

*She'd lived hundreds of lives, and it was always the same. A world on the edge of annihilation. The desperate struggle to save it. Death. Destruction. Then on to the next.*

*Would this life be any different? What would happen if a past life collided with the present?*

## **Chapter 1 - Present**

“How could you save him?” Moriki wheezed beside me. Blood seeped through his fingers, staining the dark blue fabric of his woven shinobi uniform, the Hi Haven crest barely visible on his sleeve as he clutched the wound at his side. “We were finally rid of him! And you... you went and practically brought him back to life! Tell me why!”

The wind whipped around them, tugging at their clothes as they soared high above the forest on the broad back of the massive eagle. The steady beat of its wings, each one large enough to cast a shadow across the treetops far below, filled the air with a powerful rush of sound.

Moriki's rasping words ended in a fit of coughing, and Aimee's eyes widened as she stared at the elite shinobi. She had never seen him like this—so distraught, so unhinged. His shoulders hunched, trembling, and his hands, usually steady, shook uncontrollably as they pulled at his short brown hair. His usual unbreakable composure had shattered, and she couldn't even blame him. Not after what she had done.

Her mouth opened and closed. “I... I...”

“I agreed to share everything I learned from within my former apprentice in support of the Haven Alliance.” The smooth, unhurried voice of Hi Haven's greatest traitor interrupted, floating through the wind.

Moriki glared at the man, though he said nothing, before turning back to Aimee and raising an eyebrow expectantly.

Against her will, Aimee's gaze flicked away from him and toward the cause of all the drama.

Perched in the center of the bird's back was a thin man of modest height, sitting cross-legged as if the chaos around him meant nothing. His chin rested lazily in the palm of his hand, a single finger tapping idly against his cheek. His long black hair drifted in the wind, barely shifting. The dark, weathered robes of a former Ryōsh clung to his wiry frame, worn loose but sharp, much like the man himself. His serpent-like eyes were half-lidded, yet his gaze flickered almost nervously in her direction.

But Aimee knew him better than that, or at least she knew the man he had once been—a fact known only by the current Hi Seishō and her Squad Leader and lover, Kiba.

Her eyes narrowed. It wasn't why she had freed him, and they both knew it. He'd never made any such offer, but, now, he was giving her a convenient excuse, a way to cloak her reckless decision in logic.

"We need the intel, Moriki-sensei," she said, her gaze locked on the villain before her, even as his lips curved into a slight, knowing smirk. "He has it." She couldn't bring herself to outright lie, but she would play along, for now.

"She's right," the eagle's Rider added from where he perched on the bird's helm, still scanning the shifting terrain beneath them. "We next to nothing about the enemy, other than that they want the Six Elementals."

“Shit.” Another cough rattled through the injured man, blood flecking his lips. “Fine. Let the Seishōs deal with him.” He swiped a hand across his mouth, his strength fading fast, and slumped forward.

Without hesitation, Aimee crawled toward him, careful not to disturb the bird’s large but delicate feathers. She shrugged off her pack and tucked it beneath Moriki’s head, creating a makeshift pillow, her hands quick and steady as she eased him into a more comfortable position.

“It’s a long flight back to headquarters, Ryosh,” she sighed, tightening the bandage around his waist and pulling a twig from his coffee-colored hair. “I can handle things the rest of the trip.” She cast a glance at Kazuma, who hadn’t moved an inch. “He’s not going anywhere. Last I checked, flying wasn’t in his bag of tricks.”

Moriki barely managed a grunt in response before his eyes fluttered shut, his breathing evening out as unconsciousness claimed him. Aimee knew Moriki's training to resist pain was legendary, whispered among the younger Tanshi as an unreachable standard. But even still, she had no idea how the man had stayed awake for so long after she’d pulled him out of the enemy’s lair. They’d had him for weeks, desperate for any information he had on the Elementals.

“Flying may not be in my ‘bag of tricks,’ but I’ve mastered enough dark arts to make any ancient Ryōsh envious.” Kazuma's voice oozed amusement, and his smile broadened as he leaned in to whisper. “Surely, you haven’t forgotten the nights we spent in the shadow of the Blood Moon... the way you begged.”

*Fuck.* Aimee’s heart slammed into her ribs as memories she had long buried surged to the surface. *His hands gripping her waist, pulling her against the hard planes of his chest, his breath hot against her skin as his lips hovered far too close...* She sucked in a sharp breath, fighting to keep herself steady, though her pulse thundered in her ears.

“Fuck off, monster,” she muttered, dropping her head as she shifted back to her spot on the bird. The words were weak, lacking the venom she desperately wanted to hurl at him. “What the fuck happened to you, anyway?” Her voice trembled, the question slipping out before she could stop it.

