment, attempting to formulate the correct response. While her tone was so casual it almost hurt, I recognized that it couldn't have been easy to lose the person you were told that you were going to spend the rest of your life with. Underneath her lilting tone there was a sadness. Even a little bit of anger. In a way I recognized it. She sounded like she felt...abandoned. Abandoned by Chosuke.

Which was surprisingly something I'd understood, after what happened with Atsuko. I recognized that Atsuko had chosen to leave and that Yuzuha's betrothed had been taken from her but it wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility for her to feel that way. Emotions weren't rational after all. They were the exact opposite.

"I'm sorry." I finally decided to say. I knew it was weak but it was all that I could manage.

She glanced at me from the corner of her eye, her chin still buried in the palm of her hand.

"Thank you. I don't think I'll ever be over it - not really. But, well," she sighed and finally moved herself back into an upright sitting position, "what are you going to do? Can't wallow in self-pity forever."

"Allrigghhttt!" I was prevented from saying anything further when Choza Akimichi returned to the table, carrying three plates heaped with different flavoured dumplings. "I got these to start us off!"

Choza was clearly excited, his mouth salivating and Yuzuha visibly perked up at his return. Her brown eyes were darting between the different platters with anticipation.

That was how our meal started. After we'd begun on the dumplings, I had been encouraged to order a minimum of three things off the menu to try.

Countless dumplings, a bowl of gyudon and a small plate of sashimi later; I had decided that I had eaten enough to keep me going for the next three weeks.

I discovered that Yuzuha's earlier words hadn't been blind boasting.

She really could keep up with Choza Akimichi which for a woman of her size was remarkable. She matched every morsel and bite the man consumed with little to no effort at all. Even after I had slumped back in my seat feeling defeated, the woman was still (to my fascination) packing it away alongside the clan head. I was still watching them eat and speaking with Yuzuha, who was somehow managing to hold a conversation, when the server approached and offered me some green tea. I accepted gratefully, still not willing to leave my hosts but needing something to do while they devoured every crumb in the building.

The Nara and Akimichi were on their fourth dish and had ordered a few large plates of yakitori when it happened. The surface of the tea in my cup began to ripple and the stacked, empty dishes on the table began to clack together. The windows at the front of the restaurant warped and Choza's attention was drawn away from his meal as he looked around questioningly.

The servers had all stopped what they were doing and were swiveling their heads in all directions.
Yuzuha had also frozen, a gob of noodles hanging out of her mouth as she raised an eyebrow in response to the growing disturbance.

"What the-?" Choza pondered aloud, putting his chopsticks down and standing up slowly. Without thinking, I wordlessly followed the jonin from the building - although in hindsight it really hadn't been the smartest thing to do. I heard footsteps directly behind me and discovered that Yuzuha was also coming along, still holding her bowl of ramen with noodles hanging limply from her lips. Whatever was going on she was curious but apparently not curious enough to completely abandon her meal.

I heard something in the distance, that started out sounding like a faint buzzing noise. As it got closer, I was able to distinguish that it was a word.

The same word.

Being infinitely stretched out.

"YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY/YYYY
I shrugged my shoulders.

XxX

Thankfully the shattered windows hadn't bothered Choza a bit since he claimed he'd already been planning to renovate the restaurant to have an open patio at the front.

We'd returned to our table and after a few more minutes of eating, Yuzuha finally told the Akimichi clan head that she was dismissing herself. She claimed that the sound of the servers sweeping up glass was failing to maintain her appetite. I took that opportunity to also say goodbye, thanking the clan head vigorously for his generous invitation to lunch.

While I didn't know much about the man he was just as sweet as I remembered from when I was a child. He'd blushed in response to the thanks and told me that once the restaurant went through its grand re-opening I was more than welcome to attend with my brother. His treat. He also admitted that he hadn't seen Genma in a few months and asked if I would let him know that he was interested in sparring with him sometime soon. I agreed to pass the message along, waving all the while.

When Yuzuha and I exited the building together, I expected for us to say our goodbyes and go our separate ways. However, my former supervisor had something else in mind and continued to walk with me through the village, offering to help me replace all my clothing.

"It was about time you updated your wardrobe anyway. You're too young and hip to be dressing like us old fashioned ladies. Have you ever considered pants?" She asked finally, pointing to a store we passed which was not having a sale. There was a rack at the front of the store under the awning that had several pairs of nicely tailored, grey slacks. I could smell the price tag from across the street.

I didn't stop walking and hoped Yuzuha would get the hint that if there wasn't a sale sign I wouldn't be going inside.

Plus, I didn't really like the idea of wearing pants to the office. I just wasn't a pants person.

"I don't think I'd like to wear pants to work," I started, "it would feel strange."

At that exact moment I spotted a bold '30% OFF!' sign farther down the street, accompanied by a rack of promising looking dresses. I made a straight line towards them and once I arrived, began flipping through the styles at almost lighting speed. If nothing caught my eye or I couldn't find anything my size I would move on just as quickly as I'd come.

Yuzuha joined in quietly, holding up a style every now and then that I would either tilt or shake my head at.

"How are things going with the Uzumaki case?" She asked after a few minutes, while I was holding up two dresses in front of me. I didn't really like either but the price was right.

"Well, he can't read or write and I have no idea how to teach him." I said with a straight face, loathe to remember the most recent issue I'd encountered when handling Naruto.

I was met with silence and after a few moments I slowly lowered the dresses to look at her. She appeared to be with deep contemplation, to the point that I could almost see the cogs grinding and clicking into place. I jumped slightly when she suddenly snapped her fingers.

"Well that seems pretty easy. Why don't you hire through the Civil Affairs Office?" I raised an eyebrow which prompted her to elaborate, "A word to the right people and you could probably hire a tutor using a mixture of the kid's budget and grants from the Department of Education. He is an
orphan; he has to qualify for something. There's no need to teach him all by yourself. I kind of owe
that kid for the refugee thing - how about you let me help you with the hiring process?"

"You seem sure that I'd get the approval and the funding." I responded, making note of the fact that
she mentioned that she owed Naruto for helping her with housing the refugees. I recalled thinking
how all of those people owed Naruto for their fresh start in life and they would never realize it.
Something about the fact that Yuzuha recognized that cultivated my already deep respect for the
woman.

She went to open her mouth again but she was paused by a distant and sadly familiar sound. The two
of us snapped our heads to the rooftop across the street, where a green blur whizzed by followed by
what appeared to be a growing team of ANBU. They had doubled in number since the last time Gai
had run by. Quite embarrassingly, one stumbled in what appeared to be exhaustion, tripped and fell
flat on its face. Out of consideration for what I assumed was an extremely humiliated elite ninja,
Yuzuha and I returned to our browsing and conversation as if nothing had happened.

"Of course you'll get the funding. Likely with the same amount of ease that you were able to
convince them to spare that building. Naruto Uzumaki has been a pain in the council's side since he
was born." Her head tilted slightly to the side and she bit the inside of her cheek in thought, "As far
as I can tell, they're just relieved to have someone whose actually solving problems instead of
creating them."

I put both ugly dresses back on the rack, deciding that even if the price was right I wouldn't be
cought dead wearing them.

"If you can convince Lord Hokage that it is in Uzumaki's best interest and convince the council that
it is in their best interest, then the approval and funding is yours." Yuzuha seemed to have picked up
on my silent queue that I was planning to leave and also turned.

"Alright. I think I'll take you up on that offer." I agreed, "Consider yourself on the hiring committee."

XxX

When I returned to Gai's apartment that evening, shopping bags in hand and feeling infinitely
satisfied with the way my day had gone, I had to stutter step to avoid stepping on Gai's collapsed
form. He was passed out on his back in the middle of the floor with his eyes rolled back in his head
and drool running out the side of his mouth.

Genma was perched cross-legged on the couch with a steaming cup of instant ramen in his one hand.
Standing in front of him were two ANBU, who even I was able to tell were extremely unimpressed
under their stoic white masks.

It looked like they were finally able to catch Konoha's Sublime Green Bean...I meant Beast.
Author’s Note: Hey everyone! Well...HERE IT F@$KING IS! Unlucky number thirteen! I’ve never been superstitious but to you lovely readers who have been following me since the beginning I had chapters 1-12 released just BANG BANG BANG! Then I got to this one and it has been months.

I’m blaming everything on this being unlucky Chapter 13 (nevermind the fact that I had surgery on my eyes, started going back to university part-time, continued to work full-time...and work has become INSANE, continued to volunteer at my regular rate and have since discovered that I have a new medical debilitating concern).

Also, I have now discovered that I have grey hairs. I have like 4. I AM TOO YOUNG FOR THIS!

I’ve decided that everything above is BECAUSE I am writing the thirteenth chapter of Civil Affairs.

Once I get this done it’s smooth sailing. I considered writing and posting a very ‘meh’ chapter or a chapter that was only, by my standards, half-done but I ultimately decided against it. I want to put the same effort and quality into every chapter of this story. There’s few things worse than reading 10 or so good chapters of a story and then realizing that it seems like the author lost interest or gave up.

I’m still very much interested and in love with Civil Affairs and Kiyoko (and her future pairing which makes me ‘Awwwww’ every time I think about it).

Beyond venting, the point of this note is just to let you guys know that I appreciate your support and that I HAVE NOT given up on Civil Affairs. It’s just that my real life has making time for writing difficult.

Thanks for bearing with me, people!

"I don’t want to go." Naruto said, his large blue eyes squinting up at me from his position on the park bench. I had lured him out to the park so that I would have neutral ground to discuss the next big step in his little life.

It was March 23rd, 1461. Naruto Uzumaki was seven years old and that meant that it was time for him to be enrolled in the Ninja Academy. The new school term would start in May and registration started as early as January, but I had been concerned with his capacity for reading, writing and basic arithmetic. Due to these concerns, I had made the decision to have Lord Hokage postpone his registration until the last minute. I would rather wait for another year and register him with younger children, then send him to school without the basic tools to succeed alongside his peers. I wasn’t delusional enough to think that he would be the top of his class or anything but he had to at least know how to read, write, add and subtract to some degree.
His tutor had used the extra months of time I'd bought to devise some tests for him and once they were completed, reassured me that while Naruto's math and literacy skills were still weak for a boy his age, he would be able to manage. Obtaining this 'proof' however had left the poor boy with a terror in response to the thought of taking written paper tests. Not an ideal result and I worried that we had pushed him too hard but at least now we knew he would manage to stay afloat.

Today, both his tutor and I were trying to convince him to come with us to The Academy to get him registered. It wasn't required for him to come with us but we had both agreed that we wanted to gauge the reactions of the staff to his presence. We wanted to test the waters before we threw him into the ocean.

"Why don't you want to go, Uzumaki?" A soft voice came from my left and my eyes shifted to look at its source.

These last few months it had been nice to have backup when it came to dealing with the young demon container. His tutor's natural, maternal personality surprisingly complimented my own rigid one and we'd become a formidable duo.

Despite having seemed like a straightforward idea at first, hiring a qualified tutor for Uzumaki had turned out to be guided by fate more than anything else. I had posted an add looking for a part-time tutor to be on the Civil Affairs Office payroll, wisely choosing not to state just who the student would be. I certainly planned on telling the potentials eventually but I counted on it being more difficult to say no to my face.

Yuzuha and I had started the day with forty-seven eager potentials. Then after interviewing the fifth, the two of us had closed the door to review what we'd heard, as well as give ourselves a short break. A few minutes later, a knock had revealed a frantic looking Tamaki. She informed us that our fifth candidate had, upon exiting the room, told all the others just who we were expecting them to tutor. This had resulted in a mass walk-out, leaving the waiting room empty. Upset but not necessarily shocked at the reaction, the two of us had gone to survey the damage for ourselves and discovered that Tamaki hadn't been entirely correct.

There was still one person left.

In the far corner sat a woman, a few years older than myself, quietly reviewing what looked to be a page of notes. She was dressed in a plain black skirt suit and I could see the swell of her lower abdomen indicating that she was expecting. I didn't want her to waste her time, having assumed that just maybe she hadn't heard the commotion, and went over to her. I offered full disclosure of the job and what would be expected of her with my typical deadpan expression. I thought telling her about Naruto would scare her away like the others but she hadn't appeared to be intimidated. In fact she had just stared back at me with a slightly raised eyebrow.

Mrs Himari Amano was her name. Pregnant and recently widowed when her husband had perished on a mission, Himari was desperate for work. On paper she looked good; she had many of the qualifications I had been looking for. She was a former Koba Academy student, only graduating three years prior to myself, who had become a teaching assistant immediately after school. She'd done that for a few years but had quit in favor of becoming a housewife following her recent marriage.

When her husband was killed in action, she had concluded that she wouldn't be able to give her child the quality of life they deserved living off the Survivor Benefit the village provided. So, she'd gone looking for work and she had quickly learned the hard way that no one wanted to hire a woman who was expecting a baby. She'd interviewed for everything from washing dishes, to waxing floors and tending bars, but they'd all ended the same. As soon as their eyes trailed downwards they'd scowl,
look disappointed and thank her for coming in that way people did when they weren't going to contact you again. She'd been ready to accept defeat when she'd come across our job posting on a corkboard in the Kamotsu District.

She was well-educated, had teaching experience and had an obvious work ethic that seemed to overpower any fear she may have towards the nine-tails. Quite like myself, which was something I could certainly appreciate. She was perfect, and I hadn't had to waste my entire day to find her either. I couldn't help but marvel at the circumstances that, while unfortunate, had managed to deliver me Naruto Uzumaki's ideal teacher.

"I just don't." He bit out petulantly, crossing his arms. There was clearly a reason, but the boy also seemed to be hiding it from us. I could almost feel the other woman's eyes burning into the side of my head, clearly wondering how I thought we should proceed.

Himari's baby, a little girl that she'd named Yuki, had been born in January. Without the extra weight her form was revealed to be naturally slender. This both enforced and complemented her excessive height, as she stood at nearly 6 ft tall. I'd also discovered that the skirt suit she had worn when I'd hired her was a rarity, most of the time she wore casual, grey pants and a dark blue, long sleeved sweater. She had big brown eyes that peered from behind silver, oval-framed glasses and straight orange hair that was cropped unevenly at her chin.

While her manner of dress wasn't as formal as I would have preferred, over time I had realized that I couldn't have asked for a better tutor for the demon container. Himari was a genuine sort, open like a book, who seemed to have endless amount of patience for any child...even Naruto.

Which was sadly very difficult to find.

"Naruto," I began sternly, "I wasn't asking you what you wanted...I was telling you what we were doing today. You're coming with us to The Academy; you can sulk the entire time if you like. I didn't say you had to be happy about it but you do need to come."

He was silent, and he had begun to glare at the ground but after a few moments nodded slowly. He hopped off the bench with a huff, making sure to keep his arms crossed angrily over his chest. He began walking in a random direction - making sure to exaggerate his movements to make it look like he was stomping.

Himari and I shared a look. I noticed the corner of her lip quirk in what I could only guess was amusement while I met it with my typical blank mask, although inside I couldn't help a warm feeling that spread through my chest. I realized for the first time that Naruto had managed to win over.

Wordlessly, I turned to start following him and Himari fell into place beside me. I wondered how long it would take for him to realize that he didn't know the way there and, on top of that, how long it would take him to admit it.

Over the last few months I'd discovered that he was notoriously determined which at times manifested into stubbornness. That wasn't always a good thing, but it wasn't necessarily a bad thing either. While in most people I found bullheadedness infuriating, I found the trait only seemed to endear me towards him.

Naruto wore stubborn well.

As we walked, I felt my left sleeve begin to ride up my shoulder and I reached over, tugging it down irritably.
My mind's eye went back to that day about seven months ago when I'd been forced to go shopping to replace my entire wardrobe. After being joined by Yuzuha, she had discovered a powder blue shift dress. It had a small triangular slit in the front, which for a bustier woman would have caused a problem but didn't interfere with the modesty of my own petite form.

It had short sleeves which, in my opinion, sat awkwardly on my upper arms. It was also a little too short for my tastes as the hem only reached the middle of my thigh. Even when faced with a short hemline I still hadn't bought pants, much to Yuzuha's chagrin, but we had eventually compromised in the form of thick black leggings to accompany the new dress. I was a little put-out by the fact that Yuzuha refused to let me continue to wear the green sandals that Gai had recently bought me.

Her exact words were 'they clash with everything, but they really clashed with that'. This began a passive aggressive dispute that went on the remainder of the day, consisting of Yuzuha shoving different pairs of shoes in my face and me pretending to look at anything else.

It took her until sunset...but she finally won.

She convinced me to purchase a pair of conservative, grey heeled boots. I had to give her credit for her innovation, as the way she had done so was rather interesting. She had disappeared for a few minutes, although I had been so absorbed in looking at a set of dishes that I didn't notice and returned with a little black box. Inside, neatly folded and swathed in tissue paper, was a beautiful and expensive (I knew it was expensive because my hair began to curl in horror) silk dress. She reached in and began to raise it up in front of me and I noticed that there was also a full set of golden jewelry in the box. My face slackened as I realized that she was giving me the outfit as a gift. 'This will go with those green shoes,' she'd said, 'just save them for a special occasion if you can't wear them every day.'

She'd made surprising sense. So, when I got back to Gai's (stepping over his passed-out form) I'd polished the green heels and stored them away along with the dress.

As we walked, I adjusted my badge which I had fastened over my left breast. Between September last year and February, Konohagakure had accepted over 500 refugees from the Land of Snow. In the past, the village had discovered that such drastic action could cause protests and, in a worst-case scenario, riots.

As a preventative measure, The Director had announced that moving forward there would be an increase in guards, a new check-in/check-out system for all office employees and we would be required to carry badges to gain access to the building. No badge, no entry. This was, of course, except for the tower's first floor which was a general information and services hub for members of the public or visitors to the village. The Director called this the 'Emergency and Security Initiative'. Some departments, like Immigration for instance, were not being affected by the change as most of their interactions with the public were done in the interview rooms on the first floor already.

Other departments, like Registrations and Children & Youth Services, were being thrown for a complete loop. While in the past they had been able to meet with their many clients throughout the day at the comfort of their own desks, they were now required to book the interview rooms for use. This had proved to be a nightmare as it had quickly become apparent that between the entire organization there just weren't enough interview rooms to go around. On top of that, Shared Services had been tasked with creating the employee identification badges, which had doubled the chaos. Shared Services, ironically, weren't exactly the most organized.

The badge was a little laminated card with your photo, name, occupation and employee identification number. On the back of the card, to help the guards, there was a 'Privilege Chart' which stated which floors the individual was permitted to enter as well as their shift schedule.
Obviously if they checked your chart and your shift schedule didn't line up with where or when you were, the guards reserved the right to kick you out of the building. This made working late an impossibility. This was a nice excuse for some people but for people like me who enjoyed burying themselves in their work or simply enjoyed working at the office when no one else was there, it was pure agony. My days of being able to arrive early or come in late were now over, which was a shame considering my workload had not been re-proportioned to accommodate this change.

Despite Shared Services being in charge, the badges managed to be completed and distributed before Lord Hokage announced to the village that we would be taking the refugees in.

At first there was only indifference in response to the announcement but slowly, just as we had prepared for, the unrest began - as it did every time the village made a notable change or decision. There were thankfully no riots, just polite protests, and by the time January rolled around the majority of Konoha's citizens seemed to have forgotten about the matter altogether.

The Civil Affairs Office, was breathing a collective sigh of relief and was desperate to go back to the way things were - no badges, no privilege charts, no interview rooms. The new 'more secure' way of doing things had slowed the office's efficiency to a crawl which had many of the employees fed up. Then, to everyone's horror, The Director announced that she would be making the 'Emergency and Security Initiative' permanent.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about the whole thing. In a way, it was nice to have the extra security although considering Konoha was locked down by default I doubted that it was necessary. On the other hand, I missed the efficiency that we had sacrificed for that security. With the way things were, I had to go through three security checks just to go downstairs - let alone transfer materials or paperwork regarding Naruto from one level to the other.

Shortly after the new security had been put in place we had hired Himari, which had proven to be a borderline disaster. Tamaki had learned of someone taking early retirement and had managed to snag a desk for use in the Department of Education. Despite her having her badge (courtesy of a forethinking Yuzuha) and being accompanied by myself, not only had we been stopped by every single guard between the First Floor and The Third, but every single one had insisted on rifling through, not only the box of teaching materials she had with her, but her purse as well. In full view of everyone they pulled out every single item they encountered from the small black bag. A few of said items were rather personal in nature and made the kindly, soft spoken woman red faced and humiliated.

Considering the office's typical employee demographic was middle aged women, those that did notice her spare panties, pills, prenatal supplements and hygiene products, were sympathetic and purposefully pretended they didn't notice. Once would have been bad enough, but the searches seemed to happen every time we went through a doorway.

By the time the fourth guard asked to see her purse, I was frustrated and went out of my way to oppose it. I had bluntly pointed out that her bag had now been searched three times and that if he was curious about its contents he could go ask any of the last three.

I had been written up, like a misbehaving child in school, and sent to The Director's office with a yellow 'Security Report' slip in my hand.

The Director stated she was surprised to see me of all people sitting in front of her being accused of interfering with the guard's duties. She did mention that she had already seen Tamaki...twice...which didn't exactly surprise me (nor did it surprise her if the dry tone was anything to go by). I had waited patiently for The Director to finish her half-complete stack of paperwork and then I had explained my concerns about the repetitive baggage checks and the way they were being performed.
The Director had nodded along with each sentence, but I got the distinct impression I was being ignored. Then, once I was done my partially rehearsed speech, the middle age woman metaphorically slapped me on the wrist and shooed me from her office.

At first, I thought my concerns had gone unheard. However, a few days later on my way to work I noticed that my briefcase had only been checked once and the guard was considerate when navigating my more sensitive items. At first, I had shrugged it off as a result of the guard being a kunoichi but I began to see a similar change amongst the other guards, most of whom were male. They didn't yank every item out in full view of the entire CAO - which was a pleasant change. I didn't know whether it was what I had said or whether it was the more vocal Tamaki or the countless others whom I was sure had been written up over the last month. Either way, change had happened and I was satisfied with that.

I was brought out of my thoughts by Naruto abruptly stopping ahead of us. I watched as his head swiveled from side to side, then his back stiffened and he stilled completely.

Ah, he just realized he had no idea where he was going.

I didn't stop walking until I was right next to him. We were silent for a long moment as I stared down at the top of his blonde head, waiting for him to say something.

He didn't make a sound.

Instead I felt a pull on my dress and a glance down gifted me with the sight of large blue eyes staring up at me with a fear I couldn't comprehend.

At least I couldn't comprehend it at first but…

Something new, something different, something strange… I supposed the more I thought about it I could understand. Comparatively, it had been a very long time since a drastic change had been introduce to my routine; the last thing I could think of was the day I graduated from Koba and suddenly realized I was an 'adult'. I supposed there was the security initiative but that hadn't been a change so much as an annoyance. One could argue that there was the sudden change of becoming the caseworker for the village’s designated demon container but for some reason I didn't count that.

His reluctance to come with us earlier suddenly made a lot more sense. I supposed in some capacity human nature made you want to avoid change because from an evolutionary perspective change meant danger. Change wasn't always bad, but it was, sadly, inevitable.

I decided, this would be a good learning experience for him and how I reacted to his behaviour was important. I had realized after a few months of being responsible for Uzumaki that he was very…observant. Everything I did or said was absorbed, processed and saved for later at a rate I found astounding. I was thankful that I was a controlled person by nature and had therefore never acted out or done anything to be ashamed of. I had quickly discovered that he would have retained the behaviour and possibly even imitated me.

I noticed that he had adopted my perseverance already and I supposed that considering working hard was my way of life I couldn't find fault with it. There was nothing wrong with a child believing that he could accomplish anything with enough hard work and determination - obstacles be damned.

Still, I couldn't help but be made uncomfortable by the fact that he was starting to behave even a little bit like me or share some of my values.

It was...unsettling.
It's called parenting. Tamaki's voice echoed around in my brain for a moment, nearly causing me to freeze at the unwelcome intrusion. I'd confided my insecurities on the entire thing with Tamaki who had, to my ire, laughed at me from around a mouthful of noodles and slapped me on the back. I decided I didn't like it when she said it that way. Parenting. The word being used in this context gave me this weird, burning feeling in my chest that reminded me of heartburn.

I wasn't parenting. I wasn't his parent and I was paid to be there.

I was not parenting.

I was... calibrating ideal behaviours through example.

You couldn't go through life afraid of new things or change if you were going to be a ninja of Konohagakure. I concluded that this would be an important lesson for him and how I reacted to this would set the tone for new experiences in the future.

I hesitantly placed a hand on the top of his head and after only a few short seconds removed it.

It was supposed to be a reassuring gesture, but I was aware of how poorly I'd executed it. It was hardly appropriate for me to comfort him as if I was a relative or guardian, but I couldn't just do nothing either. The awkward attempt at comfort was the best I could manage.

I did hesitate for a moment while I wondered whether I could or should try to do more.

Practicality won, and I turned abruptly and began walking down the street to my left.

Despite the fact he had no idea where he was going we weren't entirely off-course. I felt the resistance from the hem of my dress while he was still momentarily rooted in place before he quickly went to move with me. He didn't let go.

Himari followed but I felt her eyes burning into my back as she observed us in silence.

I ignored her.

By the time we arrived at the Academy there was already a rather large crowd of people loitering around the front of the building. I could see another mass near what I believed was the yard where the children took their recess and the teachers took them to practice. It looked like they were doing some sort of demonstration, but I couldn't tell what from where I was. The final day of registrations was a half-day for current students, allowing them to go home in the afternoon, which was done to give families the opportunity to tour and view the school.

I saw a few children from various clans amidst the crowd. I assumed they weren't late registrations like Naruto and had been registered since day one. I saw a Hyuuga, an Inuzuka...the list went on. Every one of Konoha's clans seemed to be represented by at least one timid seven-year-old. Their parents had probably brought them so that they could get used to the layout of the school more than for registration.

"What's going on over there!?!" I felt a tug on the bottom of my skirt as Naruto, seeming to forget that he was gripping me, quickly darted towards the crowd I'd noticed at the back. His big blue eyes were wide as he pointed. His earlier fear completely forgotten. He remembered himself when I wobbled slightly in response to his pulling and he quieted down at my blank expression.

"Kunai and shuriken throwing demonstrations," a familiar voice cut in before I could say anything, "it looks cool, huh?"
I swung my head quickly to look at Yuzuha who was approaching the building from behind us. A little boy, with a gravity defying ponytail of black hair and brown eyes, was holding her hand with a scowl that indicated he was not pleased with the arrangement. In fact, the poor boy looked like the woman was half-dragging him down the road. Yuzuha's crooked smile indicated that she was either oblivious to the child's displeasure or was enjoying it - I couldn't tell which.

Naruto knew Yuzuha as she was often lingering around my desk when he came to see me. He didn't mind her...I'd even go so far as to say he liked her. Her presence had become as natural to him as the trees in a painting of a vast landscape. For that reason, I was surprised when he reacted like a startled deer.

Suddenly he was no longer straining on my skirt and was hiding behind it, peering with a guarded expression. He hadn't needed his distrustful face in nearly six months, so I'd completely forgotten about it.

It was in that moment that I realized for the first time just how little experience Naruto had interacting with other children. When he was around others it was usually adults, like Lord Hokage or myself. I would have expected some natural excitement or curiosity when presented with another child that he could meet but instead I was seeing unnerving apprehension.

Hm. That wasn't a good thing. Naruto couldn't be timid or scared of other children. He wouldn't get very far in civilian life with an attitude like that and he would do even worse as a ninja.

Yuzuha's slightly widened eyes indicated that she had noticed the concerning behaviour.

Himari was biting her lower lip as if she was nervous about something. I wondered if that was because the dark expression on the young blonde's face had reminded her about what he really was. That happened every now and then.

I had realized a few months into our partnership that despite her desperation for work and her golden heart, Himari was - much like myself - still very much afraid of the nine-tailed-fox. Unlike myself, this meant that she was afraid of Naruto. She'd gotten chatty one night after a bit too much sake and disclosed everything. She told me that she tricked herself into forgetting about the beast he contained and in doing so was able to convince herself he was just like every other child.

But...every now and then Naruto behaved in very un-childlike ways that seemed to remind his tutor about everything she tried so hard to forget.

I noticed how she'd try to hide it by turning her head away and I had to give her credit for trying. Most people didn't even try to hide their fear or, more often, loathing.

I figured that was the one major difference between myself and Himari.

I didn't forget that Naruto was the demon container. I didn't need to.

I suppose it made sense that I might have had to play mind games with myself. Sometimes I wondered if other people could go to work every day like I did without having to manipulate themselves. I certainly didn't think I was special but over the last few months I'd determined I was odd. People had told me that before but until recently I'd never actually taken them seriously.

For me, making sure Naruto had the necessities of life wasn't a big deal. Perhaps that was because he was a child. A child whose existence only seemed to be to contain a bloodthirsty demon but still...a child.

My mindset had always been that it wasn't the container I had to fear.
I was absolutely terrified of the demon but if I was lucky it would stay locked up until Naruto was a grown man. When it did crawl its way back out into the world I would hopefully be long gone; maybe I'd be retired and have my own business. If I was lucky I'd be on a business trip and miss the whole messy affair.

Or at least I hoped.

More likely I'd be huddled in fear inside one of the village's bunkers while I sprouted more grey hairs then I had a right to. One could hope though.

"Shikamaru," Yuzuha began as she put a hand almost roughly on the top of the boys head while he grimaced, "this is Miss Shiranui, from my office. You remember me talking about Miss Shiranui, right? That lady over there with the glasses is Mrs Amano. Kiyoko and Himari; this is my nephew, Shikamaru. Shikaku's kid."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Shikamaru." Himari seemed to have recovered from her momentary discomfort and made a point of greeting the boy.

"Yes," I began more evenly, "good afternoon."

I was distracted thinking about how to improve Naruto's temperament with other children and it unfortunately reflected in my voice. Shikamaru mumbled something that could be interpreted as a greeting but only earned a glare from his aunt for the lack of sincerity.

"Terribly sorry, Yuzuha," Himari began quickly, "we've so much to do this afternoon. I'll have to excuse myself."

She nodded at me before she began making her way to the academy entrance, weaving and dodging through the crowd with enviable skill.

"Anyway, you never answered me." The older woman scolded lightly as her gaze traveled to the blond, "It looks pretty cool, huh?"

She watched Naruto expectantly and I wondered at her ulterior motives. She was greeted with silence as Naruto continued to stare at Shikamaru, who in turn was gazing off into space. If he noticed the other child's gaze the Nara boy gave no indication of it.

"Naruto," I addressed him and when his large blue eyes snapped up to me I crossed my arms. "Ms Nara asked you a question."

He blinked a few times as if he was being brought out of a trance before looking pointedly at Yuzuha.

"Um...yes?" He responded, although it sounded more like a question. Like he was expecting there to be a wrong answer or maybe it was because he had no idea what she had asked.

"Here's a thought!" Yuzuha said almost as soon as the boy replied, "how about you come with me and Shikamaru to watch the demonstrations? It sure looks fun!"

I felt Naruto's grip tighten on the hem of my skirt and my chest clenched in response to his uncertainty. It was like I had indigestion or something.

"But what about Miss Shiranui?" The concern in the blonde's voice was evident.

I met Yuzuha's eyes briefly and I finally worked out what she was trying to do. She was trying to
give Naruto a chance to interact with some other children his age in a safe, monitored environment. I was going to have to go fill out his registration information and monitor the staff at the Academy for concerning behaviour. Himari was with me but we had agreed that she was going to be looking into the curriculum. Her primary goal, besides observing the teachers, was to see if she could get some guidelines for preparatory work. Now that Naruto was entering school she was only going to be on the CAO payroll for the next month, but we were going to make that month count.

Neither of us had considered his social skills which I willingly took the blame for. I should have realized that he was also behind in that aspect long before today.

Yuzuha was offering to help me tweak those social skills; even if it was something simple like allowing him to spend time with her nephew. I couldn't refuse, especially since I knew I could trust Yuzuha to treat the young boy fairly and watch out for his best interests. That was very hard to come by in Konohagakure.

"I have paperwork to do so that you can come to school here, Naruto. Once I'm done I'll come out and join you."

He pouted in response but didn't argue. Naruto had learned very quickly that while I had little experience with children I had plenty of experience with argumentative adults and I had had no hesitation in applying those skills to conversations I had with him.

"Come on, you two." Yuzuha said, gesturing for Naruto to come closer as she gripped a bored Shikamaru's hand. She flashed me a grin, ran her eyes over both children to make sure they were accounted for, and turned to lead them towards the crowd.

I exhaled heavily.

I had work to do.

I made my way towards the entrance and weaved through the crowd as gracefully as I could, following Himari's earlier example to the best of my ability. I had to admit that despite my smaller size I was not skilled at navigating large groups of people and got elbowed in the face at least once.

Once I finally made it through the crowd and into the building I discovered the hallways of the academy weren't much better then outside. I'd never been inside the academy building before, but the layout was rather concise. There was a single, double-wide, main hallway that went down the middle of the building with staircases located on either end of each hall. All the doors along the main hall, apart from a few, had been closed which indicated that they were likely classrooms. At the end of the main hall opposite the entrance I'd just come through a single wooden table had been set up.

A couple of men in chunin uniforms were sitting there with stacks of empty file folders beside them on the table and stacks of what appeared to be empty forms. The one on the left had a little metal security box for money. Behind them, I could barely see some storage boxes on the floor.

With the amount of people in the hallway it was difficult to figure out where the line ended but eventually, with many awkward 'excuse me, are you in line's, I managed to locate the end. After looking me up and down curiously, a group of chunin who seemed to be there to register their own children, chivalrously offered to have me go ahead of them. I tried to refuse but they insisted. At first, I felt bad about it but after eavesdropping for a few minutes I realized that they seemed to be old friends who were using the line as an excuse to catch up with each other.

About twenty minutes passed before I made it to the front. I had thought the actual registrations would be few and far between today since we'd waited so long to register Naruto but apparently, I'd
been mistaken. Apparently ninja parents procrastinated too.

"Hello. Looking to do a registration today?" The older-looking man greeted as I approached the table. I noticed he was looking at me curiously. The same look I'd been getting everyone else in line as well. I supposed I looked seventeen and therefore wasn't typically someone you'd see registering a child. It certainly wasn't impossible since my brother had been twelve when he'd become my legal guardian, but that wasn't common.

"Hello." I responded, "Yes, please."

"Alright," he said as he pushed forward a blank form and pen, "please fill this out. We'll also need to see the child's citizenship document."

My head snap upwards so I could look at him.

"Citizenship document?"

I didn't have citizenship for Naruto.

"Yes," He replied. He didn't seem to notice the note of concern in my voice, "we can take a birth certificate, most types of immigration documentation, formalized declarations of paternity or a clan identity document…" He was listing off all the several types of documents in rapid succession, as if he'd been doing it all day. Which he probably had been. My experience working for the Civil Affairs Office had been that most people, especially if they'd been born in the village, had no idea what a 'citizenship document' was. They all had one, but they didn't usually know they needed it.

I of course knew what a citizenship document was. I knew that Naruto had to have a birth certificate somewhere, but I hadn't realized I'd need it to register him for school. I suppose it made sense and I was a fool for not considering it. I should have known better.

"I... I'm sorry," I began blandly, "It completely slipped my mind that I'd need it."

The man didn't seem bothered.

"Do you need to run home and get it?" He asked politely, "I'll remember your face and we can pick up where we left off when you get back."

That probably wouldn't work since I had no idea where his birth certificate would be. I tried to remember if I'd seen it in the files I had but I didn't think so. So where was his birth certificate then? Did Registrations still have it? Or maybe Lord Hokage? Was it archived?

I knew where to start looking but I doubted I could track it down before they were done taking registrations.

"Actually, I'm a caseworker for the CAO. I'm here to register a child in the village's care. I'm sure the birth certificate is at the office somewhere, but it would take me awhile to find it. I'm sorry; I should've been more prepared."

The man's look faltered for a bit before he applied another fake smile to his lips.

"How about you fill out the form and leave it with us." He started, briefly locking eyes with the man next to him who nodded in agreement to some unspoken question, "The only rule is that we need to see citizenship before the child starts classes. Technically you can take until the term starts to get us the document. I'll let the headmaster know what's going on and as long as you produce the document before the term starts we should still be able to take the registration."
"Thank you."

XxX

"I can't believe there was nothing!" Tamaki exclaimed, causing the decorative glass of the booth to vibrate and our cups of tea to ripple. A few curious eyes slid to our table from other parts of the restaurant and a few waitresses stopped what they were doing to stare.

"Tamaki, seriously, take it down three-hundred notches. Ibiki probably heard you in The Land of Waves." Himari grumbled as she moved a hand up to her forehead, "I have a headache like you wouldn't believe."

"Well, excuse me." The black-haired woman snapped back immediately, "It's not my fault you have a newborn at home."

"It's not my fault either." Himari grated back although beyond that didn't say anything else. I could think of a few choice, inappropriate things that Tamaki could have said in return. To be fair having a newborn, in a way, was her fault. Not that Yuki wasn't a blessing but Himari and her late husband had consciously made the choice to have a baby. It was like how every time I heard someone complaining about having five children. I really didn't have any sympathy. As my brother always said; 'It's not like you don't know how it happens at this point.'

We all needed to learn to live with our mistakes...I mean choices.

Speaking of choices, Tamaki seemed to have made the choice to not continue the confrontation. She did narrow her eyes in the other woman's general direction and purse her lips. Personally, I was relieved that neither of them wanted to continue digging at one another. The two women mixed like oil and water. I had too much on my plate as it was and didn't feel like being in the middle of one of their little spats right now.

When Himari and I left the academy earlier we had been burdened by three new textbooks, a starter-set of shuriken and a very excited seven-year-old boy. Naruto had enjoyed the kunai throwing demonstrations and had tried everything he could think of to persuade me to leave the shuriken at his apartment. He was too enthusiastic and, smelling trouble, I'd refused.

I had spent a few hours at his apartment making sure it was clean and that Naruto's new school things (except for the sharp school things) were organized and put away. After we'd made sure he was settled, Himari and I had parted ways with a promise to meet after I was done work.

From there, I'd made my way to the CAO with one thing in mind: finding Naruto Uzumaki's birth certificate.

I certainly hadn't thought it would be easy, but I hadn't thought the task would be impossible.

I'd checked the files that Children and Youth Services had for him and I was unable to locate any sort of citizenship document.

From there I'd moved on to Registrations who, to both my surprise and the surprise of the clerk who was assisting me, had absolutely nothing on him. No birth certificate, no half-finished or incomplete birth registrations, no hospital paperwork...nothing. There wasn't even anything registered 'Uzumaki'. No distant relatives having babies either since he was apparently the only Uzumaki in the entire village. The baffled look on the Registration clerks face told me that the whole thing was indeed odd. She'd said that they usually had proof of birth letters from the hospital or a midwife.

Unless...
Unless the child wasn't born in the village.

So, I'd checked Immigration. I was confident enough in my knowledge of Konoha's immigration policies and procedures that even if I found a moth-eaten, coffee-stained, half-completed file on him I could still process his status in days. Apparently, even that had been too much to hope for.

There was nothing. Not a damned thing. I'd even enlisted the help of Tamaki to help me sift through the endless sea of Immigration paperwork from the year he was born. After all, he was a newborn when the Kyuubi was sealed inside of him so that meant he had to have arrived in the village shortly after his birth. If he came into the village legally there was no record of it.

I was at a loss. What was I supposed to do?

"Really? There was nothing?" Yuzuha whispered in disbelief as she absently swished the green tea in her cup.

When I'd left the CAO to meet up with Himari, Tamaki on my heels, we'd run into Yuzuha. Having returned her nephew to the care of his mother and having the rest of day to herself she'd stated that she wanted to join us. By the time we reached the Yumehara Teahouse our dining party had gone from two despondent women to four disgruntled ones.

"Nothing." I responded dryly, struggling to keep my face passive.

There was an uncomfortable silence that fell over the table. Tamaki was sitting next to Himari in the booth, both women leaning back in their seats. Tamaki looked exhausted and Himari looked like she'd died a while ago but we had decided to bring her along anyway. The giant dark circles under her eyes reminded me again of why the idea of having a child of my own was so terrifying. Across from them was myself and next to me was Yuzuha. The Nara woman was sitting quietly but had a scowl on her face while she digested what she heard. She was very...thoughtful.

"Any other ideas?" Himari asked me as she peered around a hand she'd placed over her face.

I was silent for a long moment which I'm sure answered her question. No, I didn't have any other ideas. Where else could I possibly find his citizenship? What if Uzumaki is an alias? What if he's registered under a different name? I'd never find his information. If I didn't find his documents how was I supposed to register him for the academy? I'd have to go to Lord Third and admit that my job had stumped me and that I needed help. I had never had any shame in admitting that I needed help doing something in the past but this was supposed to be a simple thing. It would be like admitting I was ill-equipped for the task he'd given me.

Something about that hurt my pride. It shouldn't have but it did.

I knew I shouldn't let something like that affect me. One of the biggest problems with the world was that there were too many people valuing their pride over everything else. People needed to learn to set aside their pride. Myself included.

I would set my pride aside but only when I was sure I had exhausted all possible avenues.

"I wish I could be more help," Tamaki said with a sigh, "but I'm already out of ideas."

Himari nodded in agreement but suddenly looked over at the older Nara woman.

"What about you, Yuzuha? You usually have all the clever ideas." The orange haired woman asked.

At first, it was as if Yuzuha hadn't heard her. She remained quiet and her scowl remained in place.
She'd stopped swishing her tea around in her cup and placed it gently on the tabletop. The seconds slowly passed by as all three of us watched her think.

I wasn't above admitting that I was hoping Yuzuha would have an answer for me. She usually did. Yuzuha was my idea-woman. My wise-woman.

"You want to know what I think?" Yuzuha asked and I nodded intently, eager to hear her wisdom.

To my surprise, she leaned forward across the table and narrowed her eyes, beckoning the other two women towards her. When she began speaking it was in a whisper and I was forced to lean forward as well.

"I think you should just forget about the whole thing and have Lord Hokage overturn the rule that Uzumaki needs citizenship documentation. I think those documents are missing for a reason. I think someone doesn't want them found."

XxX

"I'm home!" I heard Genma call as he entered the apartment, noticing how he made a point of stomping his feet on the welcome mat to announce his arrival. I heard the heavy 'flunk' that indicated he had taken off and dropped his protective vest onto the ground next to the door.

Genma had accidentally scared me half-to-death more times than I could count with his tendency to navigate the apartment like a ghost. He was, after all, an elite jonin and by his very nature he was used to making no sound. He'd learned quickly that when I was home he would have to make a show of being noisy enough for me to be aware of him.

Despite the landlord at our old building offering us another, renovated apartment on a different floor we had made the decision to move. We had lived with Gai for a month while we surveyed the village for apartments. During that time, we'd discovered that the two-bedroom apartment next to Gai's was soon to be vacant. According to the owner of the apartment complex, despite being very kind Gai was an exuberant neighbour that few could handle for extended periods of time.

Genma nor I were daunted by the idea of living next to Gai. Even with thin walls. However, that didn't stop Genma from pretending he minded and haggling the owner down on the monthly rent as much as he could.

As a result, we now lived next to Gai in a renovated, two-bedroom apartment in the Mita District.

It was a considerable upgrade from our last apartment. Neither of us wanted to spend too much money but we had decided to paint the once clean white walls of the living area a light, pastel blue. Our couch from the old apartment had been destroyed but we'd managed to find a simple, black one second-hand. We still didn't have a kitchen table but that was a choice because even if we did have one we would never use it. With the help of Tamaki's old flame from the furniture store, whom I was starting to feel like we were taking advantage of, I'd managed to replace our beds and dressers within my strict budget.

I sat up from where I was lying on the couch, a little surprised by Genma's arrival. He'd left the village almost a month ago for a mission somewhere. Sometimes he could tell me where he was being sent but that didn't happen often. This was one of those times I wasn't allowed to know. He did tell me that the mission was projected to be nearly 3 months long although he had speculated that with the team chosen it would be finished at least a month early.

This was two months early though.
I shot him what I hoped was a concerned look from over the back of the couch. Since I had begun hanging out with Tamaki I had realized that I didn't have 'normal-people expressions'. Or at least that's what Tamaki said. I assumed that was her way of pointing out how I always tried to maintain a straight face. Sometimes I failed. I was only human after all.

I had learned over the years that when a mission was cut short too early it was usually because the mission had either failed, or the team suffered too many fatalities and was forced to return.

He didn't say anything, but he sent me a defeated look that confirmed my suspicions. Someone had died. Not someone I knew, like Gai or Ebisu, or he would have immediately said something. I chose to remain silent and instead moved to resume my position lying back on the couch.

Nothing I could have said would have comforted him and as callous as it was to say, Genma was used to losing people. Me pouring false sympathies on him for someone I didn't even know would likely only agitate him. It was best to leave him to mourn in his own way. I also trusted that if my brother needed me he would let me know.

I had just gotten home from the Yumehara Teahouse and was still pondering Yuzuha's cryptic words.

_I think those documents are missing for a reason._

What could that reason be? I couldn't think of anything good that would come from withholding citizenship from a child who had a right to it.

Having worked in Immigration I recognized how important it was for someone to possess a citizenship document. Without it, the Immigration department had the right to kick you out of the village as soon as they discovered you didn't have one. In fact, they were required to order your deportation once they discovered the lack of document.

Naruto was a special case and Tamaki had been helping me out under-the-table, so she hadn't needed to fill out a deportation order. At least not yet. Not to mention Lord Third would never allow the Nine-tails demon container to be deported.

Still, citizenship was important. It was a part of who you were. Showed that you had the right to be here...to be a part of Konohagakure. Whether that right was through several long years of immigration paperwork or through a chance of birth it still made it your right.

It was __important__.

By the normal laws, child or not, Naruto Uzumaki should have been deported from the village today when I failed to produce a citizenship document for him. That wasn't fair; if anyone had _earned_ the right to be considered a citizen of Konohagakure it was _Naruto_.

So why? What reason could someone have to destroy, not produce, or hide his documentation? The very documentation that not only proves that he had a right to live in the village but also the same documentation that proves he exists. I felt a sinking in my stomach.

That was the other thing. I realized now that beyond my single file-folder in the Children and Youth Services Department, there was no formal record that Naruto Uzumaki even exists. He could disappear tomorrow and on paper I would be the only person who would notice…

Maybe that was the point? Maybe it would make it easier to dispose of him?

I abruptly shot back up into a sitting position and felt dizzy at the action, leaning forward to clench...
From the kitchen area, I heard our possessed coffeemaker gurgled and screeched as Genma attempted to get it working. My sudden movement had caught his attention and he was now staring at me from a leaning position against the kitchen counter. He had dark circles under his eyes, clearly sleep deprived, and he'd removed what I assumed to be a shredded shirt. The black piece of clothing was on the floor next to the door along with his protective vest.

We locked eyes and stared at each other blankly for a long moment.

"What's up with you?" He asked, "You've been fidgety since I walked in the door. Something piss you off?"

That question had me freezing. I hadn't really thought about how the whole situation made me feel...after all how I felt was hardly important.

Did it piss me off?

Yes. Yes, it did.

"Where's my birth certificate?" I asked him quietly, clearly catching him off guard since his eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"It's in my room with our family photos. Do you need it for something?" He asked.

"No," I began as I shook my head, "I just want to look at it. It's one of things you forget about until someone brings it up."

"Sure." He consented easily, "I'll go grab it for you. Watch the coffeemaker for me? It's acting more aggressive than usual."

As if it heard him the coffeemaker made a few strained clicks that drew my attention. Genma rolled his eyes in response, as if he was being nagged, and moved towards his room.

Doing as I was told, I watched over the back of the couch as the coffee began to trickle slowly into the pot. The kitchen appliance groaned in protest the entire time but continued to work. As my eyes roved over the dent in the lid, courtesy of Gai, I contemplated replacing it. I quickly shook the thought away. It still worked therefore it wasn't broken. So that meant there was no reason to replace it. So what if it had a few bruises, scratches and dents? Genma did too and I wasn't replacing him.

"Here you go, Kiyo." I heard Genma come up behind me and gently place the small document onto my lap before proceeding back to the kitchen. I looked down at it.

It was rather unremarkable for something so important. It was a long piece of paper, carefully folded and placed inside a plastic sleeve. It was folded in such a way that I could see my name and the registration number but nothing else about it without removing it from the sleeve.

\textit{SHIRANUI, KIYOKO}

\textit{1443-02-05-21547}

It wasn't as if I'd never seen a birth certificate before. I had spent a little bit of time helping in Registrations and had been presented with them when people were attempting to organize sponsorships of loved ones while I was in Immigration. It was just that as I thought about it I realized that I'd never seen \textit{my} birth certificate.
I'd never laid eyes on it before now.

I gently slid it out of the sleeve, noticing that the paper it was printed on was much like money and therefore less easy to forge but easier to rip. I unfolded it and looked it over.

My name was along the top with the registration number. Below it was my date of birth, sex, weight at birth and the hospital where I was born. The name of the attending doctor and the two midwives was there. I noticed a little 'Multiple Births' box had been ticked and next to it SHIRANUI, ATSUKO was referenced next to it. Then, along the bottom, was my father's name neatly printed in handwriting that I recognized as his own. Next to it was my mother's name but as she had passed away when we were born, a midwife had signed to 'witness' that I had indeed been born from the woman the certificate stated.

"There's a Declaration of Paternity for each of us too if you're interested. You'd have to go to the Archives to get them though. After we were born they weren't relevant anymore, so dad had them archived at the Hokage Tower."

Declaration of Paternity….?

"That's it! Genma! You're a genius! What if it's not in Registrations because it's a Declaration of Paternity!?!"

The coffeemaker grumbled in the background as Genma stared at me in confusion.

"...What?" He asked.

XxX

An occupational hazard of being a shinobi was that there was a good chance you wouldn't be present to witness the birth of your children. Sometimes it was because they were killed in action or sometimes it was simply because they were away on a long-term mission. The village didn't stop needing your services just because you were expecting a child. Not only was this a sad fact of life but in a society where a person's lineage was considered significant it proved to be a major barrier for the village.

In the village's earlier days there had been many disputes about the paternity of a child that was born after the presumed father had been killed in action. Many women passed off illegitimate children as the children of dead clansmen to have themselves and their children admitted to a clan under false pretenses. Not all the clans fell for it, most notably the Nara, but sometimes the fear of taking on children not their own caused them to turn away infants that were blood relatives. It was a mess.

The Second Hokage, who notoriously despised disorganization, recognized that something in the system needed to change. When he came into power he proposed the Declaration of Paternity.

Any shinobi, who wasn't married to the woman who carried his child, was required to fill out a formal declaration if they should choose to claim paternity of the child. This statement would be witnessed by the Hokage and three other individuals who were not related to the shinobi by blood. If the shinobi was killed in action before his child was born, the declaration would serve as a substitute for his signature in order to create a birth certificate. A substitute that could not be disputed by anyone; not even the mother of the child.

I understood the importance the document had and why it had been created. It had been created so that the clans weren't taken advantage of by greedy people and so that a deceased shinobi's family had rights to the child. It also formalized the child's inheritance and made sure that if they took their
father's name, it was legalized, and it couldn't be taken away from them.

There were good reasons for the Declaration of Paternity but just like anything else it could be misused.

The Declaration of Paternity was a rather flawed document since what the mother of the child wanted was not taken into consideration. Even if the mother wanted nothing to do with the shinobi she would have to adhere to the decision he made. He got to decide whether the child was his or not and she couldn't say anything about it. That wasn't usually a terrible thing. Usually it just meant she would eventually get forced into marriage with the shinobi or have to awkwardly co-parent with him. On the other hand, with clans like the Uchiha and Hyuuga that often meant that the child was taken away from her upon birth. Although that hadn't happened in years. The child was to be the shinobi's legacy, inherit his wealth or possessions and be inducted into his clan (if he had one). It said nothing about how the mother was to be treated.

To the shinobi clans The Declaration wasn't always about the child or what was best for them. It was about paternity. Lineage. Money. Politics. It was a means to an end. It was how they protected their bloodlines and continued to get their way.

I pulled Genma's coat around my arms a little tighter, attempting to combat the sudden chill I got. Except for a few paper lanterns here and there, the streets of Konoha were dark. If I strained my eyes I would be able to notice the odd ninja navigating the rooftops but other than that the night was completely still.

Considering I was lurking around the village in the middle of the night and was unlikely to be seen, I hadn't paid much attention to my outfit. Underneath the grey coat of Genma's that I'd lifted from the entranceway was a pair of black pants, which Tamaki had given me after my apartment had been ransacked. I didn't really like wearing pants, but I hadn't been able to refuse her generosity. I had slid on a bra but I was still in the plain navy tank top that I sometimes wore to bed. My hair was pulled into a low, loose ponytail as opposed to it's typical bun.

The Hokage Tower loomed ahead of me in the dark. Initially, I had planned on going to bed and coming in to work bright and early to get started. I had gone to bed but I hadn't slept. My head had been buzzing with thoughts, ideas and questions that I couldn't ignore. I tossed and turned in the dark for a few hours before I finally gave up.

I knew the chances of me getting into the building this late at night were slim. It was going on eleven o'clock and with the new 'Privilege Chart' system the guards probably wouldn't consider my request. I couldn't sleep though and I figured at the very least the walk to the tower might wear me out.

The village had two archives, neither of which could be considered complete on their own. There was an archive located in a safe room behind the heads of the Hokage that were carved into the cliff face. That archive contained mostly ninja clan contracts which were public knowledge, as well as mission reports that had been deemed accessible to the public by the Hokage. It also had comprehensive records of all rogue ninja that had once belonged to the village or had been imprisoned here. In short, it contained all the 'ninja stuff'.

The second archive was in the basement underneath the Hokage tower and subsequently the Civil Affairs Office. It contained most, if not all, of the irrelevant documents that the Civil Affairs Office produced but also couldn't justify destroying - just in case. An example would be marriage certificates that were older than ten years and were unlikely to ever be requested for viewing. Another example would be Declarations of Paternity. Once the child was born, a formal birth certificate would be commissioned, and the Declaration would be filed away in the archives. It couldn't be discarded as it would need to be produced in the event a child's paternity was questioned
but it also wasn't relevant enough to remain filed upstairs in Registrations. It became clutter. Important clutter but still clutter. So, it needed to be moved to archives where it was out of the way but still accessible.

The entrance to the archives located in the tower was on the back of the building, outside instead of inside, and was usually guarded. As I approached I was interested to see that it was not guarded. I stood outside the door in baffled silence for a few long moments, eyes roaming the darkness around me. I couldn't really see but it didn't look like there were any guards around.

Well, I didn't want to break into the archives. Which is exactly what I would be doing if I waltzed in without someone knowing. I sighed in defeat and turned to leave but couldn't force my legs to move. It was like my body was telling me that I needed to do this.

...It was probably locked anyway...so what harm could trying the door do?

I moved back to the imposing metal door which was barely illuminated by the single lantern hanging next to it. I had to look down several times as I approached. I was worried that I would trip due to the lack of light.

When I got to the door I grasped the large handle and tried to shift it, a little surprised when it easily unlocked and popped open. It made a bit of a scraping sound as I pulled it outward over the uneven dirt that surrounded the entrance.

I stood for a long moment and stared down into the dark depths of the basement. There were no lights on. I also knew from experience that there were no windows since the basement itself was several feet underground. Architecturally windows would have been impossible and defeated the purpose of making it difficult to infiltrate.

Infiltrate. Even with those precautions infiltrating the archives was proving to be a simple task. I took another moment to look around, not that I could see much in the darkness, and contemplate whether I really wanted to break into the archives. I figured I wasn't doing anything wrong or nefarious, beyond breaking some newly established rules, so a quick apology if I got caught would probably suffice.

I finally stepped inside and felt blindly along the side of the wall inside for a light switch. There was one but it was dangerously close to the first step of what I knew to be a very steep flight of stairs. It was a safety hazard. Then again, I was the one who was coming to the archives in the middle of the night. If I waited to come during the day there would be plenty of light.

I flicked the switch and heard the industrial lights both above and below hum to life. It took my eyes a second to adjust. Once they had I turned and heaved the door shut behind me, wincing as it screeched. I waited a few moments to see if the sound had attracted anyone but when no guards yanked the door open to inspect what was going on I decided to proceed. I gripped the iron railing and moved gingerly down the steep staircase, suddenly very grateful that I'd chosen flat sandals for this little escapade instead of my heels.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs I was met with an odd mix between a musty and clinical smell. Which is probably exactly what it was. Many of the older documents in the archives were treated once a year with a varnish-like spray to prevent them from fading. My eyes began to sting and my throat began to close up as the wall of scent hit me. They must have done the varnishing recently.

I was reminded again why no one was keen to come down here. I wondered if the archive receptionist had lost her ability to smell from being required to sit down here day after day.
I glanced at the empty receptionist desk which sat next to the stairs and out across the rest of the room. I hadn't really thought this far ahead since I'd been convinced I wouldn't make it this far. Without the receptionist there to guide me I had no idea where to even begin looking for the documents. Everything was coded, numbered and alphabetized based on age and type. It wasn't a complex code, but it was still a code that few save the archive receptionist knew.

I wandered over to her desk and browsed through some of the loose documents there. Most looked like older files that she needed still needed to catalogue and put away. I pondered for a minute.

I noticed a filing cabinet behind the desk and moved over to it. I slid each drawer open and scanned the folders.

46531-2-61 DB 10

DECLARATIONS

Feeling like I might be making some progress I moved the divider aside and focused on that drawer.

DECLARATION OF IDENTITY (DB 10-12A)

DECLARATION OF LAND REGISTRATION (DB 10-12B)

DECLARATION OF PATERNITY (DB 10-12C)

There!

As carefully as I could, weary that I'd disrupt the organization, I pulled the folder out and put it down on the receptionist's desk. I scanned down the list. They appeared to be coded and organized further based on 5-year spans of time.

YEARS 1450-1455 (145a)

That should be the right section. I shuffled around the desk until I discovered a pencil and a piece of blank note paper to write on. I wrote down the section and the code K-DB 10-12C 145a. I was sure it wasn't going to be very easy to find the section but worst-case scenario if I couldn't find it I would just come back tomorrow and ask the receptionist where it was.

They hadn't made finding the section easy. I discovered that The Declarations were kept in a smaller, separate room near the very back of the archives. I stood there staring until I figured out how they were organized. They appeared to be alphabetized based on the father's surname and then they were divided further into children who had been born and those who hadn't made it to term.

Declarations didn't have the names of the children unless a birth certificate had been completed. The miscarriages sat eerily on the shelf labelled only by their father's names and a number assigned to them. I had to choose where I would start. Since a birth certificate didn't appear to have been assigned to him, I assumed it was completely possible that Naruto's paperwork had been misfiled as a miscarriage. I'd heard of that happening before.

So, I started sifting through the files on the shelf. I couldn't help the lump in my chest as I browsed through them as quickly as I could. The whole act made me feel...uncomfortable. I felt like I was desecrating a grave site. I tried to ignore the fact that I was disrespectfully pawing through the information of these children that had never had the chance to be born. I'm not sure how long it took me, there wasn't a clock in the small room, but I finished looking through the files with no success.
No Uzumaki was listed on the shelf. I sat on the ground for a long moment before reaching into Genma's jacket and pulling out a small, journal labelled 'Uzumaki'. I sighed deeply as I flipped it open and sifted through the pages absently.

March 23rd, 1461. Today, Himari and I went to register Naruto for school. We wanted to assess the behaviour of the teachers towards him and Himari was eager to put together some preparatory work. I'm sure he won't thank her for it...at least not until he's much older. At first, he didn't seem very excited to go but by the end of the visit to the academy, he was asking me a bunch of questions. Questions I don't really know the answer to. I wrote some of them down and I think I'll ask Genma for him. I feel like they are questions parents would know the answer to...it's stuff the other children probably already know. It wouldn't be right for me to leave him to figure it out on his own. I at least need to try. Parents. I discovered today that Naruto doesn't have a birth certificate. In fact, there's no record of him anywhere. That needs to change.

I closed the journal again and stared down at the cover. I wasn't ready to give up yet but I needed a break. I needed to think.

I let my eyes scan the shelf one more time from my position on the floor as I clenched the journal to my chest.

What if.... what if Uzumaki wasn't his father's name? What if Uzumaki was his mother's name?

On one hand, that had potential to mean that I had just broke into the archives and wasted a huge amount of time. A child that used its mother's maiden name was typically illegitimate and was therefore likely never claimed by a Declaration of Paternity.

On the other hand...if someone was deliberately trying to hide his parentage that would certainly be a way to do it - in plain sight. Especially if you were certain that no one would probably ever care enough to investigate it. I twisted my head to look at the section of the shelf for birth certificates that had been processed. In that case, it could very well be on that shelf too.

But...what could the father's name be? I suppose you couldn't judge a book by its cover but he didn't belong to an Uchiha or Hyuuga. As I scanned, trying to figure out which of the files I should start with my eye was caught by a familiar name. It was in the section for births that had been carried to term.

**K-DB 10-12C 145a1-1454 NAMIKAZE**

Namikaze?

My mind suddenly flashed to a vague memory I had of Minato Namikaze, the Fourth Hokage. My brother had served as one of his elite guards, so I probably saw him on a more regular basis than your average civilian child. I remember him being very handsome, with blonde hair and shocking blue eyes.

He used to laugh at me because whenever he tried to talk to me I would get shy and hide behind Atsuko. My twin, on the other hand, had no such reservations about speaking with him which I couldn't comprehend. I couldn't understand how she wasn't intimidated. He was *The Hokage*. He could snap me in half if he wanted to, in front of everyone, and no one would even notice he'd done it.