Against her will, her eyes flicked upward—and there it was. For the briefest moment, something like pain flickered across his face. It was quick, almost too quick to catch, but unmistakable. His jaw tightened, and his lips twitched as if betraying a wound that had long festered beneath supposed indifference. A hand rose to brush a stray lock of hair from his face, the movement casual, as the mask fell back into place.

“I was always a monster, pet.” His voice was as hollow as the wind sweeping across the battlefield. “You just disappeared before the shadows consumed me.”

Her chest tightened painfully at his words, guilt swelling inside her. Her muscles tensed as she fought back against the weight of the past, the memory of disappearing all those years ago threatening to drown her. She wanted to look away, to distance herself from the emotions clawing at her, but her eyes remained locked on his.

For a moment, Aimee’s hand hovered near her waist, fingers twitching as if she could still feel the ghost of his touch. Then, the tremor in her body stilled as she closed her eyes and focused on the wind whipping past her face. She pushed the past down, down where it belonged—beneath the surface, where it couldn’t reach her.

“No.” She shook her head. “Whatever you became, it’s not the man I knew, just the hollowed remains of something... else.”

*Don’t let him get to you. His actions were his own. He’s a monster.* Aimee’s eyes fixed on the drifting landscape beneath them, trying to hold on to that thought. *But you left all the*

*alterations he made to himself in Doruto. Everything that made him more snake than human. Physically, he's the younger version of himself, the same man you knew... The same man you may have loved.*

Her fists clenched, knuckles turning white as those unwanted thoughts slithered through her mind. *Nothing can erase everything he did. He killed the last Hi Seishō. He ate people and experimented on children. What the fuck is wrong with you!*

Self-loathing twisted inside her like a knife. Even allowing these thoughts to surface made her feel like a terrible person. A despicable friend, teammate... and lover. Why had she freed him? *What will Kiba think?* Her breath caught in her throat as a new surge of guilt welled up inside her. *How could you do this to Kiba, you stupid, stupid...! He's the best thing that ever happened to you!*

Her hand shot up, gripping a fistful of her hair and yanking hard. *And he's already dealing with the fallout of your relationship being exposed... a senior Ryōsh dating a teenage Tanshi, one under his guidance no less... even though you're neither a Tanshi nor a teenager... another lie.* The sharp sting in her scalp barely registered as her grip tightened, strands of hair slipping free in her fingers. She could feel herself spiraling, lost in the whirlwind of her own self-recriminations. *The Rules. The Pattern.* A tiny, distant voice in the back of her mind tried to break through the chaos, but the storm of shame drowned it out.

“Just rest.” That familiar tenor cut through the storm, pulling her back from the edge.

She blinked, her vision clearing as Kazuma's words sank in. She was so tired. It had taken everything she had to disable both Kurotaka and Doruto long enough to get Kazuma and Moriki and then escape. Her power was drained, her body pushed beyond its limits. Only the madness of the situation kept her from collapsing.

The weight of it all pressed down on her, her exhaustion crashing in like a wave. She stared blankly at the horizon for a moment, her body trembling with fatigue before darkness closed around her.

She awoke to darkness and the cool bite of a breeze, a strong hand gently combing through her hair. “What the hell?” she mumbled, struggling to open her eyes. When she finally did, she found Kazuma’s dark, inscrutable gaze staring down at her.

“We’re almost there,” Moriki coughed from the other side of the bird. “You might want to sit up.”

“Fuckity, fuck, fuck,” she muttered, scrambling out of the monster’s lap, no matter how comfortable it had been. She glared at him, pushing her hair back from her face. “What did you do?”

The pale man sighed, rolling his eyes with an exaggerated display of impatience. “You seemed uncomfortable. Twitching and rolling about in your sleep. I was concerned you’d accidentally fling yourself right off the bird.”

“Like you’d care.” Moriki shifted uncomfortably, pulling at his bandages.

Kazuma pursed his lips. “She is my witness to the deal we struck. Until the agreement is presented to the Seishōs, her death would not be in my best interest.”

“Well, at least that makes sense,” Moriki muttered, moving away from them toward the front of the eagle. “You’re incapable of caring for anyone other than yourself.”

Kazuma's shoulders lifted in a lazy shrug. "You may be surprised by what I am capable of, boy."

*I do care.* His voice echoed softly in her mind, too intimate, too familiar. *At least about you, I do.*

She flinched, her jaw dropping in shock.

*Ah... so it still works.* His gaze softened, amusement flickering behind his dark eyes. *That is... encouraging.*

*There is nothing to be encouraged by here, Kaz!* Aimee forced herself to turn her back on him and join Moriki and the Rider, hoping to hide the erratic rise and fall of her chest. *So a part of me didn't want to see you trapped in that living hell within that asshole apprentice you took on. That doesn't mean anything. It doesn't change anything. Not the mile-long list of horrible shit you've done, and certainly not the fact that I love Kiba. Now get the fuck out of my head!*

"You've given me a second chance, shinobi of Hi Haven... *Aimee...* to... to be human again. I'm not fool enough to waste it," Kazuma exhaled, drawing surprised looks from both Inkyo and Moriki.

"You don't deserve any chances, snake." Moriki's glare was ice-cold as he turned away again, focusing instead on the distance ramparts of Tengūjō.

Aimee exhaled in relief, taking in the sight of Ten Haven's capital and temporary Alliance Headquarters, rising from the sprawling canopies of the ancient forest. It rose like an ancient fortress carved into the forest itself, massive trees intertwining with stone, as though the city had been grown, not built. The wooden bridges between the towering structures seemed to sway gently, connecting buildings that reached for the sky like the talons of a giant bird.

*Maybe I don't deserve any second chances. But how can the Silver Wolf love you if he doesn't even know you?* Kazuma's voice slithered back into her thoughts. *You can't tell me you've shared with him what you once shared with me.*

Aimee bit down on the inside of her cheek, her nails digging into her palms so hard they left tiny grooves in her skin. She had to sever this connection somehow—this mental link they had forged all those years ago. Back when they had spent countless nights talking about life, morality, war, and love during an unexpected peacetime in the middle of the previous great war between the Havens.

Kazuma wasn't wrong about their bond, but it didn't matter now. *That life...* Her heart clenched at the thought. *That life is over. It was over the moment she disappeared into another great war on a distant world that needed her help. Whether she had wanted to leave or not. It didn't matter that her new Mission had brought her back here. In this life, she loved Kiba.*

She inhaled deeply, pushing the memories back, forcing them into a corner of her mind where they couldn't reach her. She wasn't that person anymore. And Kazuma wasn't the man she had known back then. He was a monster now; second chances be damned.

## **Chapter 2 – Eight Years Ago**

“For fuck's sake, guys. Just leave him alone already,” Aimee grumbled, her arm brushing one of the younger students aside with ease, the cream-colored tunic clinging to her corded muscles as she moved between them and the red-headed kid they were taunting

“Oh, come on, Aimee! He's a joke! He shouldn't even be here,” the kid whined, rubbing his shoulder and stumbling back a step.

“I do so! You don't know anything! I'll be the greatest ninja the world has ever seen!” the tiny red-headed kid yelled, his voice full of raw determination. He lunged forward, aiming a



wild kick at the name-caller's legs, but his foot missed by a mile, throwing him off balance. With a loud thud, he hit the ground, landing square on his butt.

Aimee sighed, shaking her head. "Kenta, you should worry about your own skills. Harato-sensei nearly turned purple when you botched the basic kata. You're lucky he didn't have you running laps until the moon rose."

Kenta's face flushed crimson, his bravado crumbling as the group of kids around him snickered. He stammered, eyes darting to the ground, trying to save face, but Aimee had already turned her attention to the troublemaker.

"And Taiga." She looked down to see him sticking out his tongue at the other kids, his hands on his hips as he made obnoxious nah nah nah noises.

"If you want anyone to take you seriously, you've got to stop acting like an asshole," she scolded, crossing her arms.

Taiga's eyes widened in disbelief as he scrambled to his feet, dusting off his pants with quick, clumsy movements. "What?! Me? An asshole? Come on, Aimee. They were the ones being assholes!"

She couldn't argue with him there. The way the locals treated this kid never sat right with her. Sure, he was loud and obnoxious, but the cruelty people directed his way went beyond typical playground bullying, especially from the adults. Still, she had to shake her head. "But they're not the ones trying to be the next Hi Seishō, are they?" Aimee's voice held a teasing edge, but she knew the weight of that title. The Hi Seishō was the ultimate protector of Hi Haven, the one who could supposedly harness the Elemental power of the Great Phoenix itself.

Taiga blinked, frowning for a second before his face brightened with determination again. He quickly wiped the dust from his pants and caught up to her. "Yeah, but it's still not fair."

“What about this world has ever struck you as fair?” Aimee snorted, shaking her head.

Taiga frowned, his expression unusually serious for a moment. “It shouldn’t be this way.”

“Who’s going to change it? You?” She gave him a sidelong glance. This was why she was here—to nudge, to encourage. She could only hope she had it right this time.

“You can count on it!” He pumped one fist in the air as his other hand drifted to the Hi Haven bandana tied proudly around his neck. It was the same one he’d somehow earned the week before, despite failing nearly every test in the Academy.

“I can’t wait to see it,” she chuckled softly, though a hint of something—despair, maybe—slipped into her voice without her meaning to.

Taiga’s face shifted, his exuberance cooling as he studied her. “Are all sixteen-year-olds this grumpy all the time? Is it an age thing? You don’t look like an old lady yet, but you’re not too far off.” He squinted at her, leaning in dramatically. “Wait... is that a wrinkle?”