He didn't have any children. I distinctly remembered that. My brother had offhandedly mentioned once that he had a serious girlfriend. No children though.
Lord Fourth didn't have any children. But the Declaration of Paternity folder glaring down at me from the shelf begged to differ. There was a child...whether it was Naruto or not remained to be seen.

Blonde hair, blue eyes...the face wasn't the same as his...but it would make sense. I remember my dad saying once that he thought all boys looked like their mothers.

No, I was insane for thinking it. There was no way.

But I owed it to Naruto. I owed it to him to at least check.

I slowly stood up so that I could reach the shelf the file sat on and extended my hand. I hovered over the folder for a moment while I thought it over.

There was no coming back from this. Would it be worth it?

I closed my eyes and in doing so brought a picture of Naruto into my mind. His blond hair, bright blue eyes and fox-like grin. His whiskers. His innocence. How was it that sometimes I felt like one of the only people who considered what was best for him? So, was this worth it? Could this be what was best for him?

Yes.

Just as my hand grasped the edge of the folder a voice rang throughout the archives and I froze.

"Lord Hokage," the aged male voice said, "I can't leave any task unfinished - It's just not in my nature." It was an exact quote from the conversation I'd had with Lord Third all those months ago.

There was a dry chuckle as my eyes slid to look at the Third Hokage, who was standing just beyond the door of the room with his arms behind his back.

"I knew in that moment. I knew that one day you and I would have to have this conversation. I didn't expect it to be so soon, however. But I suppose that's my fault. By now I should have learned not to underestimate your determination."

"Lord Hokage..." I began slowly, watching him carefully. I knew that technically I'd broken into the archives and was poking around in something that I really shouldn't have been. Still...I wasn't afraid.

"Let's go sit down, Kiyoko. We have much to discuss."
There was silence.

Lord Hokage had lead me to one of the tables located in the main room of the archives. The must and chemical smell had been muted when we had been in the back room, but now it was in full force. I did my best to appear as if the scent didn't bother me.

He pulled one of the chairs out for me and made a motion for me to sit. I did as instructed with apprehension. Lord Hokage had just pulled my chair out for me. That was a weird feeling because before now I really couldn't imagine The Hokage doing things like pulling out chairs for people. Not to mention acting like a normal human being. Which he just did. So that was awkward.

Once I was seated he moved around the table to the chair across from me and sat down.

There was silence.

Lord Third just sat there and stared at me. It wasn't in an unkind way, but it unnerved me nonetheless. After several long moments I wondered if he wanted me to speak first but I decided against it. I didn't really have anything to say. I'd essentially broken into the archives to establish Naruto's citizenship. That had been for the boy's own benefit. I hadn't been doing it just because I could or because I was nosy. I'd been doing it for him.

I almost startled myself with the thought that came next.

I could never feel guilty for anything that I had done for Naruto. Whether it was right or wrong or somewhere in between...like this was.

So, what did that mean?

Did I care about Naruto?

Taking care of Naruto was my job. Caring for him was not. Caring for him was not part of my job description and yet...neither was breaking into the archives. Or getting 'pissed' (as Genma had so kindly put it) when I discovered he was being denied his citizenship. Making sure the teachers at the academy were going to behave themselves could be passed off as work but...I didn't have to do that. If Naruto had a roof over his head and food in his pantry my job had been done.

So why, if I just did what was in my job description, would I feel like my job was half-done?

As I came to this newfound realization that I might care for Naruto, Lord Hokage decided to speak.

"Might I see that?" He asked politely, his weathered voice cracking a bit.

It took me a second to realize he was talking about the journal. For the first time I had the sense to feel a embarrassed. Lord Hokage wanted to look at the journal I kept about how I handled Naruto. Mostly, it contained how I'd managed to sort everything out with his housing and schooling. It was also a detailed account of how his learning had progressed. I even had a journal entry for the day Himari and I managed to teach Naruto how to write his name.
Everything was in there...even some of my more personal thoughts on some of the people I'd interacted with over the last few months. I had observations about him, his prospective teachers, his cleaning lady and even Lord Hokage. The thought that Lord Hokage was going to read it was mortifying and, at the same time, I couldn't help but remember that I'd essentially done this to myself. I'd had reservations about having a journal back when I'd first started. I knew you shouldn't keep anything like that in writing. Yet...I did.

I supposed I deserved this for not heeding my own advice.

I passed the journal over the table, watching as the old man scrutinized the cover before opening it to the first page. He either read extraordinarily fast or wasn't reading the entire entry because soon he turned the page. He stopped when he was about halfway through the pages I'd filled.

"This is very detailed." He said simply. With his tone I couldn't tell whether I was being complimented or scolded.

"Yes."

He gently handed the journal back to me and I brought it to rest on my lap. I'd half expected him to burn it with a fireball jutsu right in front of me. Maybe he didn't know that one…

Who was I kidding? He was The Hokage. He probably knew every jutsu.

I waited for him to say something else.

"I knew that someone would eventually try to investigate Naruto's parentage." He began, "I've always had a few suspects in mind. There are only a handful of people that would be able to make the connection but all of them are ninja. Most of which, thankfully, wouldn't mean him any harm."

I was silent but couldn't stop my eyes from falling to the NAMIKAZE folder that was glaring up at me from the tabletop. Lord Hokage had brought it with us when we'd come over to sit down but I'd been so lost in my thoughts I'd disregarded it.

Had I been correct?

"I never suspected a civilian would be the one to figure it out...but then again at that time I hadn't known you, Kiyoko. I've had you watched from day one…"

I knew that. I had felt eyes on me and turned around to nothingness countless times since I'd taken on Naruto's case. Every time we went out to eat together Genma would get all tense and glare in random directions, which at first I had dismissed but then later pieced together what was happening. The ANBU were following me, he didn't like it and there was nothing he could do about it. Well, except for glare at them venomously.

It hadn't taken me long to figure out that Lord Hokage was having the ANBU follow me. Probably not a full detail - I wasn't dangerous - but just enough to keep a close eye on me.

It was only common sense that he'd have me followed.

"I noticed." I said bluntly, keeping my face calm.

He chuckled.

"I know you did. It credits you that you never seemed to be unnerved by it."
"Well, I knew they were following me, but I never actually noticed them." I explained, "It's not like they were going to hurt me either...they were just doing their job. I can understand that."

There was a silence that lapsed for a few minutes.

I stared at the manila folder and contemplated it.

"If you read the contents of this folder," Lord Hokage finally said, "you'll never be able to come back from it. You'll know a secret that I intend to keep for many years...perhaps until I die."

Beyond his cryptic talk of keeping this knowledge a secret until his dying day I also recognized the thinly veiled threat. He was giving me the option to walk away. Until I saw it with my own eyes, the truth of Naruto's parentage would just be pure speculation. Lord Hokage would hide this folder somewhere it could never be found again since apparently hiding it in plain sight hadn't worked. Who Naruto's parents were couldn't ever be proven and while I could claim to have my suspicions...I would never be able to say for certain. The second I looked at the contents and my theory was confirmed I would formally know that secret. I would have proof.

Lord Hokage, would know I knew that secret and had seen the proof. If one day, he was forced to choose between preserving my life and keeping that secret...he wouldn't choose my life. Lord Third considered this secret important enough to take it to his grave so chances were, he considered it important enough to eliminate me if I proved to be a risk.

I thought about it a few more seconds. I was trying to gage my emotions and make sure I understood my motivations for wanting to figure this out. Was it all simply curiosity or was it for Naruto? Were my motivations as pure as I believed they were? This was my opportunity to be brutally honest with myself and potentially save my neck in the long run.

While I was looking into this...was I thinking about Naruto or was I thinking about myself? Was I thinking at all? Typically, curiosity was thoughtless with no regard for consequences or the future.

The more I reflected the more I realized that I had been thinking about Naruto the entire time.

I reached forward and opened the folder.

I, Minato Namikaze, as of March 14th, 1454, submit this document to formally declare paternity of the child carried by Kushina Uzumaki (ID#012607).

That had to be Naruto. 012607 was his file number in the Children and Youth Services department.

In the event of my death apparent, or my absence on or before the date the child is carried to term, let this serve as undisputed proof of paternity. It is my wish that the mentioned child hold all rights to citizenship, my name, wealth, properties and any other inheritances he/she will be eligible for by the laws of village.

Signature of Father: MINATO NAMIKAZE

Signature of Mother: KUSHINA NAMIKAZE

All witnesses present have been of sound mind and agree that they have been informed of the consequences should this declaration be at any time proven false. All witnesses listed below have been determined to hold no blood relation to the parents nor hold personal/professional interest in the paternity of the child. The witnesses hereby declare that the above-named father is of sound mind to make this declaration. All witnesses are of the belief this child is biologically that of the person submitting this declaration.
My spine tingled in intrigue when I read the names of the witnesses. Even though he was Hokage, he wasn't allowed to officiate his own declaration, so he had to have a member of his council do it. He had obviously chosen Lord Third, retired at that time, to do it. But it wasn't his name that shocked me. It was the others.

Witnesses:

**BIWAKO SARUTOBI**

**JIRAIYA, THE SANNIN**

It was written in a loud, messy scrawl that I could barely interpret. I'd never met the man or even seen him, but I had a gut feeling the handwriting matched his personality well. I also made note of the fact that he didn't have a surname; I'd never know that about the legendary sannin. He must've been an unclaimed orphan.

The last one shocked me and generated so many questions.

**YUZUHA NARA**

Yuzuha witnessed Naruto's declaration of paternity? She knew? Why hadn't she said anything?

I realized a second later that she had said something. It just wasn't a something I had wanted to hear.

*I think those documents are missing for a reason.*

She'd tried to warn me away from playing detective and I hadn't listened. Yuzuha knew something but it wasn't obvious how much she knew. I supposed it was very possible that she knew the Fourth Hokage had a son but without seeing a birth certificate she had no way of proving Naruto was that child. Not to mention I couldn't think of a reason she would want to prove Naruto was the child of the Fourth Hokage. Especially with Lord Third going to such lengths to cover it up. Knowing Yuzuha as soon as it became apparent that her betters were determined to keep it a secret she'd probably decided to bury what she knew forever.

"Why wasn't a birth certificate ever commissioned?" I questioned finally, bringing the old man out of his thoughts.

"A birth certificate, by its very design, tells everyone who sees it who you are and where you came from." He started, "The Fourth Hokage wanted Naruto to be remembered for who he was and what he did for the village. Not just for who his parents were. Naruto is a hero in his own right and he wanted that to be recognized."

I took issue with that statement. It had been seven years and the village still couldn't see Naruto as a hero. I had to admit even I didn't see him as a hero...although what Lord Third had said did make sense. He spent every day containing a demon that should it be released could doom us all and he wasn't even treated well for it. Heroes were self-sacrificing and that was the definition of self-sacrifice. There were a few people who didn't hate him, but I didn't think they saw him as a hero.

Would knowing who Naruto's parents were effect the way the village viewed him? It was hard to say. The human mind was a complex thing that was difficult to predict.

"They might treat him better if they knew." I suggested.
"Or they might not. My sons were not always treated well for their parentage. They were envied, even scorned, and when that wasn't happening they found themselves surrounded by people completely motivated by self-interest. I don't think my eldest has ever had a real friend." He started, "That relentless drive to pamper also haunted every Senju who ever called this village home and that got many of them killed. Lord First's only grandson comes to mind. If his instructors hadn't spent so much time coddling him in an attempt to gain favor he may yet have lived."

I quietly listened although he still didn't have me fully convinced. He must have recognized this because he continued.

"Did you know Tobirama Senju had eleven children?" He suddenly asked.

I couldn't stop my eyebrows from raising up to my hairline at the sudden question. I couldn't figure out how this was relevant to the conversation and to be honest that was new information to me.

"I thought he had two sons-" I started, thinking back to my history lessons.

"-who were targeted, hunted and assassinated while performing low-level duties for the village. Yes, that's what the history books say, and it is true. It's just not the whole truth." He leaned back in his seat as he said it. "Agents of another village claimed to be a foreign lord who wanted to give them ancient records that belonged to the Senju. Even though their father was long dead they both meant a great deal to the village and the enemy knew that. They were Lord Second's sons. They represented something special to the people of Konohagakure."

He paused for an agonizing second before continuing.

"When they arrived, they hadn't been expecting the ambush waiting for them. Their bodies were dismembered, and the pieces were covertly returned to the village. Most came to me but a few unfortunately went to their mother, who died only days later. She hadn't been well for years, not since her husband died, but losing her sons had finally pushed her over the edge."

I was silent. That was...horrible.

"I was still trying to avoid an open conflict and hid the nature of their deaths. My formal statement was only that they were killed in action. Despite that some details about what happened still spread. The sons of the late Second Hokage, who were considered the embodiment of the village's will of fire, had been hunted like lowly animals and slaughtered like them. The response was outrage and fear."

I noticed how his aged eyes went distant. Clearly, he was still very troubled by the incident and I couldn't blame him. I'd thought they'd only been ambushed and assassinated, which had never sat right with me to begin with. For their bodies to have been desecrated as well? It caused a thick lump to form in my stomach.

"So... the other children?" I prompted after giving him a few moments. I hadn't known Lord Second had more than the two sons, I doubt there were many that did, so I was curious about the others and why he'd brought them up.

"They had nine sisters whom I met with after the incident. Almost all of them were married and lived civilian lives. Still, they were Senju and after what happened to their brothers they were frightened. They were frightened by their own name and I could do nothing to pacify them. I couldn't make them feel safe. They worried for their children. After all, Lord Second was now out of sons but he had at least 10 grandsons at that point...more now."
He took a small pause and stared down at the manila folder thoughtfully.

"I tried to convince them not to do it but ultimately it was decided that I would have their records sealed or destroyed. Marriage certificates were re-commissioned to reflect them as orphans, birth certificates were sealed away...they wanted them destroyed but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Their formal connection to the Senju family would be removed. With the death of their brothers their branch of the Senju family was already considered extinct in the male line but now, as far as our records are concerned, it doesn't exist at all. Lord Second would be...most displeased if he knew."

He accompanied that statement with a dry chuckle and I had to admit the thought of the frigid Lord Second springing out of his grave in anger over the whole incident was morbidly amusing.

"I thought there were laws that prevented the destruction of records?" I asked.

"There are...but you're smart enough to realize that there are diverse ways to interpret every law. We have the best intentions when we create them, but we can't make them perfect. I have the right to destroy records if I am given the express consent of the individual to whom the records pertain, and it is determined that the village's safety is at risk."

"The village's safety wasn't at risk." I pointed out.

"Interpretation." He said almost casually, "The village's morale was in danger. I interpreted that as a safety risk."

I let that information sink in for a moment.

Lord Second had nine nameless daughters, countless grandchildren and now there was no record of it. How many people in the village were secretly descendants of the Senju clan and had no idea? It was positively mind-boggling. Any person I passed on the street could have Tobirama Senju's blood flowing through their veins.

I felt my stomach twist itself into tight knots and felt a little nauseous. Naruto's parentage, Lord Second's daughters...just how many secrets did this village have? I had a feeling that was only scratching the surface and the thought made me uneasy. It reminded me why I lived by the 'honesty is the best policy' approach. All these secrets I'd learned today almost made me feel...unclean.

"So... you've hidden Naruto's parentage...to keep him safe?" I partially asked and stated at the same time. I realized that he'd told me the story of Lord Second's eleven children to try and help me understand how being the child of a Hokage wasn't exactly a good thing. His two sons targeted and brutalized. His nine daughters spent their entire lives scared of their birthright and what it could mean for their families.

Severing ties to my father's family isn't a decision I would have made but then again, I don't have children to worry about. What I could understand is that they were afraid and people do extreme things out of fear.

"As well as give him the opportunity to be his own person. Kazuma and Asuma never had the opportunity to be recognized for what they accomplished any more than my predecessor's sons did. I want to keep him safe and give him a chance to be Naruto Uzumaki. Not Minato Namikaze's son. Just...Naruto Uzumaki. I believe that is what his parents would have wanted." He explained.

"How do you know that's what they would want?" I asked bluntly.

"I don't." He responded simply.
I nodded slightly, conceding his point. I still didn't fully agree but I had to remember this was Lord Hokage I was speaking to and I didn't have the right to dispute his decisions. He had been surprisingly patient in explaining his thought process and motivations to me. He didn't have to go to that trouble just so I could understand. Or at least try to.

I looked down at the contents of the folder again, reading over the document again carefully.

"I would like permission to continue the commissioning of Naruto's birth certificate." I told him flatly.

"You won't need it to register him for school." Lord Third explained, "I've already taken care of that."

"I know." I responded, "but it just...doesn't feel right that he doesn't have one. I understand everything you've told me and I respect your decision but..."

I paused and leaned back in my chair. I thought about my birth certificate and the names on it. I thought about what that document meant to me. It explained who I came from, where I came from and it confirmed that I was part of the village I loved...that I was part of Konohagakure. It was a statement that I belonged here.

Naruto was already alienated enough.

"Your parents may not be everything about who you are...but they're an important part." I told him, struggling to keep my face straight, "One day, whether it's ten years from now or fifty years from now, he's going to go looking for where he came from. You can't honestly tell me that we have the right to deny him that? To deny the proof that he exists? To deny the proof that he's one of us and that he belongs here? To tell him that who his parents were didn't matter at all?"

I only realized how heavy my voice had become at the end of my little speech as Lord Hokage raised an eyebrow in response.

There was a long, chilled silence that met me. I wondered if I had gone too far by asking although I was confident my request had been respectful.

"Very well." He agreed, much to my surprise, "but once it's commissioned it will become a sealed record and placed in the vault. I should hope you'll be alive in fifty years to show him where it is...I certainly won't be around that long."

I did my best to keep my face passive as my mind wandered to my 'Uzumaki' journal. If I played things right, it wouldn't matter whether I was alive or dead. One way or another, that knowledge would be there for Naruto to find.

"By the way, Lord Hokage, how did you know I was down here?" I had no doubt that Lord Hokage probably could have heard me sneeze from the other side of the village. If he'd been up in his office he probably could have heard me enter the building but I was under the impression he would have sent someone else to check. He did admit earlier that he had me followed by ANBU...so maybe that was it?

"Well, actually, I ran out of tobacco and went to get some. My preferred convenience store is across the street. I watched you enter."

That was surprisingly...uncool. Not that I had room to talk. I was the one sneaking around doing work in the middle of the night.
As if suddenly remembering something, he reached into his sleeve and pulled out what appeared to be a newly purchase packet of tobacco. He began to open it and also produced a pipe.

"Um...Lord Hokage?"

"Hm?"

"You can't smoke in here...sir."

"Oh. Right."

XxX

It was passed midnight when I left the archives and Lord Hokage. We had agreed that I could commission a birth certificate if I also devised a 'red herring' that would divert any other nosy individuals, like myself, away from the truth. I didn't really like that idea since that had the potential of backfiring but that was the only way I could convince Lord Hokage to allow it.

In the event both myself and Lord Hokage were long dead by the time Naruto went looking for the truth about his parentage that would only provide another barrier. Still, what Lord Hokage didn't know was that I was planning on leaving bread crumbs for Naruto to find. I wasn't entirely sure what I was going to do yet, but I had a feeling that my 'Uzumaki' journal was going to be the key.

The good news was that I had pretty good feeling I was going to be alive for at least a few days to figure it out.

Akkinomi, sadly, was along the most direct route from the Hokage Tower to my new apartment. The notorious bar was closed most of the day so that normally wasn't an issue for me but right now, when it's nightlife was in full swing, was an inconvenient time to wander by. I'd almost forgotten it was there until I got to the end of the street and heard the thrumming bass and cat-calls coming from that general direction. So, I made the decision to detour to the edge of the district and skirt around into the Sakata District. From there, I'd make my way east again towards the Mita District.

At least that was the plan.

When I made it all the way to the edge of the Sakata District it occurred to me that I wasn't all that far from the Harashi District. So, I wasn't far from the Nara Clan compound. I hesitated for a while in the middle of the darkened street.

It was passed midnight and the chance of Yuzuha being awake were very slim. Still...there couldn't be much harm in wandering by and seeing if the lights were on.

Unlike in the past, the clans in Konoha kept the gates to their compounds open except for when they were performing ceremonies or in lockdown for safety reasons. Tonight was no exception. When I arrived at the Nara Clan compound their gate was unguarded and had been left wide open.

The Nara compound was on the outskirts of the village because they needed access to foliage and fields to raise their deer. When you were in the rest of the village, even the nearby Harashi District, you always heard *something*. Even in the middle of night there was always some distant sound that had been produced because of thousands of people living on top of one another. There was always a bar playing music, a couple fighting, dogs barking, cats yowling, pans smashing against one another or store bells ringing. There were always people sounds.

When you got the Nara compound...the sounds just stopped. It was like the only things alive were the deer, the fireflies and the crickets. I remember more than once when I was younger wishing that
I'd been born into the Nara Clan. I didn't dislike living in the heart of the village, but I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live amongst the Nara.

It was so peaceful.

I had never been to the Nara clan's main house but usually the main estates weren't hard to find in compounds. It was usually the biggest, nicest, oldest house right in the center of all the others. It appeared the Nara were no exception.

It was obvious which house was the main one and I moved immediately towards it.

There was a light on that appeared to be coming from the main entrance to the house, so I continued in my approach. It wasn't until I got closer that I could make out the darkened form of someone sitting quietly on the front porch.

It was Yuzuha.

She was sitting on the front porch of the house with her knees drawn up to her chest. She appeared to be wearing her night clothes. Her hair was down and I was reminded just how long her hair actually was. She wore it up all the time and it had the tendency to defy gravity, so I always forgot that it fell to her chest. She didn't look at me when I finally made it up to her but she did pat a place next to her on the porch.

I took the silent invitation and sat down. Now that I was closer I could see her face and I realized that it was darkened. Her eyes were locked on a small group of fireflies that were dancing around a small rock-garden nearby.

"You're up late." I commented in a whisper. I didn't want to disturb any members of the sleeping Nara Clan.

"That's hypocritical." She shot back.

"Yeah, it is. I hoped you'd be awake but I didn't honestly expect it."

"I don't sleep well. Never have." She responded, her eyes never leaving the fireflies, "My old man didn't either. Whenever we were both awake we used to come out here and watch the fireflies together until we got tired enough."

She was silent for a long moment and all I heard were the crickets singing in the background.

"It's funny. I haven't done this in years. I stopped doing this not long after my dad died but tonight just...felt right...for some reason." She finally finished. She blinked but other than that she didn't move from observing the insects.

Suddenly I felt a little bit like an intruder and I realized I probably should have let the whole birth certificate debacle go until the morning.

"I'm sorry," I began hesitantly, "would you like me to go?"

"No, it's fine." She responded dismissively, "It's nice to have the company."

She finally broke her gaze to turn and look at me with her piercing brown eyes, although a cheek still rested on her knees as she did so.

"Besides," she said lightly, "you looked like you had a lot on your mind. What's up?"
I leaned back and let my legs stretch off the porch, putting my arms behind me so I could rest my weight on them. I took a deep breath and listened to the crickets singing. I'd opened a lot of doors I probably shouldn't have tonight and now I was left with the quandary of whether I should open one more. I honestly hadn't thought I would get this far. I'd expected the compound to be dark and lifeless. I hadn't expected the person I was looking for to not only be awake but waiting outside for me.

"I just left the archives." I watched as Yuzuha's shoulders tensed in response, but she didn't say anything. "I had a conversation with Lord Hokage there."

I paused.

"He showed me some documents. Your name was on them."

I heard a heavy exhale of air that I hadn't realized Yuzuha had been holding.

"So, you know." It could have been a question, but I could tell it was more of a statement. She knew that I had learned the truth and she knew exactly which documents I was referencing.

"Why?" I asked suddenly and immediately berated myself. I hadn't meant to ask and it was hardly the question to ask. The truth was 'why' wasn't exactly the question I wanted the answer to, but it was a good summary. Why did you sign the document? Why did you keep it a secret?

"Why you?" I tried again. I just couldn't understand the connection.

"Yeah, why me?" She echoed as soon as I'd finished speaking. "I've been asking myself that since they announced Lord Fourth was dead."

She sighed.

"Don't get the wrong idea – it wasn't anything special. I'd just started at the Civil Affairs Office, managed to piss off the head of my department who shuffled me into doing dead-end work at Registrations. The Fourth Hokage was looking for someone he could trust to commission the declaration and he found out I was working there. He knew my brother; they went to school together. It wasn't exactly a big secret when he was still alive, but it wasn't exactly something he wanted blabbed all over the village either...so he asked me. Personally."

She huffed before she continued.

"Ever tried to tell a Hokage 'no' to his face? It's impossible. It didn't help that Minato had mastered looking like a kicked puppy at the drop of a hat."

I noticed that she had called him 'Minato' instead of Lord Hokage or Lord Fourth, but I didn't say anything. I couldn't help but think about how I'd just told Lord Third not to smoke in the archives an hour ago. I didn't exactly find it hard but I had to admit that it certainly gave me pause. Not to mention I don't think Lord Third could ever manage looking like a kicked puppy. He was pretty much a tired old man and that was about it.

"When Minato died, no one told me that I couldn't tell anyone..." She started, "but it didn't take me long to notice that Lord Third was trying to hush everything up. One day Lord Third himself came into the office, went into my filing cabinet, took the Declaration of Paternity and then left without a word. Not even a sideways glance. I knew that was his way of telling me that I was never to speak of it." She told me in a hushed tone. "It was a silent order that I followed."

She adjusted her position so that she was sitting with her legs dangling off the edge of the porch next
to mine. Her eyes went back to the fireflies.

"It's kind of nice to have someone else know." She admitted, "It eats at me every time I see the kid. That hair and those eyes? He looks just like his father. I know there's no documentation to prove it, but it amazes me no one else has figured it out."

"Yeah." My response was a little absent as I dug around for those vague memories I had of Lord Fourth from when I was a child.

I followed her line of sight and watched the fireflies myself.

"I got permission from Lord Hokage to commission a birth certificate for Naruto. With some conditions of course. Since it's commissioning is several years delayed I need at least one of the original witnesses from the declaration to sign it. Lord Hokage isn't going to count since he's the officiator." I started to explain.

"I hope you'll do it. I'd rather not go looking for Master Jiraiya." I felt my brow crinkle at the thought of having to chase down the famous man.

"Yeah," Yuzuha began, "there's certainly better ways to spend your vacation then trying to track down that old perv."

"Wait...you get vacation?" I shot back dryly, not wanting to miss the opportunity.

Yuzuha and I looked at each other blankly for a moment before her face cracked into a smirk and she started laughing heartily at the abrupt joke. When she calmed down a little she looked back at me and smiled.

"Yes, I'll do it. I'd like to think I'm being altruistic but to tell you the truth I mostly hoping the whole thing won't bother me so much if I manage to get his citizenship sorted out. Kid deserves something with his name on it. This is me making up for...for..."

"Leaving a task unfinished?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah. Exactly." She whispered back.

"Aunt Yuzuha?" A small voice said from behind us and we both turned. Shikamaru was standing there in his night clothes, rubbing a small fist over his one of his eyes. The other one was partially open, but it was obvious the child was just roused from sleep.

"What are you doing out here?" The little boy asked her with clear suspicion. More suspicion then a seven-year-old had a right to in my opinion.

"I couldn't sleep." She told him simply.

"Me neither." He grumbled. Clearly the fact that he was not able to sleep was very offensive and he wanted us both to know it.

"Come sit with me then." The older woman said, stretching her arms out towards him. Despite his grumpy presentation the boy easily complied and spilled into his aunt's waiting arms. Even though he claimed he couldn't sleep the child looked very tired and snuggled into the woman with half-closed eyes.

Maybe it was how tired I was, but I couldn't hold back a small smile at the sight.
"I'll see you tomorrow then." I told her and stood up to dismiss myself.

"Yeah," She responded, "Goodnight, Kiyoko."

As I walked away, I heard her hushed voice as she continued to speak to the child in her arms. I couldn't make out what she was saying but she seemed to be trying to lull him to sleep with her voice. By the time I got down the walkway, I didn't hear the little boy's responses anymore and a glance backward saw he was already limp in her arms. Fast asleep.

I couldn't help but smile to myself again. Me smiling? I must be really tired. I turned again and continued on my way out of the compound. Even as I made it to the gate, beyond the crickets and the rustling leaves, I could have sworn I heard Yuzuha's whispered voice on the wind.

"Seriously. Why me, Minato?"
Hey everyone!

Couple quick things before we start.

A poll is available! It's just for fun as I'm curious about what my readers think. I'd really like to see where your minds go.

On my fanfiction.net profile (www.fanfiction.net/u/5070883/OrthodoxLily) is a poll asking about who you think is/who you want to be Kiyoko's mystery pairing. I've posted several options but if the one you want or are thinking of isn't there you can select the Other* option. If you pick that one I would appreciate a quick PM stating who your Other pairing is. You don't have to but there's a wide range of options available so if the one you want isn't there you are leaving me unbearably curious. I suppose I probably deserve it for the cliff hangers I've given you over the last little while.

I'll be leaving the poll open until I post the chapter where it first becomes obvious who the pairing is.

IMPORTANT(ish): SEVERAL PEOPLE HAVE LET ME KNOW THAT THE POLL IS NOT VISIBLE ON MOBILE DEVICES. IF YOU ARE USING A MOBILE DEVICE AND WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE, I HAVE CREATED AN ALTERNATE POLL (IT'S THE SAME CONTENT JUST DIFFERENT HOST-SITE).

The link for the alternative poll is: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CZ6HTCM

Also, I have started a tumblr account. I tumble now! Fun!

My name is OrthodoxLily on there as well and my blog is titled 'Fanfiction Authors Anonymous'. I'm posting random excerpts from Civil Affairs as shorts and memes/gifs relating to fanfiction. I have several partially written spin-offs that take place in the Civil Affairs version of the Narutoverse and I'm toying with idea of posting small parts on there as teasers until they're ready for publication. As for the memes and gifs: I try to do original stuff instead of just reblogging everything (although I do that too). I've pleasantly discovered that Tumblr isn't blocked at work so I can Tumble all day without hindrance! You can check me out if you like - COME TUMBLE WITH ME EVERYONE!

Anyway, that's all for me (for now).

Love you all and thanks for the support!

"Last chance to back out." Yuzuha warned me.
We'd chosen her small corner office in Immigration to conduct our 'covert operations' as I was calling it. I'd always liked her office, but I imagined there weren't many people that did. For most people the small but cluttered space would be overwhelming or even claustrophobic. Personally, I thought it was cozy.

It was on an inside wall so there was no window and it was barely big enough to fit her desk and a chair, but she made the space work for her. She'd gotten creative and had shelves installed across every available section of wall. The shelves were overflowing with escalated immigration cases, mission requests, small house plants and employee records. There were so many files it was hard to tell that there was even a wall behind them. She had a set of three porcelain deer figurines that sat at the far corner of her desk, partially hidden by the mountain of documentation.

I was sitting opposite of Yuzuha in her small, wooden visitor chair. Every time I adjusted my weight or leaned in a new direction it would make an irritating squeak. For this reason, I was sitting rigidly in the chair with my arms almost pinned to my sides. I was doing my best to remain perfectly still.

It had only taken Yuzuha and I a few days to sort out the paperwork required to commission Naruto's delayed birth registration. It was a more complicated process than a regular birth registration but if it was a priority we could get it done efficiently. We could have taken our time, but both of us were afraid if we didn't process it fast enough Lord Hokage might change his mind.

I said nothing to her casual warning but continued to stare blankly at the unsigned document. Yuzuha had already signed it. After all her name was already on his Declaration of Paternity so she had fewer reservations. Just like Lord Hokage had done a few nights before she was giving me the opportunity to walk away.

I don't know why she bothered. It was already too late for me to back out. Not that I wanted to. I grabbed the pen that had been sitting neglected on her desk and signed my name alongside Yuzuha's as a witness.

All that was missing was Lord Hokage's signature as the officiator and Naruto Uzumaki's birth certificate would officially exist.

As satisfied as I may have felt I realized my job wasn't done yet. Clearly Yuzuha was thinking the same thing.

"Have you finished thinking about the 'red herring' yet?" She asked, leaning over her desk slightly as she stashed the birth certificate out of sight. I noticed how her eyes darted around the tiny office quickly while she did so. It was if she was scared she'd turn around and find someone casually reading it over her shoulder. It was obviously out of paranoia since it wasn't as if there was anywhere for someone to hide in the shoebox she called an office.

"Yes." I told her and took a moment to choose my words carefully.

I'd thought very long and hard about what I could do to produce a red herring that would throw any potential sleuths off the scent. It had to be a document that would pacify their curiosity and hopefully dissuade them from probing further. It would have to be a document that lead them to a dead end that was about as far away from the truth as we could get. If it was too unbelievable then it would be obvious that it was fake and that they had to look elsewhere.

It was also against the law to forge false documentation - especially citizenship documentation. I knew that considering the circumstances Lord Hokage would let the indiscretion of a blatantly forged document slide. However, it wasn't guaranteed a future Hokage would feel the same way about what I had done. There was no guarantee that they would think my actions were justifiable and there
was a possibility I'd face prosecution. While I was willing to do what it took to help Naruto's situation that was not a preferable outcome for me.

For a while, I felt like I was at a dead end. If I couldn't forge false documents how could I create a red herring? Somehow, I would have to commission a genuine document that would meet that purpose. What kind of document could that be?

The idea had come to me yesterday while listening to a co-worker in the Children and Youth Services Department complain. It was a winning idea and the more I thought about it the more I realized it was the only thing I could do. I knew I would have to brace myself for Yuzuha's reaction. She probably would think I was insane, not that she didn't have her suspicions already, but I was still counting on her to help me through this. If I was going to manage this I would need all the help I could get.

The older woman leaned back in her seat and raised an eyebrow at me expectantly. She'd obviously picked up on my hesitance.

"I'm going to adopt Naruto," I said, keeping my face completely straight.

Yuzuha was frozen and her jaw dropped.

"E-Excuse me?" She finally choked, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly as her brain visibly fizzled at the unexpected statement.

"I'm going...to adopt Naruto." I repeated slowly.

"Are you out of your mind?" She almost snapped back at me. I probably was but she had to hear me out.

"It will just be on paper. I won't actually move him into my house or anything like that." I tried to reassure her. No, I certainly wasn't ready to be responsible for a child in more than just a professional capacity. I was already going above and beyond the call of duty but I had to draw the line at actually adopting a child.

Yuzuha looked confused.

"I'm not sure I understand." She told me, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms over her chest. I could tell she didn't and I had known from the start it would take some explaining to help her reach the same conclusion I had.

"It's a perfect red herring." I began, "think about it. Of every process you've ever gone through on behalf of this office which is the biggest, stupidest, bureaucratic mess you have ever had the displeasure of wading through?"

I let that sink in for a second and watched as the other woman's eyes slowly began to widen in realization.

"An adoption."

"Exactly." I agreed, "It's a total of 57 documents to process an adoption and that's if the adoption runs smoothly. Children and Youth Services needs to conduct a screening on both the child and the perspective parent. Then it goes to Healthcare for the secondary screening; making sure the child doesn't have any unidentified health concerns."

I paused for a moment to get my breath but apparently, I didn't need to continue. Yuzuha simply
picked up where I left off.

"If citizenship isn't apparent, Immigration needs to assess whether there's any reason to believe the child came from outside the village. Even if it's obvious that they didn't it's still at least a month's worth of paperwork. Then Registrations needs to commission the name change documentation required for the process."

She stopped but both of us were aware that the list went on.

"I have to admit," she finally said, "it certainly would generate an overwhelming amount of paperwork to sift through. However...what makes you think someone won't piece it together? It would be a pain in the ass but it's still possible."

I adjusted my weight and crossed my legs. I had to stop myself from cringing when the chair squeaked in protest at the movement.

"There are things we can do to make it even more difficult. We can lose documents, misfile them and archive them before it's necessary. I have plans to have his name changed to Shiranui then have them change it right back to Uzumaki. If you'll help me, we can commission the documents simultaneously and that way they'll cancel each other out." When two documents of the same type, pertaining to the same person, were commissioned simultaneously they cancelled each other out. In the case of a name change that meant that no change would take place. Not really. Both documents would be useless, but they would exist, which would add to the complicated web of records I was weaving.

"Fair enough." The older woman conceded but, just as I expected, she soon came back with another flaw. "You can't adopt Naruto, though. It'll never be allowed."

That was true. Konohagakure had many questionable, old-fashioned laws. One of these laws was that young, unmarried women who did not possess property or title were unable to formally adopt children. They could have guardianship of proven blood-relatives or children whom they were formally declared godparents of, but they couldn't adopt. The wording of the law, referring to women with 'title', was a good indicator of just how outdated that law was.

It predated the village as it had originated during the Warring Clans period. It was one of the ways the clan heads had made it legal to impose themselves on the lives of their family members and keep their clan's bloodlines pure. Lord forbid that a single cousin of a clan head might bring some stray into her home and dishonor the whole family. I wouldn't have thought that in the days, where women were to be seen and not heard, adopting random children would have been a big issue. Even so, apparently it had been common enough that the clans had petitioned the Daimyo to create a law. The rest of the Land of Fire had dropped the law about a decade ago but since Konohagakure was independent it was still able to maintain it.

Not that I could understand why they did. Mostly I just hoped it was an oversight and it would be on its way out within the next few years.

Where Yuzuha saw a barrier, I saw an advantage.

"True. But there's no law that says I can't try to adopt him. An adoption can't be denied until the end of the process when it makes its way to Lord Hokage. As officiator he reviews all the findings presented to him, reviews the laws that govern adoption and then either rules in favor or against. If I don't agree, I appeal, and the process has to start over again from scratch. That would take the documents we just processed and multiply it by two."
"And I assume you plan to appeal. That will generate a spider's web of redundant records so intricate that only someone with a detailed knowledge of CAO operations would be able to begin to understand it." She said with an almost impressed tone, "They would also have to be exceptionally dedicated to even want to try. I know one look at that mess and I'd run away screaming."

The sheer volume of documentation, combined with purposeful misfiling and record damaging would be enough to confuse anyone. That confusion would hopefully result in a very overwhelmed amateur detective who would then likely become discouraged. Even if they didn't get discouraged and decided to keep looking they would likely become distracted by the adoption process and overlook the fact that the child had no mentioned citizenship. My hope was that, just a red herring was meant to do, they would be misled and distracted from what they had originally been looking for. Naruto's parentage.

"You do realize," Yuzuha began with slight hesitation, "that your name is going to be plastered all over those records. If someone is invested in figuring it out and can't do it on their own, they'll probably approach you."

I had thought of that.

"I am aware. I have no intention of ever saying anything about this to anyone who doesn't already know. I'm not easily persuaded. If they do anything too drastic, like following me around, chances are Lord Hokage would intervene somehow. I'm not as vulnerable as I appear." I explained, keeping my face passive as I played with the pen. I had completely forgotten that it was still resting limply in my hand.

"What if they interrogate you?" She wondered aloud.

"I'm not going to pretend I could hold up to being interrogated." I told her, "We have to take a step back and consider what the likelihood of someone wanting the information that badly really is."

I remembered Lord Hokage mentioning that most of the people he thought would go searching were ninja. He seemed quite positive that these ninja wouldn't mean Naruto any harm. Someone who doesn't mean any harm isn't likely to resort to interrogation. When their snooping failed they would; give up, ask me directly or go to see the Hokage about it.

After that conversation with Lord Third, I understood that he believed keeping Naruto's parentage a secret was for the kid's own good. He was keeping it a secret to give him the chance to grow up and be his own person. He wasn't keeping it a secret because he was already in danger.

The man had eluded to the fact that there was always the possibility Naruto would become a target when his parentage was discovered but that didn't mean he was a target now. It was unlikely that I would be in danger for creating a perfectly legal red herring and knowing the truth about Naruto Uzumaki's parents. By the time the secret got out, if it ever did, someone targeting Naruto would then have no use for me.

Yuzuha seemed to think about it for a minute before letting out a heavy sigh.

"What about the kid?" She asked suddenly, "What if something happens to you, the old man, me...we live in a dangerous world. What if we're all dead and he comes looking for proof of who he is? How is he going to pick through this mess we're creating? It doesn't sit right that he might never be able to figure it out either."

"I have a plan." I reassured her.
"Why am I not surprised?" She retorted automatically.

She huffed. I watched as she ran a hand over her hair and into her messy bun. A dry smile was pulling at the corners of her lips.

"Dammit, Kiyoko." She sighed again, "I guess I'm in. Anyway, it's not like either of us can turn back at this point."

XxX

"Do you have everything?" I asked the blonde again, fighting to keep my face blank when he groaned in irritation.

I knew it wasn't the first time I'd asked but he didn't need to groan at me.

"Yes." He emphasized. He stopped walking and looked up at me as he continued, "I have my pencils, notebook, textbooks, shuriken and I brought the bento Mrs. Amano gave me."

I noticed how he held up his hands and used his fingers to count each item he was supposed to bring. I had gone over the list with him several times a day as the date for him to enter the academy drew nearer. I hadn't wanted him to forget anything but at the same time doing everything for him wasn't my place. I was his caseworker. Not his parent. No matter how much Tamaki liked to tease me.

"It's all in here!" He said proudly, pointing to the small book-bag that I'd helped him purchase.

I didn't respond verbally; I just nodded.

Without another word we continued to the academy that loomed up ahead of us. I think I was probably more nervous than he was, although I couldn't exactly pinpoint the reason why. I'd made sure he was there. He had everything. He was clean. He was on time.

My job was done and there was nothing for me to be nervous about since that was the case.

When we entered the academy's main yard, I quickly assessed the area as best I could. We weren't the first people there but we were early enough that we weren't the last. As much as I'd wanted to be there early I had been worried that Naruto would get bored if he was forced to stand around and wait for the academy to start. I didn't trust what he might do if he got bored.

Lord Hokage was there and was standing closest to the academy entrance. He was speaking with a small cluster of parents who looked like Hyuuga. It was far enough away that I couldn't see their eyes, so I didn't know for sure, but the pristine robes were a dead giveaway. He appeared to be engaged in his conversation with them but somehow, I knew that he was observing me. It was a feeling I had that I couldn't shake. The teachers appeared to be assembling the ninja-student hopefuls into neat rows as they arrived while their family members were being lead to the opposite side of the yard.

There was a small weight on the hem of my dress.

I looked down.

On our way there, the blond child had been preening with excitement. That excitement had flooded him with a confidence that so far, I hadn't seen in him. Naruto could be stubborn, determined and hard-working. I'd learned he could be very observant...even insightful. But confident? I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him confident before. It had been...pleasant...to have seen him so full of himself when I'd gone to collect him from his apartment.
Now, however, that confidence was gone and replaced with uncertainty.

I expected to see big blue orbs, but he wasn't looking back at me. Instead he was staring at the ground while one hand clenched his book-bag and the other one fisted in the hem of my dress. His shoulders were shaking slightly.

"Naruto…" I said softly before I could stop myself.

Was it the people that were making him so unsure of himself? I hadn't heard any rude remarks yet that could have caused this reaction. So far it seemed like no one besides Lord Third saw us arrive. I swiveled my head quickly to take in my surroundings again. Had I missed something?

"Are you...okay?" I asked as quietly as I could. I didn't want to attract more attention to us then necessary.

He didn't respond at first, but my question seemed to have stopped his shaking. I watched as he stared at the ground for another agonizing moment, then he snapped his head upwards to give me a grin.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He said in an almost chipper tone. "Will you hold my book-bag?"

I was a little unsettled by the sudden shift in mood. He'd gone to quaking in what I had assumed was terror to smiling and behaving chipper. I wasn't sure what to do with that. Clearly, he wasn't really over whatever had been bothering him but...what could I do? Was there anything I could say?

"Yes." I said in a deadpan tone, "I'll hold your book-bag."

He handed it to me and made his way over to the crowd of other children. The chunin was moving the children to stay in rows but as soon as he put one in place, another would move and break formation. He was so distracted he didn't seem to notice when Naruto quietly snuck in to stand with the others. He didn't move even when the chunin did notice him and tossed a glare in his direction.

Naruto shot him a fox-like grin.

"Excuse me, Miss?" A voice caught my attention and my gaze snapped from Naruto to meet the newcomer. A middle-aged chunin with a patient expression was standing there looking at me kindly. "If you're a family member I'm going to have to ask you to wait over there."

He gestured towards the growing mass of parents and various relatives at the opposite side of the yard. I nodded and lightly apologized, casting one last glance at Naruto before moving over to stand in the crowd.

I was short, so the large group of people quickly swallowed me up. I couldn't even see the children from where I was - everyone else was so much taller. I couldn't hear anything beyond the wall of people either. The families of the new academy entrants were mingling and weren't being quiet about it. There was plenty of laughter and surprised exclamations, likely as old teammates who hadn't seen each other in years caught up. Many of the various clans were refraining from doing so but were whispering conspiratorial amongst their fellow clansmen.

Within the depths of the crowd, I caught sight of the Uchiha clan head, whose name escaped me, standing with his arms crossed and a terrifying scowl on his face. His dark onyx eyes were flicking from child to child. It was like he was sizing up competition. It was clear to me he either didn't want to be here or was taking this entirely too seriously. Maybe both.

As I was staring at him, an elbow knocked into my back and I stumbled into the same man I'd just
been observing. I braced for what I thought was an inevitable impact, but he must have caught the movement out of his peripheral vision. Without even looking at me, his hand shot out and grasped my shoulder. He held me steady and put me back on my feet.

"You should watch yourself." He stated absently. I had to give him credit for not blaming me for the almost-collision but he was so rigid it unnerved me. I nodded at him in agreement and after a moment of hesitation turned on my heel. I pushed my way further into the crowd. I wasn't sure where I was going...just further away from the Uchiha clan head would be nice. He made me uncomfortable and I really didn't have an explanation as to why.

"Kiyoko!" I looked around with wide eyes but kept moving.

I could have sworn I heard Yuzuha.

"Kiyoko! Over here!"

That was Yuzuha. I stopped and let my eyes skim the mass of people once more. To my left, I spotted a single pale arm sticking up over the tops of people's heads. I began to shove my way towards it and after some fighting ended up face to face with my favourite Nara.

"I saw the top of your head," Yuzuha began as soon as I emerged, "you were looking a little lost."

"I'm not big on this crowd." I admitted bluntly, keeping my voice low. I doubted what I said would offend anyone, but I had to be careful. I pressed Naruto's tiny book bag to my chest.

"Yeah, it's not how I remembered it being." She grumbled, "then again last time I was to one of these entrance ceremonies I was like...six. When you're young you perceive things differently."

I don't think I could have ignored the crowd no matter how young I was.

"No, you're remembering correctly. It wasn't like this. This time it's because every single clan is represented in this group of entrants." The gruff, off-put voice of Yuzuha's brother Shikaku broke into our conversation. "Every clan head has a kid entering this year. Whenever a clan head's kid enters the academy all sorts of relatives who have no business being here turn up."

I watched as Yuzuha raised an eyebrow at her brother, crossing her arms.

"Just what's that supposed to mean?" Her question was coarse but there was a small smirk tugging at the edges of her mouth.

"Shut it." The Nara clan head was quick to shoot back at his younger sister, his voice becoming an irritated growl, "I didn't mean you."

"Like hell you didn't, Shika." She threw back, raising her voice slightly. It didn't take me long to figure out that it was all an act. Shikaku really hadn't meant her and she knew that. She was messing with him. At first, I didn't understand why she was making such a fuss but it wasn't long before I had my answer.

"What's going on?" Came the sharp voice of the Nara clan matriarch, pushing through the mass of gathered villagers with her hands on her hips. She seemed to have been summoned forth by the bickering between the two siblings.

Despite being of average height and build, Yoshino Nara was an obvious force to be reckoned with. She was a chunin who had retired from active duty several years ago, but she still held the overbearing demeanor of a woman who was used to having orders followed. Most kunoichi were.
Which wasn't a bad thing: actually it was a trait I admired. A book-bag that I assumed belonged to her young son was clenched in one of her hands.

"What did you say?" She questioned her husband harshly.

"I didn't say anything." Shikaku emphasized and while his face remained calm I noticed his eyes darting around for an escape route. He looked at me and I purposefully moved my body, so I was facing away from him, doing my best not to meet his eyes. He was on his own.

"Shikaku just said I had no business being here." Yuzuha nearly talked over Shikaku's lame defense. She was attempting to sound wounded, but I could still hear the amusement in her voice.

Apparently, Yoshino couldn't.

The air was filled with a flurry of nagging as the Nara clan matriarch laid into her husband for his 'rudeness' towards his 'only, loving sister who sacrifices so much to help their family'. She didn't seem to care that they were in public and that she was starting to turn a few heads. I began to get second-hand embarrassment for the man but a quick look at Yuzuha revealed a poorly-suppressed grin. Clearly, I was the only one who felt that way. This went on for a few minutes until Shikaku spotted someone at the other side of the crowd and tried to dismiss himself, which didn't help his situation much.

"Don't walk away from me, Shikaku." The woman snapped at his back and when it became apparent that he was still planning to leave she stomped after him. When both disappeared from sight, Yuzuha snorted, clearly still amused by the incident.

"Why did you do that?" I finally asked once they were out of earshot.

"I can't help myself. Partially it's because I can. They also just make it too easy." She chuckled loudly. "I want to see how long I can get away with starting marital spats between the two of them without being caught. So far, we're on year eight."

I tried to think of an appropriate response but couldn't, so I decided to change the subject instead. Or rather, I decided to revert to the original topic of conversation.

"What exactly did Shikaku mean?" I questioned, looking around at the various people in the crowd. Now that I paid attention, the relatives milling about were mostly clansmen. I had noticed a few clan children, obviously Shikamaru among them, but there weren't a whole lot. The non-clan children present seemed to outnumber them at least six-to-one.

Yuzuha groaned as if she was remembering something irritating.

"I didn't notice until he said something. As much as I hate to admit it - he's right." She shifted her weight and her eyes darted around, "Almost every major clan in the village has one kid in this year's group of entrants. Once more...they're the children of the clan heads."

I still wasn't following. I raised an eyebrow imploringly but didn't say anything. The older woman picked up on my silent question.

"Nosy clansmen." Yuzuha spat, glaring at a Hyuuga who overheard the comment and shot her a look. "The only people invited to attend are immediate family. Random clansmen turn up like counterfeit ryo to ruin the event. They're not here for the kids...they're seizing up the competition."

Seizing up...the competition? My mind wandered back to the Uchiha clan head that I'd almost run into earlier. I recalled the look on his face.
"They're children." I said bluntly.

"Not to them." Yuzuha retorted stiffly and I could tell that she didn't like the thought, "To them they represent the future of the clan. They want reassurance that their future is more secure than that of the others. It's stupid, if you ask me...but it's the way they think."

That's right. I don't know how I had but I'd nearly forgotten how elitest the ninja clans in Konohagakure could be. I forgot how important it was to them that they be better than the others...how important it was to them that they were the elites everyone looked to and followed. Those children would one day become elite ninja that would proudly represent their clan and raise them above the others.

I read between the lines of what Yuzuha had said. She had said 'it's the way they think' but she had really wanted to say, 'it's the way things are'. They weren't deluded. The more I thought about it...it really was the way things were. The Hokage was the most elite ninja in the village and everyone followed the Hokage unflinchingly. The clans that the Hokage belonged too were similarly elevated to a certain status among Konoha's people...civilian and ninja alike. The Senju was a prime example. They were the equivalent of royalty in the village. There was a reason that everyone called Lord First's granddaughter "Princess Tsunade".

The Sarutobi were a small, humble clan that clearly didn't draw attention to themselves, but both the old man and his sons were highly regarded. They were still considered elites and when trends needed to be set the village looked to them. Most importantly: we looked to Lord Hokage for advice and believed he knew what was best for the village. We believed he knew what was best for us all.

*I want to keep him safe and give him a chance to be Naruto Uzumaki. Not Minato Namikaze's son. Just...Naruto Uzumaki. I believe that is what his parents would have wanted." He explained.

"How do you know that's what they would want?" I asked bluntly.

"I don't." He responded simply.

The truth was that, in the end he was just a person and he didn't know any better than the rest of us. He was just the one willing to make the hard decisions and live with the consequences.

I was brought out of my thoughts when a quiet fell over the crowd of assembled adults. At first, I was confused, but I heard Lord Hokage's wizened voice floating over the tops of their heads. I could barely make out what he was saying and I couldn't see over the mass of bodies in front of me. I suddenly found myself wondering about Naruto and tried to stand on my toes to check on him. I tried adjusting my position a few different ways, which drew Yuzuha's attention, but still couldn't see any of the children.

"What's wrong?" Yuzuha bent down slightly and whispered.

"I can't see." I confessed as quietly as I could, not wanting to disturb the other spectators. I set aside my pride and cast a sidelong glance at the Nara woman. "What's Naruto doing?"

She raised herself up as far as she could and peered out over the crowd. She dropped down a few seconds later.

"He's fidgeting next to Shikamaru and glaring at Lord-Talks-Too-Much." She said with poorly concealed amusement. I felt my mouth tighten in disapproval at the thought. There was a part of me that wanted Naruto to...I don't know...make a good impression under the harsh scrutiny of all these clansmen. I know I shouldn't have thought that it mattered but for some reason I did.
Noticing that I didn't find it humorous, Yuzuha was quick to dismiss my concerns with a wave of her hand. "Calm down, Kiyoko. He's not the only one...they're seven. They're all moving a little. Not to mention if they gave out awards for the most long-winded Lord Third would definitely win first prize."

A shushing noise came from somewhere behind us and Yuzuha waggled her eyebrows at me, clearly undaunted by the wordless scolding. I, however, was less shameless and made a point of staring at the ground for the rest of the speech.

"My congratulations to all of you! You have a lot of hard work ahead of you as you walk the path of the shinobi but I expect great things. I know you will do Konohagakure proud." Lord Third concluded and while I couldn't see him I assumed he looked rather pleased.

Almost as soon as he stopped the crowd exploded outward as parents moved towards their children. Those that I had established as the 'nosy clansmen' made an immediate B-line for the gate. Apparently, anything that happened after the actual ceremony didn't appeal to them. I glanced at Yuzuha and came to the unspoken conclusion that we should stand there until most of the people dispersed.

We were there a few minutes, watching the bodies thin out, when Shikaku's familiar voice reached through the bustle.

"Yuzuha, let's go. If we don't start moving now you won't get to embarrass Shikamaru before they take him inside." I craned my neck as the unashamed Nara clan head forced his way between two loitering parents. 'Embarrass Shikamaru'...he certainly did have his little sister's number, didn't he? He was slouching slightly and his hands were in his pockets, with his typical despondent look.

Choza Akimichi wasn't far behind him and they were accompanied by a man that, judging by his blond hair, was the Yamanaka clan head. I'd never met the man before but even I, a civilian, knew about the famed 'Ino-Shika-Cho' formation. I knew the current generation consisted entirely of the clan heads, so it made sense that it was Inoichi Yamanaka who was with them.

"Where's Yoshino?" The older woman asked, shifting her weight to a different foot and crossing her arms as she stared at the three men.

"She got distracted talking to Mei." Choza was the one to respond with a light-hearted chuckle, "If we wait for those two we'll be stuck here until sunset!"

Well, we certainly couldn't do that. I still needed to present myself at work.

Not that I knew what I would be doing at CAO from this day going forward. With Naruto at school all day my home-visits were now going to be shorter and take place first thing in the morning. Obviously, my home-visit today had been when I'd gone to pick him up. Until now, Naruto had been the only child in my caseload. This was partially because making sure he was taken care of was already a full-time job and partially because Moemi had still, to this day, neglected to get me formal training. Maybe now I'd get trained as a caseworker and start taking on other cases.

"Come with us, Kiyoko." Yuzuha's voice invaded my thoughts. "This crowd is still pretty thick and Shikaku has a point. We don't want to take too long."

I nodded and moved with the group, watching with quiet fascination as the people in the yard seemed to bend to the unspoken will of the three jonin. As soon as they got within a few feet of someone, that person would move away from them - as if they sensed them coming. The crowd just parted for them.
I was still wondering at this as we finally came upon where Shikamaru was standing with a little, brown haired, rosy-cheeked boy that judging by his size was an Akimichi. Inoichi silently dismissed himself and made his way over to a brown-haired woman who was speaking intently with a little, blonde girl. Her big blue eyes were wide while she nodded intently at whatever the woman, who I assumed was her mother, told her.

I searched for Naruto and my eyes found him standing by himself near the edge of the yard, watching the goings on with a sullen expression.

There was a heavy feeling in my chest that I quickly dismissed.

I nodded a good-bye to Yuzuha, who acknowledged me silently before stooping to her nephew's eye-level. I couldn't help but watch as she proceeded to take both her hands, cup them on either side of his face and squish his cheeks together. A grin slowly crept onto her face as she did it, followed slowly by a trickle of maniacal laughter. I had to resist rolling my eyes at the woman's odd need to terrorize the men in her life, no matter the age. The longer I spent with Yuzuha the more aware I became of her mischievous side. She really could be too much sometimes.

Done watching the Nara family, I turned and made my way over to where Naruto was standing. He didn't notice me at first and unsure what to do I hovered next to him for a moment. He appeared startled when he finally did notice me standing there.

I silently handed him his small book-bag and he accepted it without a word. Silence lapsed as we stood there for a few moments. Looking out over the crowd of doting parents I felt obligated to say...something. Anything.

"Did you enjoy the ceremony?" I asked blankly after a moment, doing my best to hide how unsure I was.

"It was boring. That old man talks to much." Naruto shot back, visibly grumpy at the remembrance. Across the yard, I could have sworn I saw Lord Hokage sneeze.

Not for the first time I thought about correcting the boy for the disrespectful way he spoke about Lord Third. I thought about Yuzuha calling him 'Lord Talks-Too-Much' and realized that it would be hypocritical to scold him. I hadn't said anything to her and she was a grown woman who should have known better. I supposed that was also the reason I should say something to him...I didn't want him to end up like Yuzuha.

Still, I decided to leave it. Besides, I think the old man secretly liked the blonde giving him some cheek every now and then. There weren't many others in the village who had the guts to do so. I certainly didn't.

"Well," I tried to think of something neutral to say, "that's a matter of perspective."

The boy was right, but I had to be the adult here.

We fell silent again and I watched the top of the blonde's head as he went back to surveying the other children. His head swiveled left first, then right, lingering on a few children. Their parents were clapping their shoulders or patting them on the head. Some were being praised, others being scolded. Some were making eager conversation with their parents while others were blushing bright red as their parents (or aunts in some cases) embarrassed them. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could almost feel the lonely aura that had developed since I'd left him earlier.

They were all getting one thing that Naruto wasn't: attention.
It was a type of attention that I just couldn't give him. It wouldn't be appropriate and I... didn't know how. It was a type of parental... nurturing... that I hadn't felt myself since before my father died. Even then such a sentiment had been sparse in the Shiranui household. My father was an elite shinobi who was gone for extended periods of time and just wasn't available to nurture his children. Love us? Yes. He loved us and that was obvious. He just didn't nurture us.

I never thought I'd have children, but I had a feeling that if I did it would take practice for me to learn to nurture them in the way I was currently observing.

"Miss Shiranui," I heard Naruto's tiny voice come from below and felt the familiar weight on the hem of my skirt as he gripped it. That had become a habit of his when he needed reassurance or felt insecure. "Why don't I have parents? Where are they?"

I paused for a moment as my heart leapt into my throat and I felt my spine stiffen at the sudden question. I swallowed hard and willed myself to investigate the large blue orbs that were staring back at me pleadingly.

I forced myself to keep my face a calm mask and did have to gather my thoughts for a moment...otherwise I wouldn't have been able to look him in the eye.

"I don't know." I confessed, struggling to make my voice as genuine as possible. It was, partially, the truth. Just because I knew who his parents were didn't mean I knew why he didn't have them.

While I knew about the fate of Lord Fourth same as anyone else, I genuinely had no idea about the kid's mother or what had happened to her. I assumed she had passed away...although if that was the case I had no idea how.

One day, Naruto would need to know the truth about his parents.

One day, he would be ready, and he would be old enough to understand.

At least, for Lord Third's sake, I hoped so because even I barely understood his reasoning and a secret so monumental was something he'd be expected to answer for.

What I knew for sure was that right now, this time and place, was the wrong time for Naruto to know about his parents. Even regarding the future I still debated with whether or not I was the appropriate person to tell him. I really felt like I shouldn't but...if I didn't who would? What if Lord Third was dead? Would Yuzuha do it or someone else I was overlooking? Part of me was hoping he would get curious and find the clues on his own so I wouldn't have to worry about it.

For now...I would have to give him vague answers and tell him half-truths. I felt dirty for the deception, but I couldn't tell him the truth.

He looked downtrodden at the response and returned to staring at the ground.

I couldn't leave it like this. I could do better.

"Naruto," I began and hesitated slightly before continuing, "I want to tell you something important and I want you to remember it."

I waited for his eyes to meet mine again before I continued.

"Parents are a part of who you are as a person...but they're not the most important part. I know what it's like not to have them...it can be lonely. But the most important thing to remember is that you don't need anyone else to become a person worthy of acknowledgement. You have that potential all on
your own. One day...they'll pay attention." I finished softly.

When Lord Hokage had implemented the laws that kept the nature of Naruto's condition a poorly kept secret and made the open discussion of him in public illegal, he had inadvertently done the boy a disservice. When people weren't allowed to talk about him that had slowly become people refusing to talk to him. Which then evolved into ignoring his presence entirely or staring at him with that cold look that did a poor job of concealing their fear.