She froze mid-step, turning slowly toward him. His eyes were wide as he struggled to hold in laughter, and his cheeks puffed wide with the effort.

Aimee scoffed, fighting to keep the smile off her face. “And do all fourteen-year-olds look like they’re constantly about to shit themselves, or is that just a Taiga thing?”

For a moment, the two of them stood there trying to hold back the bubbling laughter threatening to escape. And with a sudden burst, Taiga coughed, and Aimee’s own laughter broke free, the two of them stumbling forward. Leaning against a nearby fence, they doubled over with laughter that neither could stop, their shoulders shaking.

As the laughter finally faded, Taiga wheezed, still catching his breath. “Why are you so nice to me anyway? Everyone else around here is... well...”

Aimee shrugged, her expression softening. “We’re both freaks here. The village clown...” she gave him a teasing look, “...and the girl nobody knows what to do with. Why else would they throw me into the Academy with a bunch of kids barely able to make a clone? No offense.”

Taiga puffed out his chest, but his brow furrowed in confusion. “But everyone loves you, Aimee. You never cause trouble, and you already know all the techniques. The teachers had you running half the classes before the exams.”

“I dunno.” She glanced at the ground, kicking a stray rock. “I guess I’m just lonely. I like you guys; you’re good kids, but I don’t really belong anywhere yet. I still don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to be doing here.”

“I get that. Every day.” He swallowed hard, then brightened up. “But tomorrow, we get our teams! We’ll both have a place then! They’ll have to accept us!”

“You’re probably right.” She reached out and tousled his spiky red hair. “You’re pretty smart for a kid.”

He swiped at her hand, grumbling. “You’re not that much older, Aimee!”

Aimee grinned and danced out of his reach. “I thought I was practically a wrinkly old lady, according to you!”

“Whatever, crone,” Taiga shot back, rolling his eyes as he turned toward the small building that housed his tiny studio apartment. It still amazed her that he’d been living on his own for so long, fending for himself.

“See you tomorrow,” she called after him. “I know you’ll be dreaming about getting onto Momoka’s team.”

“In her dreams!” he yelled, a blush creeping up the back of his neck, before disappearing around the corner.

“I’m sure,” Aimee laughed quietly to herself, the sound barely carrying in the dry air. All the boys had crushes on Momoka, and the girl barely noticed.

She glanced up at the Phoenix carving, her sharp, pointed nose catching the faint breeze, dark blue eyes narrowed in thought. The sun’s last rays danced over her high cheekbones, making her tanned skin appear almost golden. “Just what the heck am I supposed to be doing here anyway, huh?” she asked the mythic bird. The great bird loomed over the settlement, its wings spread wide as if ready to rise at any moment from the red-hued cliffs. Below, Hi Haven sprawled out in a maze of sun-bleached stone buildings and wooden shacks, the streets winding like rivers through the parched earth.

*Maybe Taiga’s right*, she thought, though without much conviction. *Maybe tomorrow will show me my path here*. She sighed, not feeling the least bit tired, and began walking at a leisurely pace through the quiet streets of the village. *I wonder if this life will be any different than the others*. She’d been here before; different lives, different ages, but it was always the same. The role of the outsider, trying to fit into a life she barely remembered asking for. A new world on the edge of destruction, the struggle to save it, death, on to the next. She’d done this hundreds of times.

*Must be later than I thought*. She pulled herself back to the present. The faint smell of dried herbs and spices wafted from the closed vendor stalls, lingering in the air as she passed. The village, usually alive with the clang of blacksmiths and the chatter of merchants, now lay still under the weight of the rising moon. She smirked, remembering how Taiga had practically drained Harato-sensei’s wallet during dinner, ordering course after course with wild enthusiasm.

It wasn't until the restaurant was closing up that Harato-sensei ushered them out, insisting they get a good night's sleep before meeting their new Squad Leader the next day.

*I just hope it's not Rock-sensei.* Aimee cringed at the thought. The one time she'd seen the man, the word intense hadn't even come close to describing him. But she didn't know any of the Ryōsh or senior shinobi, so it didn't matter much who it was.

*It'd be good if I were with Taiga.* Someone would need to keep an eye on him. It was just a gut feeling, but she'd learned long ago to trust her instincts. Besides, who else would keep that little imp out of trouble if not her?

When she looked up again, she realized Hi Haven sprawled beneath her. Somehow, in her wandering, she had made her way to the top of the Great Phoenix. "Damn," she muttered, sinking into a cross-legged position, and leaning back on her hands. She let her eyes drift to the stars, tracking the familiar constellations. *I wonder how long I'll be under these ones this time.*

The sudden snap of a branch caught her attention, pulling her gaze to the tree line on her right. *Who could that be?* Not that it was unusual for people to be out late—this was a ninja village after all, and nighttime comings and goings weren't out of the norm.