While I wasn't so naive as to openly compare myself to Naruto, I suppose I did to an extent know what it felt like. Not how it felt to be purposefully ignored but...overlooked. Atsuko had always been the outgoing, open twin with the vibrant personality that everyone remembered. Even now years after she had left, those who weren't aware of her leaving would approach me in the grocery store or at the street. They would call me Atsuko and ask me how I'd been, reminisce about things I wasn't there for. It never seemed to occur to people that I might not be Atsuko, that I might be Kiyoko. Because...I don't think anyone who had ever met Atsuko remembered me. They just remembered her.

I know I sounded bitter but in truth I really wasn't. I was happy with the way I was and I wouldn't change anything about myself or how I lived. But that didn't mean that every now and then, I didn't think about how nice it would be for someone to remember me. Just me. Not her. Me. In most company, when Atsuko was there it was like Kiyoko wasn't.

I faded away and I wasn't...acknowledged.

As much as I wished he did have them, I wanted him to realize that he didn't need parents or anyone else to become someone that could be acknowledged. He could do that all on his own.

He returned my sentiment with a thoughtful expression before he appeared to gather himself. He didn't say anything to me. He just squared his tiny shoulders and began marching towards the school, where the other children were beginning to gather around their new sensei. The chunin were shouting something that was unintelligible at this distance but it appeared they were dividing the children up into the different classes.

Naruto took a few steps before he stopped and looked back at me.

"Miss Shiranui, will you..." He seemed to hesitate and tumble over his words slightly, "will you be here to walk home with me? This afternoon, I mean."

It surprised me a little and I gauged the question carefully.

"Yes."

I heard the aged voice of the Third drift from behind me. I should have felt startled by his sudden appearance but I after my short conversation with Naruto I was feeling emotionally drained. I just didn't have the energy. "It almost makes me want to consider those false adoption requests of yours."

I peered at him out of the corner of my eye, trying to figure out whether the old man was serious. Thankfully, I only saw a mischievous glint in his eyes and humor in his expression.

"No thank you." I responded tartly. I wasn't in a joking mood and I certainly didn't want to joke about Naruto.
"I was curious to see what you would say to him...I see I was right to entrust you with Naruto's heart." I couldn't help but cross my arms and raise an eyebrow at what he had said.

"You heard him?" I asked and wondered at why he hadn't intervened. Lord Hokage showing up might have distracted the kid from his question and I probably could have avoided answering it.

"Yes, it was difficult not to. I admit I was concerned about today. So far, the only children Naruto has been interacting with have been other orphans. He hasn't yet had the opportunity to compare himself to others who are more fortunate than he is. I was concerned about how he might behave." The Third explained to me in a gentle tone.

I glanced across at the entrance where Naruto was allowing himself to be put into a row of children. He wasn't fussing or complaining. He wasn't giving the sensei a hard time.

"I think he's behaving well enough." I admitted. From what I could see he appeared to be just as well-behaved as the other children.

"He is. He has a natural, pure heart and I'm glad for it." The old man replied, a light chuckle lacing his tone.

I was quiet for a moment before I spoke.

"I have a feeling you didn't come over here just to tease me about Naruto." I was blunt about my phrasing and I worried that I'd gone too far when Lord Third snapped his sharpened eyes to meet mine.

"You're quite right." He told me seeming to lose his humor, "I have to speak with you in my office immediately."

XxX

I sat quietly in the guest chair across from Lord Hokage's desk, crossing my ankles and doing my best to keep my face passive. The old man was sitting at his desk, his elbows propped up and his fingers tented. I couldn't see his eyes beyond the rim of his hat, but he'd been still for so long I wouldn't be surprised if he'd taken a nap. Two ANBU loomed stoically on either side of his desk.

The Elder Council had been present when we'd first arrived in his office and they'd spent several minutes whispering to Lord Hokage and nodding. They seemed to have reached a decision or at least a compromise because when they left they had varying degrees of pleased expressions. That actually...shocked me a bit because I hadn't realized they were able to do anything beyond scowl.

The Hokage had then gestured for me to sit down before sitting himself and informing me that we were going to wait for The Director to arrive. He seemed keen not to discuss what he had brought me there for until she arrived, so I was left to wonder in silence. I'd been fine at first, but I was beginning to grow uncomfortable with the constant idleness.

Nearly an hour later and she still hadn't shown up.

I was just getting the courage to ask Lord Hokage if we should begin without The Director, when the door slammed open and the woman bolted in. She appeared mildly flustered - as if the summons had been sudden.

"I apologize for the delay, Lord Hokage." she bowed as she stumbled to stand in front of the desk. I could still see her chest heaving from her obvious sprint.
The Hokage raised his head to look at her evenly but said nothing in response. Instead he pulled his pipe out of his sleeve and began to neatly stuff it with tobacco. The other woman and I watched quietly as he finally finished and lit it, placing the end in his mouth. He puffed a few times.

When he had finished he looked at The Director before his gaze moved and settled on me.

"Miss Shiranui," He began slowly, "as I'm sure you're aware your workload is about to change."

He held up a hand to stop me from interrupting as I had been about to do. He knew the question that was on my mind. Was I still going to be responsible for Naruto?

"Not to worry," He reassured me gently, "you will remain Naruto's caseworker. After much deliberation it has been decided that you are still the best suited individual for the position. However, as Naruto ages and continues in school he will require less from you. You'll find yourself available at the Civil Affairs Office more often."

He puffed on his pipe a few more times. I waited patiently for him to continue as I was sure he would. He did not disappoint.

"I've discussed the different possibilities as to where you should be placed at length with the various department heads and The Director." His eyes flicked briefly to The Director, who nodded as if confirming something. "Yuzuha Nara was eager to have you back in Immigration and The Director had several other departments express interest in your being assigned to them. However, The Director has found a position in the office that needs filling immediately and she believes you would be a suitable candidate."

He nodded at The Director who seemed to take that as her queue and began speaking hurriedly.

"I have identified a long-standing need within our system for a liaison of sorts." She stated quickly. "It's been apparent since before I was appointed as The Director, but it was overlooked mostly because we were managing and there were more pressing things to attend."

"Liaison?" I questioned, failing to keep the curiosity from my voice.

"Ninja relations, mostly." She paused and seemed to give herself a moment to breathe. I felt like she was beginning to tell me a half-finished story because I felt like I was missing something.

"I'm sorry, Director," I told her as politely as I could, "I'm not sure I understand."

She took a breath and seemed to collect herself.

"Ninja Clans," She started, "are some of the office's most frequent customers. The clans own most of the land, businesses, homes and they are taxed the heaviest. While some clansmen prefer to conduct their own business, they'll sometimes 'batch' all their paperwork and hand it over to the clan head. The clan heads would spend most of their lives standing in the office if we weren't willing to...make some compromises. A long time ago, the decision was made to allow them to drop their batches of paperwork off with The Director. The Director then sees to it that everything is distributed to the right departments and processed. Some of them took advantage of the offer but others still preferred to do their own."

I nodded. It made sense when she put it like that. Why shouldn't they make things easier for their biggest customers? Having someone with an internal knowledge of the system would also make processing the paperwork more efficient for everyone involved. It would reduce the strain on the clan heads and the office.
"When I implemented The Security and Emergency Initiative, I thought I had accounted for all possible risks. Admittedly, I hadn't realized that it would affect such a process." She told me, almost looking embarrassed.

"But it did." I returned bluntly.

She sighed.

"Civilians and ninja alike can no longer go to the Department they want to submit documents to. Instead, they must wait on the first floor and submit there or make appointments to have someone from that department meet with them. For this reason, more clansmen have begun sending their paperwork to the clan heads to be batched."

I think I was following now.

"...and the clan heads are now more inclined to leave the work with you for that same reason." I finished for her.

"Yes, I see now you're beginning to understand." She confirmed, fidgeting with the sleeves of her blazer while her face twisted into a scowl. "Lately I've been so buried under paperwork from the ninja clans I've failed to keep up with my many other responsibilities."

"It seems processing this documentation has become a full-time position." The Hokage suddenly picked up the conversation, "So, I approved The Director's request to generate a new position for someone to handle such matters."

So... I was being transferred to…?

"Will I be classified as working for Shared Services?" I asked finally, secretly dreading the answer. It was the only department I could think of that type of work could be categorized as and I really didn't want to work for Shared Services.

"Well...to be honest you don't belong to any one department. It's more of an... individual position. Like, well, like mine." The Director struggled to find the right words to explain. "You'll be the CAO's only 'Shinobi Relations Liaison'."

Shinobi Relations Liaison. That was an awful fancy title for someone who was just doing the 'overflow' work that technically belonged to the director.

"Moving forward all requests for missions from the office will be approved by the department head and then will be passed to you. I trust you to approve them appropriately. It's more...secure that way." It sounded like additional paperwork to me. Working in Immigration we often had to request D or even C rank missions during the applicant screening process. I had a handful of cases where they claimed to have no prior criminal involvement and a ninja investigation that I'd requested revealed otherwise. I knew there were a few other departments that requested missions, but I couldn't think of which ones. "You may also, on occasion, mediate disputes between ninja and CAO employees. That happens from time to time when dealing with the veterans who've been denied - in that case you'd be working with the Social Services Department." The Director told me.

Me? Mediate disputes? I wasn't big on confrontation.

"I also may send ninja that are investigating something on my behalf to you, so they can pull records." The Hokage put in, puffing on his pipe a bit more, "I've been told when they're allowed to look on their own they tend to make a mess."
He shot a meaningful look at The Director whose cheeks went a little rosy. I assumed she had at one point made a comment or a complaint about ninja coming for records and leaving the office disheveled. Not that I blamed her. I remembered an incident with a team of ninja were conducting a records investigation for Lord Hokage while I was in Immigration. They seemed to leave everything they touched in a disorganized mess and if it weren't for Yuzuha following them around the department, stuffing things back in their proper place, we wouldn't have ever been able to find any of those documents.

"I know it sounds like a lot of work." The Director empathized, "but the truth is the only thing we mentioned that happens consistently is the clan paperwork. The other tasks only happen on occasion. It was already discussed at length whether you would still be able to manage Uzumaki's caseload and we're confident you can do both."

I don't know why they were trying to sell me the position. It was obvious to me that, just like the last time I'd changed positions, I didn't really have a choice.

I fixed my hard gaze on The Hokage whose aged, flinty eyes were peering at me with intrigue.

"When do I start?" I asked bluntly.

"Right now."

XxX

Lord Hokage hadn't been kidding when he said 'right now'. I'd been quickly ushered into a handshake with The Director before she practically pulled me from the room, saying something about my 'office'. I hadn't even realized that I would get an office but apparently, I did.

When she led me into the hallway I expected her to take me to the stairs to head downward, but instead she took an immediate right. We didn't walk very long before we came upon a narrow, slightly weathered door. It had small chips, holes and markings across its oak surface which indicated to me that it had experienced decades of kunai abuse. I had my suspicions it predated the building. Maybe it was a second-hand door.

When we walked in I was treated to the sight of a small, windowless room with a dim hanging light. There was an L-shaped desk near the back corner and a few shelves on the wall which were all empty. There was a filing cabinet near the back of the room, though I had my suspicions it was empty. This office was bigger than Yuzuha's but it was also...darker. It seemed to close in on itself. While the desk surface and the shelves were clear, there were at least 10 brown boxes on the floor.

"These are the batched clan submissions for this month...or at least the ones I didn't finish." The Director told me with a slightly sheepish tone. "I managed to get the Hyuuga, the Inuzuka and the Nara done."

I was quiet for a moment as I stared at the overwhelming mountain of boxes. No wonder the woman had been overwhelmed. Doing all this, helping pass legislation, negotiating trade relationships, meeting with Lord Hokage and overseeing the entire CAO? I was surprised the woman was still standing.

"Here's the key to this office and your new privilege chart." the woman said passing me the key and a new badge. This badge was identical to my own but when you flipped it over the privilege chart showed unrestricted access to the CAO and the fifth Floor during daytime hours. I un-clipped my current badge and handed it to her, replacing it with the new one. "I also took the liberty of bringing the items from your desk up here."
Sure enough, upon closer inspection my writing utensils and ink were laid neatly on the surface of the desk. My little maneki-neko stared at me frozenly from a position near the edge of the desk and next to it was a tiny glass bowl that I'd been using to keep the collection of rocks Naruto had given me.

Great, another incident where the office witnessed someone packing up my desk. I wonder how many people thought I'd been fired.

"So... how do I do this?" I finally asked her, gesturing to the boxes.

"Well," She began, "most of this just needs to be sorted and delivered to the correct department to be filed appropriately. If something is being commissioned, like a business license, you need to make sure it's done and that it makes it back into your hands. That's the hardest part...tracking everything so that when the clan head comes back you can safely say everything has been done."

"Have you been...tracking everything?" I questioned, remembering that she'd mentioned she already had done some of it.

"Don't worry about the Hyuuga, Inuzuka and Nara this month." The Director said, "I'll meet with their heads once everything comes back to me. Next month they're all yours."

"Anything else I should be aware of?" I was aware my tone was rather blunt, but I was caught between being eager to start and having no idea where to begin.

"Try to look for obvious errors. If you see something glaringly obvious like a missing signature or something hold onto it and maybe contact the clan head about it. It's better than wasting everyone's time by waiting for it to bounce back or get it misfiled." She advised.

I nodded. Sound advice.

We stood in silence for a few more moments before The Director broke it.

"I'm downstairs in my office if you need me. Don't hesitate to ask if you have a question." She told me as she turned to leave. I listened as she began to walk away but suddenly I thought of something.

"Director," I called out before she could leave, "do you think I could get that door taken off? It's very...dark and enclosed in here."

I heard the woman's hesitation.

"I really wouldn't," she cautioned, "that door is going to be your best defense come rookie genin season. I mean...you are on the Fifth Floor."

Ah, that's right. I was in ninja territory wasn't I? Arrant kunai from rookie genin was a very real possibility. Probably better the door then me.

"Not to mention the clan heads may want to discuss private matters with you. It would be best to have a door you could close." She said almost off-handedly, still probably thinking more about the kunai then the privacy of the clan heads.

"I understand." I conceded.

"But...you know..." The Director's voice finally said, surprising me, "there's nothing wrong with leaving it propped open if you're comfortable with it. Just make sure you lock the door when you're not here and you keep the contents of the files out of plain sight."
I was relieved that she gave me something to work with. Unlike Yuzuha's office, this one was far from cozy and I wanted to get some fresh air inside if I could. This office had a dark atmosphere to it...like someone had been killed here. Well, this was the fifth floor. Plenty of people had probably been killed here.

Suppressing that dark thought I thanked The Director for her guidance and watched as she left, leaving the door propped open behind her.

I looked at the clock that had been placed on the wall over the door frame and made note of the time, as well as what time I should be at the academy to get Naruto.

I had several hours so I could probably at least put a dent in this mountain of paperwork before then.

XxX

I paused and looked up at the clock, rubbing my tired eyes. The academy would be ending in twenty minutes so now was a good time to call it quits.

I'd managed to distribute the Yamanaka paperwork apart from a few documents I held back because they were missing some signatures. I had quickly made use of my new filing cabinet and was organizing everything by clan. So far, I only had sections for documents that needed to be 'reviewed' or corrected since I had distributed the paperwork to the correct departments as soon as possible. I'd had to create an itemized list for each clan of which documents to keep track of, what I'd reviewed and what was sent for filing or commissioning. I was currently a few files into the Akimichi documents when I finally decided to look at the clock.

Almost an entire day had passed, and I'd only managed to distribute one clan.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. I couldn't help but think that there had to be something I could do or change to make this whole thing more...efficient. I looked at my scribbled attempt at tracking the documents. The tracking method was a good place to start. There had to be something I could do.

I shook my head and stood up, stretching eagerly.

That could wait though. The end of the day had come, and I had told a certain blonde demon-container that I was going to walk him home from the academy.
The Right Tool For The Job

Chapter Notes

Hey! I'm going to try and keep this as short as possible everyone.

First; This is it...the last chapter before the big reveal! I reviewed the outline of Civil Affairs and the 6 chapter estimate I gave was way off. Kiyoko's mystery pairing will be revealed at the end of the next chapter so now is the last chance to vote in the poll! The poll is available on my FF profile or, if you use a mobile device, there's an alternate Surveymonkey version which I've posted on my below.

Second; While Civil Affairs won't be ending for some time, I have several different spin-offs in progress that take place in the Civil Affairs Narutoverse. Problem is, I can't decide which one I will start posting first. I have it narrowed down to a 4-way tie. So, I've decided to extend the question to my readers in the form of a survey that provides overviews of the 4 potential spin-offs. You can give them an individual star rating and then rank them most favourite to least favourite.

You don't need to respond but I'd honestly appreciate the help in picking one. I genuinely have the same amount of love for all of them so I want to see which one is your favourite. If you wouldn't mind taking the time, I'd appreciate your feedback via the survey.

Kiyoko's Lover Poll: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CZ6HTCM

Spin-Off Survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MSPJFWR

I hope you enjoy the chapter and, as always, thank you for all your support!

IMPORTANT CHAPTER WARNING: Implied sexual content with questionable consent. Unintentional drug use.

Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 16 -<>- The Right Tool For The Job

"This has to stop." I told the old man with a deadpan expression. I was standing in the middle of Lord Third's nearly empty office.

Over the last week I'd had an increasingly hard time making arrangements to speak with him, so when I'd passed him in the hall I'd grabbed the opportunity and followed him right into his office. I was currently trying and failing to ignore the fact that I had Nara Clan paperwork piled up and spilling out of my arms. I had to stand funny to stop the entire pile from falling out onto the ground. Even though it was just Lord Hokage and his two ANBU guards in the room I didn't want to risk exposing any of the documents that had been entrusted to me. I would consider it a privacy breach if that happened.

Lord Third responded with a look that told me he realized that despite my dispassionate voice I was very serious. That look also showed that he agreed and I didn't have to convince him.

Those had been the first words out of my mouth once the office door closed behind us but it was
clear the old man knew what I was talking about. He had ANBU following Naruto nearly all the
time so there was no way he didn't notice the same thing I had.

It was April 17th 1462. Naruto was eight and had just started his second year at the academy. I was
eighteen, unsurprisingly I forgot about my birthday again, and I had spent the last year buried under
paperwork. Tamaki and Ibiki finally got engaged and later married in a small, tasteful ceremony.
Ironically, Registrations screwed up Tamaki's name change three times but after much struggle she
formally became 'Mrs. Tamaki Morino'. Genma obtained and then lost a girlfriend which happened
so quickly that I didn't even get to learn her name. I was sure he'd said it but I hadn't met her so I
forgot it. What else happened?

Oh, yeah.

The Uchiha Clan was massacred in February.

The entire situation was awful but commissioning the death certificates was considered 'Ninja Clan'
business...therefore my business. Which made it even more awful. As the Shinobi Relations Liaison
it had fallen to me to officiate all of the Uchiha clan's death certificates. Commissioning death
certificates was a grim task but spending an entire day writing up the certificates, cross-referencing
with the doctor to make sure their death was confirmed and then boxing those certificates up for
storage was...emotionally exhausting. The entire Uchiha Clan now amounted to nothing more than a
box full of certificates in the archives. It was...morbid.

By the time I finished the last one I'd felt tainted. As if I'd been steeped in some dark energy the
entire time.

As a result of my new position I'd been engaged in meetings with Fugaku Uchiha, the late clan head,
several times over the last year. He was just as rigid as I had remembered and even though I didn't
mind a certain level of distance in people...even I found his demeanor to be a bit much. He was too
passive. Too harsh. Too cold. I suppose with my straight-laced expressions I was hypocritical for
thinking that. I couldn't help it though. It took a lot of effort for someone to genuinely get on my
nerves. Somehow, Fugaku Uchiha had managed it.

One of the things I'd designed to make my job more manageable and improve my efficiency was
come up with a new way to track the documents. I designed a spreadsheet that could be easily filled
out to organize the information on the clan submissions. This would in turn make tracking them
easier. It would include the type of document, the date requested, the name of the clansmen and then
a 'filing information' section where I could state whether it was filed or returned to the clan. I could
also put the file number there to make it easier to find should it be requested.

It was a great idea but it had proven to be more difficult to implement then I'd initially thought. At
first, I tried to review the documents and fill the sheet out simultaneously. However, reviewing the
documents was a time consuming process. By the time I finished looking over one document I'd
gotten distracted and forgot to write it down. Numerous documents later, I'd realized what I'd done.
Then I had to backtrack and try to figure out which documents I'd forgotten to write down...not to
mention where I'd put them. I ended up misplacing a few documents which I was able to recover.

I soon realized that with the way my brain worked, I just couldn't do it that way. So, I tried
considering other methods. I could go through each batch of documents first, without reviewing
them, and fill out the spreadsheet. Then once the spreadsheet was done I could go through the batch
a second time and review them. It would keep everything organized but it would make the process
two times longer than it had to be.

I didn't want to give up on the spreadsheet though so I wracked my brain to try and figure out how I
could make it work.

Then it occurred to me.

Every single document passed through the clan head's hands at least once before it was put in the box of batched documents to be delivered to me. Why not have them fill the spreadsheet out as the submissions came in the first time? I could have Shared Services create plenty of pre-made duplicates so that all they'd have to do would be to fill it out. Other than gathering the documents and delivering them, the clan heads didn't have much involvement in the process so it wasn't like it was a bunch of extra work for them.

I had two meetings per-month with each clan head. Which gave me the opportunity to present the idea to them in a neutral environment. It went better than I expected. Choza Akimichi, Inoichi Yamanaka and Tsume Inuzuka agreed to try out the new process almost indifferently. I had a feeling that as long as the work was getting done they were happy and they didn't mind taking on such a simple task. Shibi Aburame, Shikaku Nara and - to my surprise - Hiashi Hyuuga all seemed enthusiastic about the newly proposed system. Well, it was difficult to tell since none of them were openly expressive individuals but they seemed a bit more eager to try the idea than the others.

Fugaku Uchiha was the only one who gave me a hard time about it. I tried to reason with him as politely as I could until I eventually realized that there was no reasoning with him. He told me that it was my job to do it and I should do it without complaint or reservation. It was his belief that things worked just fine the way they were and they didn't need to change. It was an argument rooted in deep-seated pride and stubbornness. It was an argument that had no bearing on fact and therefore could not be combated with fact.

So, I was stuck doing the Uchiha paperwork the hard way at least until I could figure out a way to convince him. It was morbid but when you thought about it, Fugaku had gotten his way. I wouldn't have to change the way I did his clan's paperwork...after I finished commissioning the death certificates and filing away their property deeds...I would never have to deal with Uchiha paperwork again.

Yes, Fugaku and I didn't exactly see eye-to-eye but I was very saddened to hear that he'd been killed...by his own heir no less.

The Uchiha were officially off the clan roster in general. There was only one of them left, well only one that wasn't a criminal. Legally they weren't classified as a ninja clan anymore. A formal hearing consisting of The Director, Lord Hokage and the Elder Council determined that moving forward, the Uchiha family was just that. A family. They no longer had clan status - at least not by the village's standards. I had no doubts they would still be referred to as a clan by everyone but officially they weren't.

I didn't understand the laws or intricacies as to why going forward the Uchiha would no longer be considered a clan but I assumed it likely had something to do with numbers. They only had two known members; one of which was currently a civilian child and the other was a mass murderer. I knew that others, like the Sarutobi Clan which only had five members, still maintained their clan status despite their small size so I knew there must be more to it. In the end though that was ninja business and therefore none of mine.

Still, it was a shame.

Sasuke Uchiha, a young boy Naruto's age, was the only survivor of the once proud clan. Considering his age and his circumstances, after he'd recovered from his catatonic state in the hospital, he was made a ward of Konohagakure. I'd convinced The Director and Moemi to consider
giving his casefile to Rumi Ichiya who I personally felt would be a good fit. Unlike me, she was nurturing and could still somehow manage a professional demeanor. Unfortunately the council had ruled that with the exception of the clan's main estate, which had been determined to be Sasuke's inheritance, the village would take possession of the Uchiha clan compound. I wasn't sure why they bothered. No one would ever want to buy the land so they weren't going to be able to profit off of it.

Then again, neither would Sasuke. He'd probably never be able to live there again and if he tried to sell it he'd run into the same problem as the council. No one wanted to buy tainted land. No one wanted to live in a murder-house...let alone in an entire district full of murder-houses. I wasn't sure what the council planned to do or whether they had any plans at all. Frankly, I didn't really care either. Once I officiated the deed transfer between the now deceased Uchiha clan head and the village, that part of my job was done.

The massacre had me drowning in documentation from dusk until dawn for the last two months. When I finally came up for air, I'd noticed a change in Naruto that I did not like. I also had no idea, at first, what could possibly be causing the change of behaviour. After some puzzling I had figured it out and I was not happy.

Lord Third knew exactly what I was talking about and for that reason I continued into the rest of what I wanted to say.

"I had to drag Naruto to the academy for the last three weeks. He doesn't want to go and he wasn't like that before. He won't tell me why. I went by his apartment to get him this morning and he was already gone. When I went to the academy he wasn't there either." I told him quickly, fidgeting under the weight of my paperwork as I did so. I wasn't typically like this. I had the urge to throw my hands up over my head in fury and exasperation.

"He never used to hate going to school...in fact he even enjoyed it. What's changed?" I was aware my voice was gradually rising and I must have looked thunderous. I had been bottling in my frustration for awhile and I was ready to snap. I wasn't infallible, even I had a breaking point.

"It's the staff at the academy...isn't it?" I questioned harshly when The Hokage took too long to respond.

During my rant the old man had taken out his pipe and stuffed it with tobacco. He was puffing it with a thoughtful expression. After a few minutes of tense silence, he sighed.

"I had been hoping to resolve this before you noticed...I hadn't wanted to concern you. After all, the problem isn't material nor are they things you could control. The problem isn't with the things that are your responsibility." He puffed on his pipe again before continuing, "This problem stems from the ninja academy...which is my responsibility."

I allowed myself to simmer and fought my expression back into its usual passive mask.

"Naruto is my responsibility." I stated bluntly, "If it affects him then it is my concern."

He chuckled lightly, although I don't think it was out of humor. I certainly didn't find this funny.

"As much as I admire it, Kiyoko," Lord Third started, "this is something even your determination can't fix. At least not on its own."

"Then let me use it to help." I said, shuffling forward to stand a little bit closer to his desk. "How can I help?"

The old man was silent for another few seconds and he puffed on his pipe thoughtfully. To my
surprise, he waved his arm towards me and one of his ANBU guards moved forward. He or she, it was difficult to tell, gently took the stack of Nara Clan paperwork from my arms. Responding to an unspoken order, the guard nodded at The Hokage and then moved towards the exit with the paperwork. Somehow, the old man had given the order to have the paperwork returned to my office. I was simultaneously relieved and concerned.

Relieved because I didn't have to hold them anymore and concerned because ninja were notorious for having no respect for the organization of paperwork. My luck they'd just drop it on the floor once they got to my office or let the stack topple over.

"Please be careful," I caught myself saying almost involuntarily to the ANBU's back, "I just put those in the right order."

If they heard me they didn't acknowledge it and I watched helplessly as the door slammed behind them.

"Please sit, Kiyoko." Lord Third said, gesturing to the chair he kept for guests. I silently conceded and moved to sit down. I subconsciously flexed my arms a few times which were a little sore from holding the mountain of documents for so long. When I was finally situated across from him, I crossed my legs and leaned back in the chair so I could easily look him in the eye.

"What exactly is going on?" I was ashamed to admit that there was clearly something going on with Naruto that I didn't know about or at least there was something I didn't fully understand.

With my new position and the massacre of the Uchiha clan, I had been finding it difficult to devote the same amount of time to Naruto. I still managed my visits in the morning but they were short. Sometimes I missed a day. Sometimes I couldn't walk Naruto to school because I was needed at the office first thing: Hiashi Hyuuga was very insistent about meeting with me as early as possible. I hadn't been there for Naruto as much as I should have been. There was no excuse for it.

"Naruto has been having some difficulty with school." He stated simply.

I thought on that briefly before I responded.

"Well, we knew he'd be behind a little. Is it math or is the learning material above his reading level? I could always hire another tutor...with your permission, of course."

That wouldn't be an easy task but I was willing to try. Himari had recently obtained a position working at Koba Academy, our alma mater, where she was relishing the chance to shape the minds of the young women there. She really was in her element and it was a good job for her. Unfortunately that meant she no longer had the time to be Naruto's tutor. So I would have to start from scratch.

"No," Lord Hokage responded, "when they manage to test him his math and reading skills are satisfactory."

"I don't understand what you mean then, Lord Third." I told him. I really didn't understand. He was having trouble at school but it had nothing to do with mathematics or literacy? Was he having trouble keeping up with the ninja stuff then? Like kunai and shuriken throwing and....whatever else ninja children learn. Jutsu? I guess? Admittedly, there really wasn't much I could do if that was the case. Maybe hire a ninja-tutor? Not that I would know how to acquire such a...specimen. I wasn't a very good judge of strength when it came to ninja. All I really knew was that the Hokage was the strongest, followed by jonin like Genma and then chunin and genin. So did I want a...chunin level teacher? Or jonin?
I was pretty sure all the sensei at the academy were chunin so that was probably what we'd need to look for.

I was still devising how I, of all people, could look into getting Naruto a ninja tutor when Lord Third responded to my statement.

"It's not a problem with his learning so much as it's a problem with his staff." I looked at him with what I assumed was a thoughtful expression. "When he raises his hand in class...they don't call on him. When something goes wrong; a prank one of his classmates pulls for example...Naruto ends up taking the blame even if he isn't involved. I'll admit that these are subtle things I didn't notice at first."

I hesitated slightly before I responded.

"So...this went on for a...long time then?" I questioned quietly.

"The last year."

Why hadn't Naruto said anything? When I asked him how his day went...how come he'd never said anything? Why had he just grinned at me? I hadn't noticed any indication that something was wrong.

I reflected on my earlier anger. I'd suspected that the staff at the academy had something to do with Naruto's newfound reluctance to go to school...but now I realized I should have been more angry with myself. I let this happen.

"It wasn't until a few months ago," the old man began, "when we both were around less that Naruto began to develop some...troubling behaviour as a result. That's what made me decide to investigate."

A few months ago...that would likely be about the time I got all the extra work because of the Uchiha Clan massacre. That would be about the time I started slipping. My heart clenched in my chest and then sunk into my stomach. For the first time in my life I felt...like a failure. I should have noticed. I should have tried harder. I should have told Hiashi Hyuuga that he'd take an afternoon appointment because that was all I had. It occurred to me now that while I had been doing my job I hadn't been doing the most important part.

"What do you mean by troubling behaviour?" I asked him.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

"You mean you haven't noticed?" He inquired in disbelief.

I felt my face form into a stiff, indignant mask. I already felt guilty enough...he didn't have to poke at me like that.

"Noticed what?" I forced myself to ask through my slowly escalating shame, "I noticed that he suddenly doesn't want to go to school..." He looked at me for a long moment before shaking his head, as if he couldn't fathom something. He puffed on his pipe a couple times.

"Forgive me, Kiyoko," He told me with a slowly growing grin, "I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty. You don't have anything to feel guilty for. You are not to blame. He's incorrigible, that boy. I'm just surprised he hasn't..."He started to laugh, which started as small chuckles but soon grew. That went on for a bit before he seemed to calm himself down and returned to our conversation.

"Unbelievable. He pranks everyone in this village, sometimes multiple times a day...but not you." Now that his laughter had subsided he instead was choosing to look thoughtful, puffing on his pipe while he stared at me unwaveringly. "I wonder why...?" He questioned, although I realized he
wasn't asking me so much as he was asking himself.

"So...Naruto has been playing practical jokes on the village?" I asked cautiously. I was trying to reason why he would turn to mischief and what that had to do with the academy.

I thought about what Lord Third had said. When he was in class and had a question or wanted to contribute...he was ignored. The sensei didn't pay any attention to him when he tried to be a good student. When the other children did something wrong, he would get blamed even if he wasn't involved. I imagined the sensei maybe yelled at him or stuck him in the hallway. They punished him. While they were punishing him they were...paying attention.

I thought back to what I'd said to Naruto when he had first started school.

"But the most important thing to remember is that you don't need anyone else to become a person worthy of acknowledgement. You have that potential all on your own. One day...they'll pay attention."

He just wanted them to pay attention and he didn't care what form that attention took.

"Yes. The entire village has been plagued by his mischief over the last few months. I'm ashamed to admit that it's taken me so long to determine where his need to cause mischief originates from."

"His sensei is ignoring him." I stated bluntly, letting him know that I figured out what he had been getting at. "He's looking for attention and he doesn't care how he gets it."

"Yes. I've tried moving him to a different class but unfortunately I'm only seeing the same results. If anything...his pranks have only gotten worse."

"What can we do?" I wondered aloud, "If this continues he won't learn anything and he'll end up dropping out of the academy."

That wasn't an option and Lord Hokage knew that. Naruto was a demon-container, he needed to know how to use his chakra. He needed ninja training to insure that the demon remained sealed and the village remained protected. Not that he knew that. It wasn't just about the nine-tails though. The idea that Naruto would miss the opportunity to be someone left me with a hollow feeling.

"I have plans to hire a new sensei...specifically with Naruto in mind." He informed me, puffing on his pipe a bit more. "I have a few candidates who would be appropriate. However, I have yet to decide on one."

Without saying anything else, he opened up the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a handful of file folders that he placed in front of him. I leaned forward slightly to look at the names. None were familiar.

"Perhaps you'd like to look them over?" He asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

"You'd allow me to do that?" I couldn't help but question. I didn't know anything about what someone would need to know to be Naruto's ninja teacher.

"All of the potentials listed here have the skills to be Naruto's teacher, so you don't need to worry about that." He told me, as if he was reading my mind. "I simply would like your opinion."

"My opinion?" I echoed. I had opinions but I couldn't remember the last time anyone had ever asked for them. Ideas? Yes. Opinions? No. I wasn't entirely sure how Lord Third asking for my opinions made me feel but since it was for Naruto's benefit I really didn't want to refuse. Or, at least, I hoped
He nodded and at the confirmation I reached for the first file. I slowly brought it to my lap and opened it, looking over the information inside. Young man, mid-twenties, average looking. Chunin, which I assumed was the status quo for an academy sensei. I looked over the information inside once, twice, three times. To be honest...I couldn't really form an opinion. All that was enclosed was a photograph and their service record, which quite frankly might as well have been a different language to me. It was all...ninja business.

I peeked up at Lord Hokage quickly and found him staring at me. I looked back down at the file as soon as our eyes met. Well, maybe I'd form an opinion once I'd seen all the files. So I grabbed the next one...and the next one and the next one. I still couldn't seem to form an opinion.

It seemed to me that what I would want for Naruto was a sensei who could see him for what he was...just like I could. He was the boy that contained the demon fox but he still was just a little boy. A little boy who needed guidance and someone to pay attention to him.

I blinked as a thought came to the forefront of my mind. He needed a role-model. Not just a sensei. He needed a respectable, adult male in his life to aspire to - something tangible he could work towards. I couldn't judge whether a man could be a good role-model for Naruto just using the professional information in their service records.

I glanced at Lord Hokage again. He was still staring. Despite the fact that I was slowly reaching the conclusion that this was going to be fruitless, I still reached for the last file.

I pulled it into my lap, topping off the neat pile of folders there and opened it up. My head tilted as I stared at the photograph of the ninja shown. A male chunin. Average looking, brown hair and dark eyes. The only distinguishing feature was a scar across his nose. He seemed...familiar. Although I couldn't exactly place where I had seen him before. I ignored everything else in the file but the photo - after all I'd already distinguished it was all gibberish to me. I picked up the photo and held it up in front of my face so I could ponder it.

"What's on your mind, Kiyoko?" I heard the aged voice of Lord Third ask. I lowered the photo and placed it neatly back in the file, the familiar chunin still staring back at me.

"Naruto doesn't just need a sensei..." I began, "he needs a male role model. He needs a man he can look up to and who will listen to him. He needs someone who can give him the things that I would never be able to." I took a moment to pause and think over my next words carefully, "I can't help you pick a role model based on mission statistics and photographs. I can't form an opinion on any of these men with the information I have."

Lord Third seemed to think on it for a moment before he responded.

"Perhaps opinion was the wrong word to use." He conceded, "Instead...what does your instinct tell you?"

Instinct? Animals had instincts. Mothers had instincts. Ninja had instincts. Me? I wasn't sure I had instincts and if I did they were dreadfully neglected. If I did have instincts I wasn't sure how to use them and I doubted Lord Third would be able to give me an impromptu lesson. It probably wasn't something that could be taught. I took a deep breath. I should try. For Naruto's sake I wanted to have at least some input in this decision. After all...it wasn't like I could do any harm. Things were already going terribly.

I looked closely at the photo of the familiar Chunin for another few seconds, before shuffling through
the pile again and giving all the candidates another long look. Eventually, I came back to the familiar one. I stared at it awhile longer. Something about him resonated with me and I didn't think it was simply because he was familiar. There was something in his eyes. Kindness and...loneliness. He stood out.

"This man stands out." I finally said, flipping the photo around to show him.

A smile began to tug at the corner of the old man's lips.

"Very well, Iruka Umino it is."

XxX

A few days had passed since my conversation with Lord Hokage. It was Saturday and after going to check on Naruto, only to find an empty apartment, I had sullenly walked home. I'd made sure to keep my eyes peeled for any sign of him but I didn't see the familiar blonde anywhere on my walk. I didn't usually check on him in the evenings but I was worried about him and his absence this late only made me more so.

Yesterday, Lord Hokage had called me into his office briefly to inform me that he had spoken to Iruka Umino and he had agreed to be Naruto's new sensei. Part of me felt pleasantly surprised...until I remembered that there was once a time when The Director claimed that I had 'agreed' to be Naruto's caseworker. It hadn't been an agreement so much as it had been a proposition from my superiors that I couldn't refuse. The pleasant feeling, at that realization, had reverted to reservation.

Instincts be damned. I wasn't fully comfortable with the idea.

When I entered the apartment it was silent, indicating to me that Genma was gone. I remembered him mentioning something about going on a mission with Gai but I hadn't paid attention to when he would be leaving. It was sooner than I had anticipated.

Realizing he was gone, I was quick to lock and bolt the door behind me. Considering the fate of our last apartment, I had become much more cautious with security when Genma was away. When I knew he wasn't in the village I always made sure the door was secure - even if I was inside. I slid off my boots and put down my briefcase next to the door.

I observed the empty apartment. After a long pause, I sighed and started towards my bedroom. As I was making my way past the counter I caught sight of something in my peripheral vision. I stopped and swiveled my head to look down at it. It appeared to be...a letter?

KIYOKO

The handwriting was familiar. It belonged to Genma.

I slowly picked up the envelope and flipped it open, ripping the seal. To my confusion, inside that enveloped was not only a letter but a second envelope which was heavy. The letter was in Genma's handwriting but the writing on the other envelope, which simply said SHIRANUI, was in unfamiliar writing. I had a hunch that Genma wanted me to read his letter first, so I picked it up and unfolded it. The letter was dated for today; April 20th 1462.

Kiyoko,

It began.

*It's funny where a person's mind can go sometimes. This morning after you left I got thinking about...*
our old man. I miss him. When he died, his teammates returned his and mum's wedding rings to me in that very envelope. I've never opened it. The more I think about it, I don't think I ever will. They're heirlooms: passed down through the Shiranui family. Belonged to some wealthy great-great grandparent...or something like that.

I could almost hear Genma's disinterested tone seeping from the page. He'd never been big on history. Even if it was family history.

Dad always used to say that when I got married then they would be mine. Truth is, I remember the goddamn things being so intricate and expensive looking...well, let's just say knowing my luck I'd probably lose the band in some enemy ninja's chest cavity. I don't know how Dad did it.

I couldn't stop the grimace at the morbid picture he was painting.

The old man had bigger hands than me. I don't think the band would fit me and I'd hate to compromise it by getting the band altered. I know neither of us think about stuff like marriage but I've thought long and hard on this...I want you to have them. You'll probably get more use out of them...someday. Probably long before me anyhow.

I know you probably want to talk about this and I promise we will if that's what you want. Just something about today...I felt like I had to get this off my chest.

He was right, I did want to talk about it. Dad meant for the rings to go to Genma and if that was his wish then Genma should be the one to keep possession of them.

I'll be home soon.

Genma

I sighed again and put the letter down on the counter, my eyes sliding to the other envelope. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands a few times. Just like Genma had said, it didn't appear he'd ever opened it to look at the rings.

I'd always known that Genma kept our parents wedding rings as mementos, in the same place he kept our birth certificates and our important photos. I had never really thought about them much. Genma was right. I didn't think about 'stuff like marriage' and so things like wedding rings never crossed my mind.

I thought for a moment, before rummaging around in a drawer for a letter-opener. Once I found it, I turned the envelope back over and made the neatest incision I could. Once I had carefully opened the envelope, I put the opener down and tipped the envelope over my palm. There was a quiet clink as two gold bands slid out and into my palm. I inspected them carefully. I could see what Genma meant. While small, there were expensive looking gems laid all along the band in...etched leaf patterns? Most wedding bands weren't usually so intricate. The man's and woman's rings were identical but the woman's ring was the smaller of the two.

I had the urge to try it on. I was curious to see if it fit but just the thought of putting on what had once been my mother's wedding band made me...uncomfortable.

I slid both rings back into the envelope and grabbed the letter from Genma that I'd left on the counter. I turned and continued on my way to my bedroom.

The bedroom in my new apartment, while still minimalistic, was still better than my last one. There was a door, which was a nice start. I'd taken the opportunity to upgrade from a twin sized bed to a queen sized. I actually had a matching bedroom set, which was a first for me. I even had end tables
on either side of my bed for the first time in my life. I had dark blue curtains that matched my comforter set. I even had a little rug under my bed that matched the colour scheme of the rest of the room.

It might have been minimal for some but for me it was rather luxurious. It had been Genma who'd insisted on furnishing it for the most part. I'd been happy with the bed frame and the curtains.

I went over to one of the nightstands and opened the top drawer. I put the letters, envelopes and the man's ring inside neatly and just as I went to put the woman's band in I hesitated. I stared at it in my palm for a few more moments, watching as the small white gems caught the light. When I moved it a certain way, I could almost make out what looked like words etched into the inside of the band. I scrutinized it and even rubbed my thumb over it, as if that would somehow correct whatever damage had been done to hide the name in the first place.

M-S-K-

Beyond those characters, I couldn't make out the rest. My investigation was interrupted by a knock on the door. Absently, I closed the drawer and put the ring on the nightstand with a silent promise to give reading it one more try before bed.

I made my way to the door, crossing the living room just as the person knocked a second time. I peered through the peephole and saw a familiar set of green eyes. I unlocked the door, slid the bolt back and opened it.

"Hey!" The excited voice of Tamaki greeted me. She wasted no time in diving into what she was here for, which I could appreciate. "Ibiki's working late and Idate's with a friend. We've still got some daylight...wanna get dinner with me?"

I nodded. I wasn't surprised that she was here to ask me out to eat. Tamaki did that often. I bent down and slid on my boots, grabbing my wallet out of my briefcase as I did so.

"Where are we going?" I asked her as I stepped out into the hall, making sure to lock up behind me, "I don't know." She responded, "Somewhere close by might be nice. What about the Yumehara Teahouse? It's not far and we haven't been there in a few weeks."

"Sure." I agreed easily. I always enjoyed going to the Yumehara Teahouse so it wasn't a hard sell. Not to mention I always liked to check up on the owner's only daughter, Izo. She was a nice girl and to be honest I thought she wanted more for herself then just working at her family's teahouse. There was an ambition in her that was hard to miss and interesting to probe at. She didn't realize it but despite her young age she had rather intuitive ways of looking at business and economics. When she had the time, picking her brain on such matters was a joy.

It didn't take us long to get there as it was a few streets over from our apartment. As I expected, the teahouse was bustling as people came in for the dinner rush. Izo greeted us with a sweet smile and ushered us to a booth not far from the kitchens. She left in a rush, promising to return with tea for the two of us. Hurried as she was, it wasn't likely the girl was going to have much time for chatting which I had to admit was a disappointment.

I rested my head on my hand and listened quietly as Tamaki talked about work, her home life and everything else she could think of. Every now and then I would respond, but for the most part I just absorbed what she was saying.

"So Idate is ranked sixth now in his entire grade!" She finished excitedly, clearly happy about the
"That's great." I did my best to enthuse in my typical placid tone.

Suddenly, there was a ringing in my ears like a warning about what was coming. As soon as the ringing stopped, a sharp pain started behind my eyes and spread throughout the rest of my skull. I leaned forward and placed a hand over my face, trying to curl in on myself to keep out the light and sound. I sucked air in through my teeth at the assault.

"Do you have another migraine?" Tamaki questioned softly, leaning across the table towards me. I nodded but didn't say anything, continuing to keep my hand over my eyes to block out the light.

I was hyper-sensitive to sound and could hear Tamaki rustling around in her bag from where she sat across from me. After a few agonizing seconds, I heard the light scrape of what I assumed was a teacup being pushed towards me.

"Here drink." She told me.

I didn't hesitate and just did what I was told. Minutes passed. Izo came and went, Tamaki ordering what she knew was my favourite meal for me. Eventually the migraine subsided and I noticed it had done more quickly than usual.

"What did you give me?" I asked curiously once the pain had ebbed away to almost nothing.

"I don't really know," She confessed, "Yuzuha came by my desk this afternoon. I told her I was going to ask you for dinner and she told me to give it to you for your migraines. I'm assuming it's medicine made by her clan."

She shoved a little pouch towards me and I picked it up, opening it slightly and peering inside. A strong scent of mixed herbs and lord knows what else penetrated my nostrils. I almost gagged at the powerful smell. It wasn't pleasant but it did work.

"She said to put one spoonful in either tea or water during the onset of a migraine. It will alleviate the pain and encourage it to subside." Tamaki explained.

"She seemed sure it would work?" I questioned. From my experience so far there was little else you could do about a migraine besides wait it out in the dark.

"Well..." Tamaki hesitated before continuing, "she said if your migraines were caused by tension or stress like she thought then this would work. If they were caused by something else then it wouldn't."

She paused for a second.

"Kiyoko," She said, "You've gotta slow down a bit. Take a vacation or something. If anything these migraines you've been getting just prove that you've got too much to do. Your workload is ridiculous and you're not taking care of yourself. You need to rest."

"I'll rest when I'm dead." I shot back bluntly.

"That's what I'm worried about." Tamaki grumbled, clearly not pleased with my response.

She began saying something else in an unimpressed tone but I had tuned her out because a familiar face appeared. Across the restaurant, in a booth by himself sipping tea, was Iruka Umino. Seeing him in person now I finally understood where I had remembered seeing him before. He was the chunin that I had met nearly two years ago - the one that had carried Naruto's things to his apartment for me.
Well, he'd shown me in the past that he was capable of chivalry and consideration. Maybe there was something to say for instinct after all. However, there was no proof that such consideration would extend to Naruto. Before he hadn't any clue who's things he was carrying.

He stood up, set his teacup down and left some ryo on the table. I had a decision to make in that moment. I stood up, earning a startled exclamation from Tamaki who I ignored.

"I'm sorry, Tamaki," I apologized absently as I rooted around for the money to pay for my meal, "but I have to go."

"Look, Kiyoko. I'm sorry. I'll stop nagging you-" Tamaki began, clearly thinking it was her concern that was causing my sudden flight.

"It's fine. You're concerned and I appreciate that. It's not you. Something...something has come up." I told her hurriedly, watching as the man turned to leave the restaurant and made his way towards the door. I clumsily threw the ryo on the table and made sure to grab the pouch of medicine, stuffing both that and my wallet away. He was just out the door when I hastily stumbled out of the booth and across the restaurant, Tamaki calling after me.

XxX

I tailed him through the Sakata District, stopping at stalls and doing my best to look like I was shopping. He was a chunin and there was a good chance he had already realized that I was tailing him. Still, I could at least try to go unnoticed.

When we were nearing the edge of the district, passing Hekishoku-Kijo, two slightly drunken chunin loitering outside the bar called out to him. They stumbled over and latched onto him, eventually managing to drag the reluctant man inside the establishment. I had been standing at a nearby stall that sold magazines when that happened and I hesitated a moment.

While Hekishoku-Kijo was a classier establishment then Akkinomi, it was still a bar frequented by shinobi. This early in the evening a civilian woman would probably be okay. Everyone was still likely to be on their best behaviour. Still, it was a weekend evening and in a few hours it wouldn't be a suitable place for me to be.

I had to decide how badly I wanted to continue following the man.

To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure why I was following him in the first place. It was more of an impulse then anything. I suppose if I really thought about I might have been following him in the vain hope that there would be an observable behaviour that would help me determine if Lord Third had made the right choice. If I had made the right choice.

A child with spikey blonde hair and hopeful blue eyes came to the forefront of mind.

What was the worst that could happen?

XxX

"I'm sorry, Miss," the server apologized to me quietly, "but if you're not going to order something to drink I will have to ask you to leave."

I'd been able to get away with spying from the confines of one of the bar's 'private' rooms. The rooms were usually reserved for groups that wanted to have private conversations but if they weren't busy one could usually get away with occupying one alone. They were soundproof, the top half of the room's walls were glass, so they still allowed whoever was inside to observe the rest of the bar
patrons. Similarly, it helped remind the servers that you were there and you shouldn't be able to get away with squatting inside without paying.

I glanced quickly over to where Iruka was sitting at the bar and noticed him order another drink. He probably wasn't going to be leaving anytime soon. As much as I didn't want to waste money on something like alcohol the girl had a point - I shouldn't be allowed to sit there for hours without ordering something.

"I understand." I told her, keeping my face blank, "I must admit beyond the occasional sake I don't drink much. Do you have any suggestions?"

The server seemed to think before she nodded. She began describing the drink but to be honest I wasn't interested. All I needed to do was order something to drink...anything...and she would hopefully leave me alone.

"It sounds fine. I'll take that please."

"Sure!" The girl exclaimed cheerfully, "I'll be right back!"

Once she was gone, closing the glass door behind her, I leaned back in my seat and sighed. What was I doing? I'd been staring at the man for over an hour and I had yet to come up with any sort of indicator as to what he was like. I supposed I could just go talk to him.

The girl arrived back in the tiny room and delivered my drink before quickly disappearing again. It was getting later and the bar had started playing music. Ninja had begun flooding in. A few civilian women were around but I had a feeling I knew what their profession was and it wasn't...savory. It was about time for me to leave.

Just as I brought the drink to my lips and took the first sip, puzzling over the cider-sweet mixture, the very man I'd been following stood up. Then he paid and left, leaving a barely touched drink behind him.

I stared after him for several long moments. Then I took another sip of the drink. It was quite good.

I sighed and surrendered the battle for tonight. I wouldn't continue trying to trail the chunin - I would find a way to approach him and speak to him like a human being...hopefully before he started as Naruto's teacher.

I looked down into the unidentified red beverage the server had provided me. It certainly was good and was so sweet one could almost forget it was alcohol. I also assumed, based on the overly excited look on the server's face, that it was expensive. If I was going to be paying for an expensive drink either way then I should probably finish it.

I was halfway through the drink when I suddenly felt...ill. Thankfully I wasn't nauseous but I did feel a little dizzy. I wondered at the reaction. Maybe I'd had too much to drink? I wasn't necessarily a drinker but I had always been good at holding my liquor when the occasion arose. This was a new feeling to me.

My instincts screamed that I wasn't drunk. They screamed that something else was happening and they protested loudly when I dismissed the concern. This was a new type of drink, one I'd never had before and I hadn't even let the server tell me about it. For all I knew there was nothing in it but a litre of sugar and spirits, which would surely get anyone drunk.

I quickly finished the last little bit, put the ryo on the table and stood up from the booth, making my way to the glass door. From what I could tell I wasn't swaying but then again in a situation like this
you really couldn't trust your own perceptions.

I decided that maybe it was best I went to the bathroom and splashed some cool water on my face before I headed out.

Once in the bathroom I ran some water and splashed it on my face, before grabbing a paper towel and patting it dry. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I leaned forward to inspect what I was seeing. My pupils were dilated. My vision distorted...what was happening to me?

Logically I knew what was happening was abnormal but for some reason I couldn't bring myself to be uneasy or upset. After all, whatever was going on with me was strange but once I made it home it wouldn't be an issue. I ran my hand over the pocket in my skirt and discovered that I didn't feel the familiar lump of my wallet. I must have left it in the room. I'd have to grab it before I left.

With only that thought in mind I made my way back towards the private room. When I reached the glass door, I pulled it open and easily stepped inside. My eyes roamed around the room searching for my wallet but all I saw was a table filled with empty sake bottles.

It was the sake bottles in place of a wallet and single empty glass that tipped me off.

This wasn't my private room.

That was the last coherent thought I had that night as my world slipped into darkness.

XxX

When I woke up the next morning, face burrowed deeply into my pillow, my first thought was my wallet.

My second thought was that my mouth tasted like I'd drank an entire brewery and my throat hurt like I'd been exhaling fire. I opened and closed my mouth a few times, running my tongue along the back of my teeth. Had I...had I been smoking?

My third thought was that I felt sticky...everywhere. I had sweat...a lot apparently.

My fourth thought was that I was naked. Very, very naked.

I groaned in disgust.

I slowly sat up in my bed, moving up until I was in a half-assed lion pose. I felt my back crack and my neck was stiff, almost as if I had been in an odd position all night. I exhaled a few times. I then moved so that I could swing my legs over the side of the bed. I sat perched there on the side of the bed for a few seconds and ran a hand through my hair. It had long since come out of it's bun and was falling to my chest, messy and disheveled.

I shifted my weight on my perch and that's when I felt it. A dull ache and soreness in a place that I hadn't felt in a long time. I wasn't a virgin but I hadn't had many sexual partners so when my uterus spasmed at the movement I wasn't surprised. Until last night I'd only had one sexual partner and that had been shortly before I had graduated school. That had also been mostly through the manipulations of Atsuko who had wanted me to have a boyfriend.

I let my eyes scan my room for anything out of place that might indicate that the mystery man...I assumed man...was still around. The apartment was dead silent, the clothes on the floor were mine and there wasn't another body in sight. I had a moment of panic and my eyes flashed to the ring on the end table. Good, still there. Thankfully whoever it was wasn't a thief. Or at least not a jewelry
I stood up gingerly, ignoring the way my body protested the action. My muscles screamed at me to go back to bed but I couldn't do it. When I checked the clock on my nightstand it was well passed noon. I scooped my mother's wedding band up off the end table and popped it in the top drawer alongside my father's.

I looked around and found my dress on the floor, pulling it on over my head hastily. I noticed my tights, boots, hair tie and pretty much everything else that had been on my person scattered around the room. My panties were on the dresser. My bra had somehow ended up hanging off the door knob.

My wallet, to my relief, was on the floor next to the nightstand and had the pouch of Yuzuha's miracle migraine medicine sticking out from underneath it. I could see the little pull string. It obviously hadn't been handled with care but it looked like it had survived the journey home.

Much like myself.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a tension headache coming on. Why on earth didn't I remember anything? I hadn't drunk enough to black out. Even if I had then I would probably have felt at least a little hungover. But I wasn't. No dehydration, no alcohol-related headache, no nausea...

I wasn't comfortable since I'd clearly been manhandled all night by some stranger. That was of course an opinion based on how sore I was and the red, angry 'love-bites' all over my neck and...

I lifted up the collar of my shirt and looked down a my breasts which I could already tell had received a lot of attention. I could already see that the top of my right breast was going to bruise a little. I was only a B-cup...who would've thought someone would give them that much attention. They'd certainly never gotten it before.

I felt another twinge of pain in my uterus. No, I definitely didn't do this to myself. I had more than a little help...I am sure.

With mixed emotions, I decided to go brush my teeth and have a shower. Anything to get over this feeling of discomfort I had. I decided to brush my teeth first...I felt like I would be able to enjoy my shower more when I wasn't focused on the dumpster I called my mouth.

After a thorough brushing, I peeled off my dress and tossed it onto the floor. I couldn't help but pause and view my naked body in the mirror for a few minutes, holding up my breasts while I observed all the new markings. I had to turn a few times and try a few different angles to see them all. They weren't violent markings I finally decided, which was a good thing, but I could tell my body had been well-used.

After staring at myself for so long, I almost grew disoriented and stepped into the shower with caution - as if I was a newborn fawn testing my limbs. I wasn't a virgin but I wasn't exactly used to sex either. I certainly wasn't used to this...used feeling.

I let the hot water, as hot as I could make it without burning myself, spray down over my head and shoulders. I stood there without actually doing anything as the minutes passed, at first my mind was blank and then it erupted with questions.

Why had I blacked out? It didn't make sense. I hadn't been drunk enough to pass out and besides some minor dizziness I had been completely coherent...up until the point when the world went black obviously. I could assume that I had been completely coherent, maybe even rational, while I was
blacked out too. Unless I'd begun drinking after blacking out…? What had caused the back out though?

I had so many questions and I doubted any of them would get answered.

I finished up my shower and retreated quickly back to my room as, for once, I hadn't brought my change of clothes with me. I'd had...other things on my mind.

I pulled out a fresh, clean change of clothes and got dressed, pulling my hair into a low ponytail instead of a bun. I just didn't have the energy for a bun today, even a messy one and it was my day off. I could wear whatever the hell I wanted.

I had just finished dressing when there was a knock at the door.

I sighed, looking one more time at the mess in my room, before exiting it and closing the door behind me. I didn't know who it was and I would rather they didn't see the aftermath of what had happened.

When I answered the door, Yuzuha and Tamaki were standing there with matching expressions. For once, they both seemed to share the same sentiment. That sentiment appeared to be concern.

"Good Morning." I greeted.

"It's afternoon." Yuzuha responded tartly, "and there's nothing particularly good about it if you ask me."

"Are you okay?" Tamaki blurted out instead.

I looked between the two of them and opened the door all the way, gesturing for them both to come in. They'd obviously come by for a reason. Yuzuha immediately went to lean up against the back of the couch with her arms crossed. Tamaki simply hovered next to me with a confused look.

I closed the door and latched it.

"Why wasn't your door double-locked?" Yuzuha asked sharply. "You always double-lock your door." Ever since the first apartment was trashed I'd been very careful.

"I didn't remember to do it last night." I told her, which as far as I knew was the truth. I didn't remember anything. I didn't even remember who the man I slept with was so I most likely hadn't remembered to lock my door.

"Tamaki said that you practically ran out on her last night. What's up? Is it the migraines?" The Nara woman asked. "Where did you go?"

Tamaki was being uncharacteristically silent, letting the older woman poke and prod at me.

"I was following, or at least was trying to follow, the man Lord Hokage chose as Naruto's new sensei." I began, "I'm not sure how I feel about him yet. I wanted to observe him."

"What!?" Tamaki questioned loudly, "Kiyoko, are you insane? You don't tail a ninja just for fun!"

"I take it you didn't succeed in stalking a chunin through the village?" Yuzuha asked dryly.

"I followed him for awhile. I ended up at Hekishoku-Kijo. But he left and I..." I hesitated for a moment. Did I really want to tell them that I randomly blacked out? They were both such worrywarts. "I blacked out after he left. I don't remember anything about last night. One second I was in one of their private rooms looking for my wallet, the next I was waking up in my bed. I'm
98% sure I slept with someone though." I made sure to keep my face and tone passive. I didn't want them to think I was bothered by the incident. I really wasn't.

Yuzuha expression darkened and she looked thoughtful. Tamaki, on the other hand, looked positively scandalized.

"Who did you sleep with?" She asked in a half whisper, "Was it a ninja?"

"I genuinely have no idea. I hadn't even been talking to anyone before I blacked out." I explained.

"Are you...are you alright?" Tamaki inquired while her eyes roamed my form cautiously. It was like she was scrutinizing me for anything that was out of place.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You're not upset?"

"No," I said in a deadpan tone, "Not about that part. There's no reason to be. I'm more concerned about the blackout then anything."

"I think I might know what caused that." Yuzuha broke back into the conversation, "Kiyoko, did you take that medicine I told Tamaki to give you?"

"Yes."

"Did you have anything to drink at the bar?"

"Well, it is a bar. They made me order at least one drink and I didn't want to waste it...what are you thinking?" I asked her.

"That migraine powder I told Tamaki to give you has several different warnings and side-effects. There's a little paper stuck in the pouch that states everything. You're not supposed to consume alcohol within four hours of taking it." The woman explained, her eyes darting towards Tamaki, "I told Tamaki to tell you that. Apparently she didn't and now this has happened."

Tamaki looked ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Kiyoko. The list of do-nots and side-effects was so long I forgot most of them. You ran out of the teahouse so fast too..."

"It's fine, Tamaki." I replied, not wanting her to feel bad. "It's really not a big deal to me."

There was an awkward silence that fell over the three of us and stretched on for several long minutes.

"So...you stalked Naruto's new sensei?" Yuzuha attempted to clarify.

"Yes."

"Learn anything."

"Just that everyone seems to think I should have instincts. Which I clearly do not have."

XxX

Monday was when Naruto switched classes.
This morning, I'd gone to see Naruto first thing. He was pleasant but avoided eye contact with me for the duration of my visit - especially when I asked about anything involving school. He said it was fine. He said he was doing okay. He did realize that when the report cards came out I got a copy and therefore couldn't be lied to...didn't he?

Apparently not because he was trying. He wasn't confiding in me. He wasn't telling me that he was hurting inside. Had our bond, limited as it was, broken already? I brought up the pranking and told him that it wasn't appropriate. He agreed with me but I could see the lesson didn't sink in. I'd had no effect on him.

I told him he was going to have a new sensei today...a new class. I saw the cogs in his mind working as soon as the words left my mouth. I finished my inspection of his living quarters and grasped his shoulder stiffly.