Another sharp crack echoed through the still night, and a masked man clad in the traditional Hi Haven uniform stepped into the moonlight. *Oh my,* she thought, watching his silver hair catch the light while the metallic tag of his bandana, tied to cover his right eye, gleamed under the stars. Seeing her, he paused. His hand hovered near the back of his neck, fingers brushing it in an awkward, almost sheepish gesture.

"So sorry, miss." He raised his hands. "I didn't realize anyone was up here."

She remained quiet, watching as he walked toward the cliff's edge. He was a stranger to her, but he was obviously shinobi. The uniform and bandana gave it away. And by the way he

carried himself, she could tell he was skilled. It wasn't confidence, but rather a lightness in his steps, each motion perfectly balanced and controlled. He moved like a wolf - relaxed but ready to strike at any moment.

"A beautiful night." He sighed, then turned back the way he came. "I'll leave you to it."

"There's more than enough space." The words fell from her mouth before she could stop them. "Don't leave on account of me."

Facing her, he shoved his hands in his pockets, giving a slight bow. "If you insist." Then, he pivoted and sank smoothly to the ground before pulling out a small book and beginning to read.

Sitting in silence, Aimee tried to clear her mind, tried to recapture the peace she'd been chasing before his arrival, but her eyes kept drifting toward the silver-haired stranger. *Who is he?* The question burned in her mind with a sudden, inexplicable need to know more about him.

She should leave. She knew it. Getting caught up with a random, unknown shinobi certainly wouldn't help her in whatever mission the Pattern had set for her. This wasn't her first time feeling the pull of desire, but it was a dangerous game for someone like her. She was supposed to be sixteen years old, for crying out loud, and he was clearly a full-grown man.

Nodding to herself, Aimee took a deep breath and lifted her gaze to the sky, where the sliver of moon hung like a gleaming shard of silver and moved to stand.

"Leaving?" the stranger asked, though he hadn't shifted from his relaxed position. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

Aimee scrambled the rest of the way to her feet. "No, no. I've just been out too long already and have an important day tomorrow. Just needed to clear my head."

"I understand that," he said, exhaling slowly.

“Oh?” she asked, waiting for more. When no further explanation came, she shrugged.

*Time to go, I guess.*

But just as she took a step to leave, his voice stopped her. “Do you often come here to find stillness?”

“No,” she said. “I’m not usually the quiet meditation or ‘stillness’ kind of girl, but I guess it’s been one of those days.”

“And what kind of girl are you, then?” he asked, his body shifting with easy fluidity. He twisted to the side to prop himself up on one arm, his elbow bending just enough to support his weight as he rested his head in his hand. His dark eye, visible beneath his headband, fixed on her with an intensity like he was studying her every move.

“I’d honestly rather be kicking someone’s ass. Nothing more calming than that.” She cocked her hip. *Who is this asshole, anyway? And why is he looking at me like that?* The challenge sparked within her, and before she could stop herself, she added, “Would you like a demonstration?” *And why am I challenging a probably highly skilled Ryōsh? Get it together, girl!*

The suddenness of her words startled him, and his elbow slipped out from under him, sending him tumbling awkwardly to the ground. All the grace he’d shown before vanished in an instant, replaced by a look of embarrassment as he scrambled to recover. “My apologies, miss. I didn’t mean anything by it... I was just... curious about what you do to prepare for a big day, if not this,” he stammered, his voice stumbling over itself as he crawled to his feet, brushing dirt from his uniform. “I am also searching for some presence of mind and not finding the quiet very helpful.”

“Oh?” she asked again, raising an eyebrow.

“Tomorrow. Big day.” He offered a shy smile, tucking away the book he’d been reading. “I’m being given a responsibility I don’t feel ready for,” he admitted. “But I have to be ready. It’s too important to ignore, and failing isn’t an option.”

She nodded in understanding. That sentiment was all too familiar, something she felt every time she was thrust into a new life in a new world. “Umm... well, I get that. Kicking ass usually does help. Or at least moving through forms or sparring. That wasn’t a joke.”

“Are you asking me to volunteer?” He sputtered a laugh, a wide, genuine grin spreading across his face. “To let a little girl kick my ass?”

“What? No! And I’m not a little girl, you twat,” she exclaimed, laughing along with him. “Just sharing what works for me. You asked, after all.”

“Fair enough.” He raised his hands in mock surrender, the smile never leaving his lips. “You’re a shinobi, then?”

“Huh?” She absentmindedly reached for her headband, only to remember she had taken it off at some point during the night. The damn thing always made her itch. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Not from around here?”

“Depends on who you ask,” she said with a shrug. “Though I seem to be here now.” All true, if unnecessarily vague. *Why the games, Aimee?* She asked herself before realizing she was having fun talking to this guy.