Please don't give him...too hard a time, Naruto. He's here to teach you and I'm sure he'll pay attention.

As I said those words I remembered hoping that Lord Hokage's intuition and my so-called instinct were right. I hoped, for Naruto's sake, that this man really was different from the others. We'd picked him because between the two of us, from Lord Third's observations and my 'instinct', he seemed like he'd be different.

Please, be different. I prayed to nothingness as I left Naruto's apartment and made my way towards the CAO. Once I got to work, I proceeded to spend the entire morning worrying about Naruto's new class and fighting to keep the worry off my face. At about eleven o'clock, I was summoned from beneath a mountain of Akimichi Clan paperwork by Lord Third's voice. He was standing in my open door way, smiling at me knowingly and he asked me if I wanted to go for a stroll with him.

That stroll led us both to the academy hallway. A hallway where Naruto was notably not being punished. It was obvious he would have pulled at least one prank on the teacher...so where was he? Lord Third hesitated in front of the door briefly with what I could only describe as disappointment before he led me to the yard of the academy.

He spent almost an hour giving me a 'tour' of the outdoor training facilities before he said we should eat lunch on the grass together. I'm sure I shot him a dubious look but I couldn't refuse The Hokage and the two of us went to get take-out before returning to our spot behind the building. It was obvious to me that he was waiting for something though I didn't know what.

The sound of a group of children making their way outside was my answer. I abandoned my food and moved to peer around the corner of the building. Lord Third silently joined me.

Naruto immediately began making a spectacle of himself.

"That kid can't do anything right!" One of the other children shouted loudly and I felt my chest clench. I was suddenly finding it hard to breathe as all the others in his class laughed at him and some of their comments were...so cruel. Why were they allowed to speak to him like that? It wasn't right.

I felt relief when Iruka stepped in.

"Listen up!" He began, glancing at his class over his shoulder and holding Naruto in place by his shoulders, "Stop ganging up on, Naruto."

There was a shred of hope that fluttered in my chest which the blonde boy seemed to echo. While they were facing away from me, I could still imagine Naruto's expression as he stared up at his new
teacher with pleasant surprise.

"Leave him alone. Just ignore him." Iruka said, that expression of poorly concealed fear on his face. The same expression everyone in this village had towards him, whether they knew it or not.

I watched with a heavy lump in my stomach as the class turned and left Naruto behind. Lord Third was standing beside me, leaning against the wall and holding the brim of his hat while he listened to the Chunin teach his students. He seemed to have decent teaching methods but the way he was handling Naruto specifically was...not satisfactory.

I went to move towards Naruto who was standing there alone. I wasn't very good at it but I could at least try. I felt a wrinkled hand gently clasp my forearm and hold me in place. My head snapped back to its owner who shook his head quietly.

"No." He told me sternly, "If this is going to work we need Iruka to understand that Naruto's fate is in his hands...and we need Naruto to value him as a role-model. We can not interfere. Not now. If we do, he will never hold Iruka in the high regard that he should. This is something that needs to be worked out between the two of them."

I couldn't understand his cryptic and enigmatic words. As far as I was concerned rookie teacher Iruka was making a huge mistake and Naruto shouldn't hold that man in any sort of regard. I quelled my bitter thoughts and looked to the ground.

He released my wrist.

"You can't always be there for him, Kiyoko." The Hokage chided me gently, "The reality is that you are a civilian woman and there are situations he's going to encounter as a ninja that you'll never be able to prepare him for. Would you know how to help him mourn a teammate? Come to terms with his first kill? Empathize with the emotional trauma that comes from a man having to kill a fellow ninja, a brother in arms, because they chose to become a traitor to the village? To cope with a wrong decision he made in the field that got a teammate or even an entire squad killed?"

I continued to stare at the ground, crossing my arms over my chest like I was being scolded. I wanted to protest but...Lord Hokage was speaking and I had to listen. He was often right.

"I'm not saying that you couldn't understand what he was feeling. I'm not saying that you can't be there for him during those times." He told me, "Pardon my harsh metaphor but...when it comes to Naruto I must choose the right tool for the right job."

I felt him place a hand on my shoulder.

"You have a special place in Naruto's life." He began and I looked up at his words, meeting his eyes for the first time since this conversation started, "Just by being there for him you teach him about kindness. You teach him about how to value the village and everyone in it, civilian and ninja alike. You teach him about determination and how to have a solid work-ethic. You treat him like a person...just like you do everyone else."

I couldn't hold back the frown of doubt. He wasn't using this so called 'work-ethic' I taught him as far as I could see. He was just being a class clown. He certainly wasn't being kind either if what Lord Third said was true and he was indeed pranking the entire village. Right now I didn't feel like I'd managed to teach him much of anything.

"You don't believe me?" The old man asked dubiously and I chose not to respond. He chuckled lightly at my silence.
"Do you know what he told me the other day?" The old man asked rhetorically before he continued, "He told me that all he needed to do was work hard enough and he had the potential to become a person worthy of acknowledgment all on his own. He said, 'Maybe I'll even be a hero!'"

"When I asked him who told him that...he said you did." The old man recalled.

"I never said he could be a hero," I protested.

"No, you didn't. You told him that he had potential. Told him he was worthy. Told him that if he worked hard then his goals were attainable. That's what you said...and that's what was important."

I was quiet for a long moment, turning to glance around the corner. Naruto was already gone. I hoped he'd gone back to class.

"So...which tool am I, exactly?" I asked curiously.

"You're the tool that's guiding him on the path to being a man. I need Iruka to be the tool that guides him on the path of the shinobi."

XxX

A voice drifted through my door frame from further up the hallway. It sounded like it as coming from the entrance to Lord Third's office.

I was especially tense that afternoon. I'd discovered that Naruto hadn't been going to school at all and every time I went to his apartment he wasn't there. It was like the boy was avoiding me. I felt like it had something to do with his new sensei and I wasn't pleased. I'd already been to see Lord Hokage and told him of my discovery. He didn't seem surprised but he, once more, told me not to interfere. This was Iruka's personal ordeal. Or at least that's what he told me. I still didn't like it but I knew that I couldn't disobey Lord Third. He was, after all, the only other person in the village who seemed to have Naruto's best interests at heart. He was, also, The Hokage.

I stood up from my desk. I moved so I could peer out of my office and down the hallway towards Lord Third's office. There, standing in front of the guards, was Iruka Umino and he was being denied entry to the office. I'd just been in there a few minutes ago so I knew that the old man wasn't busy and Lord Third had a notorious 'open-door policy' that he extended to the ninja of his village. One thing I could say with confidence about Lord Third was that he always tried to be available for the people of the village.

"But why not?" The man asked in disbelief.

"Lord Hokage is busy with his official duties." Came the blunt response of the guard, who as far as I could see had been ordered not to let Iruka in. I watched in silence.

"I don't understand." The young man expressed, "Did he give a reason why he wouldn't see me?"

The guard was becoming visibly annoyed at this point, scowling in the other chunin's direction.

"That's not our concern. We have our orders." The irritation was starting to leak into the guards voice, clearly not used to being argued with and he glared at Iruka. The silent threat was obvious to me: I'd seen it used before on Lord Third's unwanted guests. He was giving him the chance to back off of his own initiative or he'd have him escorted out of the building.

Iruka didn't look ready to give in. I decided this had escalated far enough. I wasn't the chunin's
biggest fan right now but that didn't mean I wanted to see him forcefully removed from The Hokage tower.

I left my office and made my way towards the two men, heeled boots clicking loudly on the hardwood. The abrupt sound heading towards them drew their attention.

The guard looked at me and I saw him pale. Not long after I'd taken the office down the hall, I'd discovered that the fifth floor of the building was a chaotic and loud place. There was always a team of genin squabbling or chunin talking loudly to one another. Since I wanted to keep my door open so my office was less claustrophobic that meant I had to contend with the noise. Which made getting work done difficult at times.

One morning, during an open-door meeting I was having with Hiashi Hyuuga, some sort of ruckus had started between the guards and an angry jonin. It had gone on for five long minutes before Lord Hyuuga slammed his palm face down on the desk and practically launched out of his seat.

I followed behind him, not wanting the man to walk out on me mid-conversation as we'd been discussing something very important. Specifically, his most honorable mother's burial site and which plot he wanted for her.

We were narrowing it down between one in view of a river and another in view of a cherry grove: both of which we were in agreement she would like equally. I thought both were lovely ideas, but because the grave sites he wanted were public owned, he needed to not only pick the plot for her but also purchase it from the village. That was why I was involved - to help him navigate the mess that was purchasing land from the village.

Considering he'd just lost his mother, he'd been handling the whole thing rather stoically...until the noise in the hallway had started.

He bolted down the hallway toward the offending ninja and gave him what, appeared to me, to be a poke in the stomach. It obviously wasn't just a poke in the stomach. The man's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the ground. He then rounded on the two guards, who retreated as far away from the angry Hyuuga as they could.

Hiashi proceeded to inform them that their job was to keep the rabble under control and if they couldn't do that then they needed to be removed from their positions. He also let them know that if Lord Hokage wouldn't remove them, then he had no qualms with showing them the way out...preferably through the window. He shot them one last warning look, turned on his heel and walked past me back to my office.

The two guards and I stared at each other awkwardly before it was agreed that next time the noise in the hallway began to interfere with my work, I would make sure to let them know personally.

Having me come to warn them was better than having them jumped on by an irritated clan head. Hiashi was...after all...one of the more controlled ones. If they'd angered Tsume Inuzuka, for example, she wouldn't have shown them the window...she'd have escorted them out of the building by throwing them through the floorboards. It would save their bones and some moderate property damage if I just made sure to speak up.

So, I was used to the guard's uncomfortable expression as I approached. It was the 'oh no, who am I pissing off this time?' look. I kept my face passive.

"Miss Shiranui," The first guard started tensely, "I'm sorry if we disturbed you. We've almost have this situation under control."
"I'm not a situation." Iruka protested, crossing his arms over his chest. The guard glared back at him.

"We'll have this sorted out soon, Ma'am." The other guard tried to reassure me, "We'll try to keep the volume down for you."

"Don't worry, it's fine." I told them blandly, trying to let them know in so many words that there wasn't an irritated clan head sitting in my office. "Actually, I would like to speak to Lord Third's unwanted guest myself."

The man flushed at being called an unwanted guest.

"Are you sure, Miss Shiranui." The first guard questioned with a bit of concern and he spared a glance at his partner, "We were just about to escort him out."

The man seemed offended by that comment and spluttered at the guards.

"I'm sure that's not necessary." I told them with a blank look on my face before swiveling my head to aim that expression at Iruka, "Is it, Mr. Umino?"

The young man nodded mutely in what I assumed was agreement.

"I'll holler loud if I need you." I reassured the guards who nodded with looks of uncertainty, clearly not sure how they felt about what just occurred. That established, I turned around and made my way back to my office, the brown haired man following closely behind.

When I finally made it back into my office, I ushered the man inside and closed the door behind him. I pointed to my guest chair and he sat, then I maneuvered around the desk to sit as well. As soon as I did so I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. I scrutinized him from behind a neutral mask.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked him after a few long seconds of awkward silence.

"I'm afraid not." The man admitted.

"My name is Kiyoko Shiranui. I am the Civil Affairs Office's 'Ninja Relations Liaison'. More relevantly...I'm also Naruto Uzumaki's caseworker."

"O-Oh." The man said and he seemed to be searching for something else to say. I didn't give him the opportunity.

"I don't care for you very much." I told him with what I was aware was a harsh tone. The man jumped slightly in response and I noticed a bead of sweat form on his forehead while his eyes widened in surprise at the statement.

I wasn't sure why I had led the man all the way to my office when that was literally the only thing I wanted to say. I just felt so...paralyzed by the entire situation. I really didn't have anything else to say to him. Nothing profound or anything. I just didn't like him...because even though he'd been hand-selected by two people who wanted what was best for Naruto...he'd still turned out to be just like all the others.

I loved my village...I did...but they were all the same when it came to Naruto and the longer I did this job the more it started to bother me. It hadn't bothered me at first. I'd rationalized it. I'd made excuses for them...but now? After nearly two years of being one of the only people willing to treat a little boy like he was a human being? After nearly two years of standing alongside him and witnessing the depravity and abuse? No. No more excuses. It was okay to be scared...but it wasn't okay to be cruel.
At this point I was of the belief that anyone who didn't look at Naruto and see the child he was instead of the nine-tails was an inexcusable waste of space.

My mind stopped working for a moment as the cogs began to twist and grind in the opposite direction. A memory. There was a memory buried deep in my mind that suddenly sprang forward. Konohagakure, July 1460...It had started with a rumor of a department transfer and a long agonizing walk to the director's office in lopsided high-heels.

What was it they had asked me? Oh, yeah.

I yanked open the nearest drawer and pulled out Naruto's casefile, putting it to the side with the exception of the photographs. There were a couple in there now, since Naruto had to have a new one done every year. Usually the old ones were discarded when the new one was taken, but I kept them all.

I slid them across the table to rest in front of him: three pictures of the blonde haired, blue eyed little boy staring up at him.

"Tell me what you see when you look at these pictures." I said, echoing The Director's words from that day exactly.

There was a long silence while he stared down at the pictures. It took him a long moment before he finally seemed to reach an answer.

"I don't know." He admitted, seeming emotionally drained as he said it aloud.

Even though it was an ambiguous answer I was actually satisfied. He hadn't said he saw a child but he hadn't said he saw the demon fox either. He seemed genuine. He hadn't made up his mind yet about Naruto which gave me a sliver of hope.

Maybe that was what Lord Third had meant when he said this was 'Iruka's Ordeal'. He needed to come to terms...with the same thing I had to two years ago. He had to process all on his own that Naruto was a child...a child who contained the demon fox...but a child. I hadn't been qualified to be Naruto's caseworker. I had no idea how to deal with him: he was different and the attention he needed was different. I hadn't known what I was doing most of the time. Still didn't.

Maybe...Iruka was the same way? Maybe he felt he wasn't qualified...or equipped to teach a kid like Naruto?

"Very well." I responded, "That's all I needed to know. I'm sure you know the way out and I'm sure you realize by now that no amount of arguing is going to get you in to see Lord Third."

The man nodded, almost absently, his eyes downcast as he still seemed to be pondering Naruto's photos. Eventually, he tore his eyes away and made his way to the door of my office - grasping the door handle.

He paused and looked over his shoulder.

"It was nice to meet you, Miss Shiranui." He told me quietly.

I paused for a moment before letting out a disinterested 'likewise'. Once he was gone, I began to put Naruto's photos back in the file looking at each one. His most recent one looked so much better. He was cleaner...better fed...there wasn't that despondent look in his eyes. I had the sudden realization that Lord Third had done the same thing with me then that he was doing with Iruka now. He'd left me to sort things out all on my own.
Suddenly, I didn't dislike Iruka so much.

I still didn't like him either though.

XxX

Since I'd discovered Naruto wasn't going to school, I decided to catch him off guard by arriving to check on him in the middle of the morning. I hoped he wouldn't be expecting it and I would actually get the chance to give him a...pep talk? He really needed to start going back to school or I was going to go grey.

I was on my way down the stairs outside the tower, passing the third floor, when I encountered a familiar couple going the opposite direction.

Tamaki waved at me, although her expression wasn't as eager as I was used to seeing. Ibiki was walking close to her, with a hand on the small of her back as he guided her up the stairs. I noticed the defensive body language the jonin was displaying and I wondered at it.

Outspoken Tamaki, for the most part, could take care of herself and her husband knew that. He didn't typically hover over her like he was doing this morning...he very rarely walked her to work. Based on what Tamaki told me, his duties for the ANBU Torture and Interrogation Unit had him leaving the house long before Tamaki needed to be at work herself. He would have had to go out of his way to take the time to walk her to work.

"Good morning, Tamaki." I greeted as we met on the stairs. There wasn't anyone else coming up behind them or going down behind me so I figured it was safe to stop for a quick chat. She returned the greeting. My eyes slid to Ibiki.

"Good morning, Ibiki." He looked at me instead of his surroundings for the first time since we'd encountered one another.

"Kiyoko." He greeted gruffly.

"There was a battle in the back hills last night. Enemy ninja." Tamaki mentioned in a whisper as a response to my visible curiosity.

"What?" I questioned in near-disbelief. Enemy ninja breached the village? I had an unsettled feeling deep in my gut that screamed danger. I knew that I wasn't in danger at this very moment but I couldn't shake the feeling. It's like those non-existent instincts of mine were screaming loudly.

"That's all I know. Mr. Stubborn here won't tell me anything else." Tamaki said in a dry tone, although I could tell she was joking. Like me, Tamaki was perfectly happy not knowing the details.

"I'm not going to give you fodder for you to throw to the gossips in this village." He told her exasperatedly. "There was an enemy and they were eliminated. You are safe. That's all you need to know."

"Fine fine," Tamaki said as she waved her hand, dismissing the fact that Ibiki clearly didn't get that she was making a joke. Even I got that and Tamaki claimed I was emotionally stunted. "You know you're lucky I didn't marry you for your sense of humor."

He looked down at her and raised an eyebrow, this joke also going right over his head. I watched as she rolled her green eyes.

"Anyway, make sure you stay away from the back hills today." Tamaki cautioned me.
"When do you think it will be safe again?" I asked Ibiki directly.

"Can't say for sure. Some of the bodies still need to be cleared up and we need to sweep for any intelligence they may have left behind. I'd give it at least two days but I'd stay clear for a week."

 Civilians like me didn't often go near the back hills anyway. Mostly because they were filled with traps that while many ninja would consider them low level, a civilian like myself likely couldn't detect...let alone disable. Still, I appreciated the warning.

"Yeah, I'll do that. Thanks, Ibiki."

"Hey so because of this incident, Grumpy here has to work late. Wanna go out to eat with me tonight? Idate asked to stay over at a friend's so I'm a free agent. We'll um...maybe leave the drugs at home this time." Tamaki asked me in her usual cheerful manner. I noticed Ibiki stiffen next to her.

"What drugs?" He asked with slightly widened eyes. I don't think I'd ever seen Ibiki concerned before that moment.

Tamaki seemed to consider the ramifications of telling him. It would probably lead to her confessing to accidentally drugging me and me ending up having what I assumed was wild sex with a stranger. The bruises still hadn't faded which is why I was classifying it as 'wild'.

"None of your business." Tamaki finally decided on a retort. Which her husband very much did not like.

I didn't want to give the couple an excuse to bicker and after a couple seconds of consideration I made my decision.

"Tamaki gave me some migraine medicine. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to take it with alcohol so after I'd left Tamaki I went somewhere else and had a drink. I blacked out and when I woke up I was in bed at my house. I don't know what I got up to that night and I'm afraid to ask." I explained. It was only half lie: besides having sex I really didn't know what else I'd been up to that night.

There was a long silence.

"You're so irresponsible...I can't believe you accidentally drugged your best friend." Ibiki began finally, "This is a good example as to why we're not ready for a baby."

Seeming to decide that Tamaki was now safely escorted to work and she could do the last flight of stairs on her own, he shoved his hands in his pockets and turned down the stairs. He was out of sight before his wife seemed to fully process what he'd just said.

"It was an accident! The two things are completely unrelated!" She yelled down the stairs after him, unleashing a sudden fury that I hadn't realized she was holding in until it erupted. "Why he...he…"

She growled.

Another long silence stretched between us.

"You and Ibiki are trying to have a baby?" I finally asked.

"No," Tamaki admitted before looking at me with a large grin, "I just want one really, really bad and I make sure he knows it."

XxX
When I couldn't find Naruto at his apartment, I decided to check the academy. Maybe he had decided to start going back. I wasn't confident, but I could hope.

When I walked passed Naruto's classroom, I didn't hear what was becoming the familiar drone of Iruka's voice. Curious, and figuring I couldn't get in trouble for quietly checking, I slowly opened the door.

When I peered inside, the classroom was half-empty, as if some of the kids had wandered off. Iruka was nowhere in sight. The children that remained in the class were chattering and laughing, some were even running around. I couldn't help feeling disapproval; kids would be kids but if they wanted to play tag then they should go outside. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. I saw some familiar children.

Hinata Hyuuga, Kiba Inuzuka, Shino Aburame, Ino Yamanaka…

I saw Sasuke Uchiha brooding in the back corner.

On occasion, the clan heads would bring their children along for our meetings. It was obviously an attempt to get the children accustomed to the tasks that would one day be theirs and the clan kids were usually quite respectful, so I encouraged it. They obviously weren't involved but they came and sat next to their parents, looking bored while we talked business. I figured if they weren't paying attention then they would at least subconsciously pick up the jargon we were using so it would be somewhat familiar in the future.

No Naruto, though. Shikamaru Nara and Choji Akimichi were missing too.

"Miss Shiranui!" A familiar little voice called out. I glanced across the room to where Ino Yamanaka was sitting, looking surprised and excited to see me. I liked Ino, she was a sweet girl. Inoichi seemed to have convinced his daughter that doing paperwork for the clan was a very important task so whenever she came with her father I could expect lots of well formulated questions.

At her exclamation the classroom quieted as all the children stopped what they were doing to look at the adult who had appeared among them. I made my way away from the door and to the center of the room.

"What are you doing here?" The little blonde girl asked, her light blue eyes inquisitive.

"Well, to be honest I'm looking for someone." I told her.

"Ino, you really shouldn't talk to strangers." The pink haired girl next to her chided softly, doing the best to whisper. I could still hear her.

"Miss Shiranui isn't a stranger." Ino told the other girl almost smugly, "She's a very important person who works for Lord Hokage. My dad and I go to see her for important business every month." In a weird way her smug attitude was almost cute. I personally found it adorable when children could attach an importance to what they did. Especially if it was something boring like what I did all day. I had to admit I had a soft spot for her.

"Oh." The other girl said simply, as if that explained everything. "Who are you looking for?" She asked me then.

"Yeah, we'll help!" Ino told me, not wanting to be outdone.

"I'm looking for Naruto Uzumaki." I told them simply.
"Naruto?" The pink haired girl asked indignantly, "Why would you be looking for him?"

"It doesn't matter why, Sakura." Ino scolded the other girl. "It's probably important grown up stuff or something."

Well, she wasn't entirely wrong.

"He went into the back hills. Something about looking for corpses." Ino informed me and I felt my heart stop. "Iruka sensei went after him. That's why we have a free period right now."

While uneven, my heart began to beat again and I exhaled. He went after him. He went after him.

That was a good sign. However, I unintentionally reflected on the bad feeling I'd had earlier when Ibiki had told me about the back hills.

"Did that help, Miss Shiranui?" Ino asked, eager to please.

"Yes, it did. Thank you, Ino."

I left the classroom after that. My first thought was that I had to let Lord Third know what was happening.

Iruka had run off so quickly that he'd neglected to tell any of the other staff so on my way out of the building, I made sure to stop and tell the headmistress what was going on. The wavy haired, bespectacled woman was shocked and immediately left to go check on the children. On my way out the door I had encountered Shikamaru and Choji, who were returning to the building. I went to scold them and tell them to go to class but Shikamaru held up his hands before I could say anything.

"I'm going, I'm going!" He said, "Just please don't tell Aunt Yuzuha."

I didn't say anything. I just stared him down until he and the other boy picked up their pace into the building.

I stood outside the academy and sighed, then I began running through the village streets towards the tower.

XxX

I had sat uncomfortably in Lord Third's office for hours. I wasn't able to go back to work until I learned that Naruto was safe. I told myself that him being returned safely was the only option. The sun was setting when new ANBU appeared beside Lord Third's desk.

"Lord Hokage," The monotone voice stated, "Iruka Umino has returned to the village with Naruto Uzumaki. They're on the academy grounds."

That was all I need to hear before I was up on my feet and bolted for the door. By the time I reached the academy, I was panting heavily and had to hunch over. I spotted Naruto standing in front a tree with a swing, Iruka standing in front of him. His hands were on his hips.

"You idiot!" The man shouted at him thunderously and I stood up straight.

Naruto was visibly shocked by the man's shout. To be honest so was I. He hadn't really seemed the type.

"Are you kidding!? You almost lost your life today because of that thing!" The man scolded and Naruto looked at the ground with a...pout.
I walked a little closer and neither the boy nor the chunin seemed to notice me.

"Yeah, that's true but..." The boy mumbled and I was glad I was closer so I could hear him.

"You seem quiet today." The man remarked.

"That's because this is the first time you've actually yelled at me sensei. I'm just surprised." I wasn't sure I'd ever seen Naruto look so...thoroughly scolded. Considering the terror he just put me through he deserved a good scolding. This was...a good thing...I think. I think Iruka had finally come to terms with Naruto and what he was.

A child.

I missed the rest of what the man said but I did hear the blonde voicing some displeasure.

"Naruto..." I heard the man begin, "Do you have the will of fire in you?"

"The will of fire? What is that?" The boy questioned.

"It's the strong will to do whatever it takes to protect Konoha no matter what. If you have it then you can become as strong as the Lord Hokage." He explained patiently.

"The Lord Hokage? Is he really as strong as they say?" Naruto exclaimed.

The will of fire can make you as strong as Lord Hokage. His dream. Iruka was acknowledging Naruto's dream. Even encouraging it. I looked down at the ground and became lost in my thoughts. It seemed like Iruka had passed Lord Third's test.

"A hero? That's it then!" Naruto's exclamation broke into my thoughts, "I'm going to become an even greater Hokage then the Fourth Hokage. Then everyone in the village will have to acknowledge how great I am!"

"My guess is," I watched as the man moved forward and made a scratch in the tree with his kunai, "By the time you're about this tall you'll be ready to become Hokage."

"Okay!" The boy exclaimed in excitement.

A small smile pulled on my lips. Then I was noticed.

"M-Miss Shiranui?" Naruto stuttered, clearly just seeing me around his sensei's shoulder. I noticed the chunin tense but he didn't turn around. I kept my face passive and placed my hands on my hips, moving up to stand next to the man. I think for the first time I realized that he and I were about the same age.

"Naruto," I began with a harsh tone, "I heard you went and did something stupid."

He had the mind to look ashamed.

"Are you going to yell at me too?" He questioned through a pout and I felt a warmth spread through my chest.

"No." I responded, "I feel like that's more Iruka's thing. I hope we've learned our lesson though."

The boy grumbled in response. I ignored the thoughtful look the chunin cast me and instead moved a little closer to the boy. I reached out and gently patted his head with my hand.
"I know you've had it rough the last few days...you have to tell me when that happens, okay? Don't run away from me. I was worried about you...please don't make me worry again."

My nose stung and my eyes got misty but I didn't cry. Crying wasn't really my thing either. The three of us stood there, basked in sunlight, my hand on Naruto's head. My eyes moved to meet Iruka's and in that moment I knew that we finally understood one another.

I still wasn't confident that I was the right tool for the job, as Lord Hokage had put it, but I was willing to try.

So was he.
Mother

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Hey everyone, just a heads up that things are going to get worse for Kiyoko before they get better.

The next four chapters are going to contain some dark themes and some bad things are going to happen to our favourite suit-lady. It's going to be unfair and it's going to be sad.

It won't be doom and gloom forever - in fact the next couple chapters are the only planned 'bad things' that are going to happen to her for the rest of this story.

These dark themes are an important part of her character development as I establish to my readers how Kiyoko's priorities and convictions become set in the next phase of her life. I am aiming to have her development be organic, which is why she needs to experience some serious topics before they become relevant to her. Some people find it possible to develop a strong opinion on issues without needing to have direct experience. Since Kiyoko is a little emotionally stunted and her ability to empathize needs some work, she is one of these people that would need to experience something herself to fully understand it (if it's something emotionally based over logic based). I mean, we are talking about the character that when she first started to care about Naruto...thought she had indigestion.

For those of you who would like to know what the light at the end of the tunnel is, as soon as you see me post the chapter titled 'Kiyoko's Convictions' you'll know we're out of the woods and it's smooth sailing from there. After that, Kiyoko's character will be sufficiently 'developed' for her to take the next big step in her life...which I am so excited for!

For those of you who may wish to stop reading due to the anticipated dark themes I'm sorry to see you go but I will just say that 'One can only come to morning through the shadows.'

IMPORTANT CHAPTER WARNING: Discussion of sensitive topics and adult themes, such as questionable consent, implied non-con, suppression of women and discussion regarding the ethics of termination-abortion. The views expressed in this work are views of fictional characters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the author.

Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 17 -<>- Mother

It was June 11th 1462.

I'd always told Choza that he was free to eat in my office if he was careful not to make a mess. That rule was just as true today. I'd thought nothing of it when the Akimichi Clan head had forced his large body into my small office, plopped down and pulled out a container full of natto. He popped open the lid and immediately the small office was filled with the smell of fermented soybeans.
The smell of natto had never bothered me in the past but my stomach suddenly lurched. I felt the bile roll in my stomach and shoot up to my throat. I brought a hand up over my mouth and over my nose. I swayed a bit in my seat and I could feel the colour in my face drain.

"You okay, Little Shiranui?" I vaguely heard the man ask. I swallowed thickly to pacify the nausea.

"Ye-" I went to say but felt the bile rising again.

I shot up from my seat and stumbled towards my office door, spilling out into the hallway. My hand was over my mouth and I was blinded by panic. I raced as quickly as possible down the hall and into the women's restroom.

I vomited for a minute and dry heaved for another after that. When I was sure that there was nothing else struggling to come out I flushed, rose on shaky legs and made my way over to the sink. I ran some icy water and did my best to rinse my mouth.

I took a moment to scrutinize my reflection. I had heavy bags under my eyes despite having ample sleep and my cheeks were flushed. Rosy almost. I held a hand up to my forehead. I wasn't exactly burning up, but I was hot. The vomiting. The mild fever. The exhaustion. This had been going on for the last four weeks. At first, I had thought it was the flu but now I wasn't so sure. I had been slowly developing a debilitating disease.

When I left the bathroom, I discovered a very concerned looking Choza Akimichi flanked by two equally concerned chunin guards. They must have seen my wild sprint to the bathroom and come to investigate. It wasn't exactly normal goings on.

"You don't look so good, Kiyoko." Choza told me, his eyes scanning me from the top of my head to my feet. He had notably used my name for the first time in my life. "I noticed it last time I was here...you were sick a few weeks ago too. I have no concerns with postponing our meeting...I'd like to see you go home and rest."

I attempted to swallow down a thick, residual bile, that was coating the inside of my throat. I felt some mild nausea again but stubbornly tried to ignore it.

"No, it's fine. I-"

"Kiyoko Shiranui," I heard a new voice enter our conversation. All four of us turned our heads to stare at Lord Third who was making his way towards us at a leisurely pace. He was holding his hands behind his back and his eyes were peering out at us from underneath the rim of his hat. "This has gone on long enough. In fact, I don't want you to go home...I want you to go to the hospital first."

At his stern, almost scolding tone I felt myself deflate.

"I have too much work, Lord Hokage. If something serious is wrong with me I can't just leave all of it here to sit. By the time I came back it would be spilling out into the hall." To anyone else it might have sounded like an exaggeration, but it really wasn't. That was a very real possibility.

"It will be fine. If that's the case, then I will temporarily assign someone else to handle your workload...is there anyone you would prefer for that role?" He asked me, and I felt my heart sink. There was no way I was going to be able to talk my way into staying. I could at least take the opportunity he was presenting and choose my substitute.

Yuzuha would certainly be best for the job, considering her years of experience at the office and the way she thought. Since she was from a ninja clan she certainly understood their needs as well as I
did. However, I was worried that because she was a Nara there may come a time when she got accused of conflicting interests. I knew she wouldn't ever favour her brother over the others...in fact, anyone who met her knew she wouldn't favour Shikaku for anything. It was more likely she'd purposefully do things to make his life more difficult than do things for him she shouldn't. Still, her being accused of having conflicting interests was a very real possibility the CAO would need to consider.

So, if it wasn't going to be Yuzuha...

"Tamaki Morino." I informed him.

It would have to be Tamaki. Even if she was less suited to that type of work then Yuzuha she was still the only other person I trusted to do it right. I knew she would meet my standards. I just hoped she didn't try to strangle me for dropping my workload on her, whether it be for a month or just a day. She'd remarked on more than one occasion that she didn't envy my job.

The Hokage seemed to think about my suggestion.

"Very well, I'll call Mrs. Morino up from Immigration right now." He looked to one of the guards and gestured with his chin towards the stairs outside. The guard nodded and moved to do as he'd been silently told.

"Lord Hokage, I just think I need to go home and rest." I said, ignoring the scrutiny of the old man and my brother's former sensei. "I don't think there's any reason for me to go to the hospital." I didn't need to go to the hospital. It wasn't as if I was dying. Even if I was dying I would prefer not to know and go on in blissful ignorance instead. I'd rather just curl up in my bed, dose myself with over-the-counter cold medicine, drink some hot tea and hope that I got better. The hospital seemed a tad excessive.

"Nonsense," The old man dismissed, "I've already made you an appointment with my physician. Dr. Ito is expecting you in an hour and I've warned him you are a stubborn patient. Get well."

With that said, he turned on his heel and casually returned to his office. The remaining guard followed and Choza clapped my shoulder gently with his hand.

"I'll reschedule a meeting with Mrs. Morino once she gets here. You need to focus on your health, Little Shiranui." With a light smile, he too turned and left - I watched as he ducked into my office and grabbed his natto. The very thought of natto made my stomach churn again and I could have sworn I felt my face go from flushed red to green.

I brought a hand up to my mouth and struggled to force the bile down. I failed and was forced to bolt back into the bathroom, nearly tripping over my own feet in my desperate scramble back to the toilet.

This was a nightmare and I needed to wake up.

XxX

Dr. Ito was hovering at the reception desk, waiting for me, when I entered the hospital.

He immediately introduced himself and launched into babble about how this was the first time he'd had Lord Hokage request that he look into the wellbeing of a civilian. It turned out that while Lord Hokage's physician was licensed as a general practitioner, he specialized in ninja. His focus was in battle-related injuries and genetic disorders or side effects caused by kekkei genkai overuse. I wasn't his typical patient and he seemed almost excited at the prospect. Especially since Lord Hokage had
specifically asked him to treat me.

Dr. Ito seemed to be a decent enough man. He was short, balding and portly with a round, over-
enthused face. He clearly enjoyed his job and he spent the entirety of our walk through the hospital's
halls telling me all about the various diseases a byakugan user could get...simply for using the
byakugan. When we reached the examination room, he asked me to sit and surveyed me with nearly
three pages worth of questions.

He stated that they were necessary because I hadn't ever received medical attention, beyond getting
my inoculations. My medical file at the hospital was practically empty. He told me that if he
determined something serious was wrong then he would need to know the rest of my medical needs
and family history to decide on a treatment. To anyone else, his words might have scared them, but I
appreciated his candor. He didn't pull any punches and I could respect that.

He nodded in satisfaction once we finished answering all the questions and stuffed what he'd written
away in a file folder he'd placed behind him on a counter.

He took my blood pressure. Checked the inside of my throat, my heart, the inside of my ears. He
took a blood sample and had me do a urine sample. He checked everything. He left no stone
unturned. After that, he told me that beyond a slightly increased temperature he couldn't really find
anything wrong with me. There were certainly conditions and diseases that manifested themselves in
ways that weren't always apparent, so he told me he'd have to have my samples taken to the lab.

He gave me a choice. He informed me that if I wanted to wait in the examination room then he could
likely return with the results in a few hours. His other option was that I could make an appointment
with the receptionist to come back tomorrow and go home to get some rest. I thought about it for a
moment before deciding that I would prefer getting this part over with. If it wasn't something to be
concerned about then there was potential for me to go back to work tomorrow.

I chose to wait.

The hours ticked by slowly and I was nearly excited when Dr. Ito returned. I took the opportunity to
analyze his facial expression as he entered. He didn't seem overly concerned so my heart lightened a
bit. It was probably just a vicious strand of the common cold or something.

Once he closed the door he moved so that he could sit down in front of me. He leafed through the
information in my file for a moment.

"Well, Miss Shiranui…" He began, and he pasted a smile on his face, "You're pregnant! Isn't that
wonderful?"

My mind went blank. My face went blank.

"My congratulations to you and the father. It's always a joyous day when a shinobi finds out his
legacy is going to be continued."

My soul temporarily left my body and started its ascent to the heavens.

"I'm not pregnant." I finally managed in a monotone, "I can't be pregnant. It's something else."

"Well," Dr. Ito seemed to be realizing slowly that I wasn't exactly ecstatic about the news,
"I did have it narrowed down between you either being pregnant or having a thyroid disorder; the
symptoms of which can imitate pregnancy."

"It's the thyroid disorder." I enforced in a deadpan tone.
"No, it's not. The test results haven't left any margin for debate." He chided, "We found chorionic gonadotropin in both the urine and blood samples we took."

I stared at him blankly.

"It's the hormone released after an egg is fertilized." He explained to me quickly, "I'd say you're about eight weeks pregnant. A few more weeks and you'll be through the first trimester."

I was quiet for a few minutes. I listened to the clock on the wall as it ticked with each passing second. I tried to absorb the news. I was pregnant. There was a fetus...no a baby...a little person growing inside me.

I couldn't grow a little person...I didn't even know how to deal with little persons that weren't mine.

I had no interest in men...unless I was in an impaired state apparently...and I had even less interest in growing my own little person. My own child. I didn't know anything about children. Naruto was the exception and he wasn't the same as other children. He wasn't the same as other little persons, so I couldn't count any experience I had with him.

That and I didn't have to grow him...in my body.

"No." I rejected bluntly. Logically, I realized I was in denial and it was pointless to argue with him, but I just couldn't imagine it. Me? Growing a little person? In my body? It was...it was...I couldn't comprehend it. Other people had babies. People like Tamaki and Himari...not me.

"I take it that you weren't trying for a baby then." Dr. Ito stated simply.

"No."

"May I ask who the father is?" He questioned.

I didn't know.

"I don't know." I informed him. I didn't particularly care either, whoever he was he was about as far from my mind as a person could be. Right now, I was thinking about me. My body, my job, my livelihood...my little person that I was growing.

No, I couldn't. I couldn't have one. I... was not...growing...a human being...in my body. That was incomprehensible. I was snapped out of my thought by a hand resting gently on my shoulder and my eyes snapped up to meet the warm, brown eyes of Dr. Ito.

"I can't have a little person growing in my body." I told him evenly. He was silent for a moment while he obviously tried to gage my mood. He smiled lightly before he spoke. "I can see your one of those types..." He mumbled to himself and appeared to think of something.

"Here, Miss Shiranui. If you don't mind I'd like to show you something." He said, letting go of my shoulder and moving over to a cupboard at the back of the room. He grabbed something from the cupboards and returned to me, pulling his chair so he could sit closer. "Usually, we physicians have this problem with kunoichi. They spend so much time killing people that some of them really can't comprehend that they can create people too."

I furrowed my brow while he continued.

"Oh, they get the mechanics of it alright. Logically they know it's possible and I know you do too. They understand that it's possible for their bodies to create life but the concept that they
could personally perform such a miracle? Impossible. Pregnancy is a theory to them more than it is a practice. Until it happens."

"How do they...come to terms with it?" I asked after a few seconds, keeping my face passive.

He gently took my hand and slid what he was holding into them. I looked. It was a transparent plastic package filled with what appeared to be pamphlets and booklets, all revolving around pregnancy and parenting.

"There's a reading-list full of suggested parenting books in there. All of them are available at the library or there's a bookstore in the Sakata District that carries them all for us." He began simply, "It's not the pregnancy that scares you. It's the child that comes from it. It's the same as anything else...if you study, maybe you'll be more confident about the situation and be less scared. When you're no longer scared, the idea that you are 'growing a little person' might not be so impossible."

I was quiet while I digested his words. I suppose it made sense. It was worth a try and the thought that I could study how to be a parent temporarily subdued me. I sighed as my rationality returned.

"Then again," He began, "there is always the option of termination."

Termination? He meant...abortion? I supposed I could remove the little person from my body before it could grow anymore and then walk away like nothing happened. I stared down at the package and felt my stomach churn.

"No," I told him, "I haven't really decided if I want it yet...not fully...but I really don't think I'd ever agree to that."

I couldn't explain why but I couldn't bring myself to do that. I may be having difficulty accepting that I had a...baby...in there...but that didn't mean I wanted it to no longer exist. I wouldn't feel right about it and the truth was I did have other options. I could always put the baby up for adoption. I toyed with that idea even though I knew deep inside I could never bring myself to do that either.

Well, if I really was going to keep it, it looked like I had some studying to do. I was also probably going to need to get a bigger apartment.

A thought occurred to me. Something Dr. Ito had said earlier.

"Dr. Ito..." I began, "what did you mean earlier when you said that it was always a 'joyous day when a shinobi's legacy is continued'?"

Dr. Ito blinked a few times as he attempted to recall what he'd said.

"Oh, that?" He asked, "Well now that I know you have no idea who the father is I realize that was a touch inappropriate. I apologize."

"It's fine." I told him, as it really hadn't bothered me. It wasn't the portly man's fault I'd slept with a stranger. "It's just it seemed like you were insinuating it was a shinobi's child."

The physician nodded.

"Well, I'll admit it isn't proper to make an assumption and I apologize for that as well." He informed me, "But along with the chorionic gonadotropin we also discovered an increased amount of chakra cells in your blood."

He leaned back in his seat as he seemed to prepare himself.
"For a kunoichi who's used to using their chakra, that's not uncommon, as their chakra networks often release excess chakra cells into their bloodstream. We civilians, however, have dormant chakra networks wherein what little chakra our bodies produce is immediately used up and therefore no excess exists to enter the bloodstream. Pregnancies involving a shinobi father and civilian mother often show the mother having chakra cells in their blood. It's still something being studied, and it isn't always true, but that observation is why I assumed the father was a shinobi."

He smiled slightly.

"I really find the whole concept quite fascinating, especially since we can't seem to establish why the increase happens. It's as if the woman's chakra coils get kicked into overdrive - like they're using it to nourish their child."

So, there was a strong possibility that the father was a shinobi. Which meant there was a strong possibility…

"So, my child will have the potential to be a ninja?" I asked curiously.

Dr. Ito looked dubious, almost as if the thought offended him. He scoffed.

"Every child has the potential to be a ninja. I did, you did...all us civilians did! It's just that we chose a different path in life which didn't help stimulate or develop our chakra coils. They adapted to lack of use and now they only produce what they need. The Elitists want you to think it's all about bloodlines, but the truth is…"

He aimed a look at my still flat stomach.

"When we're in the womb and when we first come out, we all have the same potential to serve Konoha."

XxX

I was leaning against the kitchen counter, reading the book 'WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR PREGNANCY', when Genma came home. The denial had slowly faded away in the hours following my trip to the hospital. It had been replaced with acceptance and a thirst for knowledge on the subject. I had taken Dr. Ito's advice and bought a few books from the suggested reading list contained in the package.

"I'm home!" I heard Genma call from the front door, I heard him drop something on the ground that made a metallic sound. I assumed it was the box of new senbon, shuriken and kunai that he had ordered at the blacksmith's yesterday. He'd mentioned that it was ready to be picked up. Genma had been on required leave for the last few days since he'd done something to his shoulder. He had spent his entire leave going on idle walks around the village and randomly purchasing things he didn't need. Apparently, boredom was the biggest threat to my elder brother's wallet.

I had been puzzling on how to tell him that I was pregnant ever since I'd left the hospital. I'd wondered at whether I should be honest and upfront about the situation or whether I should fake excitement. I lowered the book I was reading and watched him slide his sandals off, a senbon still dangling limply from his mouth. He turned and made his way passed me towards his room, shoving his hands in his pockets. As he passed me, I realized I was missing my opportunity.

"I'm pregnant." I said abruptly.

"That's nice." He responded absently, his step not faltering as he passed me.
He took a few more steps before he froze, then he walked backwards until he was standing in front of me. He turned to face me.

"Kiyo, tell me you did not just say that." He said, staring at me intensely.

"No... I did say that."

"Why?" He seemed to ask himself. Of all the questions he could have asked I hadn't been expecting 'why'. I had honestly been expecting 'how' or 'when' since I'd never really told Genma about what had occurred while he was on his mission eight weeks ago.

"Beat me." I retorted despite knowing his question was rhetorical and moved the book up so that I could read it again, ignoring whatever inevitable meltdown he was going to have.

"No, no, no, no..." I heard him repeat over and over while I assumed he paced in front of me. I was using the book in front of my face as a protective barrier. The book was suddenly taken from my hands.

"H-how far along are you?" He asked quickly, looking almost pleadingly at me.

"Not very far. Dr. Ito thinks eight weeks." Genma seemed to deflate at my response, then a redness started to rise from the base of his neck to the rest of his face. He was flushed with pure rage.

"Why are you so upset?" I asked him finally, "It's not like you have a little person growing inside you."

When I pointed out his anger the man was quick to suppress it. I had an odd, gut feeling that he was hiding something but quickly dismissed it. My instincts were already proven to be nearly nonexistent, so I couldn't trust them.

"My little sister is pregnant, and I can't punch the bastard who did it!" He exclaimed suddenly and then he paused for a moment, his eyes widening and his hand moving up to rest on his forehead.

"I'm...going to be an uncle." He said in disbelief.

"I know...weird."

I didn't realize at the time that Genma had never once asked how or when I had gotten pregnant. He also hadn't asked if I knew who the father was.

XxX

The announcement had left the three other women speechless until Tamaki had broken the silence.

"So..." Tamaki hesitated for a long moment, her mouth twisting into a pained grimace, "a-are you going to keep it?" I understood her discomfort although in present company there was no need for it. I wasn't some wilting flower that she needed to handle with care and I knew that it was a logical question to ask. I was young, unmarried and had no idea who the father was which were certainly things that would normally cause someone to hesitate.

Yuzuha, Tamaki, Himari and I were all sitting at the table in the Morino's extravagant dining room. Since Himari had been unable to find a babysitter, her little Yuki was nestled into the crook of her arm sleeping peacefully. I had proven to be rather sensitive to food smells, so Tamaki had been weary to make a meal for us. Instead, she'd laid out some crackers and a plain cheese spread as well as blue a pot of tea for us to share.
The prenatal book I had been reading had said 'few things are more important during and after your pregnancy then a strong support-network'. So, I decided to meet with mine. It was early in the evening and after my brother had come to terms with what I had told him, I'd decided to go summon my inner circle.

"To be honest, I'm still not entirely sure." I began, "I would have to make up my mind soon if I want an abortion."

Konoha said that abortions couldn't be done past the 10th week of pregnancy, so if I wanted to terminate it I had to make my mind up soon. Currently, I was leaning more towards keeping it.

Himari visibly flinched at how easily I'd said the words and I shot her what I hoped was an apologetic look. I imagined for someone who happily had a little one of their own, whom they couldn't imagine living without, hearing someone else easily talk about aborting their baby would be uncomfortable. I noticed her glance down at her sleeping child.

I was trying to look at this as rationally as I could. Unfortunately, logic and tact rarely went hand in hand.

"So, you are considering keeping it then?" Yuzuha reiterated, crossing her arms over her chest and slouching back in her seat. Something about her body language told me that she didn't exactly approve.

"Yes."

"You don't even know whose it is." The older woman pointed out bluntly, "You don't remember what happened that night. You don't know if you gave this man consent...and even if you did give consent it could still be argued that you weren't of sound mind to do so."

She paused to let the implications of her words sink in.

"One could argue that this baby is a result of rape." She finished, her gaze intense.

A chill fell over all the women at the thought. Tamaki shifted uncomfortably in her seat, Himari suddenly couldn't meet my eyes and Yuzuha was staring at me intently. Her eyes were burrowing into my soul.

She had a point. I wasn't stupid...I knew what she said was true. To be honest, what had happened that night didn't particularly bother me because I had been operating under the assumption that what had transpired after my memory lapsed was consensual. When I 'blacked-out' I had remained conscious, I'd just lost the ability to retain my memory. My judgement had obviously been impaired as well but impaired judgement didn't always mean I didn't give consent.

I hadn't allowed myself to think of the alternative. After all, I had told myself, if it had been forced on me I would have been more likely to wake up at their apartment then my own. Or even worse; I could have woken up in a back alley. One didn't typically invite their rapists back to the apartment they shared with their brother. Then again, I suppose even that statement depended on one's definition of rape which quite frankly I wasn't in the mood to debate.

Regardless of how my inhibitions had been lowered enough for me to end up in bed with a stranger...it was done. It had happened. I wasn't saying it was normal. I wasn't saying it was right. I was just saying that no matter how I felt about it, it had already happened, and we couldn't change it. All we could do was move forward from here as best we could.

I would sort through my emotions on the whole thing when I had the time. Right now, I was busy
putting out the various fires that were starting in my life. Such as an unplanned pregnancy.

"This is my dining room, Yuzuha," Tamaki snapped, "not a courtroom. Everyone's innocent until proven guilty so let's stop generating hate for a baby because of something it's sperm-donor may or may not have done."

"I don't hate it." Yuzuha quickly responded, "I'm just saying that if the circumstances of its conception are going to be an issue in the future...then it might be better not to have it at all."

Tamaki scowled at the older woman.

"Did it ever occur to you that by insisting that what happened was rape, without really knowing what went on, you are forcing her to be a victim? What if she doesn't want to be a victim? What if her mental health is just fine and you're the one making it worse?" Tamaki's green eyes were hard as she clashed with the Nara woman, who glared back indignantly.

"So, you're defending a potential rapist?" Yuzuha asked bluntly.

"I'm defending Kiyoko." Tamaki shot back heatedly, "If she's processing this just fine and she's already decided how she feels about it all, we have no right to pry. It's a closed door that we have no business opening...we might make things worse for her."

Yuzuha, as always, made good points but so did Tamaki. I decided to not be offended at the fact that they were speaking as if I wasn't here.

"Kiyoko," Himari began which drew the two other women's attention. The orange-haired scholar hadn't been involved in the incident that had occurred and so she'd been filled in earlier as to what had happened. Until now, she had been silent on the issue. "We can debate this as much as we want but, in the end, this is about you. Do you consider yourself to have been raped?"

I took a moment to analyze my thoughts again.

"No." I finally told her after a brief hesitation. "I feel confident that I had consensual sex that night."

"No offence, Kiyoko," Yuzuha immediately responded, "but I've known you for three years now and you don't exactly have a high sex drive. In fact, I'm not sure you have a sex drive at all. That's why I personally doubt that you gave consent."

Well, she wasn't wrong, but she wasn't exactly right either. The truth was that my sex drive was like a caged, exotic animal. I kept it locked away where no one saw it, but when the sheet came off and the creature was revealed, people often found themselves in awe of it. As well as slightly horrified. In the past I had proven that I wasn't exactly well behaved when my inhibitions were lowered.

Contrary to how I regularly behaved, when alcohol was involved I got handsy and... aggressive. When we were younger, I did go out drinking with Atsuko...once. Okay...twice. She had to pry me off at least three men throughout the night. I would pounce on them and my sister would have to tear me away, leaving behind a usually very wide-eyed and shocked male bar patron. On one occasion...a female one. As soon as Atsuko turned away I'd stalk around the bar until I found another target and jump on them instead.

There was a reason I wasn't a heavy drinker.

From experience I knew that there was a very real possibility that I hadn't given either of us the chance to say no. There was the possibility we were both equally to blame. There was even the possibility that I had been the one to take advantage of him. I had been told I could be surprisingly
strong and forceful in that state.

Yuzuha sighed and deflated a bit, her vitriol ebbing away.

"But...in the end, Himari's right. It's your body and your mind. If you say you weren't raped...then you weren't, and it doesn't matter what I think."

I nodded at her. I understood her points and how she felt. I understood her concerns. The way she was approaching what had happened to me that night wasn't wrong, but it wasn't the conclusion that I had reached. To Yuzuha this was a black and white situation. To me it was grey. We didn't agree on this and we probably never would. What she did seem to realize was that if I was indeed the 'victim' then what was important was my wellbeing and mental health. If that meant I had to view this as an ambiguous situation in which no one was at fault...if that's what got me through it...then that's how we'd look at it.

"Okay, now that we've established that can we cool it with the R-word." Tamaki half-whispered, "Ibiki will be home any minute and I don't want to have to explain why we're loudly discussing ra-that around the family dinner table. Over tea and crackers no less."

Yuzuha smiled dryly at her.

"What? You don't want to tell Ibiki that not only did you accidentally drug your best friend, which he knows, but now she's pregnant as a result? Never mind the mystery man - you're more to blame than anyone else." Considering the tension that was building I was grateful for the light teasing between the two. "I mean everyone knows you want a baby for yourself but isn't this going a bit far...?"

This prompted some light bickering between the two that I ignored, sipping my tea.

"Can we take the heat off me please!" Tamaki suddenly shouted, "If we're going to point fingers this is all Lord Second's fault!"

To anyone not a civilian woman from Konohagakure that statement wouldn't make sense. To those who happened to fall into that niche it made too much sense. Lord Second had been a hard-ass who despised disorganization and was responsible for the majority of Konoha's oldest laws. In the history books, Tobirama Senju was championed for being a shinobi Equalist who demanded equal rights for everyone…except, if you read between the lines, civilian women.

For the most part I didn't think his laws were purposefully made to suppress civilian women. I think the man was simply old-fashioned and often overlooked the needs of civilian women. Except for one law which I, as well as most of the civilian women in the village, were adamant was part of a major conspiracy.

The only type of contraceptive available in the village was a medicinal powder created by the Nara Clan. Yuzuha claimed the clan would happily distribute the powder amongst everyone equally…if it weren't for the fact that an old contract demanded they could only sell their contraceptives to Konohagakure. The Nara were only allowed to sell the powder to the village.

From there, the Healthcare department of the CAO distributed it to the hospital. The hospital then sold it based on the rates that the village had set for its distribution which included a large flat-fee plus heavy taxation. 20 days' worth of contraceptive could cost a civilian woman anywhere from 300-500 ryo depending on how much the hospital had at the time. If they were in short supply, they made it more expensive or stopped selling it altogether. For perspective, that was just under half of my bi-weekly pay. Registered kunoichi who were still in active duty did not pay for contraceptive, as
it was needed for them to safely perform their jobs.

Many civilian women couldn't afford to purchase contraception on their own and therefore, like myself, they had to rely on abstinence and luck.

A conversation over the unfairness of it all had revealed that Ibiki was Tamaki's supplier; otherwise she wouldn't have been able to afford it either. Since registered shinobi, like Ibiki, could purchase contraceptive at the same rate as kunoichi, that usually meant that whether their partner or spouse had access to it was their decision. Hopefully if the relationship between the couple was healthy this wouldn't be an issue or a difficult conversation to have. It didn't seem to be an issue between the two of them, but I wondered how many children there were in the village who were born because their mother had been denied access to contraception.

Unfair, but that didn't quite add up to the 'conspiracy theory' that everyone claimed it was.

Which was true...that wasn't the conspiracy part. The conspiracy was that this system with its carefully selected distributors, contracts, legislation and laws meant that The Hokage was able to control the birthrate of the entire village. Just have a war and need a population boost? The same laws that supported this system gave The Hokage the right to stop the distribution of contraception to anyone who wasn't an active kunoichi at the drop of their triangular hat. It didn't matter if you could pay for it then. The village had the monopoly on contraceptives and they had shown in the past that they had no qualms abusing that power.

"Sure, sure. Blame the dead guy who can't defend himself." Yuzuha dismissed, drawing me out of my thoughts.

The banter continued.

"How do you feel about all this?" Himari asked me quietly, also ignoring the banter.

I wasn't sure anyone had simply...asked me how I felt. I had been trying so hard to not think about how I felt. I just wanted to reach a logical decision that I would be able to live with for the rest of my life. The more I talked about this with people...the more I was slowly becoming aware that I wouldn't be able to separate feelings from this decision. Not completely.

Every time I thought about this baby...my baby...the little person that was growing inside me...I felt. No matter how much I really didn't want to.

"I'm scared." I responded quietly after a few long moments, "I don't know how to be a parent."

To my surprise, Himari chuckled lightly and she looked down at Yuki who was still sleeping soundly in her arms. I looked at her too. Now over a year old, she was finally starting to look like a little person instead of just an infant. She had a crop of orange hair and while it was difficult to tell she looked like she might get her mother's nose too.

"Everyone's a little bit scared when they find out they're going to be a parent. I know I was...and that was before I lost my husband." She peered at me from behind her glasses, almost curiously. "Do you feel anything else? Besides fear, I mean?"

Did I feel anything else? Well, there was certainly some disbelief. Even now I was still having a tough time believing that I, of all people, was pregnant. It was so improbable that I was expecting Dr. Ito to turn up laughing at me and tell me it was all a prank orchestrated by Lord Third. Was there anything else beyond the disbelief?

I hesitantly placed a hand on the flat of my stomach and thought carefully. As hard to believe as it
was...my little person was in there right now. I felt a warmth spread through my chest and I couldn't resist the small upturn at the corner of my lips.

My little person.

XxX

July 15th 1462. I was about thirteen weeks pregnant.

After much debate, both logical and illogical, I finally came to the final decision that I wanted to keep the baby. I was still scared about having the baby and the thought of being a parent still terrified me but...but I wanted to try.

I decided I wanted to try.

And like anything else I did I was determined to do it right. No task half finished. So, I spent most of my time over the last few weeks with my nose buried in books about pregnancy and childcare. When I saw Dr. Ito again last week for a check-up he joked that he should offer me a job. He remarked that I had half the training of a proper midwife.

Since pregnancy wasn't exactly a fatal disease I had been back at work after resting for a day. When I walked into work, I had informed Lord Hokage of my condition and had been annoyed when the old man had simply given me a knowing smile. It was as if he had been aware that was what it was the entire time. I supposed he was very observant and a father of two, not to mention his late wife had been a reputable midwife, so it made sense that he might have made the connection on his own. Still, I found it annoying.

When the concerned Choza heard the reason for my mysterious illness, he'd arrived at my office with a basket of fruits he claimed were good for my pregnancy. Word spread even more after that, which I suspect was the Akimichi Clan head's fault, and I suddenly started receiving small congratulatory gifts from the other clan heads as well.

Shikaku Nara sent me a box filled with medicinal teas which would help with cramps and fatigue. I'd already tried some and they worked absolute wonders.

Tsume Inuzuka sent me a letter informing me that I'd been added to her tab at the Takaimori Onsen in the Izuna District for the next nine months. While I couldn't use the hot springs while pregnant, I could have all the spa treatments I wanted on the Inuzuka Clan's ryo. She also offered me a puppy, which I politely declined.

Since the Yamanaka ran a flower shop, Inoichi Yamanaka had decided to have fresh flowers in a 'good fortune' and 'good health' arrangement sent to my office every week for a month. It had added a nice touch to the tiny space that I was grateful for.

Shibi Aburame had surprised me with a gift basket filled with a wide variety of common and rare sweets. I'd almost wondered if the man could read my mind since, while I'd never craved sweet things prior to my pregnancy, I now thought about daifuku so often I became distracted from my duties. I craved sweets and the Aburame Clan had delivered.

Hiashi Hyuuga had, on behalf of both the Hyuuga main and branch clans, presented me with a beautiful blanket. The blanket was made of the softest material and trimmed with dark satin that had embroidered, golden leaf patterns on it. At first, I thought it might be an extravagant baby's blanket but when I unfolded it I realized it was full sized. Hiashi explained it was intended for me, to help keep me warm. It was a lovely gesture and I kept the blanketed folded neatly over the back of my chair.
at the office.

I had to admit, the Hyuuga had predicted correctly, I was often cold during my work day. It was nice to have the blanket available to drape over my shoulders while I worked.

I had decided to move out and find a place of my own. More specifically, I decided to take that money I had been saving up over the last few years and finally use it. With Genma's help, I'd found a nice house in the Saiten District. It was only a few streets north of the Morino household which had made Tamaki a very happy lady.

The house I'd finally chosen was an old, unused shop which had a two-bedroom apartment on its second floor. It wasn't perfect, it needed some fixing up. When I first bought it, I'd made plans to renovate the storefront portion of the building into the main living and kitchen area. Which would mean I could renovate what was currently the shared space in the upstairs apartment into a third bedroom...eventually.

Tamaki had protested me buying a house that needed any amount of renovation when I was pregnant, and I could understand her point. However, the only houses that were in my budget either needed a little work or a lot of work.

I would rather buy the one that only needed a little work.

Genma was uncomfortable with me moving out and living alone, but I rationalized with him that since he was out of the village all the time anyway it wouldn't really make much of a difference. Whether I lived with him still or not, I would still be alone a considerable amount of time. He had eventually conceded but he still wasn't happy about it.

Gai had been my one of my biggest helpers when it came to the renovations. He had four weeks of leave Lord Hokage was forcing him to take, so he took them to help me get the house renovated. Between Gai, Genma and the contractor I'd hired, the storefront had been completely renovated into the main level of the house over the last four weeks. The portion of the upstairs that would become the third bedroom was still a bit of a mess, having been gutted and nothing else, but at this stage having the downstairs done was good enough.

With the way things were going the house would be mostly done by the time the baby came. That had been my primary concern over the last few weeks; outside of work I rarely talked about anything else but the house. Yuzuha had joked that I was 'building my nest like a proud mama-bird'.

I wasn't sure how I felt about the comparison, but she was right about the nest building. When my father was alive we'd always had a lovely place to live. We moved often, since he was often away, and our leases were short, but he always made sure our family lived in a nice apartment in a safe district.

When he was killed, and we came into Genma's care, we suddenly had to come to terms the fact that we had to live...wherever we could afford. Three children with an income of a measly survivor-benefit and a rookie genin's mission pay didn't give us many options. There wasn't much choice and while he had always tried his best the places Genma found to live weren't very nice and weren't always safe.