“Uh-huh.” He pursed his lips, but the glint of amusement in his eye was impossible to miss. “Well, at this point, I’m willing to try anything. If you’d like to take a crack at ‘kicking my ass,’ I’m game.”



Aimee crossed her arms, giving him a slow, assessing look. The uniform didn't reveal much of what he might look like beneath it, and the mask made him even more of a mystery.

“Seriously?”

“I am at your disposal,” he said with a sweeping bow, one arm crossing his chest while the other stretched out dramatically, his head dipping low in an exaggerated gesture of submission.

“Deal.” She nodded, allowing her body to fall into the same casual grace he exhibited. “But don't say I didn't warn you.”

His eye widened for a split second—surprise flashing there, maybe in recognition of the same potential she had seen in him—but before he could react further, she was on him.

Aimee sprang forward, her foot barely grazing the ground as she launched a quick jab toward his ribs. The man moved just in time, his arm coming up to block with a sharp smack of skin against skin. Their hands met, muscles tensing as they locked briefly, testing strength. She pivoted, shifting her weight onto her back leg, and swung her other arm in a clean arc toward his shoulder. He ducked, rolling his body out of range, his feet shifting into a balanced stance.

*He's fast!* She thought with a wild smile, allowing more of her own speed to seep through.

He countered with a low sweep toward her legs, the faint rustle of cloth the only warning. Aimee leaped, just clearing the arc of his leg, her foot hitting the ground lightly before she spun back around. Without hesitation, she struck out with a palm aimed at his chest. He caught it with both hands, but the impact sent him sliding back a few inches, his shoes scraping against the rocky surface.

Pausing for a breath, she could feel the steady thrumming of his heart within his chest.

“You’re good.” His voice was calm, though his mouth stretched into a wolfish grin.

Then, the rhythm changed. He lunged first this time, a quick series of precise strikes aimed at her torso and face. Aimee deflected the first blow with her forearm, grunting as she met his next attack with a sharp block. Her arms moved rapidly, blocking, shifting, and absorbing the force behind his ever-quickening attacks. Her muscles tightened with each hit, and she could feel the force of his strikes reverberate through her frame. She retaliated with a fast front kick aimed at his midsection, but he twisted away, his body flowing out of reach as if anticipating the move.

Aimee followed with a second, faster kick, her leg sweeping low toward his ankles. He jumped, the sound of his breath sharp in the quiet night as he landed lightly, immediately driving a fist toward her shoulder. Ducking, she rolled beneath him and sprang back up with a powerful sidekick. His forearm shot up just in time to block, but the sheer force of her strike sent him sprawling to the ground, breathless.

Laying on his back, coughing and laughing, he stared at her in disbelief. “My God, woman! That was a kick!”

Aimee grinned, not hesitating for a second as she leaped forward to land between his knees and raised her leg high for an ax-like kick. At the last moment, though, she pulled back the power, and her heel came down with controlled precision, landing firmly on his chest.

“I tried to warn you.”

But before she could step back, he twisted sharply, sweeping his legs around in a quick spin, his shin catching her ankles and knocking her off balance. She stumbled, arms flailing for a second as she lost her footing, and before she knew it, she had toppled into his lap, her body crashing down into him as they both collapsed into a tangle of limbs.

Aimee's breath came in shallow bursts. She felt the warmth of his body beneath her, the solid press of his chest rising and falling with each breath under the palms of her hands. Her pulse thrummed in her ears as she registered the feel of his lean, muscular frame, her body still humming with adrenaline.

For a moment, she was acutely aware of every point of contact between them, and her eyes locked onto him as his hands slid up her back. Her skin tingled where his fingers grazed her beneath the fabric of her loose training shirt, slow and deliberate.

"There are other ways... to clear the mind." He whispered, shifting his hips to expose just how large and firm he was within the nondescript uniform. "If you're still feeling... tense."

Aimee hinged forward, her body instinctively responding to what he offered. She could feel him pressing into her, the growing dampness between her legs begging for release. She really, really shouldn't be doing this, but she couldn't stop herself. Her hands slid up, savoring the hard planes of his muscles beneath her palms until they reached the edges of his mask, fingers tracing the fabric that concealed everything but his eyes. Her breath mingled with his, their faces inches apart. "And you, my stranger. Are you still... tense?"

In answer, his hands shifted, settling firmly around the swell of her ass. Fingers digging into her flesh, he moved her up and back, his hips rising beneath her to press his body into hers. The sensation of his cock sliding against her sent a deep, slow wave of pleasure through her core, the friction of their bodies a delicious pressure that nearly sent her over the edge right there.

"I'll take that as a yes," she murmured, barely recognizing her own voice, low and filled with a hunger that surprised her. *Who is this woman?* Aimee wondered, watching herself from the edge of bliss as she boldly slid her fingers beneath the mask.