If I was going to have a child...I wanted to provide it with a nice place in a safe part of the village. Just like my father had done for us. That was only right, wasn't it? To try and at least be as good a parent as yours had been? The only parent role-model I could think of was my dad, since my mother had died in childbirth, and I hadn't known him very long. Sometimes I wasn't even sure I remembered his face.
In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I had even thought about my dad.

"Why is your tummy getting big?" Naruto's voice, laced with an innocent apprehension, smacked me out of my thoughts. I was walking with Naruto from the academy, as I had begun making the time to do it again after the incident that had occurred in the back hills. The sun was setting in the distance and the streets were beginning to clear. I'd offered to take him to Ichiraku Ramen, where Iruka had said he'd meet us. We were just coming up on the ramen stand when the boy finally asked what had been on his mind.

I blinked in surprise.

I glanced down at him, taking in his narrowed eyes, and then down at my stomach. The difference to my body was subtle; I had just started to show this week and I was surprised he had noticed. Tamaki had pointed it out this morning as well. She'd mentioned off-handedly that my frame was so petite that everyone was bound to notice my swelling stomach even at this early stage. I had no other curves to hide or distract from it.

It wasn't as if my pregnancy was a secret - in fact lately it felt like everyone in the village knew. Even with that in mind, the idea of everyone noticing at first glance made me uncomfortable. Something about my stomach starting to swell, my body changing, and people noticing that almost made the whole thing more...real.

"How do you know I'm not just getting fat?" I asked him simply.

"No way." The blonde boy responded with disbelief, "You don't eat enough to get fat. Besides, if you were getting fat then the rest of you would get fat too! Your arms and your head and your butt...they'd all get fat at the same time. Not just your tummy."

I glanced at him again and noticed he appeared to be in deep thought. This boy never ceased to amaze me.

"I can see there's no fooling you, Naruto." I praised, trying to figure out what to say. He'd need to know I was having a baby eventually, since that would be something that might affect how much I could see him later. I had no intention of not continuing my duties as his caseworker but as the past had demonstrated, I wasn't infallible. Things came up. "My tummy is growing because there's a baby inside it."

At first, it was as if the small boy hadn't heard me. Then he stopped walking and I saw him staring intently at my stomach. I stopped walking as well. I glanced left and right, grateful that the street was empty and wouldn't bear witness to my awkward conversation with the boy. I wasn't sure what I was expecting but somehow, he still managed to surprise me.

"How'd it get in there?" He asked as he scrutinized my abdomen, "Did you eat it?"

Did I... eat it?

He'd taken me by surprised and I snorted, then threw a hand up over my mouth to hold the giggles back. I was more shocked by my own reaction then anything. I don't think I'd laughed...in a very long time. Not since...I couldn't help but picture a small brown toad, flying into the sunset and screaming. The chuckle became belly laughter. Tears formed in the corners of my eyes as the laughter involuntarily racked my body. I hadn't laughed since Gama-chan.

"What? What's so funny?" The boy asked with an indignant pout, "I wasn't being funny!"

The boy's pouting just made my humor at the whole situation worse and I laugh so hard I had to
consciously tell myself to breath.

"Don't laugh at me." The boy mumbled, crossing his arms over his chest, "I was just asking a question."

I finally forced myself to stop laughing and wiped a tear from my eye. I placed a hand on top of Naruto's head, which immediately seemed to melt the scowl off his face as his eyes rose to meet mine.

"Yes," I agreed, "You were just asking a question, a good one, and I'm sorry I laughed at you."

"Why were you laughing?" Naruto puzzled up at me and then he seemed to have some sort of epiphany, "I know! You were laughing because you don't know how it got there either!"

My my, his mind worked in wondrous ways. I mean...he wasn't entirely wrong. I didn't quite remember the activities that had gotten me pregnant. Could I really explain to Naruto...who was only eight years old...where babies came from? Could I really do that? Was that my place?

"Hey, you two!" I heard a familiar voice call and my eyes snapped over to where Iruka was waving at us from up the street. He was standing just outside Ichiraku's. He didn't approach but he was waving eagerly. "Let's hurry it up! I don't know about you but I'm starving!" When it became apparent that we were going to be taking our time he ducked back inside the stand.

I don't know what compelled me to do it, but I suddenly had an urge I couldn't resist.

"Here's an idea," I said to Naruto quietly, "since it's a mystery to both of us why don't you ask your sensei? He is a teacher. I'm sure he knows."

"Yeah, good idea! Iruka sensei knows everything!"

He started to run towards the stand. He took a few steps before he stopped abruptly and was still for a few moments. I watched him with carefully hidden curiosity. He turned and made his way back to me slowly, stopping when he was standing directly to my left. His face was...determined?

It took me a minute to realize that he was staring at my hand. It was as if the world slowed to a crawl as the small boy raised his hand up to mine and then hesitated a few millimeters from my palm. He was so close I could feel the heat of his skin, but we didn't touch. In all these years, Naruto and I had never touched skin-to-skin. I'd clapped his shoulder, patted his head, nudged him with my foot and allowed him to grip the hem of my skirt. But we'd never touched skin. In the beginning that was by design...that was the way my fear of the demon-container had manifested itself. I could look at him and treat him like any other person. Except I couldn't touch my skin to his.

Somehow, he'd seemed to subconsciously realize that, and he had never even tried to touch me.

I realized as he'd been reaching towards me...that the thought of his skin touching mine...no longer frightened me. I don't think it had in some time. It's just that we'd been so used to the way things were we'd never tried anything else.

I closed the last amount of distance between us and grasped his hand, doing my best to ignore the shocked expression he gave me. I made sure that my face was its typical passive mask but inside my heart warmed. From there we walked, hand in hand, closing the distance between us and Ichiraku's. He didn't let go when we reached the stand but sped up and ducked under the curtain ahead of me.

He had just disappeared out of sight, though he was still grasping my hand, when I heard him say.
"Hey, Iruka sensei! How do women get babies in them?"

I heard what sounded like Iruka spewing the contents of his mouth all over the counter in response.

XxX

I was putting my new kitchen to good use by making myself a week's worth of daifuku. When I'd come home from eating ramen with Naruto and Iruka, I had craved nothing but daifuku. I always craved daifuku anymore. It was becoming a normal state of being for me.

My hair wasn't in its usual bun. Instead I was wearing it in a low ponytail which wasn't completely succeeding at keeping my hair out of the way. I was too used to wearing it in a bun that even a ponytail seemed like an excessive amount of freedom. I was still in my blue shift dress and tights, although with the slowly growing bump on my abdomen I knew I was going to need to change my wardrobe soon.

I'd grown attached to my shift dress, but since the hemline was at the middle of my thighs, it wasn't exactly the best length for maternity wear. As the bump grew, the hemline would gradually rise, and I certainly didn't want that. Whether I had tights on or not. For now, however, it was still fine. I had on a white apron with some lace trim that Himari had given me as a housewarming gift.

Genma was lazing on my new, grey couch reading a magazine. A senbon hung limply from his mouth while he browsed the information inside with disinterest. I had been so absorbed with making myself something sweet that I hadn't noticed him come in, so I wasn't sure exactly when he had gotten here.

Even though we didn't live together anymore, Genma was still a consistent presence in my life. Over the last few weeks, when he wasn't on missions or sleeping, he was usually lounging on my couch or chipping away at the renovations upstairs. He kept joking that with the amount of work he was putting into the third bedroom it may as well become his. We both laughed about it, but I knew that was his indirect way of letting me know that if I needed him...all I had to do was ask. It reminded me that I really did have the world's best big brother.

I was wiping my hands on my blue hand towel and contemplating doing up another bowl of mochi, so I could make another batch, when there was a knock at the door. I glanced at Genma, who hadn't moved at the sound. It was a habit of mine...it was taking me awhile to adjust to the fact that this was my house and therefore anyone knocking was usually my guest. Genma, however, didn't have trouble with the idea at all. He turned another page of his magazine casually and didn't budge from his position.

I glanced at the empty bowl I was longing to fill with mochi and at the timer I'd placed on the stove. I made my way towards the door and pulled it open, still holding the hand towel in one hand and desperately trying not to get the door sticky.

I took in the appearance of the man at the door, primarily what stuck out was the protective vest. A Jonin.

"Oh, you must be here for Genma." I said offhandedly as I turned to get my brother's attention. I was sure he'd already noticed the man but since he wasn't already hovering over my shoulder it seemed like he was determined to be rude.

"Actually," the man began which caused me to look back at him curiously. As soon as I looked at him he hesitated and then cleared his throat.
"My name is Kakashi Hatake and... I'm the father of your child."

My face went blank.

The hand towel slipped from my hands and onto the floor.

Behind me, I heard Genma growl a single word.

"Fuck."
Author's Note: So the results are in and since it's no longer a secret - voila guys! It's Kakashi...and 50% of you saw it coming (probably more but I think some people were trolling me...which is okay cause I gave you troll-answers in the poll). So of the 88 total votes received between FF and Survymonkey, 44 of you were like 'It's Kakashi'. Yeah, you gotta love that depressed Jonin.

Btw, the 'Other' that someone suggested below was a Kiyoko pairing with another civilian OC who was a single parent. I mention it because I actually thought it was a super cool idea. Even though that's not the direction I was headed in. It intrigued me and definitely deserved some love. Also...Asuma received a surprising amount of votes. Which...I'm not kidding I was very tempted to switch her pairing to Asuma but couldn't because that would REALLY mess with the story line and my love for canon-compliance. Still, it was a lovely thought because I really could see her with Asuma.

Anyway, the results were as follows;

Kakashi – 44
Gai – 14
Iruka – 6
Obito – 6
Asuma - 4
Raido – 4
Yamato – 2
Hayate – 1
Minato – 1
Ibiki -1
Anko – 1
Kotetsu – 1
Other – 1
Utakata – 1
Izumo – 1

IMPORTANT CHAPTER WARNING: Mentions of questionable consent, mentioning suicide/suicidal thoughts, depression, coarse language and inebriation.

I hope you enjoy everyone!
Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 18 -<>- Father

If he remembered correctly, it was April 21st 1462. He didn't remember much but there was no way he could forget the date. Yesterday had been the anniversary of one of the worst days of his life.

He sat on the edge of the unfamiliar bed, trying to get his bearings despite the throbbing in his head.

The last thing he remembered, he'd been literally drunk *under the table* in one of Hekishoku-Kijo's private rooms. He'd been alone. From what he could remember standing would have been a dubious prospect which meant that he hadn't exactly been in the mood to be around the opposite sex let alone go home with someone. However, knowing how easily convinced he was in that state...it wasn't exactly a major surprise either.

Kakashi wasn't a drunk but that didn't mean he wasn't above drinking excessively when the opportunity arose. Mostly, he drank when he was sad, which in his opinion was the only good reason to drink. This time around his good reason had been April 20th: which was the anniversary of the mission that had resulted in Obito Uchiha's death. The death that he still, after all this time, considered to be his fault. His goal was, as it always was when he chose to drink, to hide away in a private room and drown himself in sake, then slink back to his apartment and wallow in his long-standing grief and self-loathing. He didn't say it was healthy, but it was his way of…dealing.

He looked around again. He was sitting on a queen bed with clean, blue sheets and a dark blue comforter. There were an excessive number of pillows and he couldn't help but note that most of them were on the floor. The room was a nice balance between minimalistic and cozy...so it wasn't his room.

There wasn't excess furniture or any clutter, just a matching furniture set with recently dusted surfaces. The apartment was clearly in one of Konoha's newer apartment complexes, if the clean white walls of the room were any indication. There was a single window with floor length blue curtains that would be effectively blocking out the light if not for the fact that they were wide open. He glanced out the window from his spot on the bed and judging by the familiar sign hanging off the adjacent building, he was certain he was in the Mita District.

He wasn't necessarily surprised that he was in this situation. That didn't mean he liked it though. Acceptance wasn't the same thing as apathy.

Despite what he could only classify as his 'addiction' to smutty literature and erotica, Kakashi was generally reserved when it came to women...except for when he was drinking. It wasn't that he went on the hunt when he was drunk or anything. In fact, it was the exact opposite.

When Kakashi drank he suddenly became the prey - he was like a lost child who would follow anyone if they promised sweets and a way home. It didn't matter if he could barely walk; he'd crawl after the stranger if it meant finding his way in the darkness. In short, when he drank he was very easily persuaded into things he really shouldn't be doing. To make matters worse, when he drank that much he usually couldn't remember a damn thing about what happened.

This was one of those times.

Usually when he woke up in someone else's apartment he would discover that it had been Might Gai who had found him wandering the streets or passed out under a table. Gai couldn't have his Eternal Rival getting spotted in a vulnerable puddle on the floor and losing the respect of the entire village...
now, could he? Since he moved apartments every few months, an occupational hazard of having frequent long-term missions, the other man would have no idea where he lived (neither did he) and he would just decide to drop him on his couch for the night instead. When he woke up the next morning, hungover and ashamed, he would quickly leave. The other jonin would pretend the incident had never happened which certainly helped preserve Kakashi's pride. Or at least what little pride he still had.

Twice now Gai hadn't come to his rescue and he had ended up in bed with a strange woman.

Or at least, he assumed this was a strange woman. A glance back and down revealed a slight, nude form and a mass of long, brown hair. She was lying on her stomach and her face was buried so deeply into her pillow, that he had no way of making out her features. In Konoha there were many slight women with brown hair and he knew more than he dared to count. He used his slightly heightened sense of smell to check her scent. Not familiar.

His memory was fractured. He remembered the door to the private room opening? Maybe? He'd thought it was the server...but...it wasn't? He couldn't remember. Everything after that was a mix of half-memories and darkness.

The woman's face was buried in the pillow, so he couldn't tell what she looked like, but he tried. He searched his memory, or what existed of his memory, for something...anything he could grasp at.

He remembered...he remembered...indigo eyes.

And he remembered thinking she was beautiful although beyond the eyes her features were a mystery to him. Whether she was beautiful, or average was ultimately unimportant because he had no desire to have a woman in his life. He still found himself desperately trying to recall. He'd been sitting on the ground under the table...empty sake bottles were everywhere...had he offered her something to drink? He couldn't remember. After that all he remembered was feeling...hands...her hands were everywhere. Had she pounced on him? But was that real? He couldn't remember. He assumed it was...it was rather hard to sleep with someone without using your hands.

He could tell from the lack of tension in his body that at the very least it had been a pleasurable experience...no matter how it had happened. Not that it made him any more comfortable with the situation.

Finally deciding that his mind wasn't going to yield anything else he stopped trying to remember. Whatever happened last night, no matter what she looked like or who she was...it was of little consequence. He had no desire to have a woman in his life, so this obviously ended here and now. Beautiful indigo eyes or not.

One of his fatal flaws was that he had an inherent aversion to responsibility and women, from what he had heard, bred responsibilities. Sometimes literally since he couldn't think of any better term for a child other than 'walking responsibility'. Not to mention women often needed a consistent place to stay, money, validation and attention. All things that a partner would be expected to either provide or help provide, which again, became additional responsibilities he didn't want nor need. It seemed like a lot of work just for the convenience of having a steady sexual partner, someone to cook your meals and keep your apartment clean. He didn't understand it. Those were all services that you could easily pay someone to do.

Don't get him wrong, women were great. He loved women. He just didn't want one in his life and didn't think he ever would. The Hatake line was going to end with him and he was fine with that. In fact, arguably it was what he wanted.
So far, using complete honesty about his opinions on women and relationships had been enough to have himself immediately ejected from whatever apartment he found himself in. Whether the sleeping together had been well-planned ahead of time or not. Asuma Sarutobi had once told him, years ago now, that such opinions were an 'instant turn-off' to his flings. Although usually he and his flings met in much more favourable, sober ways.

This was a bit jarring. He was still very disoriented. While he had been there once before it wasn't a feeling he liked. He didn't like it the last time and he certainly didn't like it now.

Still, there was no need for an awkward song-and-dance which ultimately would end in disappointment or anger. It was better to stick around and be upfront about the fact that he really didn't care, that there wasn't a 'them' or an 'us' and that there was no potential for there to be. What had happened last night was a mistake, they were strangers and he would prefer they remained strangers. He was sure, considering the questionable events of last night, she would feel the same way. He had a feeling neither of them could recall what happened which he didn't expect would make a woman want to welcome you into her life with open arms.

Which in an odd way was a mark in his favour. It would be easier to walk away.

She wasn't even stirring yet, so he decided that he had time to get up and try to make some coffee while he waited. He easily located his clothes laying on the floor next to the bed, which had been a simple pair of black pants and a long sleeved black shirt. He pulled them on, rolling his sleeves up to the elbows, and slid on his mask. He hadn't been wearing his protective vest and forehead protector, mostly because he had learned from experience that they attracted a considerable amount of attention from young women. Considering his lack of consideration for 'stranger-danger' when alcohol was involved it was best to leave the beacons at home.

Not that leaving them at home had helped him this time, if the brunette in the room behind him was anything to go by.

He stood up and didn't waste any time stepping over the woman's discarded clothes and through the doorway into the rest of the apartment. It was much like the bedroom. There was no dining table to be seen, just a second-hand couch and a low, oak coffee table on the opposite side of the room. The walls were painted a pastel blue. A quick scan located his sandals to one side of the door thrown haphazardly with a pair of heeled boots.

He located the coffee maker, noticing that the coffee was on the counter, which he was secretly thankful for because he had no desire to root through the strange woman's cupboards. When he went to start the coffee maker, the red light on the side blinked three times and then went off.

Confused, he tried again.

This time the light stayed on, but the coffee maker made a loud whirring noise. He jumped slightly, ninja or not that had been startling, and out of reflex whacked the coffee maker. It made a sputtering noise and then turned off again. He couldn't help but notice that the coffee maker had a dent in the lid and wondered at it briefly.

He decided that he likely wasn't going to get any coffee, mostly because he didn't want to risk it making a noise that would awaken the entire apartment complex.

Without much else to do, he turned around and leaned against the counter. His eyes scanned his surroundings again, looking for anything he may have missed. He couldn't remember, but he was sure that even in a drunken state he had likely checked the apartment for threats. Or at least he hoped he did. Such things had become second nature and he would be a little disappointed in himself if he
hadn't.

Now, sober, albeit feeling like he was about to drop dead at any moment, he was able to verify that there wasn't anything threatening in the apartment. He didn't see any traps, disengaged or otherwise, that were indicative that his latest bed partner was a kunoichi. A civilian then.

Damn.

He wasn't going to lie; when it came to sex he had decided he preferred civilian women. Civilian women were softer, curvier and easier to let your guard down around which personally made his experience a lot more enjoyable. In contrast something about sleeping with a kunoichi made his subconscious scream danger the entire time. He usually finished higher strung and frustrated then when he started. Having sex was probably one of the few times he was vulnerable, and no ninja liked being vulnerable, especially not him. Not that he took his vulnerability into consideration when he started drinking but when he was sober it was something he certainly considered.

Having a pair of legs wrapped around you was easier to enjoy when you knew that pair of legs didn't have the ability to snap your spine in half. Some men enjoyed the heightened sense of danger that came from the thought of how powerful their bed partner was. He was not among them.

Kunoichi were easier to walk away from, not only because he enjoyed himself less but because they usually were less attached to their bed partners. Sex just meant less to them. Civilian women seemed to give it a weight that he just couldn't comprehend and thankfully the average kunoichi couldn't comprehend it either. The morning after was usually a lot more efficient. At least it was when he remembered what had happened the night before and how the two people had ended up...where they currently were. He had no doubts this morning was going to be...messy...no matter what.

As he came out of his thoughts, he noticed something on the floor next to the couch - something familiar. It was a green shinobi's vest and it wasn't his. He specifically remembered leaving his at home.

His heart started to pump in his ears as his eyes slowly began to identify other unsettling items. A spare kunai pouch on the coffee table, an unopened pack of senbon not far from the vest and a pair of protective gloves on the floor by the door. He cautiously maneuvered up to the vest and lifted it slightly with the tip of his foot, gauging its weight. There was no way to know for sure, but jonin vests were usually lighter than the ones worn by chunin because they usually required less protective layering. This vest was almost as light as his own.

If possible, he was more unamused than earlier. That made this a horse of not necessarily a different colour, but a slightly different hue. Up until that moment he hadn't been feeling the least bit guilty or dirty about what had occurred last night. He certainly wasn't happy about it nor did he think it was acceptable...but he hadn't felt guilty. After all, he didn't think he was any more to blame then the other party involved.

This changed things though. He, for the first time in his life, felt like a home invader. He'd never felt that way before, not even when his missions had specifically been for him to invade homes. It was a new feeling and one he didn't like.

Elite ninja of the jonin class had earned the reputation of being possessive of their homes and family. To interfere in any way with a jonin's sense of security or their family was usually considered an unforgivable offense. You could apologize and grovel all you wanted, but the chances of you being forgiven were slim if the disrespect didn't result in a battle royale in the middle of the street.

Amongst ninja, those of the elite had an unwritten code of conduct that they adhered to. One of these
rules was that you never, never, entered a jonin's home without being invited by said jonin. The only exceptions were if you were being asked to for a mission, investigating a crime or by the request of Lord Hokage. Even if you were invited into the home by the jonin's family member or dependent, unless you received prior approval to enter the jonin's home it was just something that wasn't done. It wasn't a law or anything...but it was unwritten law. Etiquette. Etiquette that was taken very seriously.

Considering the unfamiliar apartment was unfamiliar he could never claim he had received approval to enter it. To many elites, being drunk out of your mind was not considered a valid excuse to invade a jonin's home. As much as he wanted to defend himself, he didn't think it was a good excuse either.

This etiquette had evolved as a result of the fact that elite ninja were paranoid by nature and it was difficult for them to make their apartments or homes feel safe so they let their guard down. The severity of this rule was doubled if they had a family unit who they also naturally had the urge to provide with safety. You didn't go into a jonin's home, their safe space, you just didn't. It just wasn't done. It was beyond disrespectful.

He felt a flash of anger at himself partly because he couldn't believe he had gotten himself into this situation. The other part was because he was imagining how he would feel if he came home and discovered someone had invaded his apartment. He didn't have a family unit, didn't want one, but even just the thought of someone being in his apartment without permission...

One thing he knew for sure was that he was going to have to own up to what he'd done, although he wasn't sure how he would go about it. The thought of leaving a note for the unknown jonin made his skin crawl as it wasn't nearly a sincere enough apology for what he had done. Not that he expected his apology would be accepted. He didn't want to hang around until the jonin returned though either, having to deal with a disgruntled one-night stand for that unknown span of time was not appealing.

That left him with one option. He would have to leave and then return.

He was suddenly anxious to flee, wanting to remove himself from possibly one of the most uncomfortable situations he had ever been in. That was saying a lot considering he'd been tortured before.

In a moment of impatience, he wandered back to the bedroom and looked in at the sleeping woman to see if she was stirring at all. She was completely still, so still that it took him a moment to determine that she was still breathing. Her face was still buried into the pillow, hair fanning out behind her, so he still couldn't see her face. The blue sheet had slid down to the base of her spine and he couldn't help but slide his eyes along her back one more time. She was tiny. He felt a jolt of trepidation at the thought that to add onto the sin of this home-invasion he might have to account for sleeping with an underaged girl.

He quickly calmed himself down; his drunk self's inhibitions were not that low.

...At least he hoped not. Why couldn't he remember anything?

His eyes made another pass along the smoothness of her back. He couldn't help it. He was still a man after all. He was on his third pass, gradually growing more tempted to wake her up with each one, when he caught a glint from just outside his line of sight. He turned his head in the direction of the glint and froze.

No, no, no.

No.
Glinting on the end table next to the bed was a small, intricately fashioned, golden band. A wedding band. A woman's wedding band. Presumably...that woman's wedding band. As the pieces of the puzzle began to snap into place he felt sick to his stomach. He'd slept with another jonin's wife. Not just a member of his family unit...his wife...his breeding partner...the woman he'd chosen to make little persons with.

There was an obvious disrespect and immorality associated with sleeping with any man's wife, but the act had a heavier weight between elite shinobi. If he wasn't one of the strongest ninja in the village and was confident he could survive nearly anything, he'd be expecting to be killed for this.

The outrage was rooted in one thing; how much the elites and the rest of the ninja world valued genetics.

There was an age-old debate on genetics that had created a huge divide between ninja in general. In the world of ninja, particularly elite shinobi like jonin, there were three types of categories they could fall into.

There were the 'Elitists' who believed that the potential a ninja had in life was strongly based in genetics. Their potential came from their bloodlines...passed down from parent to child, gradually building the family's strength through careful breeding. Many, including himself as someone who came from a prestigious lineage, believed that talent as a ninja was more dependent on nature rather than nurture. Most clansmen considered themselves to be Elitists, even the more laid-back ones like the Nara and the Inuzuka. A person certainly had the capacity to become a strong ninja through hard work, but they could never exceed the strength of someone from a 'ninja' bloodline.

Whenever the subject came up in discussion, Kakashi did consider himself to be an Elitist and he had no qualms informing people of that. He was a Hatake after all. It was a name that commanded respect within the village for a reason. His lineage had always been powerful, counted among former vassals of the Senju clan, and everyone in the village knew it. He was a prodigy. He hadn't had to work very hard to obtain any of his skills and had no trouble believing that it was mostly a result of good genetics. Strong shinobi bred stronger shinobi. He supposed there were flukes, such as Might Gai, but that's exactly what Gai was...a fluke.

Speaking of Gai, the second group were the 'Equalists'. This group believed the exact opposite of the Elitists. They believed that all ninja were born equal and everyone had equal opportunity to obtain strength provided they were given the same opportunities as everyone else. Might Gai was, of course, an Equalist but that was no surprise to anyone who knew him.

The most surprising Equalist he'd ever heard of had been Tobirama Senju; the stern Lord Second himself. He remembered being shocked when his father had said told him. This alignment was part of the reason that he had founded the Ninja Academy instead of simply allowing parents to train their own children. He'd wanted to level the playing field for everyone in Konoha to have comparative strength. His alignment with the Equalists was considered ironic and unexpected, considering the man came from the famous Senju Clan and many of the laws that were part of his legacy were clan based.

Then there were the fence-sitters. They didn't have a fancy title like the other two groups and of the two groups they were the least opinionated. They were also the least numerous. Most ninja eventually picked a side even if they didn't have an opinion at first. Their opinion was simply that they had no opinion...or sometimes he'd heard someone say that they believed both sides were equally right. Lord Third was among this group, as was his youngest son Asuma, even while his older son was notably an avid Elitist.

There always had been and always would be debate over the validity of the claim that strong ninja
bred stronger ninja. Ninja, whether it be consciously or subconsciously, usually took painstaking care in selecting their breeding partners. After all, they were choosing the mother of their children. They were choosing the woman who would carry on their legacy. Sleeping with another jonin's wife was probably the worst things he could've done.

He wasn't proud of himself for it, but he panicked, and he ran.

He was in such a panic that didn't even notice that he ran passed Might Gai's apartment on the way...and therefore didn't realize that he knew exactly which jonin lived next door to the spandex-clad man.

XxX

After a few days, Kakashi slowly processed what he had done.

He still felt tremendously guilty about it, he certainly hadn't forgiven himself for what had transpired and how, but the harsh reality was that he couldn't spend all week in a depressive episode. He had enough things to occupy his mind and make him depressed, he didn't need to torture himself with more. Not to mention it wasn't exactly the best use of his time.

He couldn't necessarily drop it and he didn't want to. He was still of the opinion that he needed to figure out what to do about it...he couldn't do nothing. It was still something that needed to be addressed but he didn't know how.

Not to mention he'd ran away from the apartment in such a blind panic that he couldn't even remember what building in the Mita District it was, let alone the floor or apartment number. By the time he'd come to his senses, he discovered that he'd sprinted all the way to the Izuna District and had no idea how to get back. After he'd gone back to his apartment, showered and changed his clothes, he had grabbed his typical copy of Make-Out Paradise and decided to go for a stroll.

He'd wandered back and forth through the Mita District, looking at every apartment complex from around the edges of his novel, as he tried to find something familiar. He spent at least two hours doing it but was unable to find anything that indicated which building he had run from. He'd accidentally lost his one-night stand and therefore was encountering another barrier in attempting to right his wrong.

He'd lost the mystery woman and he felt terrible about it. Which wasn't something he thought he'd ever hear himself say about separating himself from a fling.

A week after the incident, while he was still conflicted, Kakashi finally decided that there was very little he could do, and he needed to find something else to occupy his mind. What better to do then to launch himself back onto the mission roster.

Since the Hokage had forcefully retired him from ANBU last month, he suddenly had to re-adjust to life as just a jonin. He had been in ANBU for so long that he had almost forgotten that things worked a little differently for the regular forces. As ANBU were an organization that operated as a covert extension of Lord Hokage’s reach, they were always considered on active duty and were always rostered. Regular forces, no matter their rank, had to make a point of registering for missions - otherwise they were reserve forces and wouldn't be contacted over missions. It was a little difficult to have to remind himself to sign up for active duty every week.

He sighed.

He imagined with his skillset and reputation, he wouldn't be waiting long before he was assigned a
mission but that didn't exempt him from considering the whole thing a hassle. He was pretending to read his orange book, wandering through the streets with a single hand in his pockets when a voice called out to him.

Kakashi stopped walking and had to hold in a groan. He didn't even need to turn around to know who it was. As much as he liked the man; not this, not now. With everything going on inside his head he really wasn't in the mood.

"Hey there!" It was Might Gai, probably one of the last people he wanted to deal with right now, "Kakashi, my Eternal Rival, care for a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors? I've been training hard to beat you this time!"

"Hello, Gai." Kakashi responded simply.

"Gai," Another voice scolded lightly with poorly concealed exasperation, "It's rock, paper, scissors...you don't need to train for it, man."

Kakashi did glance over his shoulder then at the newcomers. Usually when Gai ambushed him in the street he was alone, so he was curious about his company. Might Gai was standing there in his typical, sparkly, green-clad wonder doing...some kind of pose. Next to him was his former genin teammate and friend, Genma Shiranui. He noted that both men had small rips in their clothing and the brown-haired man had an odd-shaped bruise on his collarbone.

"I have been training for it! With enough hard work you can train for and master anything!" The exuberant man protested, moving out of his initial pose to give his teammate a thumbs-up and a glittering grin. Genma raised an eyebrow at him, his face remaining straight, before he eventually sighed heavily.

"Is that why Ebisu was bitching about broken fingers week before last?" He asked blandly.

"Rock smashes scissors!" The man exclaimed happily as if that explained everything, "He lacked the Skill and Youth required to defeat me!"

His teammate stared at him blankly for a long moment.

"Okay, whatever you say." Genma conceded as if he wanted to put Konoha's Sublime Green Beast to rest. "Youth or no youth, you're going to have to put that battle on hold. Lord Third is expecting a report as soon as we get back."

Gai seemed to realize something and his face moved into a serious expression that half the village didn't seem to know he was capable of. A few passing civilians shot him concerned looks.

Kakashi couldn't help the curiosity that bloomed at the statement. It had become apparent in that sentence, and from their appearance, that they had just returned from a mission. For regular forces, it was rare that Lord Hokage expected a report immediately following a mission. Usually you were given time to rest, recover and seek medical attention if required. A verbal report was due 24 hours from the time the ninja returned to the village and a written report, done by the mission leader, was due 48 hours after that.

If Lord Hokage wanted a report from them immediately then that meant something interesting was going on. What better to distract Kakashi from his woes then something interesting?

"Oh?" Kakashi couldn't help but ask as he finally turned to face to two other jonin fully, lowering his book so it became obvious he was speaking to them, "Something important I take it?"
"None of your business." Came Genma's immediate response, his voice monotone as if he could sense the selfish reasoning behind the other man's curiosity.

Kakashi and Genma Shiranui had an intricate, love-hate relationship that had been developed over years of somehow managing to know too much about one another. As little sense as that made.

Genma was about three years older than Kakashi and not considering Kakashi's promotions, was the first of their group to be promoted to chunin. Genma's career had taken off shortly after that and he'd quickly climbed the ranks, turning heads as he did so. When Minato Namikaze had become The Fourth Hokage, Genma had been selected as one of his three elite bodyguards. Since both young men were frequent fixtures in Lord Fourth's life, Might Gai's life too, they saw entirely too much of one another.

Let's just say ignorance was bliss and a part of him secretly wished that Genma had remained ignorant to his flaws. That was mostly because despite his passive visage and laid-back demeanor, Genma Shiranui wasn't someone you wanted to make an enemy of. He knew exactly what needed to be said to hit you where it hurt. One comment from the man could be a soul-crushing, destroyer of worlds from which you rarely recovered.

When it came to how Genma felt about him specifically Kakashi was aware of two things. The first was that Genma respected his abilities as a ninja. He seemed to recognize that Kakashi was, truthfully, one of the strongest shinobi in the village. He respected his talents, applauded his skill with jutsu and, on occasion, had expressed open awe of his abilities.

The second thing he knew was that the other man despised him as a human being. More than once Genma had called him out for burying depression deep inside himself instead of seeking help. He'd told him he had too much pride for someone who had such low self-esteem and that it boggled his mind. He'd accused him bluntly of having 'daddy and mommy issues' which, if Kakashi was honest with himself, he did have. With the way his childhood had gone, it was hard not to. Genma had once bluntly commented that Kakashi was so stuck in the past, with what had happened to his teammates, that he rejected any kind of responsibility and therefore any fulfillment that having responsibilities could bring.

The sad part was that Kakashi agreed with Genma.

It was harsh, but he knew where the other man was going with it. Genma wasn't faulting him for having baggage...Genma was faulting him for not dealing with it. He buried his depression, inflated his pride, ignored his issues with his parents, avoided responsibility and all around just couldn't move on. What did he do instead of reaching out for help? He buried his head in the sand and waited for the day his name joined all the others on the memorial stone.

He hated himself for it and yet he couldn't seem to bring himself to change. He couldn't change. He knew he had to. He knew the way he went about his life wasn't right or healthy or the way everyone else seemed to do it...but he wasn't ready to change. Right now, he just wanted to spend his days hating himself and leave it at that. He'd change when he was old...if he lived that long.

Sometimes it seemed like the bandana-wearing jonin was the only one who had him pegged for what he really was. Well, not the only one. There were others in the village who saw through his bored, modest facade but they were a small circle. Genma had even called him out on multiple occasions, in public no less, for pretending to read Make-Out Paradise. He did read it...but he also tended to pretend to hide the fact that he had been lost in thought. Exactly like he'd been doing a few minutes ago.

Kakashi, on the other hand, both resented and respected the other jonin's blunt manner of calling out
his...well...his bullshit. Unlike Gai, who seemed to be spending his days trying to pull Kakashi out of his eternal depressive episode, Genma basically told him to pick up his issues and move them out of the road.

He resented that Genma saw the endless mountain of baggage that he dragged around and even worse, he hated that he simply told him to cast it aside. He told him to work towards improving instead of just wallowing. He respected Genma Shiranui for the jonin and man he was...in fact Kakashi was a little envious. He wished he could say that the other man hadn't suffered and that he didn't understand...but he couldn't say that. From what little he knew of Genma's personal life, the man had also been dealt a rough hand in life. Unlike Kakashi, when Genma got his bad hand he'd flipped the dealer off and swaggered into the sunset.

Yes, Kakashi Hatake was envious of Genma Shiranui. A part of him envied the man that Gemma was. He wished he could be a better human man himself...but Kakashi wasn't done wallowing.

"Hold on a minute, Genma." Gai suddenly started with a thoughtful look on his face. "Maybe we should bring Kakashi into this. This type of work is, after all, one of his specialties."

A glance at Genma showed that he was considering what Gai was saying. That surprised Kakashi, who had been expecting the brown-haired jonin to immediately shoot the idea down. After a few seconds of tense deliberation, Genma finally spoke.

"We've got a problem." He said simply, keeping his voice low so as not to catch the attention of passing civilians. It worked. The masses of people in the street continued to flow around the three jonin. They seemed unfazed. Kakashi was not. Genma didn't usually say that you had a problem unless you really, really did.

"What kind of problem?" Kakashi asked, moving a little closer so that his voice wouldn't carry.

Genma looked around cautiously before he moved so he was standing immediately in front of the silver haired jonin. He tilted his head to the side so that he could whisper in Kakashi's ear.

"The traitor kind." He whispered heavily.

Kakashi was careful to maintain his bored expression. The mask helped. A traitor had been discovered? So soon after what happened with Itachi Uchiha? Even he couldn't completely suppress the spark of anger he felt at the news. Again? Really? Hadn't they had enough?

He didn't pry any further. It wasn't wise to discuss something like this in the middle of the street no matter how quiet you were.

"I'd like to help." He told Genma simply, trying to sound casual and not reveal just how eager he was.

Genma stared at him for a heartbeat. He knew he had decided to bring him into the mission, otherwise he wouldn't have even told him as much as he already did. Even so, the other man clearly wasn't excited at the prospect of working with him.

"As much as I hate to admit it," the man began stoically, "Gai's right about this. We need someone who's good at investigation and since you're not in ANBU anymore...you not only have the skillset, but I know you're available."

Kakashi hadn't realized that anyone else had known he'd been retired from ANBU. It was recent, and he certainly hadn't told anyone. Of course, the chunin that organized the mission rosters would know...he supposed it was possible that's how everyone else found out. It seemed word got around
regardless of what he did. He shouldn't have been so surprised.

After saying that, the other jonin adjusted the senbon in his mouth and turned to continue down the street. Gai flashed him a grin and followed his former teammate.

Taking that as Genma's acceptance of his offer to aid them, Kakashi closed his book and stuck it in his kunai pouch. He shoved his hands in his pockets and followed them to the tower.

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The three men stood at attention in front of Lord Third's desk. Kakashi could practically taste the tense silence in the air.

"So, I take it that my hunch was correct?" Those were the first words out of The Hokage's mouth and Kakashi found that he wasn't exactly surprised that whatever was going on, it had been the old man to discover it. He was so intuitive it could be scary.

"While we would need to do some further investigation...the two scenes we investigated did raise some concerns with both of us." Genma was quick to respond. "We saw some things that were suspicious, sir, but we would need to find more evidence before we could say anything with certainty."

Kakashi was silent, still trying to piece together exactly what was going on.

"I take it you have an idea of where to start looking?" The Hokage asked him, puffing on his pipe.

"Yes, sir. We want to start by reviewing their death certificates and cross-referencing them with the mission reports...as well as comparing the information we gathered from the scenes." Genma glanced at Kakashi out of the corner of his eye before continuing, "I'd also like permission to assign Kakashi Hatake to the investigative team. His skills would be useful and to be honest we need all the help we can get."

The Hokage's eyes slid over to Kakashi and back to Genma. He seemed to consider the two men for a long moment. He was probably one of the few people in the village who realized that the two men didn't exactly like each other. They respected each other well enough but they didn't like each other. Kakashi was of the belief that this awareness was a reason he only sent them on missions together when he had no other choice. Considering both of their tendencies to bluntly speak their minds and their conflicting personalities they weren't exactly a harmonious team - no matter how much Kakashi valued teamwork.

"Very well." He said after some thought, "Consider the request approved. Brief him."

Genma wasted no time.

"Lord Hokage has suspicions that there's a traitor among us. We don't know who and we have no idea what their motivation might be. While we still need to find the proof...it looks like someone might be sabotaging low-ranking missions. We've been losing a lot of chunin and genin lately for unjustifiable reasons."

"What makes you think it's not just an issue with the village's training practices?" It was a harsh question, but it needed to be asked.

"I wondered the same thing, but I still wanted to investigate." Genma agreed and Kakashi could get where he was coming from. Even if you thought it wasn't suspicious; if Lord Third was questioning something it was smart to investigate it. "I reviewed two of the more recent mission reports that were
troubling Lord Hokage. Gai and I went back to the place where the report claims everything went wrong."

He went silent for a second.

"...and?" Kakashi prompted.

"And nothing." Genma said, his typical straight face slipping to a frown, "you couldn't even tell a battle had taken place. One of the reports said it had happened less than a five days ago. The report claims that besides recovering their comrade's bodies they had to leave the scene intact. There should have been enemy corpses. Its unlikely nature would have done away with all the evidence so quickly."

Kakashi was quiet for a moment while he weighed the man's words. The cogs in his brain began grinding as he pieced together what all this could mean.

"Which means that the battle likely didn't happen there...which means someone is trying to cover up where the real battle took place…"

"Which means someone doesn't want us to know what really happened out there." Genma finished the thought for him.

"When we ask ourselves why someone would want to hide this truth from us...there is only one logical conclusion. I have come to believe that these deaths were not simply unfortunate casualties nor were they accidents," Lord Third finally concluded, "there is a traitor among us who is targeting members of the regular forces."

"Did you investigate the mission leaders yet?" Kakashi asked. It would be reasonable to at least suspect the jonin or chunin who lead the ill-fated missions. It would, after all, be their reports that were inaccurate.

"Of the two reports we've viewed there were different mission leaders. One of the mission leaders was killed in action on the mission...so the reports were filled out by different people." Gai finally spoke. He'd been silent most of the time. "If it was the mission leaders they've done an excellent job of covering it up."

Kakashi nodded.

"When we access older reports, we should keep an eye out for any names that are the same on the team rosters...not just the mission leaders." He suggested to their team leader.

"Good idea." Genma agreed and Kakashi was a little surprised at the praise, "I also want to pull the death certificates. In both cases the mission reports claim the corpses were returned to the village so it's worth a look."

The Hokage nodded at the idea.

"Hm... yes...that's a good place to start I think. When someone dies violently, and their corpse is recovered the death certificates have a thorough account of the markings or wounds they received. You'll be able to look for inconsistencies between the state of the bodies and how the reports claim they were killed." He took an empty scroll from his desk, a brush and some ink. He began writing something on the scroll and after he was done closed it with a melted wax seal. The seal had the sigil of The Hokage...he recognized it. All his ANBU orders had been sealed with that sigil. He expected the man to silently call some ANBU guards and hand the scroll to them, but instead he leaned over his desk and passed it to Genma.
"Give this to the Ninja Relations Liaison. It's my authorization to grant you access to CAO documentation. She'll assist you in obtaining the certificates from Registrations and any future ones you may require." He sent Genma a knowing look, "I'm sure you know your way to her office." The Hokage puffed on his pipe once more. "Dismissed."

All three men gave him a quick bow and turned to leave the office.

"That was easy." Kakashi couldn't help but comment as they reached the hallway. He glanced down at the scroll in Genma's hand. "it used to be such a bureaucratic nightmare to get anything from the CAO."

"It's the Ninja Relations Liaison. I remember hearing everyone bitch about it when they first created the position. A lot of people were saying it was just another excuse to build another barrier between ninja and civilians." Genma commented lightly, chewing on his senbon, "a week later those same people changed their tune entirely. She saves us a lot of headaches."

With that they began walking towards the liaison's office.

Despite the fact Kakashi had spent a great deal of his time in ANBU conducting investigations, he'd never dealt with the liaison. Whenever he needed something from the CAO he'd simply sent someone else from Team Ro to meet with her. He liked investigating. Something about solving a mystery gave him a great deal of satisfaction and he could almost say he found it fun. Having to sit and talk to a grouchy, overworked, civilian woman with a superiority complex who liked playing gatekeeper? Not fun.

"I heard a rumor she can be a bit of a hard-ass." He commented casually. He remembered her irritating members of his team on more than one occasion with her inflexibility. If Lord Hokage only mentioned death certificates in his authorization letter and you also asked her for a land registration she'd say no. If you tried to negotiate with her...well, she didn't negotiate. She'd fix you with a hard stare and tell you to go get another authorization from Lord Third for the additional document. There was also no disputing her methods to Lord Hokage. He wouldn't hear any of it.

Genma let out what seemed to be an involuntary bark of laughter as they approached the liaison's door. Gai also seemed to find the comment amusing.

"Well, she's not a pushover that's for sure." He agreed with the statement.

His eyes were drawn to the propped open door which had an engraved name plate on its worn surface. 'SHIRANUI - NINJA RELATIONS LIAISON'. Kakashi followed Genma into the cramped office absently, unintentionally pinning himself between the two other men. He hadn't been thinking and had left himself without an escape route.

Shiranui...?

"Kiyoko! How's my best girl?" Genma said casually, sounding like he was trying to weasel something out of her. Something told Kakashi that it was all a joke - after all, they had a letter of authorization, so they didn't need to attempt to negotiate with her. Kakashi was immediately pinned by a pair of feminine indigo eyes. A very familiar pair of indigo eyes.

No…

He sniffed slightly to see if he could recognize the scent. He did.

No…No…
The familiarity that Gemma was showing towards the woman...the light bantering...her last name was Shiranui...

The pieces of the puzzle snapped together with a click that caused his back to stiffen. He'd have bolted out the door if he wasn't pressed between the two other jonin in the suddenly much smaller office.

He'd slept...with Genma's wife.

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He'd spent every moment in the woman's office fidgeting uncharacteristically, which had earned him several glances from the other men. Genma's were irritated and Gai's were more concerned than anything. He'd almost jumped out of his skin every time the woman's gaze passed over him absently. He'd lost his balance and knocked into Gai's shoulder every time.

It had taken ten minutes before he realized that the woman...genuinely didn't recognize him. At first, he thought that she was faking ignorance but the more he watched her micro-expressions and her mannerisms...nothing. She remembered nothing.

He wasn't sure whether that made the situation worse or better.

At the very least that meant he could choose when to tell Genma...because he had to tell him. He would tell him. It was just that he'd prefer to wait until they were somewhere low impact. Like a training ground or outside the village. Lord Hokage didn't mind when shinobi settled their quarrels and differences with their fists...if they didn't destroy the village while they were at it. And if he were Genma? He'd want to hit him...hard. Potential property damage be damned.

There was no love lost between himself and Genma but they had always trusted each other. They were brothers in arms whether they connected on a personal level or not.

Kakashi had done the unthinkable by breaking no, shattering, that trust. He'd slept with the other man's wife. It was an ultimate betrayal and he wouldn't be surprised if the man tried to kill him for it. He deserved it. The least he could do was make sure that when Genma saw red over the incident they were in a place where he could try to kill him without getting a scolded for it afterwards. He didn't want Genma to come across as the bad guy - he was the only one who hadn't done anything wrong!

By the time they left the office, Kakashi had long since retreated into his mind and was still fidgeting. They were walking through the village towards the archives, located behind the Hokage mountain, when Genma's voice finally reached him.

"-shi? Kakashi?" The man came to an abrupt halt in front of him and held out a hand to stop him. "I asked you a question."

Kakashi had not heard the question but Genma's intense stare made his skin crawl. After a few seconds, the other man sighed heavily. "I need your head in the game, Kakashi. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Kakashi couldn't help it. It slipped out.

"I slept with your wife a week ago."

A long, heavy silence fell over the three men.
"What?" Genma finally asked and to Kakashi's horror, instead of looking angered the man was...baffled?

"I slept...with your wife?" Kakashi repeated, although this time it came out as a partial question.

"Kakashi, I don't have a wife." Now it was Kakashi's turn to be baffled. He looked to Gai in confusion, but the other man seemed to be just watching the train-wreck happen and wasn't giving him any hints.

"But the...the woman...the liaison...?" Kakashi couldn't figure out how he wanted to begin his sentence, so it came out as halting babble. He couldn't remember the name Genma had used for her it was...something nice. It was a nice name...he couldn't remember it. He'd been too agitated to remember anything that transpired in the office. It didn't make much sense to him but that was enough for Genma to catch on.

"You slept...with Kiyoko?" The man questioned in disbelief.

"Yes! Her!" That was the name. Kiyoko.

"You slept with Kiyoko!?!" Gai suddenly shouted and he launched forward. Kakashi expected an attack and braced for it, but to his surprise the man simply grasped his shoulders. Excessive tears streamed down his face. "Is nothing sacred to you, my Eternal Rival!?" He wailed.

A glance at Genma revealed Gai was the more upset of the two men. Genma just looked confused.

"Kiyoko's not my wife, Kakashi." The brown-haired man eventually started with a passive expression, "she's my little sister." A silence lapsed, interrupted only by Gai's clearly traumatized wailing.

"Oh." Was all Kakashi could say and couldn't hide his relief. Don't get him wrong; invading the other jonin's home and sleeping with his sister was still a terrible thing but at least he hadn't had an unwitting affair with the man's wife. He thought back to the ring on the nightstand. "Is she married?"

He was hesitant to ask but now that he knew she wasn't married to Genma, he needed to know whose wife he'd slept with.

"Kiyoko isn't married." Genma said simply.

"Then what was with the ring? There was a wedding band on the nightstand..."

"Probably our mother's," Genma seemed to be recalling something from his memory, "knowing her she probably got distracted and didn't put it away." Kakashi didn't say anything because there wasn't anything else to say. Thankfully, he hadn't slept with anyone's wife. Unfortunately, he had slept with Genma's little sister.

"Wait, wait, wait. I'm having a hard time understanding all this. How on earth," the man began, "did you get Kiyoko to give you the time of day? She wants nothing to do with men."

Kakashi hesitated.

"To be honest, I don't remember." He decided to tell Genma the ugly truth, "I was...very indisposed." There was silence. Gai had stopped wailing and let go of him but was still standing off to the side with his arms crossed. He was not clearly not pleased.

"Was she indisposed?" Genma questioned.
"I don't remember." He confessed and did his best to shine light on his pitch-black memory, "I think so. I think we were drinking together at one point..." he vaguely remembered offering someone a drink from his position on the floor, but it could have been anyone. It could have been the server for all he knew.

"Alright." Genma said and before Kakashi could react he felt a fist smash into his face.

He stumbled back and waited for a second blow, but it never came. Once he'd recovered he dared to straighten himself up to a standing position again. He watched Genma cautiously waiting for him to engage him in combat, but nothing happened. He just stood there.

"You know...you can hit me again..." Kakashi offered slowly. It was the least he deserved.

"No, once was enough for me." Genma said, shoving his hands in his pockets. Gai was still off to the side, watching the exchange with apprehension. It was clear that if the two men started fighting he wouldn't know what to do. Should he let it happen? Should he pull them apart? It wasn't a fair situation to put him in.

"Don't get me wrong," Genma started, "I'm pissed at you, Hatake. You should know better than to put yourself in a position like that...I always knew you were a mess but this sure is something. You're a jonin of Konohagakure. Have some more damned self-respect. I don't like you but..." he sighed, "I still don't think you'd put hands on a woman if you didn't receive consent. Whether either of you were able to give consent? That's another matter entirely that we could probably debate over for weeks and get nowhere."

He paused for a second.

"As much as I hate to admit it she's a grown woman and I differ to her judgement. Kiyoko and I have a good relationship. I'd like to think that if she was upset or anxious about what happened...she'd have come to me."

He looked at Kakashi sharply.

"However, I don't care if she comes to me hours from now or decades from now. If she tells me that someone raped her that night I'm coming after you. It won't just be some street brawl either...I'll kill you Hatake." He narrowed his eyes and pointed at him, "I'll fucking kill you."

There was a long, tense silence.

"That's...more than fair." Kakashi conceded after the tension had dragged on long enough.

"One more thing...don't be getting ideas in your head about her either." The other man warned.

"Ideas?" Kakashi questioned. He didn't really have any ideas about anything right now. He'd been expecting to be reduced to a bloody pulp on the ground at this point.

"Kiyoko doesn't want men and she doesn't need them. In fact, never mind men, Kiyoko doesn't need anybody. She especially doesn't need someone like you sniffing around. Now that we've got this sorted out...at least on our end...you're going to forget you even know her name. For as long as you're alive you're going to stay away from her. She deserves way better then you...get it?"

To be honest, before Genma had said something Kakashi hadn't had any ideas. The warning had almost had the opposite effect that the other jonin had intended. Just like he typically did, Genma was pointing out his flaws. His baggage. He was telling them that because of it he needed to stay away from her. Logically he agreed. After all, he always told himself that he didn't want a woman in his
They bred responsibility...that's what he always told himself anyway. What made this any
different?

He ignored the part of his brain that told him that what made this different were Genma's own words. She didn't need anybody. There was something about that thought that was appealing.

"Of course." He agreed.

He didn't realize why saying those words made him so uneasy. Why there was a part of him...a small part of him...that wanted to see her again? He didn't necessarily want to become involved in a romantic or even just a casual capacity. He just wanted to talk to her...he was curious...that's all. He couldn't help but wonder: just what exactly was Kiyoko Shiranui like? He didn't know anything about her.

He'd never know. Out of respect for the other jonin he'd walk away, never look back and he'd make sure to take his excessive baggage with him.

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Kakashi didn't forget about Kiyoko but he did shove her into a rarely explored area of his memory. Every now and then he'd think about her...wonder about her...toy with the idea of going up to her office and knocking on the door. But he didn't. He couldn't. He said he wouldn't.

Even though he was doing his best to forget about how damn curious he was, it was as if the universe had other plans. Suddenly, he saw her all over the village and when she did cross his path, he'd take the opportunity to watch her. Cautiously. He knew that if Genma ever caught him he'd be in trouble...despite the logical fact that she was always the one that wandered into him. It wasn't like he was looking for her.

One day he looked over and she was standing in his favourite bookstore. She had been quietly browsing fantasy novels and couldn't seem to make up her mind between two of them. He'd watched as her usual passive face had twisted to a look of deep contemplation. She was thinking. Weighing her pro's and con's. Eventually, she'd taken both.

As she seemed to make up her mind, she'd nodded to herself, tucked a stray strand of brown hair behind her ear and turned on her heel. Maybe he should take the opportunity to speak with her? After all, most of his curiosity revolved around him thinking 'just one conversation'. Just one. Now that he knew who she was he found himself wanting to know something about her. Anything really.

All that would take would be one innocent conversation; he didn't have to tell her that he was the man that slept with her that night. Although, he continually had a moral debate over whether telling her was the right thing to do...Genma be damned. But...he couldn't do that. He couldn't just walk up to her, after he'd been warned to stay away from her, and say 'Hey, I'm Kakashi. Oh, no need to introduce yourself we've already met. Don't worry, I don't remember either, not really anyway. Where did we meet? Oh, I stuck my-'

He'd had to grind his train of thought to screeching halt. He was a little frustrated with how conflicted he was feeling but there was no need to be so vulgar.

It wasn't until she made it up to the till that he realized he'd been openly observing the woman for almost fifteen minutes. He quickly put the book he'd been holding back and left without buying anything. He was eager to get away from her before he made a huge mistake.

Once they'd obtained the correct documentation to do so, it hadn't taken Team Genma very long to
track down the traitor. It turned out an elite enemy ninja had infiltrated the regular forces. He was using henge to disguise himself as registered genin or chunin, apply for missions, and then he used complex genjutsu to lead the teams well away from their anticipate mission-path.

Once they were far enough away, he'd spring an ambush. The inconsistencies between the reports and the battle scenes had been caused by genjutsu. It was a decent plan. Too bad Lord Third was too sharp for such a plan to work for long. The three jonin had apprehended the ninja and handed him over to the ANBU Torture and Interrogation Unit. He was Ibiki Morino's problem now.

With that case at a close, Kakashi was left with nothing to do. When he had nothing to do, he wandered the village. When he wandered the village? He saw Kiyoko Shiranui.

He'd finally reached the conclusion that he needed to go on a mission. A long one. So, he'd signed up for a few solo long-terms, one of which Lord Third finally approved him for. He'd never in his entire life thought that Konoha was too small until he accidentally slept with Genma Shiranui's sister.

So that's where he was now, standing out at the gate. The sun was just barely rising, he had Makeout Paradise in his hand and a backpack filled with mission supplies hanging off his one shoulder. It was a solo mission which was exactly what he thought he needed. He needed time away from the village, by himself, so that he could clear his head and get over his conflicted feelings.

As if to prove his point, a movement caught his eye and when he glanced up the source of all his confliction was at a nearby store. He could see a shag of blonde hair peeking from the other side of her body, but he couldn't tell who it belonged to. It looked like it might be a child.

He sighed, turned and left Konoha.

This may have been a mission, but he was going to treat it like a much-needed vacation.

XxX

July 13th 1462. It was the middle of the night and Kakashi Hatake was returning to a village that was sleeping soundly.

By the time he returned to the village, Kakashi was too worn out to think about his guilt or anything else for that matter. He shuffled through the gate, barely acknowledging the guards, doing his best to keep his eyes locked straight ahead of him. It was by no means the roughest mission he'd ever been on, but it had been a rough one. Suffering from sleep deprivation and several minor wounds, not to mention just overall exhaustion, he could barely even think.

That's why he couldn't dodge when he was suddenly dislodged from the ground and thrown down the street.

Thankfully, he didn't crash into any buildings. He just skidded across the ground until he was eventually stopped by a tall wooden fence. It cracked with the impact, but he would rather a fence get broken then a building. He could pay to fix a fence. He couldn't pay to fix a building. He faintly heard the guards at the gate voicing surprise at what had just happened. One of them seemed to call out to someone, which indicated to Kakashi that whoever had just attacked him wasn't an enemy. Or at least not a traditional enemy.

As he laid on the ground for a moment in a disoriented heap, he tried to remember who he'd pissed off prior to leaving. Well, he'd avoided Gai's 'challenges' for about a week before he'd left, he owed Ebisu money, he'd borrowed Aoba's favourite jacket and then lost it, he'd off-handedly insulted Ibiki…
He'd slept with Genma's sister.

As soon as that thought smashed its way back to the forefront of his mind, he groaned and wasn't surprised when he was hoisted onto his feet. Enraged brown eyes clashed with his own onyx ones. The other man didn't have his typical senbon dangling from his mouth and he was livid. He couldn't help the confusion that bubbled forward at the man's anger. He knew he'd slept with his sister, he was sorry for it, and he thought they'd put it behind them. They'd even done a mission together afterward with only the usual marginal rift between them.

He thought they were passed this. So, he was confused.

"Even-" He couldn't finish his greeting before a fist smashed into his face.

Genma punched him again, again and again. Over and over. It wasn't until Kakashi finally heard his nose give a sickening crunch that the other man seemed to freeze, one hand grasping Kakashi's shirt collar and the other poised to hit him again.

The next anticipated hit didn't come. Despite the pause he chose not to say anything. He wanted to see what the other man was going to do or say. He didn't want to accidentally provoke him. Genma leaned into him and his voice was so faint that Kakashi had to strain to hear his next words.

"You got my sister pregnant, you bastard." With that he punched Kakashi one more time, although it was half-hearted, before he released him. Kakashi stumbled back, partially due to the suddenness of being released and partially because of what Genma had just said. He completely forgot about any of the exhaustion he'd just been experiencing or the pain that had come from the other jonin's assault.

No. No. There was no way. Well...logically he knew it was possible, but it was impossible.

No.

He didn't. He couldn't have. No. There's no way that he could be...that he...that he created a little...person. He did the right act and had the right equipment but Kakashi couldn't...he couldn't be a-a...


"What?" Was all he managed to ask Genma, his voice that of clear disbelief. That seemed to frustrate the other man for some reason, who threw his hands in the air above his head. He paced for a moment and Kakashi watched him like he was a caged tiger.

"You!" The man practically yelled, before he remembered himself and brought his tone back to a whisper. They were in the middle of the street after all, in the middle of the night, and it was clear Genma didn't want everyone hearing their conversation. "You got my sister pregnant. She's pregnant. It's yours."

Genma was pointing at him deliberately, as if trying to drive his point home. Kakashi couldn't believe it.

"Are you sure?" Kakashi asked, almost innocently. He hadn't meant it the way it sounded...he just really couldn't comprehend that...there was a woman out there with a-a... his baby...growing...inside her. That wasn't possible: the Hatake family line was going to end with him and he was okay with that. The question, despite its true meaning, just seemed to make the other man angrier.

"Am I sure? Just what in the hell are you implying about my sister?" The man raged and Kakashi decided he should have chosen his words more carefully.
"Nothing." Kakashi shot back in defense. He didn't even know the woman! He wasn't trying to imply anything! "I just want to know if you're sure. I don't know anything about her...are you sure there isn't a man she's involved with? A boyfriend or something?"

He thought it was a logical question to ask but all it did was earn him another bone-shattering punch. This time to his gut. He supposed he deserved that.

"She's not involved with men. Almost twelve weeks ago you told me that you slept with my sister a week prior to that." Genma told him sternly, "My sister is about thirteen weeks pregnant. Do the math. Unless you can recall some other man fleeing my apartment that morning then it's yours."

Kakashi went numb and stood there in silence. His brain had stopped working. He'd...gotten a woman pregnant. Not just any woman; Genma's little sister. Kiyoko Shiranui. Kakashi felt...very small...like he was barely there. He wasn't sure what to do or what to think. He wasn't sure what he felt. He wasn't sure...of anything.

"What...do I do?" He asked the only other person present.

Genma stopped and looked at him, the anger seemed to melt away to confusion. He could have sworn he saw a flash of...pity? For him? Not likely but he could have sworn he saw it.

"Believe it or not...I don't hate you, Kakashi." Genma finally said after he seemed to have decided on something, "You're a good person who's been dealt a really bad hand in life. I think you're a complete mess on the best of days...but I don't hate you for it. You are who you are and to be honest there's worse things you could be then an absolute mess."

He sighed and glanced at the silver-haired man.

"For example, I know because you're a good person that right now...you're probably conflicted as hell. The fact that your conflicted...actually makes me feel better because I know it means that you're going to try to make the decision that won't hurt everyone else." He paused for another long minute, "I still stand by what I said about Kiyoko. She deserves better than you and just because she's carrying your child doesn't mean I've changed my mind. I'm not going to tell you to make her an 'honest woman' or anything like that. The more distance you keep from her the better."

He paused again.

"Kiyoko's my sister. I protect her. So, when it comes to her I'm still allowed to tell you what you can and can't do...but I have no right to tell you that you can't be a part of your own child's life. If you want to be a part of it, that is."

Kakashi was quiet as he thought about what Genma had said.

"This is your chance to choose, Kakashi." Genma began, "Kiyoko's chosen to keep the baby even though she doesn't know who the father is. I haven't told her a damn thing about you. Way I see it you have two options; You can take this opportunity to walk away or you can decide to be a father. The choice is yours."

He hesitated for a second.

"What about Kiyoko?" Kakashi asked quietly, "What if she doesn't want me around?"

"Well, I wouldn't blame her if that's how she feels but it's not about the two of you. This isn't about Kiyoko letting you into her life, it's about you being involved in the baby's life. Kiyoko's practical enough to co-parent with you even if she hates your guts." Genma explained, "Besides, I already
warned you to keep your distance from her. Be there for your child but you better continue to keep Kiyoko at arm's length."

"I need to think." It was all Kakashi could manage.

He really needed to think.

XxX

July 15th 1462.

For the last two days, the only thing Kakashi could think about was his father and how he'd abandoned him. All he could think about was how ashamed he had been in youth to be The White Fang's son. While he considered himself an Elitist, he had no pride in his lineage or family name...not anymore. He had been decided no, determined, to let the Hatake Clan die with him.

He could now add that to his extensive list of failures.

He'd gotten some innocent woman pregnant with his child. He didn't have any say at this point as to whether the child was coming into the world; Genma had said Kiyoko had chosen to keep it. Considering that the child was coming regardless of his decisions, he had to decide how he felt about the whole thing. Once he'd navigated the shock and disbelief of finding out that Kiyoko was pregnant, Kakashi had eventually concluded that he did feel a certain pride at the prospect of being a father. It was buried under a mountain of other mixed emotions, but it was there.

While he'd never have planned to be a father and while there was a part of him that loathed the Hatake name, he'd decided that he wanted it.

Kakashi wanted to be in his child's life but he had reservations as to whether that was best for the child. He had doubts that he would be a good influence in his child's life. He had to admit, there were times he wished he hadn't had the opportunity to know his father. Sometimes, he thought it might have been better to grow up orphaned.

Beyond his own, Kakashi had no role-model to follow as to what made a good father. He couldn't say with confidence that his own father had been good at it. He remembered being pressured to succeed, praised for arrogance, killing his first man when he was only five and having his father clap his shoulder...tell him what a great 'man' he was. Then his father had gone and killed himself, leaving behind a traumatized son.

Genma was right, he had baggage. Excessive baggage just like his own father had before him. Hatake men were depressed as fuck. As much as he wanted to be a part of its life...maybe it was best for the child if he wasn't around. Maybe wanting to be involved was selfish.

Now that he established what he wanted he had a choice to make.

On one hand, he could choose to not claim the child and leave it illegitimate. He could trust that Genma would keep the child's paternity a secret and therefore he could still succeed in his goal of letting the Hatake Clan line end. If he didn't get any more women pregnant because of drunken benders. Which, of course, after this whole incident Kakashi swore that he wouldn't drink sake for the rest of his miserable life.

If he chose this option, he would spare the child from...well...from him.

If he didn't claim the child formally, no one would ever know or at least could never prove, that the child was his but...he would know. He tried to imagine what his life would be like if he chose that
He could picture the brunette now, walking past him without even a glance, a small child...maybe it would look just like him...holding her hand. Maybe the child would be a ninja. Maybe they'd go on missions together and he'd watch the child's skill grow from a distance. They'd be strong. Whether he signed a Declaration of Paternity or not it would be his blood flowing through their veins. They'd have talent. Could he really do that? Could he really watch a child he knew was his grow up at a distance? Could he choose to stay a stranger?

The other option would be to meet Kiyoko Shiranui face to face...and tell her the truth. Confess to what he'd done, apologize for what happened and tell her that he wanted to be a part of his child's life. There was a possibility she'd deny him but Genna hadn't seemed to think that was very likely. If she accepted him then he would co-parent with the reasonable stranger and he would get to be involved in his child's life. He'd feel no guilt over abandoning his child...no pain from watching them grow up from afar.

This, however, would mean that the Hatake bloodline would formally continue and he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that either. It would also mean that he would risk being a poor father...maybe even traumatize his own child. Could he trust himself not to? Was his overwhelming guilt and depression something that he should subject his child to?

He sighed from where he stood in front of the memorial stone. Thinking. His eyes were tracing the characters of Obito's name absently. Obito had been a better person then him...Obito wouldn't be in this situation and even if he was he'd know exactly what to do. Not for the first time he morbidly thought that Obito should have lived and he should have died.

"You seem conflicted, Kakashi." He heard the familiar, wizened voice of Lord Third drift toward him. He hadn't sensed him, but he was The Hokage. That and Kakashi had been in very deep thought.

He was still thinking about a response when the old man continued.

"This inner conflict wouldn't happen to be about the paternity of Kiyoko Shiranui's child, would it?" Kakashi swung his head to look at the old man, who was standing next to him calmly with his hands behind his back. His face was stoic.

At Kakashi's questioning gaze, Lord Third seemed to decide to answer his unspoken question.

"I happened to be buying tobacco at a convenience store in the night when, to my surprise, Kakashi Hatake was thrown through a nearby fence." He shot a stern gaze at Kakashi. His silent way of saying 'I heard everything'.

"So, you know then." Kakashi remarked quietly, allowing his eyes to slip back to trace Obito's name. It was his default. Like pretending to read Makeout Paradise.

"I can't say I approve of how it came about...but why so much hesitation, Kakashi?" The old man questioned lightly, "All shinobi from old lineages, like yours and mine, are usually excited to welcome a new generation to their bloodline. Just think of all the potential the child will have. Just think of all the strength they'll bring to the village."

He couldn't help but think that Lord Third's very Elitist statement, considering he knew Lord Third wasn't an Elitist, was a way of mocking him. However, a quick glance at the old man showed only a sincere question.
"I want to be a father to this child, but I don't know how." He confessed, "I'm worried I'll do something wrong. I'm worried I'll be a problem in my child's life. I" I'm worried I'll hurt them."

He had a flash of his father laying on the ground after he'd killed himself.

"Being a father is one of the most difficult tasks a man can be given." The Hokage began, "Very few of us even come close to getting it right. You're concerned you'll be like your father?"

Kakashi didn't respond, since he knew the man's question was rhetorical. Of course, he was.

"It's a reasonable fear." The Hokage stated, "We often worry that we will become our parents. You think you have no example as to what a good father should be...but that is incorrect."

Kakashi shot him an imploring glance.

"When you look at what your father did wrong you have created a role-model. A role-model that shows you what not to do. You know how to be a good father, Kakashi, and if you try you will be one. Or, at the very least, just as good as the rest of us who use the title."

XxX

He took a deep breath. Then another. It had taken two days, but he'd reached his decision. Now he was standing outside the house that he'd learned through some sleuthing belonged to Kiyoko Shiranui. He hesitated for several long minutes before he knocked.

After that he heard some movement inside and the door was opened.

Kiyoko Shiranui was peering up at him with an impassive expression. Her long brown hair was pulled into a low ponytail and her indigo eyes seemed to wander his form for clues. She had on a shift dress, black tights and a white apron with lace. Underneath that, he could see a very small swell to her lower abdomen.

Kakashi froze at the sight. He'd known she was pregnant and thought about this whole situation for two days straight before he'd come anywhere near her door. He obviously knew she was pregnant but something about the swell to her once flat stomach, no matter how small, had him shocked. It was like the whole concept was theoretical before and suddenly it was real.

She seemed to take advantage of his hesitation.

"Oh, you must be here for Genma." She said with disinterest and turned to look at the other side of the room. He'd felt the other jonin there but Kakashi had been hoping he could say something before the other man decided to punch him again.

"Actually," He began and then lost his words. He had to clear his throat to buy him some time to get them back. "My name is Kakashi Hatake and... I'm the father of your child."

Her face slackened, and she dropped the hand towel she'd been holding.

Smooth, Kakashi. He couldn't help but scold himself internally. He'd had something way less blunt planned but that's what he'd ended up saying. 'I'm the father of your child'. Fuck.

"Fuck." He heard Genma echo his thought aloud.
Well-Mannered Frivolity

This was...this was...awkward. *Uncomfortable.*

I'd stood and stared at the man in stunned silence for several long minutes. The man, this Kakashi Hatake fellow, stood there in equally stunned silence. It was as if he hadn't been expecting his own announcement either and had somehow managed to shock himself.

Eventually, Genma came up behind me and gently guided me to sit down on the couch. I followed mutely. My brain had stopped working and I was attempting to get it to function. For the first time ever...I wished I had a kitchen table I could collapse onto.

Kitchen tables, I decided, were good neutral ground to discuss hard topics. Like the fact that the father of my unborn child had just crashed into my life unexpectedly. I decided that next paycheck I was going to buy a kitchen table. I had grossly underrated them and their usefulness.

The man didn't move from the doorway, until Genma shot him an imploring look.

"Personally, I'd love to slam the door in your face," he snapped at the other man, "but this isn't my house it's Kiyoko's." I realized then it was his way of letting me know that it was up to me to invite the man inside. Or not.

I still couldn't think straight.

"C-come in?" I finally stuttered out, but it was more like a question then anything. My voice was airy, and I was aware it lacked conviction.

The man hesitated in the door frame for a minute before he entered. I watched closely as he clicked the door closed behind him and stopped a few steps inside the house. He bent down and picked up the hand towel that had fallen on the floor. He stared at it for a second before he started moving again.

He came to stand in front of me and offered me the towel.

I stared at it for a moment before taking it back, doing my best to make sure our hands didn't touch. Something about touching him, this stranger who had fathered my child, unsettled me at my core.

I couldn't understand why at first, he hadn't done anything wrong, but the more I thought about it the more it suddenly made sense. Over the last few weeks I had grown accustomed to the idea that I was having a baby. Since the father didn't even occupy a small corner of my mind, I never gave him a second thought. Of course, there was a father, I'd be very concerned if there wasn't, but he'd been more of an idea then and actual person. Since the father was just a concept, I'd adjusted to the idea that this was my baby.

*My little person.*

No one else's. Just *mine.* I didn't have to share my little person with anyone because there was no one else to share them with. Up until a couple minutes ago, I didn't have to share this child with anyone and I hadn't wanted to. Then...*this man...*came into my home and announced himself. He became a person in my life...not just a concept like he had been before. Suddenly, in one second, this wasn't just my baby anymore. It was a shared little person. A little person I shared...with a
stranger who suddenly had a name and face. Subconsciously, I knew that by allowing our hands to touch I would feel as if I was giving life to a long-forgotten ghost.

I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that.

I vaguely recognized the man and I recalled seeing him in my office at least once, but I couldn't remember anything about him beyond that. I took in his height, build, his gravity defying silver hair and the mask that covered most of his face. All I could really see was a single, bored-looking onyx eye and fair skin. As much as I wished I could say I had some kind of epiphany and remembered the events of that night...I didn't. My memory was still just as blank as it had been before he'd shown up. His face...or...well...lack thereof didn't seem to evoke any memories or feelings or...anything really.

I absently folded the towel and placed it in my lap, before looking up at the two men who were now hovering over me. Genma's eyes were pinned to the other man and I noticed then that my elder brother hadn't been particularly surprised to see him. In fact, he hadn't been surprised to see the man at all. He was irritated at his presence, but it was as if he had been expecting him. I wondered how much Genma knew about all this and how long he'd been privy to this information. It occurred to me that, based on his reaction when I'd announced my pregnancy, my big brother must have known who the father of my child was this entire time. He had kept it from me.

I had mixed feelings. How was I supposed to feel about the idea that he'd known and hadn't said anything? On one hand, I was in favour of his silence. I'd been content without knowing who the father was and to be honest before the man walked into my house...it really hadn't held much relevance. On the other hand, my brother hadn't told me the truth. He hadn't exactly lied to me, but he hadn't told me everything either.

I realized that being upset about him not telling me something would be hypocritical since I hadn't told him about the incident in the first place. Apparently, he'd found out on his own.

As much as I appreciated his support, as of a few minutes ago this had become something between me and Kakashi Hatake. This part wasn't Genma's business and it was best if he sat this conversation out. I had a feeling the he wasn't going to like anything I was about to say to the man.

"Genma," I started, "Can you give us some privacy, please?"

He snapped his head to look at me and I could see the visible shock that was in his brown eyes. He didn't say anything at first and I noticed the other man also remained still and silent. My elder brother was analyzing me, trying to figure out what was going through my head and how he should respond. Eventually, he seemed to come to the same conclusion I had. He'd done his part and it was time to hit the showers.

He sighed.

"I have some drywall to do." He said, as if leaving us alone together had been his idea and not an order. He shot a warning look at the other man and then glanced back at me. "I'm just upstairs if you need me."

I nodded and watched as my brother grudgingly retreated up the stairs, glancing over his shoulder a couple times as he did so. When he was halfway up the stairs I heard a 'whooshing' sound rip through the air between Kakashi and I. After that, I saw a glint from the wall across the room, parallel to the silver-haired man's head. Upon closer inspection I noticed it was a senbon. I realized, judging by the senbon's position, that the other jonin must have dodged my brother's half-hearted attack. It must have been fast because I hadn't even seen him move.
"He just has to get the last word in." I remarked before I could stop myself, raising one eyebrow at the ninja tool. I hoped he planned on using his recently acquired drywall skills to fix the damage he'd just caused in my newly renovated living room.

"Tell me about it." The man responded with exasperation, before seeming to realize what he'd just said and looking off to the side sheepishly. I couldn't fault him for it. Apparently neither of us had very much tact.

I scrutinized him and made sure to visibly narrow my eyes, so he knew what I was doing. I watched him carefully for any signs of discomfort. He didn't fidget or shift his weight under my gaze. I don't know what I was expecting...he was a jonin like Genma after all. He was used to being calm under stress and he'd probably experienced far more severe pressure then the analytical eyes of a civilian woman.

"Do you want to sit down?" I asked, gesturing with my chin towards the other side of my couch.

"No, I'm fine thank you." He responded politely. I deadpanned at him and I realized that this man seemed to be just as socially stunted as I was...maybe more so. Whether he recognized it or not the man was looming over me like some sort of dark entity. I needed him to sit down for my own comfort. I hadn't been asking him to sit. In reality I was telling him to sit down because he was making me uneasy.

"I need you to sit down." I told him bluntly, deciding to replace my poor attempts at politeness with brutal honesty. I was better at that. "You're hovering, and it makes me uncomfortable."

"Oh." Was the casual response he gave me, "Sorry about that."

He immediately moved to sit on the opposite end of the couch. He was sitting with his back straight and his eyes were fixed on the empty wall across from him. I had plans to put a bookshelf there but for now it was just an empty white wall. It didn't go unnoticed to me that he attempted to leave as much space as he could between us.

We lapsed into a heavy silence while I tried desperately to think of what to say. We needed to talk about the baby...my little person...our little person but somehow it felt weird to just start talking about it.

"I'm sorry." I looked over at the man's sudden apology, my expression carefully controlled.

"For what exactly?" I questioned him, genuinely baffled at the sudden remorse.

"I don't know." He admitted with the smallest shrug of his shoulders, "For everything, I guess? It just felt like the right thing to say."

I thought about that for a second, trying to understand how I felt. I didn't do that very much. I certainly felt apprehension at this man's sudden appearance in my life. I felt disoriented by the entire situation...I was pregnant because of what had transpired after all. But was I angry? Did I feel like he needed to apologize to me?

I rooted around in my heart for the answer.

I finally concluded that...no, he didn't owe me an apology. At least he didn't owe me an apology any more than I owed him one. It's not like he'd done this on purpose; I'd already decided that both myself and the mystery man were equally to blame for what happened. I had no doubt that this wasn't an ideal situation for him either.
"You don't need to apologize." I responded dryly.

"I got you pregnant." He responded in an equally dry tone.

I turned my head to look at him and blinked. It was a rarity that I came across someone who was as blunt as I was. That was good though. If the two of us spent too much time trying to be gentle with each other we'd skirt around the important issues. We'd never get anything settled.

"Are you sure?" I questioned, raising an eyebrow at him. He snapped his head to look at me for the first time since we'd sat down, and I recognized his gaze. He was now scrutinizing me. Looking for anything I might be hiding.

"Well, I don't really remember anything." He told me evenly, "but through dumb luck I was able to establish that I was the man you slept with thirteen weeks ago. Unless there was someone else involved that night...then I'm the father."

There definitely wasn't someone else. I knew he was implying that, since neither of us could remember what happened, there was a slim chance that we hadn't been alone in our...activities. We shouldn't overlook that there was a slim chance there was a third person, maybe a man, involved. As uncomfortable as it was to do, you had to guess at everything when you remembered nothing.

"I highly doubt that." I responded after only a brief pause. Even the overtly sexual version of me that had lowered inhibitions wouldn't have been into a threesome. As identical twins, Atsuko and I had been propositioned for threesomes more times than I could count. Sleeping with twins was apparently a fantasy a lot of people had and there were many who had no shame in telling you so. People had their kinks and most of them didn't bother me.

Having men, and women, approach us who always wanted to sleep with the Shiranui twins had left me with a very strong distaste for the thought of sharing. They treated the two of us like we were a sexual novelty instead of people they might want to be intimate with. It was distasteful. I had a feeling I wouldn't have discarded my feelings on threesomes so easily. Even on a night like that one.

"I don't really like the thought of sharing sexual partners."

He nodded in acknowledgement.

"Your brother is insistent that you don't have a boyfriend. Now that he's out of earshot...is there anyone else you can think of that might be the father?"

I understood where he was coming from and appreciated his candor. He was trying to figure out if there was another possible father who I might be defending from Genma.

"No there isn't." I told him honestly, "thirteen weeks ago, I had sex with a man who I don't remember. That's that. No one before and no one since."

"I apologize for asking. Genma told me that and I did believe him. You were so hesitant just now that I wanted to make sure." He explained with an almost casual tone. "For what it's worth I believe you."

I nodded in understanding. So far...this was going quite smoothly. He seemed to sense that I really didn't care about being tactful, so he was reciprocating the sentiment. This was good. I could work with a man like this. So far, he seemed like the reasonable sort.

"I don't remember anything about what happened. I questioned if you were sure because I want to confirm that Genma isn't trying to pin this on the wrong person." I looked at him cautiously and he looked back at me.
Our eyes met for the first time and I could feel the tension as intuitive indigo clashed against perceptive onyx. I realized immediately that we were analyzing one another. We were like that for a long time, but eventually the intensity was too much, and I submitted. I turned to look at the empty wall again and after a second, I heard a shift of fabric that indicated he'd done the same.

"I want" The man started and then stopped himself, "I would like to be involved. I'm ready to sign a Declaration of Paternity."

I'm sure he intended for that statement to be comforting but it was the exact opposite.

I couldn't help but feel apprehensive at the mention of The Declaration. That document gave the child the right to take his name, which was fine, but it also gave him the right to have primary custody of the child. He was the legitimate father and that document reinforced both his and his child's rights. It however left me without any. As soon as that document was signed, the only thing that mattered was that he was the father. No one cared about what the mother wanted. I simmered over the whole idea and how I really felt about it in silence.

He may have wanted to sign it, but I didn't. Not until I knew more about him...and knew whether he would take my little person away from me. How could I place that trust in someone I didn't even know?

"What's wrong?" I couldn't help but notice that he seemed vaguely concerned. He may have had all the tact of a brick, just like me, but I couldn't deny how perceptive he was.

"I won't sign a Declaration of Paternity." The man froze at my statement and he went to say something, but I held up my hand. "Not yet."

I fixed him with a level stare that he met.

"I'm not saying you can't be involved but I can't ignore the rights a Declaration of Paternity would give you...and the rights it would take away from me." My voice lapsed into a controlled whisper, "You could take it away from me."

I was met with a stunned silence before the man looked away again, staring at the wall in front of us. We stayed like that for a long time and the clock behind us in the kitchen ticked loudly, building considerable tension. I didn't like his silence...but I understood it. Part of me wished he had immediately denied that he would ever take the baby away from me but another part of me was grateful that he was taking his time to reflect on all possible outcomes.

"I wouldn't do that." He finally said, "I'd have no idea how to attempt being a father on my own. I think the only reason I'm being so reasonable about the whole thing is because I know I'm not alone in this."

He turned to look at me.

"I'd only take it away if I thought that it could have a better life with me. I doubt that will ever happen." Something about his tone told me that there was something he wasn't exactly telling me. I assumed he was alluding to the fact that he had skeletons in his closet...maybe even literally.

He was very genuine. I wanted to believe him. After all, he seemed to be assuming that I was going to be a good parent or at least a better parent than him. I wanted to reciprocate his seemingly blind trust.

"Prove to me that I can trust you." Was how I finally responded.
"How?"

How? That was a good question. As much as I wanted to shove my feelings out of the equation trust wasn't something that was logical or even rational. There was the possibility that someone could spend years specifically trying to build your trust and you still wouldn't trust them. Trust was hard earned. So how could he prove his virtues and intentions to me?

"I don't know." I conceded, "but I need to trust you first. If I feel like I can trust you then I will sign the Declaration."

He seemed to enter deep thought.

"I have an idea." He eventually began, "but Genma's not going to like it."

XxX

"No, no, no." Genma exclaimed, pacing back and forth restlessly. "I can't believe you agreed to this, Kiyo!"

It was July 19th, 1462. Nearly a week had passed since I had met Kakashi Hatake and come to terms with the fact that he had fathered my child. Or at least, I had come to understand that my little person had a father that wanted to be involved in its life. The more I spoke to him, the more comfortable I got with the idea, mostly because I soon figured out that the silver-haired jonin's definition of 'involved' was slightly different from mine.

Kakashi didn't seem to care about parenting so much as he just wanted to be there. Unlike me he wasn't burying his nose in literature on parenthood or stressing over early education. He just wanted to be a consistent presence in his child's life; which I could understand and respect. I also discovered that I was comfortable with his hands-off demeanor because that meant he wasn't going to interfere with my overwhelming need to be hands-on. Essentially, he'd managed to successfully communicate to me that he was going to stay out of my way and let me raise the child how I wanted.

I was focused on grooming a good little human being that could contribute to the village. Kakashi seemed more concerned with just being allowed the privilege of watching me do that. There was something...innocent...about him having that point of view which allowed me the opportunity to be at ease. If I really could trust what he said, then his wants were simple and easy to accommodate.

He had, very briefly, informed me of the history of his family and that in the ninja community the Hatake name was a bit of a big deal. Genma and his friends didn't really discuss ninja business in front of me since they knew I cared very little about it. I would rather the ninja hierarchy remain an enigmatic, abstract ladder which I knew almost nothing about. I understood the village's administration and paperwork, but I had no desire to learn about the way ninja judged one another's worth. Especially since I'd found out that such a system classified Genma and Gai as said ladder's bottom-rung.

Kakashi seemed to decide that it was important that I know at least a little about his own heritage. I could tell he was trying to be humble about it, which I appreciated, but when he finally mentioned who his father was I'd had to hide my nervousness at the prospect. I was carrying the grandchild of Konohagakure's White Fang. Despite my willful ignorance, even I knew who that was. Sakumo Hatake had been among the top candidates to be considered for the position of Fourth Hokage before he'd killed himself. The name had stuck with me since I'd always thought it was a tragic and unnecessary death for a man who had dedicated his life to the village.

After I learned that information it made sense that Kakashi had likely earned a name for himself too,
but he didn't decide to fill me in on his own exploits and I didn't pry. I knew now that I couldn't bury my head in the sand and pretend that my child's bloodline didn't matter. If I agreed to sign the Declaration of Paternity, my child's parentage was going to matter to the entire village whether I liked it or not.

If I signed the Declaration, my relationship with my child was going to be a crowded one, invaded by the village's Elitist majority. Everywhere I would meet the scrutiny of unfriendly or curious eyes. Watching, waiting and wondering. All because of a bloodline that suggested the chance that my child would become Hokage was just a little bit better than every other child. My small family would have no privacy and no reprieve.

I remember having a moment of clarity and for the first time I truly understood what Lord Third had been trying to tell me that night in the archives. I hadn't understood then, not really. How could knowing that a child descends from a Hokage or a powerful ninja be a bad thing? Now that I could picture a life where myself and my unborn child would be under the constant observation of complete strangers? I believe I understood. Why couldn't my child just be my child? Why did it have to be the Hatake Clan's legacy?

The whole idea made my skin crawl and was almost enough to turn me off the idea of signing The Declaration altogether. I had even come close to telling Kakashi that but one look at his appeasing gaze softened my resolve. This wasn't just about me and what I wanted. This was about my little person and I didn't have the right to deny it a father who wanted to be there. I understood that if this child met the expectations of its bloodline and became a ninja, Kakashi would need to be more involved than simply being around. I made sure he was aware of that. Naruto was living proof that I couldn't teach a child the things they needed to know so they could 'walk the path of the shinobi'.

I'd bluntly informed Kakashi that anything I deemed 'ninja business' would, from then on, be his business. Not mine. What was it Lord Third had said? You need to select the right tool for the right job? Kakashi hadn't seemed concerned at the thought of having to groom his child into a decent ninja. In fact, he seemed less concerned about that than anything else about the situation.

Our conversation went well and by the time the man had left my house, disappearing down the darkened streets of the Saiten District, I had been rather satisfied. I felt like we had accomplished something. At the very least we'd scratched the surface.

However, I kept coming back to trust. How could I trust him to tell me the truth about what he wanted? I didn't know anything about him and he didn't know anything about me either...it certainly created a barrier between the two of us. I was not signing a Declaration of Paternity until I knew with certainty that I could trust Kakashi Hatake and his motivations.

"You don't need to do this, Kiyoko." Genma stressed, finally coming to stand next to the kitchen counter where I was leaning, "I can tell you everything you need to know about him. First, he's a conniving weasel who can't seem to keep his word to not get involved with my sister."

I sighed and gave his enraged features a disinterested once-over.

"Genma," I chided lightly, "We're not 'getting involved'. He just suggested that we spend some time together, get to know one another."

"Which sounds like a proposition if I've ever heard one! Can't you hear yourself!?" Genma exclaimed, my statement only escalating him further. "He asked you on a date!"

"It's not a date." I protested flatly, making sure to keep my facial expressions neutral. It really wasn't a date, at least not to me, and if Hatake thought otherwise he was going to be very
disappointed. "I can't trust a man that I don't know anything about and I'm not signing that Declaration until I trust him."

This was a recurring argument that Genma and I had been having at least once a day since I'd met Kakashi. The argument had become so predictable that I was able to mouth along to what my elder brother said next.

"Kiyoko, seriously, just sign the damn thing and get it over with!" He huffed, "It's an unfounded fear. There's a lot of shitty fucking things I can tell you about Kakashi, but he wouldn't be so callous as to take the kid away from you."

"That may be so but I'm not signing it." I shot back stubbornly.

Genma moved to throw himself on the couch and ran a hand over his head, groaning in frustration. He was also probably thinking about how repetitive this was becoming.

"I still don't get why you're going on a date with him." He growled after he'd taken a moment to catch his breath.

"It's not a date." I insisted again. "It's a well-mannered outing between two people who need to get to know each other. Like what you did with Raido and Iwashi when you first became teammates."

"I didn't get Raido or Iwashi pregnant first!" Genma shouted back at me, losing his temper again.

"There's no need to put yourself down, Genma." Came a casual, teasing voice from the entrance to the house. I turned towards the door where the subject of my brother's ire was standing, "I'm sure they still liked you just fine."

Genma didn't say anything in response to the other man's prodding at first. He just stared at him with an intensity I hadn't seen in a long time. It was rare to see Genma so worked up about...well anything. He was typically cool and composed but this whole situation was really getting to him. Seeing that he wasn't going to get a reaction, Kakashi turned to look at me.

"Are you ready to go?" He asked, and I nodded. I grabbed my wallet and got halfway to the door before Genma seemed to recover some of his steam.

"What in the hell are you even doing in here?" Genma ground out, "You don't live here and you're never going to live here. Don't just walk in to my sister's house so casually."

"Oh, I knocked." Kakashi explained lazily, "but no one heard me. Likely because there was a heated argument going on about my intentions."

Genma glared at him and I ignored the two, moving towards where my boots were lying next to the door. I was starting to get the impression that the two men hadn't been overly fond of one another to begin with and this whole incident was making their relationship worse. I ignored them both, drowning out their quips at one another, until I finally managed to get my boots on.

"Look, Genma, just calm down." Kakashi finally said and followed it with an exhausted sigh, "I told you I'd keep my distance and I meant it."

Genma didn't say anything. He just glared with a searing hatred that I was surprised he even had the ability to feel. This wasn't my big brother. This was a hardened jonin who felt as if he'd been wronged by a once trusted comrade.

"I even invited a neutral, third-party to accompany us this evening." The silver-haired man said with
a tone that sounded like he was trying to coax the other man's usual good nature back out into the open. "A chaperone, if you will."

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Kakashi from where I was now standing to his right.

"You invited a chaperone?" I questioned.

He turned to look at me, his visible eye closing in what I assumed was an indication that he was smiling under his mask.

"Yes. Mostly for Genma's peace of mind." He confirmed simply, "I hope you don't mind." I blinked at him, secretly admiring his forethought although it really hadn't been necessary.

"I don't mind." I informed him, "Actually, I invited a chaperone too."

"Who did you ask?" Genma broke the silence that had followed, his voice significantly calmer than it had been before. I noticed that his face had reverted to the passive mask that I was used to, and his eyes were sliding between the two of us almost casually. Kakashi's statement had the desired effect. For the time being, the man was pacified.

"I-" Kakashi began but he was quickly interrupted.

"Who else but KONOHA'S SUBLIME GREEN BEAST!?!?" The riotous, very familiar, voice of Might Gai came from outside my open front door. Gai burst through the entrance, vaulted over Kakashi's shoulders and landed on his feet in the center of my living space. He pointed at his former teammate enthusiastically. "You have nothing to fear, Genma! I am here to ensure that these two only have an evening of Well-Mannered Frivolity!"

Genma looked notably relieved at the other man's presence. I couldn't help but look up at Kakashi who seemed to be observing the spandex-clad man with a passivity that I thought only my brother and I had mastered. I couldn't help but feel my heart warm a little at the silver-haired man's thoughtfulness. He really was doing his best to make my brother feel secure and I couldn't help but notice how at ease he was around Gai. There were few people who were at ease around Gai, despite how genuine and lovely a person he was. The more I watched the man the more I realized that he...seemed to even like Gai. I considered the fact that he seemed to get along with Gai to be a mark in his favour.

"Don't tell me you invited Gai too?" Kakashi asked me with a tone that I couldn't quite place. He almost sounded...playful?

"No, I invited a friend of mine." I responded quietly, watching as Gai engaged Genma in an enthusiastic conversation that I couldn't follow. "She doesn't get out much anymore, so I thought she might have fun."

As if on cue, I heard a throat clear behind me and a glance over my shoulder revealed Himari.

"Good evening." She greeted politely from where she was outside. I had told her that this was a casual outing, so she didn't need to dress up or put on anything she wouldn't normally wear. She'd clearly just come from work, because she was still wearing her usual plum coloured sweater, black heeled sandals and black pants. Her orange cropped hair was a little messy, courtesy of nagging hormonal preteen girls all day, and was peering at us from around the glare of her oval-shaped glasses.

Of my three friends, Himari was the one who was handling this situation with the most reason. My other two friends were on the offensive and seemed determined to protect me from Kakashi. When
I'd told Yuzuha that I'd discovered who the father of my child was, she'd threatened to kick him in the shins every time she saw him until the day she died. Tamaki had threatened to gossip his reputation so far into a hole that he'd never get rostered for missions again. I appreciated their concern, but I really didn't trust either woman around the father of my unborn child right now.

In contrast to the other two, Himari had simply asked me how I felt. She'd asked me if I was okay. She hadn't gone on the offensive or the defensive, she'd simply watched me for any reaction that she could decipher. As much as I appreciated that the other two were trying to protect me, right now I needed someone to keep a cool head.

That cool head was Mrs. Himari Amano.

When I asked if she minded chaperoning our outing, she thought it would be a good idea. Genma knew Himari well enough to realize that she wasn't likely to tolerate me being made uncomfortable. I moved to the side to allow her into the house and she nodded quietly in thanks.

"Thank you for coming, Himari." I began, "but it seems we doubled up on chaperones for tonight."

"Oh?" She questioned, her gaze being drawn to the green and orange clad jonin who was doing a pose next to my couch.

"Yes," I responded with a nod, "Gai has this under control if you'd rather get back to Yuki." I saw her pass her eyes over the very enthusiastic form of Gai once more with apprehension. She pursed her lips slightly in poorly concealed doubt.

"Well, to be honest it's been awhile since I've had much time to myself. I was kind of looking forward to this." Himari confessed quietly, "Yuki's already sound asleep at her grandmother's, so I'd still like to tag along...if I won't be in the way, that is."

I couldn't help the small smile that pulled at the corners of my lips.

"Well, I'm sure Gai won't mind the company." I reassured her, looking over at Gai who had finished whatever conversation he was having with his former teammate. He approached the three of us who were hovering around the doorway.

"Gai, Kakashi, this is Mrs. Himari Amano. She's a friend of mine." Once I'd introduced her to the two of them and I saw that she had mentally established which one was which, I turned to Gai.

"Himari's going to be co-chaperoning with you tonight, Gai. Do you mind?"

Gai flashed a brilliant, glittering grin and a thumbs up at the other woman who blinked a few times at the brightness of his smile.

"I do not mind at all!" The jonin responded happily, "It will be nice to have the company of such a fine lady."

I hadn't expected him to say anything different.

Thus, commenced our evening of 'well-mannered frivolity'.

XxX

The four of us had gone to the Yumehara Teahouse but had gotten separate booths across the room from each other. It had been Himari's idea. She'd brought up the point that the two of us might find it difficult to discuss what we needed to with the other pair breathing down our necks. There was some protest from Gai, but I agreed with Himari's point and Kakashi had decided that he was just going to
go with the majority vote. Which meant the women. Outnumbered three-to-one, we'd split up. We made sure to get booths that were within each other's line of sight. We couldn't hear everything each other were saying, but if one of us were to raise our voice, we would probably be able to make out what they were saying. That way if anything got out of hand, all I had to do was raise my voice and Gai would be hovering over our table.

So far, that hadn't been required.

Kakashi and I had started with simple things. I'd discovered that he liked reading, specifically those smutty Make-Out Series books. I hadn't expected to find anything in common, but I had reciprocated by telling him that I was also an avid reader when I had occasion to do so. Albeit our choice in literature was vastly different.

He mentioned that he disliked being idle, since it gave him too much time to himself. Once again, I'd been surprised to find anything we had in common but responded that I also despised having nothing to do. I loved my work and I loved having a job to do.

He informed me that his favourite foods were salt-broiled saury and miso soup with eggplant. I reciprocated by letting him know that I didn't really have a favourite food, although lately I'd been craving nothing but daifuku.

"Do you have any goals for the future?" I asked him, taking a sip of my tea.

"Not particularly." He admitted to me, shrugging his shoulders. He'd ordered food and I couldn't help but wonder how he was going to eat it without showing his face. Maybe he'd distract me and then eat?

"So, you just...exist? There's nothing to motivate you?" I questioned, not being able to hide the skeptical tone in my voice. I couldn't imagine not having a goal.

"Well, I never really thought about it." He responded, "but I suppose so."

"What about being Hokage?" I decided to ask, looking down at the bowl of gyudon in front of me and picking up my chopsticks.

He let out a light chuckle.

"Not all ninja want to be Hokage." He told me with an amused tone.

"I'm not talking about all ninja," I began drily while I looked at him and pointed my chopsticks in his direction, "I'm talking about you."

His humor seemed to fade slowly when he realized I wasn't joking. Apparently, I was asking the hard questions now and he was getting uncomfortable. I wouldn't let him dodge this question though; I'd asked him something and I wanted an answer. This was part of me digging for trust. I wanted to see if he would tell me the truth - even if it was ugly.

"No, I don't want to be Hokage." He said pointedly, and I could tell he meant it. So, he was telling me the truth; he wasn't trying to lie to make himself sound humble.

"Why not?" I asked, not willing to let up my line of inquiry.

He went quiet for a long moment.

"It's too much responsibility. I have no desire for it." He admitted bluntly.
Again, I could tell what he said was the truth and I appreciated it. It couldn't be easy to admit to the mother of your unplanned, unborn child that you had no interest in responsibility. If I'd been anyone else, I might've felt insecure or insulted. Instead I felt almost comforted by the sentiment. He didn't lie to me, even though it would have sounded better and would have been the easier thing to do.

"Is it just me," Kakashi asked in a casual tone that lured me from my thoughts, "or are they having a very good time together?"

I looked up from my bowl of gyudon, swallowed, and followed his gaze across the room to our chaperones.

Gai seemed to be telling the woman an exciting story. He was very into it. He had a bright grin on his face and his arms were gesturing wildly at whatever he was telling her. Himari's face was bright red with poorly-concealed laughter, one manicured hand held over her mouth. She was leaning forward in her seat and her shoulders were shaking. Whatever Gai said had the normally quiet woman was bubbling.

"They do seem to be enjoying themselves." I nodded, "I'm glad."

"It's nice to see." He agreed.

"Himari lost her husband...two years ago now?" I attempted to recall exactly how long ago it had been. She hadn't been far along in her pregnancy when he'd died, and Yuki was over a year old now. It was odd, but the years were slipping away from me.

"I think I knew her husband. You said Amano, right?" The jonin asked, leaning on the table with one arm. I nodded, wondering where he was going with this inquiry.

"I worked with him on occasion." He began, and I noticed his one eye glance over at the other table as he began, "Until now I've never met his wife, but I always remember feeling bad for her."

I took my chopsticks and stuck them in my gyudon, moving the food around in my bowl and trying to avoid eye contact with him. I was also doing my best to avoid looking over at Himari, as if when I did she'd sense it and be able to hear us.

"He wasn't...the nicest guy." He told me with some hesitation, "The way he talked about his own wife didn't earn him many friends."

I hadn't wanted to hear it, but he had confirmed my fears. The longer I knew Himari, the more I got to know her, the more I realized that her view of her late husband was very skewed. She raised her husband up on a pedestal and didn't seem to realize that the way he'd treated her in life wasn't right. I couldn't pretend to know much about relationships, but I'd always heard that couples had to compromise and make sacrifices for one another. It seemed like when her husband was around, Himari had been the only one making the sacrifices. He sounded oppressive and she didn't even seem to recognize it.

"That's not really any of our business. We shouldn't speak ill of the dead." I chided the man softly, finally chancing a look over at the chaperones. The two of them were grinning at each other and looking over the food that had just come to their table with excitement. Gai said something. Himari laughed, not even bothering to conceal it this time.

"True." He conceded, "I just bring it up because...I don't think Gai's ever had a proper date. He doesn't look it, but he gets too nervous to ask women out. Just mention a 'date' and he turns into a total coward...but if he thinks he's just chaperoning an outing of well-mannered frivolity?"
I raised an eyebrow at him and wondered what exactly he was getting at. Another quick glance at them had the gears grinding in my head and after a few thoughtful moments I understood what he was getting at. Sly dog. He'd planned this. I wasn't sure how he'd known that I'd invited Himari to chaperone us, but he had, and he'd planned this all. He'd set Gai up on a date.

Genma had been right after all. This was a date. What he'd gotten wrong was that Kakashi and I weren't the participants...we were the chaperones.

"You know..." I started slowly, looking at the man across from me, "someone like Gai would be good for her. He's very different from what she's used to." Different from her husband was what I had wanted to say. From the sounds of it drawing parallels between the two men would be impossible.

"How much you want to bet we could leave right now and they'd be too into each other to notice?" He suddenly asked me, leaning forward over the table and bringing his voice to a low whisper. I didn't exactly like the idea although the man was slowly earning my trust and I realized that the idea of being alone with him no longer made me uncomfortable.

"If we take off on Gai, and somehow get away with it, Genma will kill him." I responded blandly. I didn't want to get Gai in trouble.

"Genma doesn't need to know. We'll catch up with the two of them later tonight." Kakashi responded, "I promise."

I promise.

A promise was easy to make but very difficult to keep. If he could keep this one, then I would feel a little bit more trusting towards him. You couldn't demand someone earn your trust and then give them no opportunities to do so.

"Okay," I said after a long pause, "I'll bite."

XxX

I wasn't sure how we'd left the Yumehara Teahouse so fast, but we had. One minute I was placing the ryo to pay for my meal on the table, the next Kakashi and I were standing on a red bridge over the Itama River. I felt disoriented and dizzy. I had to grip the railing of the bridge to keep from stumbling around. Clearly noticing my distress, the silver-haired jonin hovered beside me, but didn't reach out to touch me. He'd obviously noticed my hesitation to touch him the other day and was determined to respect my unspoken wishes.

"Sorry," He apologized, "I should have warned you I was going to do that."

It took me a few moments to get my bearings but when I finally did, I leaned against the railing and shot him an inquisitive look. He stared back quietly.

"How did you know Gai and Himari would hit it off?" I couldn't help the curiosity that was eating at me. I'd known both for a while now, they were both constant presences in my life, and I'd had no idea they would mesh. Then again people weren't exactly my forte.

Kakashi came up beside me and leaned against the railing as well. The moon was on the rise and the stars hadn't quite come out. This bridge was near the edge of the village so there weren't any buildings nearby. I could see some of the village's taller buildings in the distance, just over the treetops, but other than that there was barely anything to indicate we were still in the village. The leaves of the small forest surrounding the riverbank rustled together in the light summer breeze.
"She doesn't seem to remember but they've met before." He responded lazily, staring up into the darkened sky.

I blinked at him.

"How could she forget meeting someone like Gai?" I had a tough time buying that. Gai was a very loud personality and it wasn't exactly easy to forget him. You'd have to try to forget him and even then, you probably wouldn't manage it. I'm sure there were plenty of misguided people who wished they could forget about Gai's exuberance.

"She was distracted. It was the middle of the night, her baby was sick, and she was running through the street - probably trying to get to the hospital." He started, looking over at me, "Gai had just cornered me for a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors outside a bar when she ran by. She was clearly distraught. Gai offered to take the baby to the hospital for her since he could run faster."

I listened quietly and tried to picture the scenario in my head. Gai was the sort that would offer to help a stranger with no hesitation or thought for reward.

"So, Gai took Yuki to the hospital for her?" I reiterated.

"He didn't just take the baby. Gai put the baby in the crook of his arm, threw the woman over his shoulder and was gone. I don't think I've ever seen him go so fast." The man told me with a light-hearted chuckle.

"She never said anything about that."

"Well, she was pretty worked up. I don't think she was thinking straight and Gai tracked me down again less than twenty minutes later. He probably didn't stick around to be thanked for his service." He explained.

"Still doesn't explain how you knew they'd hit it off." I pointed out.

"True. Let's just say Gai wears his heart on his sleeve and it wasn't hard to tell he was suddenly very distracted. I had a hunch." He seemed like he was recalling something, probably something he had caught Gai doing or saying. "I knew he wouldn't do anything on his own."

"How'd you know I invited Himari?" I finally asked him, and I noticed he had a moment where he looked bashful.

"I actually came by your office to see you the other day." He told me with a small shrug, "I overheard the conversation you were having with Mrs. Amano. When I saw who it was I couldn't resist taking the opportunity." I wasn't sure how I felt about him creeping around outside my office and overhearing my conversations, but I understood there was very little I could do about it. He was a ninja after all. Still, the idea that he'd been sneaking around me and hadn't announced himself wasn't exactly a check-mark in the trustworthy box.

"I can't say I understand." I finally admitted, "I'm not very good with stuff like that but it looks like you were right. You can't argue with results."

We lapsed into a long silence before I finally broke it.

"That was sweet." I said decidedly, "What you did for Gai, I mean."

"He deserves to have somebody he can turn to." The man told me simply, "It's really a shame he has no nerve around women. I know no one better than him and no one that deserves someone to love
them more." I couldn't help the small smile that tugged on my lips at his statement. It seemed Gai had more fans in the village then I had initially thought.

I agreed with him under my breath, still thinking about what he'd said, and glanced at the man only to discover that he was staring at me. It was difficult to tell with his face mostly covered but I got the impression that he was in deep thought. I met his gaze evenly, but just like the first few times we'd done it, he stared me down and I was the one who had to look away first. The silent battle appeared to have brought him out of his thoughts and he looked back at the sky.

"How long do you think we have until Gai catches up with us?" I asked for no reason other than to break the tense silence that had fallen over the two of us.

"Normally I'd say five minutes but it's going to take him a little bit longer to notice we're gone. On top of that once he does notice his honor won't let him take off without his fellow chaperone, which will certainly slow his search down. Maybe forty-five minutes?" He finally seemed to decide on a number.

"Well, what do we do until then?" I asked him.

"Same thing we were doing before," He replied simply, looking back over at me, "try to figure each other out. Understand who exactly it is we're dealing with."

So, we talked. Asked questions. Neither of us seemed to hide the ugly truth about ourselves from the other. I discovered he was a depressed, retired ANBU, who was leery of responsibility and had lost more teammates then he cared to remember. He told me he wallowed in his own grief far more than he should, but he couldn't seem to change. Told me he wasn't ready to.

I told him that I had difficulty empathizing, that I tended to bury myself in my work and that I had no tolerance for people who made their decisions using only their emotions. Told him I didn't have many friends. Told him I was 'determined' which was just a polite way of saying I was stubborn and had a one-track mind.

We agreed that neither of us were ready to be parents but there was something deep inside us that wanted to try.

By the time Gai came running towards us through the night, clasping the hand of a dizzy looking Himari that he was pulling behind him, I'd discovered that he was an honest person. That was something I could work with.

XxX

"Does your baby have a dad?" Naruto asked suddenly from where he was sitting on the ground.

"Yes." I responded simply, looking over at him. "All babies have dads."

"Yeah, I know, Iruka sensei told me that." Naruto said, looking up at me and narrowing his blue eyes. "He said that husbands have a special technique that they learn so that they can make babies and become dads."
I was starting to get the impression that I really shouldn't have left Iruka to have the sex-talk with Naruto. I had a feeling that moment of mischievousness I'd had a few weeks ago was about to blow up in my face...in the form of a curious eight-year-old who had questions about this 'special technique'.

"You sound like you don't believe him." I remarked casually, trying to gauge exactly what the young boy was thinking.

The boy hummed with clear skepticism, his eyes still resting on my swelling stomach.

"But Miss Shiranui…" The boy eventually began, "You don't have a husband. So, who learned the special technique for you to get a baby? If it's a special technique, then it's a jutsu which means it needs to be learned by a ninja and you're not a ninja, so you couldn't learn it all by yourself. So, how do civilian men become dads if they can't learn jutsu? You don't have a husband so that means your baby doesn't have a dad, but you said that it does."

He was starting to talk in circles and I watched as he put his little hands on either side of his head in clear confusion.

Oh, boy. If I left him like this his little head was going to explode.

I really shouldn't have shoved this off on Iruka. It was clear his awkward attempts at being tactful had only managed to not only misinform the young boy but make him even more confused. Sometimes Naruto could be gullible, but this was not one of those times. I moved so that I could sit on the ground next to him, stretched my legs out in front of him and leaned back on my hands. The hemline of my skirt rose slightly, and I was reminded again that I would really have to re-think my wardrobe soon.

I sighed deeply, which earned me the boy's attention and he stared at me with his inquisitive blue eyes.

"Okay, Naruto." I started. "Let's have some real talk."

Then I started from the beginning. I told Naruto that it was hard for adults to talk to kids about where babies come from, so both Iruka and I had been avoiding the subject. His sensei had been doing his best to communicate it to him without feeling like he was stretching the boundaries of what was acceptable and had told him something that wasn't entirely true. I told him that we were going to start over, he could forget what they'd talked about before, and I was going to tell him exactly where babies came from.

So, I did.

Naruto had pulled his knees up to his chin and was resting on them, watching me with wide eyes. Occasionally, he had a question but other than that he was quiet and let me tell him what I felt he needed to know. It was very possible that eight was too soon to learn about sex but to be honest I didn't know when would be appropriate. I couldn't remember when I'd learned about such things, so I didn't really have a basis for what was acceptable. Still, I'd rather tell him early then have him go years thinking sex was a special jutsu the village taught you when you got married. To me, that misinformation would be more detrimental to him in the long run.

I told him about the difference between boys and girls. I wasn't a teacher, but I did my best to explain to him how those differences were used to create another human being. A little person. A baby.

"So...it's not a ninjutsu?" Naruto finally confirmed when I was done explaining the topic as best I
"No."

"That's good." The boy seemed relieved, "I don't like learning ninjutsu. Ninjutsu is hard - my catra never co-operates." I caught the slip-up when he said 'catra' instead of 'chakra' but I chose to ignore it. If I was going to do the sex-talk, Iruka needed to at least be able to do the chakra-talk. "I don't want to learn a baby-making jutsu." It took me a moment to fully process what he'd said beyond the innocent discussion of chakra and how hard ninjutsu was.

"Naruto," I began a little surprised, "do you mean to say you want to be a parent when you grow up?"

"Of course. Why not?" The boy began matter-of-factly, "When I'm older I'm going to be Hokage everyone is going to look up to me! I'll be important! Then I'll have some friends...and now that I know where babies come from, I'll get to have my own family too!"

It felt as if my heart was doing somersaults in my chest as I took in his innocent enthusiasm and wonder at the new information he'd learned. He was actually...grateful for the knowledge. There was a purity to the way he said it and the way he marveled at the simple act of nature that I'd just explained to him. I didn't have it in me to point out that he'd just been telling me how bad he was at ninjutsu before turning around and proclaiming he was going to be Hokage.

XxX

I sat rigid as a plank of wood in the chair across from Rika. I was used to commissioning documents but beyond my own Will and Testament, I'd never been on this side of the desk before.

It had been a hard decision but after a few weeks, I decided Kakashi Hatake had earned my trust to the best of his ability. So, I finally agreed to sign the Declaration of Paternity.

Kakashi was beside me looking more out of his element then I was. As I was a member of the CAO and Kakashi, I had come to discover, had a notable reputation the head of the Registrations department had decided to commission the document herself. She'd told me that it was her way of removing the temptation to gossip from her employees.

Genma, after much protesting, had finally been persuaded to stay at home. As a relative of mine, he wouldn't have been allowed to witness the signing of The Declaration of Paternity anyway, so it was best for him not to come along. Relatives of the parents were not allowed to formally witness The Declaration since there was always the possibility that they were attempting to coerce either parent into signing it. For Genma to be present would mean that someone could contest The Declaration should something happen to Kakashi. I understood his desire to be there, but I didn't want to risk it.

It hadn't been difficult for the two of us to decide that we wanted Might Gai to be our primary witness. The man knew both parties involved equally and would have no professional or personal interest in the child's paternity.

Considering I couldn't trust Yuzuha or Tamaki in the same room with Kakashi that left me with few other options. This had been proven by the fact that Yuzuha had jammed her foot into his shin when they passed one another on the fifth floor. To be fair, she had warned me that was her intention, but I had thought it was all bluster. She'd proven my assumption wrong. I'd witnessed the whole incident in slow motion from where I was sitting in my office and while the jonin brushed it off, the woman had clearly taken him by surprise.
So, I'd chosen Himari as our other witness.

To my surprise, Lord Third had opted to officiate The Declaration in person. Usually, the other parties involved witnessed and signed the document, then it was sent up to Lord Third's office where he would sign it. Once it was completed, it would be returned to Registrations where they would file it for safekeeping. I wasn't sure whether to feel uneasy or honored by the fact that Lord Third wanted to be present for my child's Declaration of Paternity. It gave an additional weight to the document that reminded me of my fears about having to deal with the village's Elitist majority throughout my child's life. I pushed them down.

Neither of us had any idea what we were doing but Kakashi had proven to me over the last few weeks that he had earned the right to try. Trying to him meant he wanted to do this right, the way the village wanted it, and sign a Declaration of Paternity. He wanted to give the child the Hatake name.

Rika pushed the simple contract towards me, sending me a tight-lipped smile.

I couldn't back out now. Well, I could but I wouldn't. It wasn't in my nature to go back on something that I had agreed to do. Kakashi had been patient and given me the time to think it over. He'd given me the option to say no when in reality, by the laws of the village, he hadn't needed to.

I glanced at the other occupants of the room briefly, before taking the paper into my hands. I read it over carefully.

*I, Kakashi Hatake, as of July 26th, 1462, submit this document in order to formally declare paternity of the child carried by Kiyoko Shiranui (ID#016649).*

*In the event of my death apparent, or my absence, on or before the date the child is carried to term let this serve as undisputed proof of paternity. The mentioned child will hold all rights to citizenship, my name, wealth, properties and any other inheritances he/she will be eligible for by the laws of village.*

*Signature of Father: KAKASHI HATAKE*

*Signature of Mother:*

*All witnesses present have been of sound mind and agree that they have been informed of the consequences should this declaration be at any time proved false. All witnesses listed below, who hold no blood relation or personal/professional interest in the paternity of the child, hereby declare that the above named father is of sound mind to make this declaration. All witnesses have agreed that they are of the belief this child does belong to the person submitting this declaration.*

*Signature of Officiator: HIRUZEN SARUTOBI*

*Witnesses;*

*MIGHT GAI*

*HIMARI AMANO*

*RIKA ITO*

I took a deep breath, swallowed down the last of my reservation, picked up the pen and made my mark.
Heads up everyone. At the end of this chapter the last bad thing to happen to Kiyoko in the story is alluded to. It doesn't happen in this chapter but it's made very obvious what is going to happen. The next chapter, Kiyoko's Convictions, is going to be really depressing - I felt the need to warn everyone. Don't worry...Kiyoko is still Kiyoko...she's my unbreakable girl and she remains in-character.

Unfortunately, there's something coming, arguably a good thing, in Kiyoko's future that first requires this bad thing to happen. To anyone like me who is into happy endings; Kiyoko and Kakashi DO have a happy ending, because I'm a sucker for them, but it won't be for many chapters yet. Civil Affairs is roughly half way done.

Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 20 -<>- Tobiro

I had discovered that Kakashi was often away from the village for days and even weeks at a time which, to be honest, was almost a... comfort? I liked it that way. It was normal for me to have extended breaks between seeing the men in my life. I had my own way of doing things and I had my own life that they occasionally became involved in. I'd feared that, considering the situation, Kakashi would become an invader who frequently disrupted my routine. I was used to being by myself at home and I didn't want a man I was just getting to know thinking that he had the right to hover over me.

To my pleasant surprise, he was here one day and then gone the next. Which to be quite honest was agreeable to me since I was...well...I was used to it. It gave me my space. It gave me much-needed breathing room to go about my life as usual. Genma had turned into a mother-hen that I was glad Lord Hokage seemed to think he still needed for frequent missions. It kept him out of my hair every other week.

Despite having already gotten my signature on the Declaration of Paternity, Kakashi still seemed determined to continue building trust between us. I couldn't deny that it was a promising idea to continue to develop our relationship. We were going to be seeing a lot of one another for the next sixteen years. Trusting one another was important. Whenever he was in the village we would go on outings of well-mannered frivolity, usually with Gai and Himari tagging along behind us.

After the third time we left the unofficial couple to their own devices in a restaurant, they finally seemed to get the hint and just took the gift they'd been given. Gai hadn't tracked us down and eventually, realizing the other man wasn't going to show up, Kakashi had escorted me home by himself. Thankfully, Genma hadn't been home to notice the lapse in routine or there would have been hell to pay...for all of us.

Things were going well between Gai and Himari. They were amusing to watch. Himari acted like she hadn't had fun in years which as far as I knew was the truth. Gai acted like he'd never had anything but fun. Between Himari's quiet and Gai's loud, they were a unique but not unwelcome explosion of personality. Watching them warmed my heart.

Kakashi and I were building a relationship, slowly but surely. It wasn't the type of relationship that
my brother seemed to be afraid we would build if we spent time together. Despite this odd predicament the two of us found ourselves in, it was obvious that neither of us liked the idea of entering into a committed, romantic relationship. Quite frankly, I didn't spend enough time drinking to have a consistent interest in the opposite sex. Kakashi had admitted to me that he really didn't have the strength to commit to an apartment...let alone romantically commit to another person.

I didn't have a romantic bone in my body, so I couldn't figure out what Genma was so afraid of. After nineteen years, he honestly should have known me better than that.

Nineteen. I'd turned nineteen on August 1st, 1462.

I'd spent the entire day so preoccupied, I'd barely thought about Atsuko at all. When I did, it wasn't the usual small spark of anger or grief I felt. Instead, I caught myself wondering about her life in innocent ways. I was having a baby. Was Atsuko having a baby? Did she and her husband have children now? If not, were they going to have them? Did my little person have a cousin or cousins out there somewhere? Did she work or was she a housewife? Did she have a big home or a small cottage? These thoughts were more positive than the ones I'd had in the past and I took them as a sign that the gaping wound my twin's abandonment had left was beginning to heal. Finally.

My birthday had been a Thursday, so I'd spent the day in my office with the occasional visit from my friends. Himari had stopped in for a quick visit before her classes at Koba started. She'd had a lightness to her that I hadn't seen before and I remember wondering if it had anything to do with all the time she was spending with a certain spandex-clad jonin. She'd left behind a platter of daifuku as a gift that I sadly finished within a couple hours. Around noon, Tamaki had also gifted me with birthday daifuku which I was grateful for since I'd already eaten what Himari had brought. If every part of my body hadn't started to ache so much, then I might have felt more shame for my gluttony. My breasts hurt all the time, so I felt like I deserved as much daifuku as I wanted.

I'd finally gone shopping for new clothing with Yuzuha and much to her chagrin I'd found the least expensive, simple black dress in the entire village. It was high collared, had half-sleeves and went to my knees in length. The material was breathable and inexpensive. I loved it. Yuzuha didn't entirely agree with the choice, so for my birthday she'd appeared and had gifted me a dark blue scarf that Yoshino had made to go with my plain dress. She told me that I needed to at least have some colour to my wardrobe.

I had to admit when I wrapped the decorative, pashmina scarf loosely around my neck I decided I was probably going to wear it until I was in my grave. It was magnificent. Yoshino had outdone herself with the needlework and care she'd put into it.

"How far along are you now?" Hiashi Hyuuga asked, bringing me out of my reflection.

The Hyuuga Clan head and I were doing our bi-weekly meeting to go over some of the documents that I needed his clansmen to review. I'd come to discover over the last year or so that the hard-faced Hiashi had a soft spot for women and I meant that in the purest sense. Even before I was pregnant, whenever he was present he would always make sure to carry paperwork for me, pull out my chair and hold open the door so I could go through. He was a classic gentleman that even I had to admit was nice to have around.

Even though I must've been asked the question at least three times a day, it took me a moment to do the math. It was September 6th so…

"About twenty weeks." I informed him, although I had to double check my answer and I still wasn't entirely sure I was right. Who'd have thought, with how organized I was, I'd be so bad at keeping track of time?
"Have you thought about names yet?" He asked casually.

"No, not really." I hadn't thought about names at all to be honest. Naming a child without them even being born yet seemed...odd. I know that's what everyone did, and I knew that I would have to choose a name that way as well. Still, I couldn't help but feel like there was a wrongness to it. What if I picked a name and it didn't suit them?

A part of me hadn't wanted to involve Kakashi in the naming process because I feared his indecisiveness, but I knew that I couldn't exclude him from it. This wasn't just my little person. It was his little person too. When I brought up what we could name the baby he always said he didn't care, he told me that he trusted my judgement, but I had a feeling he was going to change his mind. I also had a feeling that he'd choose the worst possible time to change his mind...like when I was in the middle of labour. I wasn't about to give him the opportunity.

"So, you don't know the baby's gender yet, I take it?" He asked softly. I couldn't help but shoot him an inquisitive look and I let a hand slide down to rest on my swollen abdomen.

"I didn't know that it was possible to know ahead of time." I remarked honestly. I thought you had to wait until the baby was born to know what it was.

"In most places it isn't." Hiashi informed me," Few people, except those in the medical community, know men and women have different chakra networks. It's slight but it's there if you know what to look for. You can primarily see the difference in the central chakra coils. If the baby's chakra coils are developed enough, which they usually are around eighteen weeks or so, we of the Hyuuga Clan can usually determine the gender."

I blinked at him. I took it this was his way of offering to check for me. I had to admit that the thought was appealing. It would certainly help me plan for the baby better. It would help me focus on a certain gender of names, help me plan how to design the nursery and help me plan for baby clothes. It would help me plan for everything which at this point seemed like the only way I was staying sane.

That being said...was it right to find out the baby's gender without even asking Kakashi if he wanted to be there? To me this was about practicality, but I had a feeling that most people would attach an emotional weight to such a reveal. So far, the silver-haired man and I had agreed on most things, but I didn't want to assume he'd be okay with me learning the gender of the baby without him. I at least owed it to him to ask if he wanted to be around when I found out.

"I think I'd like to know." I told him, "but I need to discuss this with the father. He might want to be there when I find out."

"Understandable." Hiashi agreed, giving me a quick nod. "When you've discussed it with him, know that you're welcome at my compound for a visit. I'd be willing to check the gender for you."

I thanked the clan head for his offer and since our meeting was ending, I stood up achingly and shook his hand. We said our goodbyes and as soon as he was out of my office I collapsed gingerly back into my seat. I was starting to get to the stage of my pregnancy where everything hurt...and I mean everything. My thighs hurt. I'd been warned that my feet would hurt, my back would hurt, my breasts would hurt but I had no idea the muscles in my upper thighs would hurt.

I reached around my chair to bring the blanket that the Hyuuga Clan had gifted me over my shoulders. I leaned back in my chair and sighed quietly. I stayed there for several minutes, just resting my eyes and trying to ignore the aches in my body.
"Tired?"

"Go away." I quipped half-heartedly, not bothering to move from my resting position.