Seeing the slight hesitation in the man at her silent question, she closed her eyes before pulling the mask down and letting it fall away. She felt a brief tension as his hand closed around her wrist, but when their fingers intertwined, she pressed on, closing the little remaining space between them.

His lips crashed into hers, stealing the breath from her lungs in a searing, unapologetic kiss as his hand tangled in her hair, gripping the back of her neck, claiming her. She melted into him, her body molding against his, their movements urgent and raw, deepening the kiss until she was lost in its sheer electricity. Every inch of her skin seemed to burn with the connection, her pulse pounding in time with the unrelenting force of his mouth and cock still grinding into her.

*More!* She needed more. She needed to feel him inside her. *Now!* Or the pressure would become too much to bear.

One of her hands snaked down between them, fingers searching urgently for the opening to his pants, desperate to release him. Her other hand braced against the ground, steadying her body, her lips still locked with his, unwilling to break the kiss or open her eyes.

“Damn it!” she snarled under her breath, fumbling with the buttons, then growling and tearing at the seams. Triumphant, she was already reaching for her own pants, pushing them down over her hips, when she felt his hands suddenly press against her chest, gently but firmly, breaking the intoxicating contact of their lips.

“Wait,” he breathed, his voice rough. “I can’t believe I’m about to ask this, because... my God, woman... I think I’d do anything for you right now. Anything to feel you...” His words trailed off as his hand grazed her cheek in a featherlight touch. “Fuck, just... look at me.”

“But the mask,” her breath caught as she spoke. *What is he doing? Why is he stopping?*

“Screw the mask,” he murmured, a smirk playing on his lips. “You’ve got my cock in your hand.”

A slow smile spread across her face as she realized she did, in fact, have that beautiful manhood throbbing within her palm. *When did that happen?* she wondered coyly as an eye flickered open.

One of his eyes was still hidden beneath the headband, but the rest of his face revealed a strong jaw, high cheekbones, and lips that curved with a mix of mischief and intensity, the kind of handsomeness that took a person by surprise.

“Okay?” he asked, his gaze serious, though his body clearly betrayed his restraint. “Are you sure you want to do this? Here? Like this?”

*Did he not?* she wondered, a flicker of self-consciousness creeping in despite the heat of the moment.

“I’m trying to be a gentleman here,” he coughed as if the idea was ludicrous.

Aimee glanced down at herself—pants halfway down, his dick still in her hand—and snorted. “A gentleman.”

“I might be a little late in this attempt,” he grumbled, eye glinting with a trace of humor.

“Do you want to stop?” she whispered, leaning in, her hips lifting to hover over where she held him. “Should I just go, then?” She asked, lowering just a fraction of an inch so the soft, silky head of his member teased her entrance and began slowly moving him in tight circles between her thighs.

He bucked beneath her, his body trying to finish the act before he could answer. “Have it your way, then,” he growled, the restraint in his voice slipping. Then he sat up, his hands

gripping her hips, and with a swift twist, he flipped them both. Her back hit the ground as he settled over her, his body pressing her into the earth, now fully in control.

And before she could come up with a witty remark, he plunged into her, driving any semblance of coherent thought clear from her mind. Her mouth opened in a small 'o' as he pushed his way forward and back with a delicious side-to-side motion, massaging the most sensitive parts of her. *Holy fuck. Holy fuck.* Her mind quaked at the sensation.

It didn't last long at that point. The build-up had been too intense, too perfect. The weight of his body on her, the taste of his mouth on hers... that glorious fucking cock working miracles between her legs.

With each stroke, Aimee felt her breaths becoming short and ragged, her insides clenching, and that hazy buzzing in her skull that signaled bliss was near. When it finally hit, her muscles tensed and pulsed in waves around him, sending him over the edge with her.

Trembling, he held himself above her as his silver hair fell forward, framing his face, strands brushing against her skin with each ragged breath. After a long, drawn-out exhale, he gave in, collapsing beside her and rolling onto his back, breath still uneven.

*What the hell just happened?* Aimee asked herself, over and over, her mind spinning as they both lay there, limp and spent, her pants still bunched awkwardly around her thighs. The cool night air felt surreal against her heated skin, her body humming with the aftershocks.

A low chuckle reached her ears, and she turned her head to the left, tugging her pants back into place for a bit more dignity. She found him lying on his side, his head propped up on one hand, a faint smile playing on his lips, eye soft with what looked strangely like... adoration. Their eyes met, and he quickly averted his gaze. Leaning in, he pressed a gentle, almost shy kiss

to her forehead before pulling back and sliding the mask up over his face with a swift, practiced motion.

Still unsure how to process the whirlwind of shit coursing through her, Aimee pulled herself upright, settling into a cross-legged position. He mirrored her, sitting up with quiet grace as her breathing finally steadied.