"I came all this way just to see you and I get 'go away'? I'm hurt." The response came in the form of a mock-hurt tone. I could have sworn I heard the door to my office click closed softly.

"I'm not in the mood to entertain." I told my visitor dryly, keeping my eyes closed.

"Are you sure?" I could tell that the question was a tease, "I come bearing gifts."

The mention of gifts did coax my eyes open slowly and I stared down my guest with apprehension. I took in the rest of my office and noticed that Kakashi had made himself comfortable in my guest chair. I shot a look at my office door and confirmed that he had, indeed, closed it.

Keeping my face passive, I also surveyed the 'gifts' that I'd been brought and was pleasantly surprised. Three decorative boxes, two blue and one black, sat on my desk with the emblem for the Yumehara Teahouse etched on the lids. They were bento boxes. He'd brought me lunch.

Tempted by the prospect of food, I carefully grabbed the box he'd placed closest to me and pulled it forward. I carefully took off the lid and inspected the bento's contents. Onigiri and tempura. The familiar scent of the Yumehara Teahouse's excellent food flooded my nostrils and caused my stomach to rumble desperately. My mouth watered, and I reached for the chopsticks, completely forgetting about my aching body.

"Thank you, Kakashi." I managed to get out before the drive to stuff my face kicked in. I hadn't realized how hungry I'd been which was ridiculous because lately I'd been eating more than I ever have. I noticed that Kakashi had opened his own box, but he didn't seem to be eating. Instead, he was watching me quietly. After a couple minutes, once the food began to settle in my stomach and I could think about something other than being hungry, I lowered my chopsticks.

"When did you get back to the village?" I questioned politely. For the last three days or so, Kakashi had been on a mission outside the village. It was one of those ones where it was short-term, but no one could know where he was going or what he was doing. He had, to my surprise, made sure to come by my house and let me know he was going to be leaving. It was the first time since we'd met that he'd done that, and I found myself appreciating the unexpected courtesy. I had to admit, part of me felt that it would be disconcerting to learn he was KIA and I hadn't even known he'd been outside the village.

"Before dawn." He told me lazily, "I went home, showered, took a nap. I woke up an hour ago and decided to get something to eat. Izo mentioned that they were having a special on tempura and, obviously, I thought of you." Before my pregnancy I hadn't been big on sweets. Now, I always craved daifuku. However, that didn't mean it was my favourite. I wasn't even sure that I had a favourite food. Tempura from the Yumehara Teahouse was the best tempura in the village and I had no problems letting people know that. Since that teahouse had become a preferred haunt for the two of us, Kakashi had learned this about me from experience.

"Something told me you hadn't eaten." He said.

I ignored his off-handed taunt.

"Welcome back, I guess." I chose to say in return, my face passive. I picked up one of the onigiri from the box and began nibbling at it thoughtfully. I was trying to decide how to breach the subject when he interrupted my
"You really have no interest, do you?" He asked me with mild disbelief and I blinked slowly in response, chewing at my food absently. What did he mean by I had 'no interest'? I gave him a once-over to see whether I had missed something.

Had he been injured and was offended because I hadn't noticed? That wasn't really like him and I couldn't see any injuries. He looked fine. He was in a clean jonin uniform, his mask was the same, the same hair style, same lop-sided headband and the same single onyx eye peering over at me. He was sitting straight in his chair with a pair of chopsticks poised over his own bento. I wasn't sure I knew what he was talking about...the question seemed very out-of-the-blue. Was it rhetorical? What on earth was he talking about? What did he mean by 'no interest'?

"Come again?" I questioned, raising an eyebrow and took another small bite of my onigiri.

"You seem to have no interest in seeing what I look like." He clarified for me, seeing that I clearly didn't understand. I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at his observation.

"Well, no, I guess not." I agreed, "I'm assuming you cover your face for a reason and that reason is your business. I'll admit that I've wondered but I'm not going to waste too much time thinking about it. Besides..." Now finished the onigiri I leaned back in my seat slightly, unintentionally drawing more attention to my ever-growing baby bump. I placed a hand on it lightly. "I figure I'll find out in a few months."

It was partially a joke but at the same time it wasn't. There was a strong likelihood that the baby would take after it's father in appearance. Even if it was a perfect mixture of both of us, it would be easy for me to distinguish which features belonged to my side of the family and which didn't. From what I could tell, the Hatake family and the Shiranui family didn't look anything alike. It wouldn't matter if I never saw Kakashi's face...I'd probably figure out what he looked like by default as my child grew. That was enough to fully sate whatever uncommitted curiosity I might have about his appearance.

Kakashi, instead of responding verbally, reached up and adjusted his headband so that it was sitting on his forehead. Then, in one smooth movement, he pulled his mask down to rest along his neckline. He proceeded to stare at me. He was waiting for a reaction of some kind. I blinked, a little stunned at what he'd just done. He went through all that trouble to make sure no one saw his face and then he...yanks his mask down in front of me? What was he doing?

He was...he was...aesthetically pleasing.

Once the coverings he used to purposefully obscure his face were gone he was revealed to have a narrow jawline and a beauty mark under the left corner of his mouth. A vertical scar ran over his left eye which was...red? Was that the sharingan? I couldn't positively identify it at first since I'd rarely ever seen the sharingan. As a civilian my level of contact with the Uchiha Clan's dojutsu had been very sparing and I only recognized it because of a picture I'd once seen in one of my old textbooks. I had a gut feeling that Kakashi wasn't a blood relative to the Uchiha Clan but that didn't explain how he'd wound up with the dojutsu. I felt like I didn't want to know.

Despite eating out together numerous times, I'd never seen his face. His food always seemed to magically disappear within seconds of coming to the table. Then again, as he had noted, I never really paid much attention to him.

I wasn't sure what to say so, I leaned forward and picked up another onigiri. I took a bite and after I finished chewing I said the first thing that came to my mind.
"One of the few things I remember about my dad, was that he firmly believed when it came to faces boys took after their mothers. He always used to say Genma got my mother's face...I guess that means, by that reasoning, I got his." Well, me and Atsuko. I watched as Kakashi released a tension in his shoulders that I hadn't noticed was building.

My lack of reaction seemed to somehow pacify him and set him at ease. "I don't really remember what he looked like. We have pictures, but they're stored away and I don't really look at them...I don't know if I actually look like him." I commented lightly.

I took another bit of my food and the jonin seemed to make the decision to begin eating himself. I watched as he took leisurely bites of his food, chewing slowly and quietly. I wondered how long it had been since he'd taken the time to eat his food without having to worry about his face being seen.

I also briefly wondered why his face being hidden was so important to him.

"I look exactly like my father." He told me eventually, breaking the peaceful silence that had fallen over my office. "So, I'm not sure your dad is right about that."

Ah.

I remembered Genma, weeks ago now, offhandedly steaming over what he called Kakashi's 'daddy issues'. I had ignored him to the best of my ability and I hadn't asked what he meant. To be brutally honest, I really wasn't interested in hearing about Kakashi's issues but the more I thought about it the more I realized that this complex of his might affect my child. I took a moment to think about the possibilities. If Kakashi didn't even like looking at his own face because he looked like his father...how would he behave if he had a son that looked just like him? I realized in that moment that I was obligated to listen to what he had to say...if he chose to say it.

It seemed he was going to make me fulfill that obligation.

"Maybe you're a trendsetter?" I guessed with poorly concealed disinterest. I knew that it was necessary for us to discuss his emotional baggage, but I wasn't sure I was in the mood.

"Maybe." He agreed half-heartedly.

"You're not ecstatic about looking like your father." I stated bluntly, trying to coax what he really wanted to say out into the open. While our relationship, which I was tempted to call a friendship, was just starting to bud we had already established some habits about how we communicated. One of those habits was that we didn't pull any punches. We said exactly what we were thinking no matter how tactless or ugly. This really must've been a deep wound for him to hesitate so much.

"We didn't have the best relationship." He admitted to me, taking another bite and chewing it. When he finally swallowed, he decided to elaborate more, "When I was a child I was so overwhelmingly proud...and then later ashamed to be The White Fang's son."

"I take it he committed suicide?" I inquired, finally deciding I was done eating and putting the lid back on the bento box.

"This was before that. I revered him at first, but he made a choice that, at the time, I thought disgraced us as a clan."

"I take it he made a wrong choice?" I probed.

Kakashi seemed to reflect on that for an agonizing second, then he set his chopsticks down and leaned back in his chair.
"No, he made the right choice, but no one seemed to think he did...myself included. Suddenly it wasn't a good thing to be The White Fang's little clone, the son you could identify as his from halfway across the village, and I was ashamed of him. I didn't want to look like him...I hadn't even wanted to be associated with him. It was a cruel thing to do to your own father and I realize that now." The man explained to me, clearly lost in thought. So far, I'd been able to read his manner quite well using only the tone of his voice and his one visible eye. Now the rest of his face was in full view and I was overwhelmed by how expressive his face was. You could read everything on it. Right now, I was reading misery.

"Then he killed himself and abandoned the village. My shame deepened. I didn't realize it fully, but my father's death was the opportunity for me to learn a hard lesson without having to suffer further. I learned a lesson alright; Don't make the same mistakes. Don't do what your father did. Nothing takes priority over the Shinobi Rules...not even the lives of your friends." I was quiet and watched while he contemplated what he'd just said.

"I was wrong. I spent so much time trying to do everything that he wouldn't do...that I ended up learning the real lesson the hard way. His death could have saved me from that if only I hadn't been so arrogant."

I slowly digested what he was saying, doing my best to ignore the clenching in my chest at his words. I couldn't even say with confidence that I'd had a relationship with my father. He'd been away so often, and I had been so young when he was killed, that I really didn't know anything about the man. Even so...thinking of him had never brought me shame. I'd always been proud to be his daughter. As much as I hadn't wanted to hear about Kakashi's sorrows, now that I already had I couldn't help but feel sympathetic. The thought of my parents had never brought me pain in any form...not shame...not abandonment...not regret.

I ran my hand over my abdomen soothingly and I noticed that Kakashi's eyes followed my movement.

"Yet, even though you realize that, you're still ashamed of him?" I questioned, raising an eyebrow at him. He met my eyes for another one of our staring contests. This had become a habit of ours. We'd lock eyes until one of us, usually me, couldn't take the intensity anymore and was forced to look away. I wasn't sure why we did it...we just did. This time, however, his sharingan eye was distracting me and I kept losing my focus because of it. I could tell he noticed the change.

"Yes...but not for the same reasons. Once I got over the disgrace that had driven him to it...I was just ashamed of his death. He gave up. He was a great, famous shinobi and he just gave up on his life." A life that Kakashi was a part of. I couldn't say I fully understood what he was saying, I probably never would, but I could at least entertain the concept. He was no longer ashamed of his father's choices with exception of the one he made to commit suicide.

"Depression can drive people to do terrible things." I commented simply.

"Yes, it can." He confirmed with a weight that gave me pause, "but as a shinobi you learn early that your life isn't just yours. It belongs to the village, to The Hokage, to your teammates, to your children...it's not just about you. You keep living until you're forced to die or until the village is done with you."

Yikes. That was a scary thought although try as I may, I couldn't contest it. Not only did I not know enough about what ninja were taught to be able to comment but I could tell that Kakashi was speaking from some hard-earned experience. Experience I really didn't want to delve into.

"So, you'd never give up your own life? No matter how terrible things got? Even if you thought the
"Not without a significant trade-off." He was quick to respond, and I noticed that he was refusing to meet my eyes now. "I would die so that others could live...but I wouldn't die for any other reason. As long as I can still serve the village killing myself would be pointless. Logically, no one would benefit from it besides the enemy."

Ah, he was appealing to logic. That was something I could get behind. However, something like the heavy topic we were discussing wasn't typically something governed by logic. To my chagrin. I couldn't help the eerie feeling that Kakashi had given the value of his life, or lack of value, entirely too much thought over the years. I decided I'd had enough of the angst for one day and tried to steer us back to a lighter subject.

"Do you want it to be a boy?" I asked, and I noticed Kakashi was visibly jerked out of what I assumed were dark thoughts. He blinked at me lazily before his face relaxed further into a thoughtful expression. I couldn't help but think again about how weird it was to see his face. It wasn't bad...it was just weird.

"I don't really care." He said after some thought, "but for the record, if it is a boy, I hope your dad is right."

"It's not going to be a problem if it looks like you, is it?" I questioned, unable to completely hide the warning in my tone. I wasn't about to let him give my little person a complex because it looked like him and by extension it's grandfather. My family's brown-haired, dark eyed genetics were likely dominant over the Hatake's recessive silver-haired ones. Even though the scientific odds were in my favour luck usually wasn't. I wasn't a betting woman, but I had a feeling I was just bringing another White Fang look-alike into the world.

He didn't say anything.

He looked away from me, his hand moving down to bring his mask up to cover his face again. I watched as he adjusted his headband back to the way it usually was. I took that as a non-verbal sign that we were done being open for today. I was honestly surprised our talk had lasted as long as it had.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, I realized that I wasn't going to get an answer. I'd been spoiled. I was aware that not everyone had been gifted this much insight into the mind of Kakashi Hatake. I wasn't necessarily special, but I did seem to be one of the few people he'd chosen not to close-up on, push away or deflect.

I wasn't sure whether his silence was because the answer was yes, and he couldn't bring himself to say it out loud, or whether it had something to do with the fact that he wasn't exactly sure. That could be a very hard question for him to think about. This was his child. To have reservations because your child looked like you would be cruel. It would certainly be irrational but...not everything about the way a person felt was rational. Over the last few weeks I'd come to understand that despite his neutral, calm surface this man was a deep emotional pool. He was just so damn...sad. All the time.

Even if I'd had an interest in men, I certainly wouldn't have picked this one out of a line-up. He oozed with a carefully concealed sorrow that I couldn't believe no one else in the village had noticed. Fate or something had certainly intervened, big time, to bring this little person into the world. I really hoped that getting to know the severely miserable jonin was going to be worth it in the end.

More likely it was going to be a huge mistake.
Unused to him denying me answers but realizing I'd finally pushed too hard, I decided to change the subject.

"Hiashi Hyuuga was here earlier," I began cautiously, "he told me that he could tell me the baby's gender. I'm interested in finding out, but I thought I'd ask if you wanted to know too before I did anything."

He finally turned again so he could look at me, but he still didn't meet my eyes.

"They can do that?" He asked.

"Apparently. He said something about chakra coils." I'd tried to understand what Hiashi had said earlier but to be honest as soon as I heard 'chakra' my brain shut down. I was so used to not understanding ninja business that I'd developed an automatic disinterest whenever I heard the word used.

Kakashi was quiet as he contemplated what I had just told him.

"I think...I'd like to know." He finally admitted, shrugging slightly as he did so. There was some hesitation in his voice that I couldn't interpret a reason for. Since he'd decided to shut down on me I wasn't sure what was going on in his head right now. Probably nothing good.

"Okay." I agreed, "Hiashi told me to come by the clan compound when I'd decided. Since I'm free this evening after work I think I'll go tonight...did you want to come?"

The man nodded at me, then closed his empty bento and tossed it in my trashcan. He stood and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"I guess I'll come by after your shift then." He responded.

"We could meet there if you'd prefer." I told him.

"No, it's fine. Who doesn't like an evening stroll through the Imai District?" He questioned rhetorically and with that said he turned to exit the office, leaving the door propped open behind him.

He had been gone for several minutes before I was reminded of the third box he'd brought with him to the office, which he'd left behind. Curious, I popped open the lid of the blue box and was met with a familiar sweet aroma. He'd brought me daifuku.

There was a strange feeling in my chest that I couldn't quite identify when I looked down at the neatly placed pastries and the decorative frill lining. I must have indigestion.

XxX

"I must admit," Hiashi began from where he was sitting across from us, "I'd heard the rumors, but I'd dismissed them."

The three of us were sitting at a low tea table on the veranda surrounding Hiashi Hyuuga's home. When we arrived, a middle-aged maid with the family's pearly eyes had met us at the door, bowed politely and sent us an apprehensive look. I told her my name and that Lord Hiashi had told me to come by for a visit when I got the chance. Realization had then crossed her face, followed closely by intrigue as she shot Kakashi a look. She escorted us to the veranda, pouring tea and standing in attendance until Hiashi finally arrived to greet us. She shot the pair of us a final, scandalized look before disappearing.
Hiashi had poured himself some tea and began sipping, fixing us both with a stare that was beginning to make me shift uncomfortably. I had been relieved when he broke the silence.

"Rumors?" I prompted him, picking up my own cup and using it to warm my hands. The Land of Fire didn't usually get cold, but on occasion it did get north winds that could leave you chilled if you weren't mindful. I was partially glad I'd brought Kakashi if for no other reason than to serve as a windbreaker. He was sitting to my left, on the outside of the porch, so he was getting most of the wind. Kakashi didn't seem bothered by the wind nor our topic of conversation and remained silent, sitting next to me with his arms crossed over his chest.

"There were whispers that you were carrying the Hatake Clan's heir, but I hadn't believed them." He shot a narrow-eyed look at Kakashi, "I wasn't even aware you knew one another."

Somehow, I got the impression that telling the proper Hiashi Hyuuga that this child was the product of a drunken evening neither of us remembered wouldn't be the best idea. Instead of giving into his probe for information, I switched the subject to a slightly more favourable line of questioning.

"That reminds me," I started, keeping my face passive, "why is it the Hatake name holds clan status here in the village when there's only one member? The Uchiha just lost their status due to a lack of population...didn't they? If it was just about numbers, then the Hatake wouldn't have counted as a clan for the last century." I figured if anyone knew what made a group of people formally count as a clan it would be Lord Hiashi Hyuuga.

"You're right it's not just about the clan's population." Hiashi confirmed my suspicions with a quick nod, "When a clan's status is being reviewed, several variables need to be taken into consideration. Population is only one variable assessed. The others are property ownership, contribution to military forces, monetary contribution to the village, honor...it would take a long time to list them all."

I thought on it for a moment. I suppose they had both population and property stripped from them, but Sasuke Uchiha's inheritance hadn't been taken away. Considering he was the only living Uchiha in the village he was left with a vast fortune that was a combination of all his late relatives estates. When it came to money, the eight-year-old boy was probably the wealthiest person in the entire village. It was also very likely that he would become a shinobi so when considering his potential for military involvement in the future...he was giving the village all he could. There wasn't much he could do about the fact that he was eight and wouldn't be a genin for a few years yet. Based on the factors that Hiashi had just listed, I still couldn't figure out what had been responsible for the clan losing status.

"I still don't understand why the Uchiha lost their status." I offered honestly. It didn't make sense to me. Even with just the variables that Hiashi stated, there still didn't seem to be much reason to do something so...drastic...as strip Sasuke of his clan status. Especially when you had people like Kakashi with no wealth, property or numbers who still had said status.

"Honor." Kakashi stated simply, causing me to glance at him with a raised eyebrow.

Hiashi nodded in agreement and chose to elaborate.

"It's rare when it happens," Hiashi began, "but if a clan, or their leader, commits a heinous crime they are disgraced, and their status removed to give the clan head less influence in the village. The Uchiha now exist in only two people, one of which is a criminal - a mass murderer and a dangerous enemy to the village. That mass murder, by the very laws of this village, is still considered the head of the Uchiha Clan."

"How?" I questioned, not able to fully hide my disbelief.
"A loophole." Kakashi stated suddenly. I was surprised he was even listening to us to be honest. I'm sure this was all common knowledge to him, but I wasn't expecting him to be involved in the conversation. "There's a part of the legislation which states that a clan head cannot be removed from their position under allegations that they've committed a crime. The truth is that no one witnessed the clan massacre. The aftermath? Yes. The massacre itself? No. There's no concrete proof beyond what Sasuke Uchiha claims he saw under the influence of the sharingan."

I blinked at him.

"Which makes the entire massacre an allegation that a crime has been committed by Itachi Uchiha...despite what we all know in our hearts to be true." Hiashi added.

"Why on earth would we have a clause like that in our legislation?" I questioned, starting to think the village had really shoved a kunai in their own foot with that one. It really should have been obvious that such a law would cause problems in the future.

"We can't pretend to know what Lord First was thinking," Hiashi informed me, "but I suspect it was a way of protecting major clans from being disgraced by false allegations. The major clans of the village are always under constant scrutiny...and danger from being exploited for their wealth or influence." Exploited? So, it was to protect the clan heads from blackmail and losing their positions due to false accusations? Not for the first time in my life I felt like the ninja clans had entirely too much say in the lawmaking of the village.

"Once you become head of your clan you remain in that position until you die, your clan's Council of Elders dismisses you or your clan loses their status as a clan." Hiashi explained to me.

"So, there's no Uchiha Council of Elders because they're all dead." I started but was interrupted by Kakashi.

"And Itachi Uchiha has managed to avoid every attempt made to eliminate him." he added with a deadpan.

"The only way to remove Itachi from his right as clan head, was to revoke the Uchiha's status as a clan." I concluded with a better understanding then I'd had before. "But why would they go through all that trouble just to remove a title from Itachi Uchiha?"

I made sure to keep my face a passive mask even though my mind was reeling. They were denying Sasuke and whatever children he might have the right to call themselves a clan...because of what Itachi had done? I knew life wasn't fair...but that was very unfair. There was no justice to that decision. At least none that I could see. They were punishing the only Uchiha that survived because they didn't want a criminal to be able to walk around saying he was the 'head of the Uchiha Clan'?

"It's not just a title," Hiashi began patiently, "clan heads are influential, political figureheads...as I'm sure you've gathered from having to do all of our paperwork."

I had noticed that the clan compounds were run like little villages within the village and the clan heads were like the mayors of those villages. If a member of their clan needed help or was having an issue with the CAO, it was often the clan head who would advocate on their behalf. The major clan heads advocated for their clan's rights, had a say in most military matters, had a say in most trade deals and were overall very important people in the village.

"It would have dishonored the village to keep him as an important political figurehead...even if he wasn't active in that role." I clarified slowly, still not liking the reasoning. Why should the village care so much about honor in this day and age? I looked down at the slowly cooling tea in my hands.
Almost as if he'd heard my internal question, Hiashi's voice floated across the table and into my thoughts.

"Not everyone realizes it, but the other hidden villages watch us closely and they will pounce at anything they deem a weakness. Allowing a criminal to maintain such a position, even just in name, would dishonor the village." Hiashi explained to me. Of course, the authorities in the village couldn't be caught ignoring that the massacre had happened and licking their wounds.

"Not addressing Itachi's 'dishonor' could be viewed as the equivalent of weakness...So, the village's Elder Council was of the belief that removing him from his position was a priority." I reiterated, although the questioning in my tone was dry. They would prioritize that over the wellbeing or future of Sasuke Uchiha. I wasn't surprised...that sounded like them.

Hiashi hummed in confirmation.

"I'm glad you understand." He said, "It's not an easy thing for many people to comprehend."

"Would Sasuke Uchiha ever be able to restore the Uchiha Clan?" I asked, glancing between the two men.

"It's never been done," Hiashi admitted, "but it is possible. If he were to outlive Itachi, he would then be the only Uchiha left to claim the status as clan head. Then he would have to do something notable enough for The Hokage to consider petitioning the return of clan status to the Uchiha name."

"He wouldn't have to save the village or anything so grand...a decent military record would probably do it." Kakashi added offhandedly. I couldn't help but look over at him. It occurred to me that he had thought about this subject at least once prior to this conversation. What was his interest in the Uchiha Clan? Did it have something to do with that eye of his?

I shoved my curiosity aside.

"The Hatake Clan don't have wealth, numbers or property but you're able to maintain clan status based on Lord Hokage and the Elder Council's evaluation of your honor?" I circled back to my original question about just how it was Kakashi, all by his lonesome, was considered a clan.

"Yes. Essentially." Kakashi confirmed, his tone blunt.

My child would have clan status but only so far as they specifically maintained their clan's integrity and honor. No wonder Kakashi was a fizzled-out, depressed husk of a man. Never mind walking the path of the shinobi and killing people for a living - there was already an intense pressure to succeed just from within the village.

'There's going to be a lot of pressure on you, my little person.' I couldn't help but think.

"Village politics aside," Hiashi started, interrupting my thoughts, "I'm assuming you're here about the baby's gender?"

"Yes." I agreed, nodding slightly. I finally sipped my tea which by some miracle was still lukewarm despite the weather and my neglect of it.

He nodded at me, set down his tea and then activated his byakugan. I'd never seen the byakugan activated before and it was a morbidly fascinating thing to witness. The veins surrounding his eyes and, on his temples, pulsed and bulged, becoming prominent underneath his skin.

"Do you mind standing?" He asked me after a few seconds of staring intently at my abdomen.
I nodded, put my tea down, and stood slowly. I had to partially brace myself on the table as leverage. I saw Kakashi's hand shoot out in my peripheral vision, as if to steady me, but I never felt him touch me. I wasn't surprised, Kakashi and I never touched. That was by design.

Hiashi seemed to contemplate my form for a few more seconds, looking me up and down. His eyes rested on my stomach for a few minutes but would eventually move on - as if he was tracing my veins. More accurately, I was aware he was probably tracing my chakra network although I didn't understand his intrigue in my chakra network. I had been of the impression that he just had to look at the baby's. After this went on for several minutes, Kakashi cleared his throat.

"Excuse me...Lord Hiashi?" He asked the other man, which seemed to draw the Hyuuga out of his analysis of my chakra network.

"Apologies," The man admitted and deactivated his dojutsu, "I became distracted by your chakra network - it's extremely well developed for a civilian. I haven't seen a network quite like yours in a woman since…" He trailed off in remembrance.

I could ask him what he meant and live with the consequences of knowing whatever he was thinking...which I had a feeling wasn't something I wanted to know. The way he had said that left me feeling uneasy. It sounded like he was alluding to something that would suggest I should have been a ninja. That's too bad. I didn't want to be a ninja and I had no interest in hearing I should've been one either. Instead of prompting him on the thought I decided to go back to the subject at hand.

"Could you tell what the baby's gender was?" I asked abruptly, hoping to distract the man from his current train of thought. I didn't want to know about my chakra coils I wanted to know about the baby's chakra coils. Mine didn't get any use so they didn't matter.

"Yes, it's a boy." He told me. "Congratulations."

A boy. It was a boy. I think my heart screeched to an abrupt stop, then it started pumping again agonizingly. My chest clenched painfully. My little person...was a little male person. I was having a boy.

XxX

Kakashi and I had stayed in Hiashi's company for a few more minutes before thanking him and bidding him goodnight. Kakashi had offered to walk with me back to my house and, initially, we did so in comfortable silence. Both of us seemed to be lost in thought until, to my surprise, Kakashi interrupted it.

"A boy, huh?" He asked me rhetorically and I shot him a raised eyebrow. Considering our last pessimistic conversation this afternoon about what our son could look like I wasn't overly eager to hear the direction this one went in.

"You can't make him wear a mask." I replied bluntly, not amused with the idea of his identity-complex getting in the way of my little person's self-esteem.

"I wasn't going to suggest it." He replied casually, giving me an eye-smile that I didn't trust, "actually I was just wondering if you'd decided on a name? I know you've been thinking about it."

I had been thinking about it, but I hadn't exactly been invested in name-hunting. I'd been so unsure about whether he would shoot down the names or not, despite his apparent lack of interest, that I hadn't come up with anything concrete. That and the fact that I hadn't known the gender.

"Not really." I told him and then had a moment of mischievousness, "What about Genma?" Despite
his usual calm demeanor, I saw a chill run up his spine as he reflected on the possibility of having his child named after it's over-protective, maternal uncle. It was a no to Genma then. My big brother would be very disappointed, I'm sure.

"I take this as a sign that you're finally interested in helping me choose a name?" I questioned him after a few moments of silence had lapsed.

"I had a few ideas..." he started lazily although I could sense that there was still some hesitation in being involved.

"Alright, what were your ideas?" I asked him patiently. Right now, at least I had the patience to try and coax the information out of him.

"Well...how about Kiyoshi?" He said after a brief pause. I thought about it for a moment. Kiyoshi? Kiyoshi Hatake? He was considering naming our son...after me? To be honest I liked the name, it had a decent meaning and it sounded good with Hatake but something about it...didn't feel right.

"I like it." I admitted, "but it doesn't...feel right." I put a hand on my abdomen and let it rest there while we walked. My little person just didn't feel like a Kiyoshi.

"Hm, I think I get what you mean." Kakashi conceded and I heard him take a breath then hesitate again.

"Do you have another one on your mind?" I probed.

"It would be nice to name him after your father." He asked me, "What was his name?"

"Tomoe. My father's name was Tomoe." I told him, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. He seemed genuine in his statement that he thought it would be a good idea to name the baby after my father. I didn't have a problem with it...but I wasn't sure I liked the sound of Tomoe Hatake. I didn't like that it rhymed.

"I'm not sure I like the way that sounds." I finally decided, "It kind of rhymes."

"You're right." He agreed, "That's too bad that it doesn't work." It was too bad...it would have been a nice sentiment to name him after my father.

I could feel that he had something else on his mind but that he was hesitating again. I was beginning to get a little irritated. I thought we'd established that there was very little he could do to offend me and that he should just say what was on his mind.

"What else?" I stopped walking when I asked, forcing him to stop alongside me and turned around to face him. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited.

"What about...Obito?" He asked me, and it sounded like he really struggled to force the name past his lips. He seemed to have a tough time saying that name, like it caused him pain, and if he was so hesitant to say it...why would he want to give that name to his son?

"You suggest Obito but then you sound like you're chewing on razor blades when you say it." I commented blandly, shifting my weight and keeping my arms crossed. Obito Hatake? To be honest I didn't mind the name...although it sounded a touch clumsy when paired with Hatake.

"I'd rather not talk about it." The man said dismissively, "Let's just say it's the name of a person from my past who...I wish I could pay tribute to." Obito Hatake...I thought it over for a few seconds. I did like it but just like with Kiyoshi it didn't feel right. However, unlike Kiyoshi it did feel close. I
must've been quiet for too long because Kakashi spoke up, "Never mind. It doesn't work."

I blinked at him now that I'd been drawn out of my thoughts.

"You're right it doesn't but...what if we did an anagram?" I questioned, more to myself then the Kakashi.

"An anagram?" He echoed, and I could tell he didn't quite get where I was coming from.

"Well...if we rearrange the characters and sounds of Obito...we can get 'Tobio'..." I was thinking out loud and I could feel Kakashi watching my mind work. "I don't really like Tobio, though but I like having 'Tobi' in there...like the Black Kite bird of prey or it can mean Flying...and Lord Second's name also had 'Tobira' in it...which means door or gate."

Despite me spending so much time thinking about Lord Second's laws with contempt, he honestly was my favourite Hokage from the history books. He was a remarkable leader and he had a desire for order which I could admire. If it weren't for Lord Second the village would have no formal infrastructure, no universal healthcare, no universal standard for schooling. Few people knew it, but he had also made sure civilians all had the same opportunities for schooling as ninja children. He hadn't just founded the Ninja Academy...he'd had a respect for all education.

Koba was a private academy where we'd had to pay tuition, but the truth was Tobirama Senju had founded two good civilian public schools in the village which were free to attend. He'd also put laws in place to prevent future generations from reducing the quality of those schools, like legislation preventing the revocation of public school funding. We also couldn't forget that he'd founded the CAO.

His rule had been about equal opportunity and making sure the village had a sturdy foundation. While it was obvious his laws were made by a man in a time when men were in charge and women were property...that didn't make his contributions any less meaningful. The fact that I had ample respect for the man must have come through in my voice because Kakashi chose to comment on it.

"I didn't realize that you revered Lord Second." The man stated casually.

"The amount of thought he put into the village's future and infrastructure was awe inspiring." I replied dismissively. I didn't want to sound too starstruck, but I couldn't entirely shrug off how deeply I respected him.

"How about Tobiro? Using 'Tobi' for Flying and 'ro' for Son." Kakashi suggested after we both thought for a few more seconds. Tobiro? It was a clever idea. With that name we could pay tribute to this Obito person and Lord Second, as it was only one character off from both 'Tobio' and 'Tobira'.

I brought a hand to rest on my stomach once more.

Tobiro. Tobiro Hatake...that did feel right.

XxX

"Miss Shiranui," Naruto began cautiously, "did you know everyone in Sasuke's family is dead?" I looked up from the paperwork I was doing and made sure to keep my face stoic.

Naruto had become notorious for using my office as a refuge when he was being chased for playing pranks or ditching school. Initially he'd come here to hide from Iruka, but it didn't take the chunin very long to figure out that my office was the first place he'd try to hide. It also didn't take Naruto long to figure out that I had no reservations with blowing his cover and calling the young man into
my office to get him. As soon as he figured out I wasn't on his side when it came to his hijinks he'd gotten creative with his hiding.

Now, Naruto usually snuck into my office when I wasn't looking or was gone and would hide under my desk, or among the numerous stacks of paperwork. To his credit, he once hung off the ceiling light above my head for twenty minutes before I noticed. His giggles at my ignorance to his presence were eventually what gave him away. Another time I opened the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet only to find that he'd stashed himself inside. I'd promptly kicked him out and made him put all the files he'd displace back inside...in the meticulously organized fashion I was used to.

Contrary to what normally occurred, Naruto had managed to stay in class all day today and had come to my office after school had been let out. I had noticed that he had a look of deep thought on his face but for the last half-hour he'd been quiet. He'd played around with the bowl of rocks, which he didn't seem to realize were the rocks he'd given me, and fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. He'd been silent...until now when he finally revealed what had been on his mind.

"Yes," I confirmed, "I did know that."

I braced myself for questions about the Uchiha Clan massacre that I wasn't going to answer. It wasn't as if it was illegal to talk about it, like talking about Naruto was, but it was distasteful. No one had any business talking about it openly, not so soon after it happened, and they certainly didn't have any business discussing it with eight-year-olds.

"Do you take care of Sasuke too?" Naruto's question was not what I had expected. I'd expected details about what had happened or for him to ask me why. I hadn't expected such an innocent question. When would I learn that Naruto was completely unpredictable?

"No." I told him simply.

"Oh." He said, and he looked down in thought, "So, who takes care of him then?"

Rumi Ichiya was his caseworker, she was the only one that I'd suggested when Lord Third had come to me about it. She was a sweet woman and a team player...she wasn't a gossip. She was used to dealing with the challenging cases. Naruto had obviously met Rumi at least once in the past, but I doubted he remembered so I simplified my answer for him.

"One of the caseworkers from downstairs." I replied, looking back down at my paperwork but not really reading it.

"Why didn't the old man pick you for it?" Naruto asked, his tone very genuine.

"Because I'm already very busy, Naruto." I explained evenly, "I can't handle the caseload of more than one child right now."

"Are you really busy because you're having a baby?" The little blond questioned and I knew his blue eyes were peering over the desk at me without even having to look up.

"No," I said with a slight sigh, "I'm busy because I'm very busy. With the baby coming I do have a few more things to do then normal but I have always had to perform many different tasks for Lord Hokage. I've always been busy, Naruto."

"So, with all the different tasks you do for the old man, taking care of me and having a baby...you can't take care of Sasuke too?" The boy inquired, and I looked up at him again, taking in his innocent gaze. I couldn't figure out why he was so interested in Sasuke Uchiha. He almost sounded...concerned?
"Yes." I agreed. That was about the sum of it. That and the fact that being a caseworker was no longer part of my job description. I was only Naruto's caseworker because he was, for obvious reasons, a special case.

"That's too bad." Naruto said after a few moments had passed, "Maybe if you took care of him...he wouldn't be so sad."

He appeared downcast on the other boy's behalf and I realized in that moment that Naruto had learned empathy and compassion when I wasn't looking.

I couldn't help but feel proud of him.

XxX

It was September 14th, 1462.

I had been in bed, reading a novel peacefully, when it happened. There was a loud knock on my door that bounced and echoed up the stairs of my house to the second floor. I hesitated in getting up from bed. It was almost midnight and I couldn't think of anyone who would think it appropriate to visit me at midnight. I was inclined to ignore the visitor for that reason alone.

It couldn't be any of my friends, they were likely all at home in their beds. Genma and Gai both had keys of their own, so they wouldn't have knocked. Not this late at night anyway when they knew they would have been disturbing me.

I remembered in a moment that Genma was in the field and notification that something had happened to him could come at any time. Remembering the last time when I'd jumped to conclusions about something happening to him, I did my best to keep myself calm, but I was suddenly tense.

I marked the place in my book and set it on my nightstand, rising from my bed as quickly as possible. I grabbed a red dressing gown, drawing it hastily over my shoulders, and made my way down the stairs. I flicked on every light switch along the way. I knew the lights wouldn't necessarily give me any kind of protection if my unexpected guest had nefarious intentions, but they made me feel better.

Once I made it to the door, I clenched the dressing down as tightly around my thin nightgown as I could to preserve my modesty. My door, like the door of my apartment, was double bolted and it took me a moment to unlock it. I pulled it open a crack to observe the visitor with apprehension.

"Kakashi!" I exclaimed, letting out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. I unfastened the last chain on the door and opened it completely, "What on earth are you doing here?" It was hardly appropriate for him to be loitering around my house this time of night. I wasn't pleased about it and I was about to tell him so...but then I took in his appearance.

Something was different.

Instead of his usual, half-slouching posture and laid-back demeanor I was met with an almost opposite Kakashi. His back was completely rigid and he stood tall. He wasn't wearing his headband, just his mask, so his sharingan eye joined the other in staring at me with an intensity I hadn't seen before. Without his headband, his hair seemed to lose a bit of its ability to defy gravity and it was hanging lower than it normally did.

Even considering all that it was the uniform that really stood out...mostly because I could identify it easily. The black shirt and pants, the grey protective vest, the kodachi, the gauntlets, the mask I could see peeking out from where it had been fastened to the back of his belt...it was an ANBU uniform.
"I need to come in." Kakashi told me with a stoic tone that I was unused to. In our past interactions he’d always sounded casual, depressed, lazy, exhausted, noncommittal...hell, sometimes he even sounded playful. He never once sounded like he was ordering me around. I didn't like it and a scowl I couldn't control bloomed on my face in response. I opened my mouth to respond when he interrupted me, "Kiyoko, stand aside and let me in."

I forced my face back into what I hoped was my usual passive mask. Who the hell did he think he was? Ordering me to let him into my house in the middle of the night?

"Please." It was such a soft whisper that I barely heard it and I couldn't help my surprise. Oh, so now he was asking? I fought with myself over whether I should give in to my desires and give him a piece of my mind. I gave him another once over, sighed and stood to the side so he could enter my house. As soon as he was over the threshold, he practically ripped the door out of my hand and slammed it shut behind him.

I jumped involuntarily at the sudden action. I really hadn't been expecting the aggressive action. I watched him glare at the closed door for a moment before he hastily moved over to my kitchen window and drew the curtains. He glanced around the room and his eyes scanned my ceiling, like he was checking for the smallest of cracks. I blinked and then he was over at my stairwell, scrutinizing it and seeming to check to make sure the lights were on. When he seemed to be satisfied with his assessment of my home, he moved so that he could stand in front of me.

"I need you to keep your voice down...no higher than a whisper." He told me and there was a pleading laced into his tone. The indignance I felt because of him forcing his way into my house melted away and was replaced with unease. Why was he acting so...bizarre?

"Kakashi, what is going on?" I questioned him with a hard whisper, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Nothing really," He quickly reverted to the casual tone I was used to, "I just want to have a conversation with you."

I blinked at him and he seemed to sense my skepticism.

"I have a mission. My team is waiting for me on your roof...and I'd rather have this conversation privately." he explained quickly, his voice quiet, "We leave within the hour, so I don't exactly have a lot of time."

"That was no reason to be rude and bully your way into my home." I told him dryly. He smiled at me, or at least I believe he did, because both of his eyes closed, and I could see his cheeks rising under his mask.

"Let's face it, Kiyoko, if I'd asked politely you would have said no until I explained why I needed to come in. Which is exactly the conversation I wanted to avoid having in the street." I stared at him blandly. Well, he had a point. That's exactly what would've happened.

I exhaled heavily through my nose and looked him over again, taking in his stance and uniform a second time.

"I thought you were retired from ANBU." I commented, raising an eyebrow at him.

"I still am." He confirmed with a nod, "That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about before I left."

"Is this going to be a lengthy conversation?" I asked curtly, already starting to feel my lower back
"Hopefully not." He replied, "but I can't make any promises."

I nodded at him and moved over to the kitchen table I'd recently bought. It was simple, made of sturdy oak and was built to last which was good considering its price tag had been out of my comfort zone. It was square and had four matching chairs. It had my briefcase, an empty water glass, my keys, my badge and a few things that I had brought from work, so the surface wasn't tidy. I lowered myself into one of the chairs and shot Kakashi an imploring look. He got my silent message and moved to join me, sitting at the chair across from me.

As soon as we were both settled, he wasted no time launching into what he wanted to talk about.

"I'm leading a long-term ANBU mission." He stated, leaning backward in his seat slightly while he observed me.

"Why you?" I inquired. Why was he, someone who was retired, chosen to lead this mission instead of someone still active?

"Let's just say; while all the missions in my ANBU service record are marked as successful that doesn't always mean they are complete." I got the hint in his tone that I wasn't allowed to know any more than that. I didn't really like the sound of that...

"This is specifically unfinished business of yours then?" I attempted to clarify without asking him to reveal much more than he already had.

"Yes. Mine and my former team." He confirmed, "Lord Hokage decided that my team needed to finish what we started. There's no other team that knows enough about the previous mission or even has the combined skillset to make sure it's...complete...this time."

"He called you out of retirement for one mission?" I reiterated slowly, trying to understand it. ANBU was such an elite, secretive, group that I had always speculated that once you were out...you were out. I had a feeling that Kakashi getting called back in to complete a single mission wasn't as normal as he was trying to play it off as.

Kakashi just nodded.

"You said long-term...how long exactly?" I asked him, raising an eyebrow.

"That's the other part I needed to talk to you about," He began, and I could hear some hesitation in the depths of his voice, "if we can't find who we're looking for we'll be back in two, maybe three, weeks."

"And if you can find who you're looking for?" I shot back, realizing he was alluding to something.

"Then it'll be classified as long-term, deep cover and I'll be gone seven months." He told me abruptly. Seven months? Tobiro was due in January…

Kakashi was going to miss the birth of his son.

I realized too late that I had flashed him a pitiful look and he looked away from me quickly, so he didn't have to see it. When I realized what I'd done I quickly forced my expression back into a neutral one. Having been raised by shinobi I understood that they needed to go where they were sent, when they were sent. It was their honor and obligation to do so. Even if someone else had been able to take the mission, I doubted the silver-haired man would've refused the request. From the
sounds of it, this wasn't a mission Kakashi could have refused. There was no one else for the job.

"Well, it's a good thing I decided to sign that Declaration then. Getting a birth certificate commissioned would have been difficult without it." I told him bluntly, hoping to somehow communicate that I understood. I could see why he thought I would be upset but I wasn't. This was the way life in Konohagakure was. I don't know why it meant so much to me that Kakashi realized I wasn't angry or upset with him...but it did.

I felt bad for him but Kakashi missing the birth wasn't altogether unexpected. Missing the birth of your children was an occupational hazard for active shinobi just like kunai wounds or ripped uniforms. That was one of the reasons The Declaration of Paternity existed. I know Kakashi had been aware of that as well.

My comment was met with silence, although Kakashi had turned in his seat to face me again. He wasn't looking at me. He was fascinated with the top of my kitchen table. I decided to give him a moment to himself to think but I wasn't expecting a response. There really wasn't anything he could say in response to that statement.

"What's with the photos?" He asked suddenly, which drew my attention to the tabletop. Among the disarray of assorted items were three photos of me. Shared Services had decided to overhaul all the employee badges this week and I was at the top of the list to get mine re-done. I'd just had a new one made recently, when I'd become the Ninja Relations Liaison, but the photo of me had been old so they'd insisted on doing it again. They'd also given me the outdated versions of my photos that they had on file. One was the original photo from my employment record, when I'd first been hired at sixteen. The second one was from when my first badge had been published and the third one was a copy of one that had been taken yesterday by Shared Services.

When I got home that evening I'd tossed them onto the kitchen table with all my other things and hadn't given them a second thought. What was I supposed to do with photos of myself? I had thought about throwing them in the garbage but something about throwing out photos seemed blasphemous. I figured everyone needed a nice picture for their funeral, so I was considering giving it to the woman who had my Will and Testament for just such a purpose.

"They're photos of me the CAO had on file. They gave them to me. I'm not really sure what to do with them to be honest." I told him dismissively.

I watched as he picked up the one from when I had first gotten my badge and looked at it for a few moments. I didn't understand his interest...I looked no different in that picture then I did right now. Well, except for the fact that my wardrobe had changed. From seventeen to nineteen I really didn't look different.

"May I keep this?" He asked and waved the photo in his hand slightly to indicate what he was talking about. I went quiet and my face slackened. He wanted...to keep a photo of me? Part of me wanted to ask 'why' but a stronger part of me felt like it didn't want to know the answer.

"Go ahead," I said after a brief moment of thought, "It's not like I have any plans for them." Besides funeral photos, of course. He nodded at me in response and I watched as he carefully folded the photo and tucked it away somewhere under his vest. He stood shortly after that and made his way towards the door.

Just as he reached it, I felt the urge to say something to him...anything.

"Hey, Kakashi?" I started, almost startling myself by calling out to him. He stilled, but didn't turn, his
hand gripping the handle of the door. "Take care of yourself...as best you can. I want to be able to introduce you to your son."

"I will." He said in a whisper, "Thank you." Then I blinked, and he was gone.

That night, even with the danger Kakashi faced, neither of us could have predicted that I would never be able to introduce father and son. That privilege, in the end, belonged to Sakumo Hatake.
Author's Note: This chapter is a little short for me because it is a two-parter. Originally it was going to be one big chapter but then I got writer's block and couldn't figure out why. Some talking with my best friend, which I'm super stubborn so I kept saying 'no that's not it' but she ended up being right, revealed that it was because the content felt wrong as just one big chapter. So, I split it into two parts. The second part is well-underway so hopefully you won't be waiting too long for it. Also - I felt bad for leaving you guys at a cliffhanger for so long.

WARNING: There are going to be some dark themes, an implied miscarriage and implied periods of depression in this chapter. It's also just...really sad in some places.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Civil Affairs -<>- Chapter 21 -<>- Kiyoko's Convictions: Part I

I could feel the eyes burrowing into my back as I walked, along with the pitying glances and scandalized whispers. I did my best to keep my posture rigid, my shoulders squared and my chin up. I kept my eyes forward and refused to look at anyone. I ignored the hesitant greetings a few of my co-workers threw in my direction. I just needed to make it back to my office. I just needed my office. I just needed to get to my office...then I would close the door and be alone with my work.

October 9th, 1462. This was it. My first day back at the Civil Affairs Office.

Lord Hokage and The Director, to my surprise, had attempted to convince me to stay home for a few more weeks but I couldn't do it. I was feeling restless. I couldn't spend any more time on compassionate leave. I'd only been gone for three weeks but the idleness was wearing on me. I couldn't be alone with my thoughts. I just couldn't. Everyone told me that I still needed time, that it would take at least three more weeks for me to recover physically and countless more mentally. I disagreed. I needed to work. I needed my job. I needed to go back to the way things were.

I needed everything to be just like it was in April, before Kakashi and before...before Tobiro.

I needed this more than I had ever needed anything before.

When I reached the fifth floor and subsequently my office, I ducked inside and closed my door, accidentally slamming it shut. I stood in silence and listened as the force of the slam vibrated through the building's walls and echoed in the small room.

I'd reached my refuge.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and turned to look down at the stacks of paperwork scattered everywhere. I could see that Tamaki had been attempting to keep them organized but hadn't been very successful. There was plenty of work for me to do. Plenty of work...

As I stared at the mountains of documentation, I brought my arms across my flat abdomen and couldn't help the slight nausea I felt at the action. I could almost feel myself turn white and my nose
start to sting. It was a warning of unshed tears. I forced them back.

I needed to work. I just needed to work. *Work*, Kiyoko, *work*. I'd feel better if I got back to work and hopefully I'd get distracted and I'd forget the pain.

On shaky legs I made my way towards my chair, running my hand along the edge of the wooden desk as I did so. I lowered myself down into the seat at an agonizing pace and it wasn't until I sat down that I realized I'd forgotten to breathe. I let out a heavy exhale.

I half-heartedly grasped the nearest stack of documents and slid them so they were in front of me. I lifted the list that had been laid neatly on top and immediately recognized Shibi Aburame's handwriting. A calming sense of familiarity fell over me like a blanket. Blanket...? My blanket? Remembering my blanket that was draped over the back of my chair I reached around and brought it over my shoulders.

I was just about ready to bury myself in paperwork, and moved to cross my legs out of habit, when the toe of my boot connected something under the desk. I heard a small exclamation of pain.

I shuffled my chair backwards and adjusted so I could scrutinize the underside of my desk. There, jammed into the far corner, was a small orange bundle with blond hair. Large, round blue orbs seemed to glow as they took me in with curiosity.

"There you are, Miss Shiranui!" Naruto exclaimed, and he was quick to climb out from underneath my desk. He stood in front of me and dusted off his pants, reminding me I really needed to sweep my office floor. It looked like Tamaki had been using it to store half of Suna.

I stared at him for a moment, blinking slowly at his appearance. It wasn't odd for Naruto to hide in my office, but I hadn't expected him to be the first person I interacted with today. I hadn't wanted to talk to anyone...I still didn't.

But…

There was something about seeing him that was almost a comfort to me. I wasn't sure why, but one glance at his whiskered face was a balm for my aching heart.

"It's Wednesday." I informed him bluntly, "You should be in class."

He huffed and squinted his eyes at me, crossing his arms over his chest in a stubborn manner.

"Well, you went away for a long time and you didn't tell me where you went! I was coming to see if you were here today or if it was that other lady…" That other lady? He was talking about Tamaki.

"You didn't give Mrs. Morino a hard time, did you?" I questioned him, making sure to keep my tone hard. Just because I went away for a while didn't mean that he could get away with doing whatever he wanted.

"No... not really." He muttered, but I could tell he was pouting like I had caught him getting up to something. Poor Tamaki; she never mentioned he'd been picking on her. Then again, I suppose she thought that I had enough on my mind. In hindsight it was too bad she hadn't told me. I probably could have used more thoughts of Naruto over the last couple weeks. Bless Tamaki for putting up with whatever pranks he'd subjected her to without a fuss.

I shot him a skeptical glance and he looked away from me, doing his best not to meet my eyes. He felt scolded. Good. The pranking needed to stop.
"Hold on a second…" Naruto started suddenly, and he looked back at me. His eyes raked up and down the length of my body. "What happened to your tummy? Where's the baby?"

The innocent question caused me to freeze and my back went stiff as a board. I suddenly felt hot, like I had a fever, and my nose started to sting, reminding me of the tears I'd been suppressing. The night he'd escorted me home from the hospital, I'd cried in Genma's arms. I hadn't cried since. I'd made a point not to and I was still stubbornly refusing.

I didn't cry.

I wasn't a crier. Nothing shook me. Ever.

I was confident and passive. I was Kiyoko Shiranui.

I was the woman who had a strong resolve and faked confidence in any situation until I had myself believing it. I could handle anything. That's what I kept telling myself every day when I woke up.

I swallowed thickly and tried to come up with an answer for him but the cogs in my mind had come to a screeching halt. Suddenly I couldn't think straight...I just really didn't want to cry and that desire was dominating everything else. Suddenly, I felt my face slacken and my body go limp in defeat. My eyes darkened and I retreated into my mind for a few seconds. I shut down.

I stayed like that for far longer than acceptable and I consciously recognized what was happening and struggled to get back to the surface. When I finally emerged, I noticed that Naruto was still staring at me intently despite what I assumed had been some time. I didn't know he could stand still for so long.

"It died." I said abruptly, almost choking on my own words. I fought to keep my face into a passive mask - to not let my pain show. This was an eight-year-old boy; not a sounding board for my misery. He needed to know the truth but the thought of showing him the depth of my pain...

I felt like allowing him to know would be an injustice. No one needed to know. No one needed to see me cry.

I wouldn't let them see.

Naruto stared at me blankly for a long moment, before his face twisted into first confusion and then understanding. I could see his young mind process the implications of what I had just told him. Most young children didn't understand death, not entirely. I know I hadn't understood death even when my father had been killed. It took me until I was older, maybe when I was about ten, to have the epiphany that my father hadn't just gone away. He was never coming back because someone had taken his life from him.

Most young boys didn't understand death as anything more than a concept. Naruto, I remembered in that moment, wasn't most boys.

As usual, he surprised me.

"Why?" He asked softly and could feel myself begin to crumble. Why, indeed.

I'd asked myself that question over and over and over again. Why? Why my little person? Why Tobiro? Why me? Why would fate intervene to have him conceived only to rip him away before he breathed his first breath? Buried among my sorrow, despondency and confusion as to why this had to happen to me...I found that I couldn't help but think of Kakashi too.
I wasn't sure why I felt concern for him, but I did. Pity too. If there really was some greater, cosmic reason for the loss of Tobiro why did it have to happen while Kakashi was out of the village? He'd be expecting to come home to a four month old son...and...and...he was going to come back to nothing. Just more loss. I almost felt worse for him then I did for myself. At least I knew the horrid, ugly truth.

Dismissing the dark thoughts that had invaded my mind I did my best to meet his eyes. I'd spent four days in the hospital after it had happened because Genna had been out of the village. Dr. Ito had advised against sending me home by myself and the nurses had listened. While my body hadn't fully recovered, I had wanted to be home, but he was adamant that I needed to be supervised. It was what was 'best for my healing' and the portly man was my physician, so I was forced to obey.

I would have preferred being home over the agonizing days I spent staring at the hospital's white walls or out the window at the same tree. Dr. Ito had checked on me several times a day and sat by my bedside. Sometimes he would just hold my hand and we would sit there in peaceful silence.

I didn't speak the first couple days, beyond thanking the nurses for my food or asking for something to read.

I just thought.

I thought constantly, about everything and everyone. About myself. I was introspective...I took the time to think about myself and my feelings. The feelings I usually dismissed. On the third day of being trapped in my own thoughts I finally spoke to him. I asked him to be honest and tell me what I had done wrong. I asked him if it was my fault. I asked him why.

"Sometimes...bad things happen, Naruto." I said, almost echoing the physician's words to me exactly. "Bad things happen to us all the time...there's no reason for them and there's nothing we can do about it." He'd also apologized to me, but I'd tuned out his words.

He told me it wasn't my fault and I hadn't realized until that moment how much I needed someone to tell me that. The physician said that it wasn't my fault...so why did it feel like it was?

Something about saying that evenly, looking into the small blond's innocent eyes, finally broke the dam I had been slowly building. Tears, unbidden, began running out of my eyes and I consciously struggled to bend them to my will. When I couldn't make them stop using willpower alone, I brought my hands up to shield my face from him and tried to force my face to dry. I wasn't sobbing but I did tremble. I wanted them to stop. I wanted them to go away. I couldn't let Naruto see me like this…

I felt a weight rest on the crown of my head and my trembling stopped at the unexpected contact. Slowly, I lowered my hands and from my sitting position, I had to look up slightly at the child in front of me...who was resting his hand gently on the top of my head.

"There, there." He said quickly, biting his lip which I assumed reflected how helpless he felt. He patted my head a few times as he said it.

At the gesture my mind went back to another, simpler time when the only thing I had to worry about was getting to work on time and Naruto Uzumaki. I remembered that day, when we'd released Gama-chan back into the wild, when I'd been confronted with a distraught demon-container crying at his loss. I'd been helpless. I hadn't known what to do but I knew I had to do something.

So, what did I do? At a loss I had patted his head and said 'there, there' attempting to convey in my usual, stunted way...that everything was going to be alright. I took a moment and recalled what Lord Third had said...what had he said?
"You have a special place in Naruto's life. Just by being there for him you teach him about kindness."

I remembered how skeptical I had been at Lord Hokage's statement. I had doubted him until this very moment. I had completely doubted him. I couldn't see how I had taught Naruto, with his exuberance and constant pranks, anything…

Then he put his hand on my head and attempted to console me the only way he knew how; in a way I had taught him without even meaning to. He had extended me a kindness and at that realization, there was an undeniable warmth that bloomed in my chest.

I felt a little stunned. Through some miracle the tears had stopped, I sniffed once, and I brought a hand to wipe the wetness from my cheeks.

"Do you feel better now?" Naruto asked quietly, staring at me like I was a deer that he could startle.

My hesitation was brief.

"Yes, I feel much better." I told him, mostly because I was still stunned and wasn't sure what else to say.

"That's good!" The boy said, sounding relieved, "I still need you to help me be an ace ninja, Miss Shiranui! You can't do that if you're sad."

That's right. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten. Naruto still needed me.

Why couldn't I go back to that simpler time when all I had to worry about was doing my job, getting to work on time and Naruto? There was no reason I couldn't. It would be a long road, but if I aimed for that and put my misery aside I knew eventually I would heal. All wounds healed with time if you allowed them to. I couldn't allow myself to wallow in my pain.

A small, whimsical smile tugged on my lips and I brought my hands up, taking both of Naruto's in my own. He let me do it, but he was staring at me questioningly the entire time. This wasn't a type of contact or situation either of us were used to. I stared down at his small hands, flipping them absently so I could stare at the creases in his palms. I took in his rounded cheeks, his whisker markings, his mess of blond hair and his big blue eyes. I felt a lightness in my soul...like some heavy burden was slowly being lifted away piece by piece.

"Thank you, Naruto."

It was on that day, with those simple words from a helpless eight-year-old, that my healing began.

XxX

I selfishly allowed Naruto to sit with me in my office for almost thirty minutes before I decided to make him leave.

He refused, even when I half-heartedly threatened to have Lord Hokage's door guards toss him off the roof. I'd eventually gotten Naruto to return to class on his own by threatening to make him sort all my files. They were already meticulously organized, but he didn't know that, so he'd pulled a face and agreed to return to the academy. He'd trudged out slowly with his hands in his pockets, tossing rebellious looks at me over his shoulder. I knew he wasn't really going back to class but by divine intervention I heard Iruka's voice shouting at him outside in the hall. Apparently, Iruka had finally tracked him down.
I heard a brief scuffle, followed by Naruto groaning indignantly as I'm assuming Iruka managed to capture him. That was followed by very loud scolding from the chunin which faded as I assumed he dragged the boy down the hallway.

When the time came for me to take a break for lunch, I decided to do something I hadn't done before. Usually I ate in my office or, if Tamaki invited me, I would go out to a nearby restaurant with her. I didn't feel like doing either today. I didn't want to stay in my office as having the door closed all day had left me feeling claustrophobic and pent-up. I also, despite their best intentions, did not want to spend time around Tamaki or Yuzuha right now. I wanted to be alone...but I couldn't stay in my office. The thought of having to walk downstairs and be stared at again was also not appealing.

If didn't want to walk downstairs, be around people or stay in my office, that left only one other option. Up.

I went up to the roof, sat down on the edge with my knees bent up to my chest and stared out over the village. It was sunny and bustling today. It was like not a single citizen had a care in the world...including me. I'm sure I looked rather peaceful, resting my cheek against my knee and staring out across the tops of the buildings. The civilians were moving in thick herds along the dirt streets and ninja navigated the village by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. A frigid wind blew in from the north, tugging at my hair and blowing my scarf up around my face. After a few minutes of that, I eventually became irritated and moved to sit so that my back was no longer to the wind.

That put me in view of The Hokage faces carved into the mountain. They'd always been there but I don't think I ever actually looked at them before. So, I took this opportunity to do so.

I started with Lord First, Hashirama Senju, wondering how accurate the depiction of him really was. He was dead long before my time so it's possible it looked nothing like him. I supposed there were photos I could probably dig up in the archives to do a comparison, but the truth was I didn't care enough to do that. I couldn't help but wonder how he got the idea to carve his face into a cliff. I imagined there was a great deal of arrogance involved in the decision.

Then my eyes slid over to Lord Second, Tobirama Senju. I had just begun to scrutinize is carved features when a thought suddenly hit me. Something Tamaki had said a few months ago.

*If we're going to point fingers this is all Lord Second's fault!*

That's what she'd said that night and for the first time...I properly agreed with her. The thought struck me like lightning and I once again became conscious of my flat stomach. When you really broke it down...this entire situation was all Lord Second's fault. I wasn't necessarily angry at the realization, I still deeply admired the man for everything he'd done for the village, but I couldn't deny that the flawed legislation he'd left behind was the root cause of my tragedy.

The complex web of laws and legislation regarding contraception he'd left behind were at the root of what had happened to me. I didn't deny that Kakashi and I were both at fault for what happened but there was a third party involved in our misfortune that I hadn't considered before. Tobirama Senju.

If I'd had access to contraception, I likely would have used it, if only as a precautionary measure much like kunoichi do. After all, only some of their missions required seduction. If it was accessible, there was no reason why I shouldn't have used it. If I had access to it the chances of me conceiving by accident were almost non-existent. I never would have gotten pregnant and, subsequently, I wouldn't have lost Tobir. I never would have known the pain of losing a child because no child would have existed for me to lose.
I had never given the laws that prevented civilian women from getting contraception much thought. My view was that it was just the way things were and that was it. I'd never questioned it before. I hadn't necessarily agreed with it, but I had never entertained the idea that it needed to change.

But it did. It was wrong. It was so wrong. How many women had been forced to raise children that they couldn't support? How many women in my village had no say over whether they were going to conceive another child? How much overwhelming pain had this system of Lord Second's design caused the women of this village?

We had a right to choose.

"You want to do what?" Tamaki questioned, her voice initially loud but then she tamed it to a harsh whisper.

"I'm going to abolish the legislation surrounding the distribution of contraceptive in Konohagakure." I repeated dryly, leaning back in Yuzuha's guest chair and crossing my ankles. "I'm aiming to no longer have contraceptive considered a controlled substance."

The three of us had crammed ourselves into Yuzuha's tiny office. Tamaki was squeezed between two stacks of paperwork near the back wall and Yuzuha was sitting at her desk. Both women were looking at me with stunned expressions. It had, of course, been Tamaki who had chosen to speak first.

Yuzuha's mouth opened and closed a few times, as if she was testing the words she wanted to say then thought better of it. Eventually, she spoke.

"Kiyoko, you've been back in the office for less than eight hours. You're still..." She trailed off and I heard her exhale abruptly from her nose as she seemed to re-think what she was about to say.

"I'll say it even if you won't, Yuzuha." Tamaki exclaimed, elbowing the paperwork surrounding her in irritation, "You are still mourning the loss of your child. You're not thinking straight!"

"Tactfully put, Tamaki." Yuzuha shot the other woman a glare and her voice was dripping with sarcasm. I understood why they thought that, but I was thinking more clearly than ever before. I was no longer going to sit idle and shrug off something that needed to be changed.

"The original regulations laid down by Tobirama Senju are outdated. It's time that they were changed or at least altered to accommodate the village's changing needs." I told them simply, giving my shoulders a small shrug. "I can't really blame him for creating them the way he did. He lived in a time when most women, who weren't kunoichi, slept only with their husbands and their virginity was carefully guarded prior to that. Times have changed...the world isn't like that anymore. A woman's worth is no longer measured by her eligibility for marriage."

"I know they're outdated laws." Tamaki dismissed, "Everyone knows that."

"Yet, no one has bothered to do anything about it." I replied quickly, watching as Tamaki shifted her weight where she was standing in discomfort.

Yuzuha sighed.

"We're not arguing your points. They're good points and you're right." The older woman told me with a tone that was almost scolding, "We're just saying there's no reason you have to instigate a legislation change. Burying yourself in your work and then taking on more can be just as unhealthy
People always seemed to be telling me that I was going to burn out. I hadn't yet. I figured that had to count for something.

"You're not a politician, Kiyoko." Tamaki added, shooting me a concerned glance. She seemed to have simmered while Yuzuha was lecturing me.

It seemed that this was a tough sell. You didn't have to be a politician to advocate a change in legislation. You just needed to work very hard, gain support for your cause and do your research. It certainly helped to be a politician, but you didn't need to be one.

I was doing this, whether my friends agreed to help me or not.

"So, I take it I won't be counting on your support." I commented blandly, taking in the two concerned looking women in front of me.

"Now, hold on one second." Tamaki suddenly burst with a renewed fire, "I never said that. If you're going to do this no matter what...then I'm in."

Yuzuha sighed again and slumped in her chair, crossing her arms and looking defeated.

"There really is no reasoning with you, is there?"

I shook my head. I'd made up my mind.

XxX

It was Thursday, October 10th, 1462.

I started my day by going to see Naruto before he went to the academy. Tamaki had taken over my workload except for taking care of Naruto. She'd offered to but apparently the workload had already been difficult for her to manage. Having to care for Naruto as well was considered too much to demand of her. Instead, The Director had chosen to give the file to some miscellaneous caseworker I'd never heard of. I could remember Tamaki telling me that a few weeks ago. I hadn't exactly been happy about it but my mind had been occupied with my loss and I'd quickly forgotten.

When I walked into Naruto's apartment, it looked like a tornado had hit and I blinked once in silent confusion. As far as I knew, or at least as far as Tamaki knew, the cleaner I'd hired to come in once a week was still employed by the office. The woman and I rarely interacted, except for the odd time when she would send me a letter asking me if she was going to need to change the day she cleaned. It was in the file that we sent her a bundle of ryo once a week as payment for her services. We hadn't neglected to pay her while I was gone...had we?

Recognizing that I couldn't leave it as it was, I wandered around the apartment and tidied. I held idle conversation with Naruto as he got his breakfast and got dressed.

"Oh," I began in sudden realization, turning to look at Naruto who was biting into a piece of toast, "Happy Birthday, Naruto."

There'd been so much going on that I'd nearly forgotten. I'd never really acknowledged Naruto's birthday, except to recognize that he was another year older. I barely remembered my own birthday or Genma's, so it wasn't that odd that I usually didn't remember Naruto's until it had passed. I'd been reviewing his budget yesterday after he'd left my office and that's when I'd realized when his birthday was. I didn't think anyone had ever celebrated Naruto's birthday and that realization had
made me...sad.

October 10th was the anniversary of Lord Fourth's death and the attack of the nine-tailed fox on Konohagakure which wasn't cause for celebration. Underneath that remembrance of terror and sorrow, Naruto's birthday was forgotten.

"It's my birthday?" The boy questioned, looking at me with a baffled expression.

"Yes, it's October 10th today." I threw out a couple of empty ramen cups, at first not realizing why he was so confused. I had mistakenly thought his confusion was because he hadn't been keeping track of the days like I'd taught him.

"I... have a birthday?" He asked me, his tone one of awe. I snapped my head to look over at him, making sure to maintain my typical blank expression. My eyes shot to the calendar on the wall behind him. I noticed he had been carefully placing 'X's on as the days had passed, just like I'd taught him. I noticed a big circle on the calendar next week and in red marker it said 'Ramen with Sensei' but other than that there were no other important dates marked.

Naruto...hadn't known about his own birthday?

It was one thing to forget your own birthday, like I did every year, but I realized then that Naruto hadn't even known he had one. Come to think of it, the only reason he seemed to know his own age was because I told him. I remembered back in March, he'd kept saying he was seven and I'd had to keep correcting him. I'd dismissed it at the time as a typical child's absent mindedness but now I knew that it was because he genuinely didn't know that he'd gotten older...until I'd told him.

I stared at him in silence for longer than usual. I scrutinized his expression which had, since my comment, morphed into one of pleasant surprise.

"Yes, you have a birthday." I finally confirmed.

"So, I'm older today?" He asked me.

"You turn nine today." I informed him, watching him closely as he reacted to the news. I straightened my posture and brought my arms up, crossing them over my chest.

"Wow! Really?" He exclaimed excitedly, and I didn't bother to respond, I just watched in silence as he reacted to this latest information. He abandoned his half-eaten breakfast and ran over to the small mirror I'd gotten for beside his door. He ran his hands over his cheeks and squinted his eyes. He lifted himself up on his tiptoes a few times and raised an arm in the air as if trying to measure himself, although he was failing miserably. Then he looked at me with a betrayed expression and I was a bit taken-aback by it. Why did he look so disappointed?

"Are you sure I got older? Nothing changed!" He emphasized. He seemed to pout at the realization that he wasn't magically taller, broader or different in some way.

"Well, aging doesn't really work like that. I still look the same as I did when we first met and I'm three years older. As a matter of fact, so are you."

"No! You did change! Your eyes got warmer!" Naruto insisted and that caused me to pause. My eyes got...warmer? What on earth did he mean by that? I shrugged it off in favour of trying to reason with him.

"Why are you so disappointed?" I questioned him, keeping my tone flat.
"How long am I going to be so short!?!" he exclaimed in frustration, "I'm never going to reach that stupid mark of Iruka sensei's at this rate!"

The mark? It took me a second to recall exactly what he was talking about. He was talking about the kunai mark that Iruka had made in the tree outside the academy. I remembered Iruka seemed to have tried to guess at how tall Naruto would be as a grown man and had placed the mark there.

"Naruto, you're not going to reach that mark in just a few years. It'll take a lot longer than that." I attempted to reason with him.

"How many years will it take for me to be a hero then?" He asked me with some mild desperation. That was a good question. How long would it take?

He was really putting me on the spot with that one. There was no way I could predict that, but I also had a feeling that he wasn't going to let me deflect his question. There really was a chance that Naruto would never achieve his dream...but I couldn't tell him that? Could I?

I looked down and saw his blue eyes glistening as he stared at me with an agonized expression.

"I can't say for sure," I began with some hesitation, "seven years...maybe?"

I almost choked on my own words as I said that, regretting it instantly. I should have tried to reject the question or changed the subject. I shouldn't give him false hope or unrealistic expectations. I'd just said the first amount that came to mind, which would make him sixteen. I knew he'd probably be established in a ninja career at that point...but be a hero? Not likely.

Grudgingly, I watched as Naruto's face slowly brightened at the newly discovered goal I'd unintentionally given him.

"Seven more years and I'll be an ace ninja! A hero! Then I'll be Hokage!" He shouted happily, "Believe it!"

I watched him with a slowly softening expression. I really wanted to believe it.

XxX

"Please tell me you have a plan for this campaign of yours?" Yuzuha questioned dryly then took a sip of her tea. The Yumehara Teahouse was uncharacteristically quiet for noon on a Sunday and my small group of activists had taken advantage of the hushed atmosphere. We were huddled together in the back corner of the restaurant, interrupted only by the occasional visit of Izo to the table.

"Yes, I hope you do. I have no idea how we would even begin such a feat." Himari added quickly. I had recruited her to the cause a few days ago and she was currently sitting next to Yuzuha. Both women were across from me in the booth. Tamaki was to my left on the outside of the booth, picking at a plate of dango absently.

"I'm not going to pretend I have everything planned but I have an idea of how we should start." I confessed. "First, we need to track down the original treaty that the Nara signed with Lord Second. We need to see what it actually says...there is a possibility it's being misinterpreted."

"After all these years?" Tamaki asked with disbelief. "I imagine that's a slim chance." I opened my mouth to respond but Himari beat me to it.

"It's not impossible." She informed the other woman matter-of-factly, "Historians have come across evidence suggesting that many confrontations between clans during the Warring States Period
extended from such misinterpretations. Sometimes those conflicts spanned for decades until someone realized it was a misunderstanding. The Aburame and Inuzuka come to mind."

I had forgotten that Himari was a teacher of history at Koba Academy and was well versed in such information. I had been expecting to explain it to the other women but apparently that had not been necessary.

"I'll do that." Yuzuha told me pointedly, "I'm sure I can bully Shikaku into helping me look. If it's not in the clan archives we must at least have a record that says where it is. I'm also a Nara from the head family, so I can argue I have the right to look for it whenever I want."

I nodded. It was a promising idea to have her look for the treaty.

"What's the next step of this master plan then?" Tamaki asked, "If Yuzuha's going after that treaty how can Himari and I help?"

"I was hoping you two would help me with the most important part." I explained, earning raised eyebrows from them both.

"And that would be...?" Himari questioned.

"Gaining support." I told them bluntly, "We need to demonstrate to the Elder Council, The Director and Lord Hokage that this issue is relevant to the village as a whole...not just a small group of people."

"Call me the devil's advocate," Tamaki began with a bit of hesitation, "but until you started on this warpath of yours I barely gave this whole issue a second thought. None of us did. What makes you think anyone is going to care?"

"They care." I stated, "They just don't know it yet. Not knowing how to stand up for yourself isn't the same as apathy...neither is ignorance."

"What do you mean by ignorance?" Himari asked suddenly, "I've always accepted it, but I wasn't ignorant. I can't think of any civilian women who don't know how it all works."

I felt the corner of my lip quirk slightly as I prepared to explain what I meant.

"Exactly." Yuzuha said before I could, a look of realization blossoming on her face, "Civilian women know about it because they live it every day. Kunoichi on the other hand..."

"No kunoichi has ever been denied contraception in the history of this village."

Tamaki still looked doubtful.

"Think about it," I started, "Do you know anything about a kunoichi's lifestyle beyond the fact they go on missions? Do you know about their training? Know about the physicals they need to undergo? Or the psychological evaluations they need to pass?"

All three women mumbled negatively in response.

"The same could be said about their understanding of us. All they know is that they leave the village and we stay. They fight, and we don't. They don't understand what it's like to live like us anymore then we know what it's like to live like them." I rationalized to the others.

"Well yeah," Tamaki agreed although she still sounded confused, "but you're not making sense. If
kunoichi really know so little about what it's like to be us, then why do you think they'd even care about how we have to live our lives?"

"We're all women. It doesn't matter that they fight and we don't; our bodies, our hearts and our needs are all the same. They'll be able to empathize with us better than any other demographic in the village." I glanced around the table at all three of my companions, taking in their now thoughtful expressions. "Even better...they're used to fighting to get what they want."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

So yes, I did do that...Kiyoko miscarried. I don't like it either...but I did it.

The miscarriage itself...is necessary for the plot, Kiyoko's character development, establishing her motivations/priorities in the next phase of her life and making the good things that happen to her later in life a natural progression. The loss of Tobiro is a recurring theme in this story that helps establish 'Kiyoko's Convictions' (hence the name of this chapter). This is Kiyoko's turning point...and Kakashi's too although the change is more gradual, and we won't be seeing him for a few chapters.

It has become an established joke in my circle of fanfiction friends that I have a 'Baby Complex'. Pretty much everything I write revolves around my characters having babies...I love when characters have babies. It makes the world a better place. Not allowing Kiyoko to have Tobiro ripped apart my baby-compex soul...the reason I dropped the ominous hint in the last chapter is because personally, as the grand architect of this story, I needed to rip it off like a bandaide.

Like I said, for those of you who aren't rage-quitting the story on me KIYOKO AND KAKASHI DO HAVE A HAPPY ENDING...TOGETHER. This is also the last 'bad' thing that was planned to happen to Kiyoko for the duration of the story. I hope that gives you the same peace of mind it gives me.
"Kiyoko…" I heard an exasperated voice start from behind me, "what are you doing?"

I ignored him at first and continued to flip through the stack of old documents, frowning at how dusty they were. I didn't feel like talking to him about it. I didn't have to explain myself. I didn't owe him anything. As soon as I thought that I froze. I gently dropped the paper I'd been holding back onto the surface of the desk and lapsed into thought.

I didn't owe him anything? Since when had I become so self-absorbed? This was my big brother and if there was anyone in the world I owed something...it would be him. Not that he'd ever made me feel that way. This was Genma. I knew deep down that his intentions were pure. He was just worried about me and considering everything that had happened, understandably so. I couldn't fault him for it.

"I'm doing research." I finally told him, keeping my voice low. He sighed heavily in response and brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"That's what I was afraid of." He grumbled as he lowered his hand back to his side. He looked around the archives for a moment, taking in its various other patrons, before he lowered himself into the wooden chair next to me. He leaned back in the seat, clearly attempting to convey a casual demeanor that I quickly saw through. He stretched one arm out to rest along the back of my own chair.

He sat there in silence for several minutes. After the first minute I went back to rifling through the documents, all of which were from the right period, but none seemed to have the information I was looking for. In fact, there didn't seem to be any documents authored by Lord Second. That was odd to say the least. One would think you could find his penmanship on every document but beyond a signature here or there...nothing. There was nothing. So, if his personally authored documents weren't in the archives...where were they?

"Kiyoko," Genma finally began again. His tone was imploring and I took exception to that. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I have to." I shot back immediately, flipping over another page and refusing to make eye contact.

"No. You don't." He said flatly, "We both know that's a lie."

"I don't lie." I responded with an equally dry tone.

"Not usually to other people," He started, "but when you lie to yourself I guess it doesn't feel like you're lying to everyone else too."

I flinched at his words although I wasn't sure why. I wasn't lying to myself. There was something wrong in my village and I couldn't in good conscious let that stand. There were outdated laws that needed to change and I had to change them. I wasn't lying to myself. I wasn't.

"You're looking for someone or something to blame, Kiyo." He remarked bluntly, narrowing his eyes at me.
"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." He emphasized, his voice rising slightly and earning us a look of curiosity from a group of students at a nearby table. He glared at them and they went back to what they were doing. He looked back at me and for some reason, I still couldn't meet his eyes. I looked back down at the documents absently; staring but not really seeing them.

"I'm not." I repeated after a few seconds although I noticed that the protest was weak.

I heard his chair creak and the slight rustle of clothing before I felt the weight of his hand on my head. Slowly, he began to stroke my hair. I could feel the calluses on his palms and fingertips.

"Then what are you doing?" He asked quietly.

"I'm just..." I trailed off and thought about his question. For the first time since my revelation on the rooftop of the Hokage Tower I took a step back and considered what everyone had been saying. I figured I owed Genma at least that much.

"Burying yourself in your work and then taking on more can be just as unhealthy as wallowing in misery. You'll burn out."

"I'm just working." I repeated after a moment of hesitation. I was just working...at something that needed to be worked at. There was nothing wrong with that. My big brother didn't say anything in response and I risked a glance in his direction. He was staring at me with a raised eyebrow, as if he was imploring me to make a connection.

I considered what I had just said for a few seconds more and then the realization hit me like a lightning bolt. I was lying to myself. I told myself that I was beginning this campaign because it was the right thing to do but the truth was a little more abstract. Could it be...that I was doing this...because I needed something to do? Could it be that I was doing this, not necessarily to pin blame, but to distract myself?

Was I just trying to distract myself from my feelings like Yuzuha had first accused? I'd ignored her at the time. Why had I ignored her? I ignored her because deep down I knew she was right. Just like Genma was now.

My intentions weren't as pure as I was trying to pretend. I wasn't doing this for everyone else in the village or for future generations...I was doing this for me. I was doing this because instead of confronting my feelings or mourning the loss of my child in a 'healthy' way, I was attempting to bury myself in work. I was determined to get to a place where I was so tired and busy that there was no way I could, for even a second, consider my emotions.

I chanced a look at my older brother, feeling sheepish as I did so. Who knew I could be so stubborn and obtuse? I'd always liked to think that everything I did was rooted deep in logic and common sense. Or at the very least I was the person who did what I did because it needed to be done. I never considered myself someone to be blinded by emotions. Even when emotion contributed to a decision, like my quest to find Naruto's birth certificate, I always had a stronger, logical justification for it. I tried to think about a time when I'd made a decision that was based only on emotion or feelings.

Beyond this one, I came up empty.

Kiyoko Shiranui, by the standards I'd set for myself, had broken. I'd snapped. Over the last few weeks I'd morphed into an obsessive person who ignored logic in favour of emotional gratification.
I'd burnt out...not in the way that everyone seemed to be afraid of, but I had burnt out.

Suddenly, I felt a distinct lack of control in my own life. I'd never felt that way before. I'd never felt like I didn't have any control until...until Tobiro. Where did my control go? Why was I behaving this way? What had happened to me? Why couldn't things just be the way they were before? I'd been working on this campaign of mine for almost two weeks and all I had done was spiral downward. The normalcy I'd been seeking never returned. No matter how hard I worked, no matter how busy I became, I still couldn't ignore the feelings roiling inside of me.

I wanted to be calm, collected, passive Kiyoko Shiranui again. I didn't want to be this person. The person who feels. The person who lies.

"You're burying yourself, Kiyo. If you're not careful it's going to be literally." Genma said bluntly. He stared at me in silence following his statement for a few minutes and I didn't say anything. I was paralyzed by my own thoughts. I wasn't sure what kind of reaction Genma had desired from me, but he finally sighed and slapped his open palm on the tabletop. He rose and turned to leave. His disappointment was palpable.

I stared down at the table and listened to his retreating footsteps.

"You're right." I finally found my voice, saying it to thin air. I thought he was long gone, but I was apparently mistaken. It didn't take long before he was standing beside me again, brown eyes penetrating my own.

"Oh?" He questioned simply, and I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "So, does this mean we've seen reason and we're going to take a breather?"

I was quiet. Was that what it meant for me to admit that Genma was right? Did it mean I had to reconsider everything I was doing and how I was thinking? Was that what was best?

I needed to think. I needed to take a step back and consider if the choices I had made to distract myself were really the choices I needed to make right now. I didn't want to burn out and I didn't want to change either.

"I need to...reconsider."

XxX

I wandered the winding streets of the village aimlessly. I had nowhere in mind that I wanted to go and there was nowhere in particular I needed to be. For the first time in a very long time...I felt purposeless. That was, of course, by my own design. After my brief confrontation with Genma in the archives, which had ended without a resolution, I had decided that I needed time to reflect. I decided that, no matter how hard it might be, I needed to give myself time to do nothing.

When I physically did nothing that gave me plenty of time to reflect, consider and think. So far, I'd reached no real conclusions. All I'd managed to accomplish was pushing myself into a state of melancholy that I was having a tough time getting over. I couldn't help but feel as if, after all that had happened, I wasn't me anymore.

That hurt.

I used to always work for the sake of doing it or because I'd reached the logical conclusion that work needed to be done. When I really thought about it, everything I'd done over the last few weeks had been to fill a void or create a distraction. That idea, that I didn't work for the same reasons anymore,
upset me. I wasn't entirely sure why. Perhaps it was because, until now, I had considered my ability to work simply because it needed to be done, an integral part of who I was as a person. Now I wasn't sure if that was still the case.

The image I had of myself was crumbling. My pure industriousness had been tarnished by self-interest.

Then there was the fact that Genma, and everyone else for that matter, had caught me lying to myself. More troubling was the fact that I had been blind to that personal deception. Not just blind, but willfully ignorant as well, since I'd clearly denied it when I was confronted. Alongside my work ethic, I had always taken pride in my honestly. It wasn't like it was impossible for me to lie or stretch the truth, but I had always recognized that in many situations lying had no logical purpose. All it did was delay the inevitable.

Today I realized that I had been changed by the loss of Tobiro and I wasn't sure it was for the better. As terrible as it was to admit, Genma was right. Yuzuha was right. Tamaki was right.

It took me longer than it should have to notice that I had stopped walking and was standing in the middle of the street. I wasn't even sure which street I was on, although when I glanced around at the architecture I could guess I was in the Izuna District.

It was November 17th, 1462.

It was a lazy Sunday and I was nearly alone in the street, contrary to the bustle I was used to. I imagined most people were staying inside to avoid the nip of early winter. Winter was colder than usual but from what I'd heard, winter in the Land of Fire was mild compared to elsewhere. Snowfall was rare in Konoha and based on the lukewarm winds that were blowing, I imagined this year would be no different. If we were lucky, we might see a light snow in mid-February.

A woman with a crying toddler in her arms and another young child hanging off the edge of her skirt accidentally brushed passed me, apologizing quickly before turning her attention back to her children. She had unintentionally reminded me once again that I was in the middle of the street. I mumbled an apology back and moved off to the side of the road to a dumpling stand that appeared to be closed. I stood there with my arms crossed over my chest and watched as the occasional person wander by. The street was still and silent.

"You seem more grim than usual, Kiyoko." The voice was familiar and belonged to someone on the list of people I least wanted to speak to. I ignored Lord Third's approach to the best of my ability, much like a stubborn child who was being scolded. I wasn't in the mood to have a talk about the 'Will of Fire' or having the right tool for the job.

He came to stand beside me in the shadow of the stall and beyond his earlier observation he said nothing. I didn't look at him, but I could hear the faint crunch of him stuffing tobacco into his pipe. Another few seconds and a gentle puffing sound followed as he began to smoke. The scent hit my nostrils and I couldn't help but feel vaguely...comforted...by the familiarity of it. I felt a tenseness in my shoulders, that I hadn't realized I'd been feeling, melt away.

For the first time in weeks I realized I felt at peace.

"I was sorry to hear about your loss." He said after we had stood in silence for a long moment, "It's rare I feel myself anticipating the birth of a child with such excitement. The last time was my grandson." I said nothing. I only listened. Lord Third had a way of getting to points at his own pace and over time, I had learned to let him do it uninterrupted.
"I remember thinking to myself," he began as he puffed on his pipe once more, "'Kiyoko Shiranui and Kakashi Hatake? There's a match I never would have considered but just think about how much potential that child has!'"

I couldn't completely hide the scowl that began to form on my face at his words. His words reminded me about my doubts in the summer when I'd first met Kakashi. I recalled how I'd been reluctant to admit who the father was and submit myself to a lifetime of being scrutinized. I'd made a big deal about it. I hadn't wanted to have my relationship with my child invaded by the village's elitist majority. Ironically, now I realized I'd give anything for the chance to live that way.

To me that was an open wound and the old man was intentionally digging at it. He had to have known that what he had just said was far from comforting. I was also still trying to establish what point he was trying to make. It occurred to me that his 'words of comfort' weren't the sort that were designed to comfort someone. I had heard all those a million times before, sometimes twice a day. I couldn't go downstairs to get a coffee without someone stopping me to tell me how sorry they were or telling me 'it will get better'.

Lord Third hadn't done that. His words were pragmatic.

"A terrible loss, indeed." He reiterated, "Not just for you but for the entire village."

If he was trying to irritate me it was working. I didn't want his pragmatism any more then I wanted his pity and for once in my life I could truly say I didn't give a damn about the village.

I felt like I was stumbling out of a fog and into open air for the first time in weeks. I didn't give a damn about the village? When had I started thinking like that? The whole reason I had begun working for the CAO was because I'd wanted to dedicate my life to Konoha. Everything I did in the past, ultimately, was because I loved my village. Was that the missing piece to my puzzle? Was that the error in thinking that had led to the slow decay of my integrity?

I realized that mentally this was not exactly a wonderful day for me. First, I realize that I'm trying to lie to and distract myself. This of course meant that I was slowly, or not-so-slowly, becoming a different person. I was changing. Then, I catch myself thinking that I don't even care about the village anymore. When had my intentions become so impure?

I had to wonder...could I really keep working the way I did knowing that I wasn't doing it altruistically? Was the self-serving person I was changing into the kind of person who should be working in my position? It seemed insincere. It seemed unrespectable.

Considering all this, maybe it would be best to leave Konoha's laws alone and do what everyone had been telling me to do from the beginning. Take a break. Sort my head out. Mourn. Dread Kakashi's return to the village and the hard truth I had to tell him when he did.

I sighed heavily, feeling emotionally drained.

"What is it you're trying to get at?" I asked tiredly, finally looking over at the man beside me. He was standing rigidly to my left, pipe in hand and his face was shadowed by the rim of his hat. I couldn't read his expression from where I was, but I got the impression he'd begun to smirk.

"Not in the mood for tactful conversation today, I see." He remarked.

_Not really_, I couldn't help but think. Especially since his idea of 'tactful conversation' had been purposefully taking an insensitive outlook on my loss. I had figured out immediately that he was doing it on purpose but I hadn't been able to decipher why. I wasn't in the mood for games.
"Then just tell me what's on your mind, Kiyoko. I know there's usually something profound going on in there." He took another puff from his pipe. I shot him a blank look and weighed my options. After a few moments I let my eyes travel along the nearly abandoned road once more. The few people who wandered by didn't even seem to notice that Lord Third was there. I'd expected some curious gazes or whispers, but it was as if we were invisible.

"I'm changing." I began and then couldn't get my mouth to work. For some reason I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Everyone changes." He commented lightly.

"I feel like I'm changing into someone else and it's a person I don't like."

"Oh? Is there a particular reason you don't like this person?" He asked. I chanced a glance in his direction only to see that he hadn't moved. He was still in a calm, almost meditative state.

"I can't be honest with myself and I don't seem to be paying attention to the values I was raised with. I'm not motivated to work unless it means I can bury myself in it and forget."

"Forget what?" He questioned calmly.

"Everything! Everything that's happened!" I nearly shouted back, "I feel enraged, tired and so unbearably sad all the time. Sometimes I wake up in the night and I feel so overwhelmed I can't breathe. I hurt, Lord Hokage." I gulped thickly, feeling my face flush hot at the words that tumbled forward. I don't think I'd ever told anyone how I'd felt out loud before and there was something almost liberating about the experience.

"I-I've never felt loss like this before." I confessed after I'd taken a moment to catch my breath. A little embarrassed by my own display of emotions, I glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention. The people on the street continued oblivious to us. "I feel like I'm not in control anymore."

He was silent for a long moment as he seemed to contemplate what I had said.

"I thought it was something like that." He commented, almost absently. He took another few puffs of his pipe as I watched him quietly. My little outburst had reminded me of how exhausted I was, and it took everything I had not to slump against the dumpling stand. He looked at me for the first time since this conversation had started and I saw his small, wizened eyes staring at me intently.

"It's normal to feel this way. It's certainly not good...but it's normal." He said simply, extending a free hand to place it gently on my shoulder. "You've experienced a tremendous loss and you are grieving - something you have very little experience doing. It's normal to feel, Kiyoko. It's normal to hurt. For someone like yourself, who has always been so composed, I imagine having so many emotions does feel like a loss of control. It might even feel like you're changing into a different person altogether."

I slowly processed what he had said, suddenly becoming very conscious of the weight of his hand on my shoulder. It was heavy and warm. When he finally moved it still felt like it was there.

"So... I'm not changing?" I asked cautiously.

"Oh, you are changing. It's just not in the way you are so afraid of. I prefer the term growing." He stated, "but you shouldn't confuse the pain of growing with the tirade of emotions that comes from losing someone precious."
I blinked in response to his words. 'Not in the way you are so afraid of'. It was like someone had just dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. I felt a jolt shoot through my spine as those words resonated with me deeply. I blinked a few more times. It was like my brain was going through a reboot, the gears screeching and turning as they started grinding in the right direction again.

Afraid? I was afraid? Of course, now it all made sense.

My analytical mind had returned with a vengeance, brutally shoving the emotional drivel aside as it began its work. I was afraid of my emotions. I was afraid of everything I was feeling and that's why I had begun to spiral, grasping desperately for anything that would distract me from my fear. I'd struggled to find work, more work and a sense of purpose. I'd focused on doing instead of thinking or feeling. All of that, however, failed to fully abate the fear. The more afraid I became, the more I began to feel like I was losing control, which made me more afraid. Lord Hokage was right, as usual. I wasn't changing, at least not as drastically as I'd originally thought.

I was just a mess.

That still wasn't a pleasing thought but it was better than thinking I was morphing into an entirely different person. A person I hated. For the first time in over a month I felt a sense of clarity that wasn't accompanied by exhaustion.

I was a mess, but I could get through this. I got through everything. I was calm, pragmatic, straight-faced, always confident Kiyoko Shiranui. I couldn't help but recall that first day back in my office with Naruto, when I'd questioned why I couldn't just go back to the way things were before. I realized now that it was impossible to do that, since I was growing, but that didn't mean I had to lose control.

For the first time in a while...I felt better. I started to feel some semblance of control in my life or at the very least in my own mind.

"Thank you, Lord Third." I finally said. "I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that." A quick smile tugged at the corner of his lips, but it was gone almost as soon as I saw it.

"My pleasure." He returned, "I couldn't have one of the village's strongest civilian advocates losing faith in herself, could I?" It took everything I had not to startle at the comment.

Over the last few weeks I'd developed a solid campaign to work towards the change in legislation I wanted. While the team I'd gathered had started out as a group of reluctant friends, they'd soon grown passionate about the cause. We had also been joined by, of all people, Tsume Inuzuka who had been made aware of our plans via Yuzuha Nara. The woman was a clan head, therefore a low-ranking politician, and was already proving to be a huge help when it came to planning to face the Elder Council.

The structure of my campaign was relatively straightforward.

Step One: Research the treaty and all relevant original literature to see if there was any interpretation or loopholes. We would also need to collect evidence to support our argument that contraception should be readily available to civilian woman. We had to go over the pro's, con's and then go over them again. We had to make sure that we were the experts on the topic and fully prepared to answer all inquiries.

We were, unfortunately, stuck on this step because records from Lord Second's rule were proving particularly difficult to obtain. The few we had found didn't have any insight into this decision of his.
Step Two: Develop the mission statement. While Yuzuha, Himari and myself were buried in research up to our necks I decided to assign Tamaki to developing a mission statement. I hadn't really thought it was important at first, but it was actually Tsume who'd told me otherwise. She told me that all my research would amount to nothing if the average person couldn't understand it, so I needed someone to focus on making the information palatable. Since we were a little stuck with the historical information, Tamaki's job now was mostly gathering relevant medical facts from physicians and the Nara Herbalists that could contribute to our point.

Step Three: Gain the support. Hopefully if we did steps one and two correctly, the support would come to us with a few well-placed posters. I wasn't delusional enough to think it would be easy, but I could at least hope that people would flock to the cause if it was well-formed. Tsume was already giving us a head start by making sure her kunoichi friends and fellow clan heads were aware of the coming campaign. She was giving them plenty of time to think about it before we made our move.

I also wanted to gain support within the Elder Council itself. Even without finishing all my research, it was apparent to me that The Director would side with us. She was a civilian woman and this was a civilian issue; the kind of thing she was paid to consider. Her support would be easily won in the council room, but I needed one more person on my side to secure a victory.

I knew from experience Lord Hokage would stay neutral since the final decision would be his. Danzo Shimura thought all civilian issues were a waste of time and even if we made good points would be either disinterested or unconvinced to side with us. Homura Mitokado was more fair then Danzo but he was the old-fashioned sort and the choice of topic would make him uncomfortable. He wouldn't be likely to think about it outside the council room.

That left Koharu Utatane. I'd always liked Koharu. The ex-kunoichi, almost fourty-five years retired now, was a very to-the-point sort. Much like Homura she was fair and would listen neutrally to what we had to say but because she was a woman herself, would be more comfortable taking the time to consider the topic. If I could finish my research and find enough evidence to support the change in legislation there was a good chance I could win Koharu over prior to meeting with the council.

With The Director and Koharu Utatane on my side before meeting with the Elder Council, there was still a chance for me to be successful even if Homura chose to side with Danzo. It would be a tie of opinions. While Lord Hokage was always the final decision maker on an issue, it made his decision easier to know that his inner circle was at least in partial agreement.

I thought it was a good plan...as far as plans went.

Now, I was reconsidering the whole thing. I hadn't started building this campaign because it was the right thing to do or because it needed to be done. I'd started it because I had been spiraling downward. Genma had been right. I'd been looking for someone or, in this case, something to blame. I'd been looking for more work to bury myself in so I didn't have time to feel or be afraid of what I was feeling. I'd wanted to be distracted from the thought that I was slowly starting to lose control of my life. Lord Third had just assuaged my fears, my loss of control, but that didn't mean I should completely dismiss the need to reconsider my motivations.

I suppose it shouldn't have been a surprise that Lord Third knew about what I was doing. He was The Hokage, after all. I also wasn't exactly being quiet about what I was up to since that would be counterproductive.

Still, I asked.

"How did you know?" I questioned after a few moments of reflection.
"You'd be surprised the conversations you overhear while enjoying tea on a Sunday." He chuckled as he said it, puffing on his pipe jovially. Enjoying tea on a Sunday…? He'd been at the Yumehara Teahouse that day? I didn't remember seeing him.

That old man was everywhere.

"I sense an unusual reluctance about you. What happened to your passion for your cause?" He asked.

I exhaled slowly at his question but didn't respond for a few moments. I let my eyes trace the few people in the street, who all appeared to be moving with purpose.

"I realize now that my 'passion' was born from the desperate need to distract myself." I told him, my voice now back to the passive tone he was used to. It wasn't proud to admit it but it was the truth and I was done lying to myself.

"Ah. Now you're trying to decide whether you should continue?" He concluded for me, nodding slightly.

"My intentions aren't pure. If I'm not doing it because I believe it's right how can I trust-" I cut myself off because I wasn't entirely sure how to finish that sentence. How can I trust myself? How can I trust that what I'm doing is the right thing?

"In my long life I've come across many people, each with their own unique ambitions and motivations. When I was young, like you, I questioned each one. It always drove me insane how convoluted or selfish they could be. Then, one day, I woke up and realized: it doesn't matter why someone helps the village...it only matters that they do." He puffed on his pipe and then swiveled his head to give me his full attention, "Don't be so quick to discredit your efforts simply because of your motivations. Especially if the cause you fight for is a good one."

I said nothing. I just blinked thoughtfully in response to his words of wisdom. He'd certainly given me a great deal to think about. As I was still struggling to come up with something to say, Lord Hokage snuffed his pipe and put it away. He moved his hands behind his back and began to stroll off into the street.

"Of course, the decision will always be yours," he started casually, "but should you choose to continue you should know that all of Lord Second's documents are now stored in the vault at my mansion. My former student, Tsunade, left them in my care when she chose to sell the Senju main estate to the Hyuuga."

He stopped and glanced over his shoulder at me one last time.

"You're more than welcome to stop by and take a look."

Then he was gone. It was almost as if he had never been there at all.

XxX

It was November 24th, 1462 and exactly one week had passed since my unexpected discussion with Lord Third.

"So, why are we going to Lord Hokage's Residence again?" Genma inquired, glancing around at the tall decorative fencing that surrounded us. He was chewing on a senbon as he spoke and his hands were shoved in his pockets. While to most he only looked mildly bored, I was aware that he was uncomfortable being at The Hokage's Residence.
When I'd asked him to accompany me there this morning, interrupting his painting of my third bedroom, he'd almost jumped out of his skin at the prospect. He'd refused at first, but I'd reminded him of a conversation we'd had earlier in the week about 'supporting my decisions'. It wasn't exactly fair for me to guilt him like that, since Genma always supported me, but I had been determined not to go alone.

Tamaki, Himari and Yuzuha were all busy with their families this weekend and I needed the extra hands. I'd rather Genma help me sift through old documents then let him paint the third bedroom of my house again. He'd already changed the paint colour four times and so far I hadn't been partial to any of them.

"I was invited." I responded simply, "Lord Third seems to believe there are records here that might help my campaign."

"You were invited. I was not." He looked extremely uncomfortable at the declaration.

Up until this point I'd been watching him from the corner of my eye but now I glanced at him over my shoulder, raising one eyebrow.

"Why does being here make you so irritated?" I questioned, taking in his rigid posture once more.

Genma muttered something incoherent to himself before he sighed.

"This is Lord Hokage's Residence." He informed me, "I'm a common foot-soldier and this is one of the finest buildings in the village. That garden-ornament over there is probably worth more then I'll make in my entire life." To emphasize his point, he gestured passed the fence and into the garden where a crafted glass ornament was placed next to a koi pond. It was about two feet tall and looked to have been made in the likeness of a younger Lord Third. It was immaculately done and probably one of a kind.

"You're exaggerating." I told him bluntly.

"Obviously, but my point is that I'm not used to lavish stuff like this. If I break something I'll be stuck doing D-Ranks for the rest of my life. That is not an exaggeration." He muttered the last part and I stared at him blankly for a moment before swiveling my head forward again.

"Didn't you serve as Lord Fourth's bodyguard?" I asked, "Surely you've been somewhere like this before."

"Well...no." Genma began from behind me and while I couldn't see him I imagine he shrugged, "Lord Fourth was one of those 'humble upbringing' leaders who wanted to live like everyone else. He had a two-story in the Imai District. It was nice, but it wasn't a mansion or anything."

I'd never known that about Lord Fourth but it made sense. While he could certainly be flashy, he'd never struck me as the arrogant sort. Not that Lord Third struck me as arrogant either but it was common knowledge that the Sarutobi Clan was old wealth. They were a small clan who had earned their riches serving as the Senju Clan's primary vassals during the Warring States Era. When Hashirama Senju and Madara Uchiha had begun recruiting ninja clans to join the village, they had requested that the clans relinquish most of their wealth. Similarly, they made sure that everyone was aware that there was no longer any 'nobility' amongst them.

It was their attempt at making everyone in Konoha equal from the beginning. My textbook said that Madara had called it 'making sure Konoha's foundation was level'. They had wanted a fresh start; a place where a clan's history prior to the village's founding was irrelevant. The good and the bad. They wanted to make it easier for old grudges and feuds to be set aside. Which made sense
considering up until that point ninja clans rarely worked together. The Warring States Era was sometimes called the Warring Clans Era for a reason. For the period, it had been a bold idea and many clans had initially refused to join the village because of it.

It was true that the clans still had fine estates and large compounds within the village, but if historical records were to be believed those were nothing in comparison to what they possessed prior to coming to the village. Being hired to war on the daimyo's behalf and escort kings for hundreds of years was quite lucrative for ninja clans, after all.

When the Sarutobi had followed the Senju to Konoha, Sasuke Sarutobi had notably refused to relinquish his wealth. This was a matter of contention between himself and Lord First until the former's passing. Once Sasuke was dead, his son had agreed to Hashirama's terms and donated most of his family's remaining wealth to the village. However, the damage was done and the Sarutobi family had already used a great deal of their wealth to build extravagant homes and businesses.

I ignored my brother's quiet distress and continued up the stone walkway towards the veranda. The entire Residence was built to resemble two cylindrical temples side-by-side. The first tower stood three stories high and the second stood four stories, making it look a little lopsided. It had a large, lush garden that resembled an enchanted forest with numerous hidden koi ponds and flora. It looked disorganized, but I happened to overhear Lord Third speaking to his gardener one day, so I knew that wasn't the case. Encasing the garden were tall wooden fences which were artistically painted with images of leaves, birds and vines. Even though the images were old and faded by the sunlight, it was clear they had been painted with a great deal of care.

The toe of my boot had just connected with the first step when the carefully carved doors opened. Lord Hokage emerged holding his pipe in one hand while the other rested behind his back. He was wearing his typical robes but his triangular hat was absent. He'd fixed a warm smile on his face when he saw me.

"Ah, Kiyoko!" He exclaimed almost as if my arrival was a surprise, "I'm glad to see you considered my words and have reached a decision. I assume this means you'll be continuing your campaign?"

"Yes." I responded simply. Following my conversation with Lord Third I'd taken another few days to consider everything we'd talked about. In the end, I couldn't find anything wrong with his statement. He was right. Who cared what my intentions were if they weren't bad? They may not have been pure, but they certainly weren't nefarious. Now that I'd managed to sort out my emotions and return to my normal passivity, I realized that there was no logical reason why I should stop what I'd started.

I'd already come so far, and the bottom line was that Konoha did need to move forward. The village I loved, yes loved, needed to shed the outdated laws that were hindering its progress. It had been several weeks since I had been able to admit that I loved my village. Over the last little while it had been difficult to admit that I felt strongly for anything, let alone loved something.

Now that the metaphorical mist had cleared I remembered why I'd started working for the Civil Affairs Office in the first place. I loved Konoha and I wanted to help it prosper. I wanted to serve it. Even if that meant I needed to force it to change a little.

Lord First and Lord Second, hell even Madara Uchiha, had preached equality for all Konoha's citizens. Despite the way his affiliation with the village had ended, the former Uchiha clan head's idea of a 'level foundation' was admirable. It was just a shame he'd often used ruthless tactics, both political and martial, to achieve his ideal outcome. If the Sarutobi Clan had served as vassals to the Uchiha, they likely wouldn't have gotten away with maintaining their wealth for so long. Sasuke Sarutobi probably would have died by Madara's hands for what he deemed an infraction.
"I see you've brought your brother as well." Lord Third commented, using a tone that I recognized as him trying to lay the 'harmless-old-man' act on thick. I noticed my brother fidget slightly at the elder ninja's scrutiny. If he was trying to set my brother at-ease he was doing the exact opposite. "Good morning, Genma."

"Lord Hokage." Genma returned stiffly.

"Please come in. Both of you." Lord Third said with slight glee, shooting Genma a pointed look. I knew from living with Genma that elite ninja, usually those of the jonin class, were sensitive about entering another ninja's home.

Whenever Ibiki walked Tamaki over to visit with me, he almost always hovered in the doorway unless Genma was with me, even if I invited him in. Even when Kakashi had started coming around, he almost hovered in the front entrance. Getting him to come further inside was usually like pulling teeth. Gai usually strolled inside, he didn't even knock most days, but I was starting to get the impression he had some sort of agreement with my brother.

I didn't understand it. I imagine if I thought about it long enough I would come to understand but I had no desire to. It was ninja business.

I silently accepted Lord Third's invitation and entered his residence, doing my best not to gawk as I stepped inside. The floors of the main entrance were dark hardwood and the walls were decorated with numerous paintings in ornate frames. While I ignored Genma awkwardly shuffling through the door and the conversation he was having with Lord Hokage, I took the time to observe the artwork. My eye was caught by a painting near an archway which, based on the elegant couches and chairs beyond, I assumed led to a sitting room.

It was an oil painting of the iconic red bridge over the Itama River. The same bridge that Kakashi and I had stood on that night while we waited for Gai to find us. I must have walked over that bridge by myself, with Atsuko or with Genma at least a hundred times in my life. I'm sure I had plenty of memories to attach to it but for some reason the only person it made me think of was Kakashi.

Briefly, I wondered where he was and if he was okay. The moment of consideration passed and I brought my attention back to the present.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" I hear the elderly Hokage ask from behind me.

"Yes." I agreed simply, not really discerning exactly why it captivated me.

"My late wife, Biwako, enjoyed painting. It was a hobby of hers." He commented, and I was reminded of the faded paintings on the fencing outside.

"I can't pretend to know much about art," I admitted after a few moments of silence, "but I like them." I didn't have an artistic bone in my body and didn't have any taste for artwork but something about these paintings spoke to me. They had a spirit that I hadn't realized an inanimate image could possess.

As I observed the others I realized that I recognized them all. I saw an oil-brushed image of the Yumehara Teahouse and the Nara Clan Compound. There were a few different paintings of the Imai district, most done in the heart of what used to be the Senju clan's estate. There were many more. Every painting was a different place in Konoha and they all had somehow managed to capture its beauty and will. I could understand why Lord Third kept them out on display like this.

"The vault is this way." He informed me, nodding at Genma in acknowledgement as he began
moving down the hall. The two of us followed him silently. After about the third right turn we made, it occurred to me that it would be easy to get disoriented if you weren't familiar with the building. The hallways were long and narrow. The layout wasn't exactly typical either. We passed nearly ten doors but apparently none went to the vault as Lord Third didn't even glance at them.

We went up a flight of stairs, made a left down another narrow hallway and then went down another flight of stairs. A right turn down another dark hall and, after a few steps, Lord Third stopped. It was a dead end. At least, it appeared to be a dead end. Lord Hokage gave me a look that told me to stay still and I watched quietly as he moved towards the wall in front of us. He placed the palm of his left hand flat against the wall and raised his right to make a hand sign.

"A one-handed seal…?" I heard Genma whisper to himself behind me. He sounded impressed, so I inferred that doing seals with one hand wasn't exactly common. Although it made sense to me that Lord Third could do impressive things. He was supposed to be the best ninja in the entire village after all - it was literally part of his job description.

I jumped a little as black markings, which looked like ink writing, began to spread across the surface of the wall. They remained visible for a few seconds but then faded slowly. Once they were gone, I heard a crack that sounded like stone scraping against stone, and the wall began to move. I took a hesitant step backwards as I watched the segment of wall disappear into the floor, revealing another set of stairs. Oil lanterns along the wall lit up automatically, as if they were connected to the same seal which had been placed on the door. The glow was soft and while it illuminated the steps it didn't do anything to diminish the darkness beyond.

"This way." The old man urged, making his way down the steep stairs. We had gone up, down and around so many times in the maze-like Hokage Residence that I couldn't honestly say which floor we were on. I was assuming that we were now entering a basement or cellar of some kind.

The further down we went, the less the lamps helped with visibility and soon I found myself in complete darkness. A hand came to rest gently on my back and I realized that Genma was attempting to steady me. I could barely see anything, but I imagined my brother's eyesight was sharper than mine and I put my faith in his ability to steer me. I almost lost my footing a few times but each time my brother would grab my shoulder or waist to stop me from falling. I felt relief when my foot finally connected with what I established was the stone floor.

I couldn't see anything but I heard Lord Third's light footsteps as he moved further into room. I stayed where I was, content to wait in the dark with Genma's reassuring presence behind me. I wasn't scared of the dark but there was still something unnerving about the aired, blackness of the vault. The air was dry and dusty with the room smelling of ink, parchment and varnished wood. It wasn't an altogether unpleasant scent, but it wasn't exactly welcoming either.

A paper lantern, hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room, was lit and revealed the rest of the vault in a soft orange glow. While I couldn't see all of it, I could tell the vault was massive. There was a main room, which we were standing in, but I could also see several narrow halls which were hidden beyond stacks of papers and old chests.

"This is the room where I've stored most of Lord Second's documents." Lord Hokage informed my brother and I, "You shouldn't come across anything confidential as I keep the sealed documents further inside the catacombs."

The catacombs. I'd had my suspicions when I'd seen the hallways that the vault expanded far beyond this room. I had thought perhaps there were more rooms further in, but Lord Third's words had me considering something a little more complex. Since, from what I could see, the Hokage's residence was mostly unguarded it was possible the design of the vault itself was the best defense against
intruders. I could only imagine how vast the winding, underground hallways stretched and how many traps lay hidden within them. I imagined infiltration of Konoha's vault would be a dubious prospect even for a skilled ninja.

It made the idea that I hadn't even needed to ask to get an invitation even more humorous.

"It is likely the information you are looking for is here." Lord Third finished, glancing at me before turning back the way we came, "I wish you luck."

With that he exited the vault, leaving my brother and I standing there in silence for a few moments. I eventually turned to look at him, crossing my arms over my chest.

"First we should skim the documents and separate them based on the likelihood that they'll have information on what we're looking for."

"All of them!" Genma jumped in surprise, shooting me a wide-eyed look.

"Yes, all of them." I responded bluntly, "It's not like you have to read them. Just give them a quick once-over and look for certain dates, names and words. Once we have them sorted we'll continue from there."

"For the love of-" My brother began to curse but then stopped himself short, bringing a hand up and resting it on the top of his head. I watched as his eyes traced the stacks and boxes of records, which didn't appear to have been organized in any fashion. After a minute, he sighed. "We're going to be at this forever."

He went silent again but after a minute, he sighed and looked over at me.

"So, what am I 'skimming' for?" He asked, and I paused to consider his question. As counterproductive as it was, I hadn't really thought about that yet.

"Well," I started, still thinking as I did so, "Obviously anything with Lord Second's name."

"Great. So in other words: all of it." Genma grumbled and I shot him a bland, unamused look.

"Not necessarily." I responded, "Tobirama Senju was only Hokage from February 1414 to his death which was..." It took me a moment to recall, "July 12th, 1418."

Genma's head snapped to me quickly and I caught the quiet look of surprise on his face. I didn't ask him why he was surprised but he seemed to sense my silent questioning and continued.

"I didn't realize Lord Second's rule was so short. I mean, I'm sure I knew at one time, but I guess I forgot. Everything he did for the village he did in only four years." He paused for a moment, "It's remarkable."

I didn't comment but I did continue with my thoughts on how to narrow the documents down.

"Considering those dates anything prior to 1414 isn't going to have what we're looking for. Unfortunately, the treaty and other documents that the Nara have are only dated by year and it's likely the discussion on this topic had started much earlier than the actual drafting of the documents. In other words, I can't narrow the dates down much further." I had learned by starting this process that legislation could potentially take years to be incorporated. I was personally determined to beat the odds with this campaign.

"Hopefully that will still narrow it down." Genma stated, although I could tell he was already
exhausted by the task that laid ahead of us. Unable to offer him any words of comfort I rolled up my sleeves and moved over to the nearest stack of old parchment.

I heard Genma exhale through his nose and reluctantly move over to a stack on the opposite end of the room.

XxX

Once the sorting was finished, which had thankfully eliminated everything apart from three waist-high stacks of records, I had sent Genma home. His grumbling and cursing had eventually gotten on even my gilded nerves. Not to mention he tended to knock over the piles I was making which was surprising behaviour for an elite jonin.

Now I was sitting alone in the middle of the dimly-lit floor of the vault, surrounded by the three stacks of potential records. I'd finished going through the first two stacks unsuccessfully. I hadn't been able to find anything pertaining to Lord Second's decision to regulate contraception. I was on the third stack of documents and my hope was dwindling with each discarded paper.

Nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing.

I picked up a small folded piece of paper on what I had come to recognize as the Senju clan's formal stationary. I unfolded it gently. I was trying not to rip the aged, dry paper which I could hear crackle in protest at being handled.

Tobirama,

I recognized the handwriting although I didn't know who this person was. All I knew was his name; Atsuhiko.

I had seen several letters addressed to Lord Second from this man, but I hadn't read anything that indicated who this mysterious man was. Whoever he was, Lord Second deeply trusted him and seemed to confide in him on many matters. I had begun to wonder if the man was family to Tobirama and Hashirama. My best speculation was that Atsuhiko was perhaps a cousin who was head of a branch of Senju clan that had been forgotten.

So far, while the letters sent from this Atsuhiko to Tobirama had been fascinating, none had any connection to the contraception laws. Despite this, I continued to read.

I'm not sure you were wise to seek my counsel on this matter. What I have to say is contrary to your own opinion and the opinions of the men who help make the decisions in your beloved village. I have considered everything you have told me carefully for many days before writing this response and even now, I am gripped with uncertainty. This powder the Nara have produced sounds life-altering indeed and if the decision were mine, I believe I would made it available despite the significant risk involved.

I felt my heart leap into my throat and I re-read the paragraph of neat writing a few more times. Atsuhiko was talking about a powder. A powder that the Nara clan had produced. The Nara clan herbalists had produced many different medicines over the years, so it was possible that he was referring to something else but considering the time frame...

Something the man had written stood out to me. 'Despite the significant risk involved' was what he had responded to what I assumed was a lengthy letter from Lord Second. A lengthy letter regarding this powder. What risk was he referring to? Did he mean political risk or something else entirely? My initial relief at finding a document referring to the contraception was quickly crushed by frustration. If
only I could see the letters Lord Second had sent to this Atsuhiko person. Those letters likely had the information I was looking for.

*I am a selfish man. Admittedly the promise of being able to strengthen my military forces with kunoichi for longer than my predecessors is tempting. I must admire your reluctance and genuine concern for the women of your village. It's times like these that I recall the letters Mitsuka sent me years ago telling me of your compassion. Letters which I did not believe at the time.*

Mitsuka…? The name was familiar, though in the documents I'd read so far between the two men her name had not come up. I had seen it recently. Where was it? I stood, still holding the letter limply in my hand and moved over to one of the vault's far walls. I approached a stack of documents, half-buried under other records that Genma had carelessly knocked over before he left.

I searched for a scroll that I had noted but as it had been signed by Lord First and dated at the turn of the century, I'd disregarded it. I found it easily, as it was in an ornate canister that stood out amongst the others. I set the letter from Atsuhiko down on top of another pile of documents and picked up the canister, opening it and sliding the records out.

I unrolled a thick pile of paperwork and set to work skimming through it. There was a long contract, several pages long on top that I barely glanced at. From what I could tell it was a detailed account of a protection and land agreement that was being made by the Senju clan. One of the pages had a header that simply said, 'in place of dowry' and proceeded to list sizable debts that were owed to the Senju clan within five years of the contract.

Then I made it to the final page which was the one I had remembered.

*I, Hashirama Senju, officiate the union between Lord Tobirama Senju and Lady Mitsuka of the Hanabachiro clan. In place of dowry, a contract detailing the debt of the Hanabachiro clan to the Senju has been drafted. This debt must be fulfilled within five years.*

I remembered this document, not because it was Lord Second's record of marriage, but because of how...underhanded it seemed. While I hadn't read the contract in full detail, I remember being a little disgusted by the Senju's part of the agreement. It was clear from what I could see that this Hanabachiro clan was destitute and had nothing to offer the Senju in exchange for protection. So, desperate as they were, they'd offered a dowry-less marriage and promises that they would repay the Senju as soon as they could.

On the surface, it looked like the Senju were doing the other clan a favour by accepting the deal but...

*Should the current clan head fail to honor these obligations within five years his position as head of the Hanabachiro clan will be forfeit to his daughter, Lady Mitsuka, who will retain all the clan's land and wealth over her brother, Lord Atsuhiko.*

If the clan couldn't pay them back in five years, which for a clan with nothing it seemed an unattainable goal, then the clan would cease to exist. Everything the clan *did* have would be passed to Lady Mitsuka. Which meant it would belong to Tobirama and the Senju clan. The clan may have been destitute, but this contract showed that they must've still had something the Senju wanted… otherwise this clause wouldn't have existed.

Marriage contracts aside I had found the name I was looking for. Atsuhiko was Lady Mitsuka's brother. Which made him Lord Second's brother-in-law. Considering what I had just read, the fondness that Atsuhiko showed Tobirama in his letters was strange. It would have made more sense if Atsuhiko had despised the Senju man; he had been a part of the contract meant to disinherit him.
I glanced between the marriage record and the letter I had temporarily set aside in deep thought. It was a long shot but there was a possibility that Lord Atsuhiko had kept the letters Tobirama had sent him. If he had then that meant that maybe, somewhere out there, the insight into Lord Second's decision was waiting for me. It would be foolish to ignore the cryptic risks that Atsuhiko had been alluding to.

Just what had Lord Second considered enough of a risk to do something as drastic as making contraception a controlled substance? The answers were in the letters sent to his brother-in-law. I could feel the certainty in my stomach.

If I could figure out where the Hanabachiro clan was, or at least where their old records were kept, there was a chance...

I let my eyes run over the name once more; tracing each character carefully and considering them. It was a unique surname and not one I'd ever heard before which meant the clan had either died out in the paternal line or never immigrated to Konoha. Searching for them would be the equivalent of looking for a needle in a haystack but something told me I had to try.

xXx

"So, you spent almost twenty hours looking through Konoha's vault and you only found one letter that might refer to Lord Second's decision." Tamaki stressed, resting her head in the palm of her hand while she looked at me.

"Well, when you put it like that it's not very flattering." I responded with a bland tone, sipping my tea. "But yes."

Tamaki scoffed and decided to direct her attention at the plate of dango that had been recently placed in front of her. It was a Thursday evening, the Yumehara Teahouse was full of patrons and short-staffed. You were lucky to catch a glimpse of Izo amidst the crowd let alone catch her attention to ask for more tea.

"So that's it? We've got nothing?" Yuzuha reiterated. She was next to Tamaki and while her face was passive, I could tell she wasn't pleased with the news.

"Nothing is a strong word." I responded simply. "If we can figure out where Atsuhiko Hanabachiro's records are we can potentially find his complete correspondence with Lord Second regarding these matters."

"So what if we do? What's that going to amount to?" Tamaki asked, and I could tell her curiosity was genuine.

"The letter I read from Lord Atsuhiko referred to 'risks' that Lord Second had told him about previously. What risks could he have been referring to?" I paused for a moment and watched as the two women contemplated my question, "It's very possible that Lord Second's decision regarding contraception was based on these risks. Currently there are no long-term risks to the Nara clan's contraception but what if there was at the time?"

"If we can prove that Lord Second's decision was based on fears he had at the time which were either unfounded or are no longer relevant..." Yuzuha continued for me and trailed off.

"Then that only supports the argument that the laws are outdated and weren't meant to last forever in the first place." I finished, watching as a small smile pulled at the Nara woman's lips.

"It's a promising idea." Tamaki agreed, munching on her dango, "Where do we look for the records"
of an extinct clan? If you tell me where to start I have no problem beginning the search."

"Same place we have been looking. The archives. It's just now we actually know what we're looking for." I told her, nodding in thanks at her easy offer of assistance.

"I'll spend another weekend looking through the Nara archives." Yuzuha added, "It hadn't occurred to me that the powder could have been dangerous to begin with. Before I was just looking for the treaties and correspondence with Lord Second. If the powder really did have adverse effects, it's possible the lead herbalist had notes on it somewhere."

XxX

It was January 12th, 1463.

Almost four months had passed since I'd lost Tobiro. I'd had a little time to heal, though not completely and, if I was being honest, I don't think I would ever fully recover. Having plenty to do helped my healing process but I was careful not to bury myself. I was now aware that there was a thin line between 'keeping busy' and 'drowning in distraction'. Tamaki, Yuzuha and Himari certainly helped me regulate my workload and had become good at recognizing when I began to slip.

Naruto was the same he always was which was an unexpected lifeline for me.

Overall...I was better.

As for my campaign, we were making progress and steadily gaining support but it was obvious to everyone we still had a long way to go. Many women, civilian and kunoichi alike, had come to support the cause and at times their passion surprised even me. It was a good sign.

We had yet to track down the records pertaining to the Hanabachiro clan and Lord Atsuhiko. It seemed like every time we found something, like a family tree or land deed, it only seemed to generate more unanswered questions. Still, it felt like progress and I was determined. I couldn't shake the feeling that Lord Second's letters to his brother-in-law would answer all our questions and this effort would be worth it. As time wore on, I had noticed Yuzuha and Tamaki wavering; they didn't share my certainty that the letters could be found. In fact, they had begun to dismiss the idea that they'd survived the decades as blind optimism.

Normally my logical mind would win, and I would agree with them. Yet...I couldn't shake a heavy feeling in my chest that urged me forward. Those letters were the answer and they were out there. Somewhere. I could feel it.

XxX

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It was Sunday and I was in my kitchen, fighting with the coffee maker. Genma had bought a new brewer for his apartment and had given me our old one, which by some miracle still worked. I had mostly been doing my coffee consumption at work or at restaurants, so I hadn't bothered to buy one for my house when I'd moved.

As the coffee maker chugged and spluttered, then let out a high pitch squeal, I began to question my decision to accept the hand-me-down. I let my eyes trace the plastic lid and the large dent in the lid courtesy of Might Gai.

I was still staring at it, with my arms crossed, when there was a knock at my door. I heard it open before I could verbally respond, so I assumed it was either Genma or Gai. I didn't look up to confirm my suspicions as I wasn't willing to look away from the demonic kitchen appliance. I'd learned long ago it couldn't be trusted.

At first, the silence didn't concern me but eventually I realized over three minutes had passed without
my visitor saying anything.

With a blank expression I glanced over my shoulder.

Genma was sitting at my kitchen table with his hands folded neatly in his lap. He was uncharacteristically quiet and I fought the unnerved feeling that began to grow in my stomach. I watched as he opened his mouth once, letting it hang open briefly before he proceeded to snap it shut. He did this a few more times. He never met my gaze. He wrung his hands together with a nervousness I wasn't accustomed to seeing from him.

Finally, he spoke. His voice sounded dry and it cracked with each word.

"I thought you should know that Kakashi is back."

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