“So... uhh...” he began, scratching the back of his head.

“I don’t know about you, but my mind is officially cleared,” she said, trying not to smile too hard. “Thanks for that.”

“Agreed.” He chuckled again, the sound deep and rich, sending a pleasant shiver through her. “I suddenly feel ready to take on anything.”

She rolled her eyes playfully. “Well, I hope tomorrow is everything you’re hoping for.”

“You too, mysterious hilltop woman,” he replied, pressing his palms to his thighs as he rose smoothly to his feet. He glanced toward the horizon, where the first hints of dawn began to color the sky. “Looks like we’ll both find out soon enough what the day has in store.”

Aimee followed his gaze, watching the sky brighten. Was it just coincidence, she wondered, or a sign of something brightening in her future? She stood, brushing the dirt from her clothes and hair, and asked, “Why do you wear the mask, anyway? Even in your own village?”

He gave her a sideways glance and a playful wink. “Maybe I’ll tell you... if we ever meet again.”

With that, he vanished in a classic ninja exit, leaving her standing alone to face the rising sun.

“Right,” she snorted, shaking her head, and began the long walk back to the village, wondering if she had time for a quick shower before heading to the Academy for team assignments.

She should have been annoyed—after all, they’d clearly spent so much time carefully selecting the members of each four-man team, only to throw her into this one at the last minute. *We weren’t sure where to put you, Aimee, and the Hi Seishō couldn’t make a decision before this morning.* Harato-sensei’s explanation echoed hollowly in her mind.

“This is the best team ever!” Taiga’s excited voice snapped her from her thoughts. She turned to see him practically tripping over himself, eyes wide with enthusiasm as he looked at the other girl assigned to their team. “Right, Momoka?”

Aimee smirked as Momoka gave a half-hearted nod, barely paying attention, her gaze fixed on the final member of their team with stars in her eyes. Iruka was a small, moody boy and another orphan like Taiga, but a stark contrast to her overly energetic, troublemaking friend. Where Taiga was loud and chaotic, Iruka was serious, quiet, and undeniably talented. At least for a fourteen-year-old.

“Right, Aimee?!” Taiga’s voice cut through again, this time seeking her approval, clearly needing someone—anyone—to acknowledge him, even if it wasn’t his beloved Momoka.

“Yeah, dude. Best team ever.” She smiled, reaching over to give him a fist bump.



“Well, except for Iruka, anyway,” Taiga added in a loud whisper, leaning closer as if sharing a great secret. “He’s definitely going to drag us all down. I’ll probably have to save him on every mission.”

Iruka, having overheard, simply rolled his eyes and turned to stare out the window, ignoring Taiga’s dramatic commentary.

“Definitely the weakest link,” Taiga muttered under his breath, glaring at the boy, clearly annoyed at being ignored.

“Taiga,” Aimee said in a tone that told him he was being ridiculous. They both knew Iruka was one of the most talented students in their class. Truthfully, though, she was having a hard time focusing on the present. Her mind kept drifting back to the night before, images flashing uninvited through her thoughts, sending waves of heat rising to her cheeks.

“Anyway,” Taiga pressed on, undeterred. “I just hope this Kiba guy is as good as they say. The last thing we need is a dud Squad Leader.”

“Taiga!” Momoka huffed, finally tearing her gaze away from Iruka to cross her arms and glare at the class troublemaker. “Kiba-sensei is supposed to be amazing. We’re lucky to have him. Don’t ruin this for everyone else. Some of us are actually here to learn.”

"Amazing, huh?" Taiga glanced up at the 'trap' he'd set in the doorway. “We’ll see about that.”

“He better not fail us for that,” Momoka grumbled before turning her attention back to Iruka, effectively dismissing Taiga’s antics.

Aimee was about to say something when the sound of the doorknob turning caught their attention. Taiga practically vibrated with anticipation, his eyes glued to the door, while Momoka and Iruka straightened in their seats, preparing for the arrival of their new sensei.

As the door creaked open, a shinobi in the traditional Hi Haven uniform stepped through. He paused, scanning the room, his eyes sweeping over them before freezing the moment they landed on Aimee. Time seemed to halt for just a second—long enough for the basket of trash Taiga had rigged to come loose and rain down.

“Gotcha!” Taiga exploded from his chair, laughing wildly. “So amazing, huh?!”

“Fuck.” Aimee's heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed hard, watching as her handsome stranger—now picking empty candy wrappers from his silver hair—stepped fully into the room.

“Wolf Squad, I presume?” His familiar voice addressed them, no longer playful or teasing, but even, with an edge of bored seriousness. “I’m Hokuken Kiba. You must be Iruka, Momoka, Taiga,” he looked at each of the other Tanshi before turning to her. “And our unexpected addition... Aimee.”