# To Be a Ninja

**Summary**

What if Naruto is instead put on a team with Hinata and Shikamaru, his two best friends? And with his team, and the friends they make along the way, they all learn what it means to really be a ninja and how to be one. NaruHina. ShikaSasu. UPDATED EVERY THURSDAY! ONGOING.

Current Arc: Journey to Whirpool (original arc)

**Notes**

A/N: Well, I think it’s time I try my own hand at a reimagining of the Naruto world. I’ve read a few (some good, some bad, some awesome), and I finally think I have some concrete ideas for my own. So, let’s experience this story together!
Team Formation

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 1)-Team Formation

*DUH* *DUH* *DUH* *DUH* *DUH*

I immediately slam my alarm off and sit up in my bed! Today’s the day!

Naruto Uzumaki is finally an official ninja of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, believe it!

I get out of bed and hurry through my morning routine. It’s pretty much me on autopilot out of excitement when I take my shower, brush my teeth, eat my breakfast, and get dressed. It’s only when I’m about to put on my headband when I stop and really look at it.

This was Iruka-sensei’s headband. The official reason he gave it to me was because I was able to do the Shadow Clone Jutsu rather than the regular Clone Jutsu that they teach at the Academy, which I am unable to perform. But I think he actually gave it to me because I was a ninja then – I protected my comrade and my village against the traitor Mizuki.

Mizuki…

I was such an idiot to ever believe him. I should have known better. But he was my sensei at the Academy! Still, it is a ninja’s job to see through deceit and to be always cautious. I swear that I will not fall for things like that so easily anymore. Last night was a wake-up call for me.

“Thank you, Iruka-sensei.” I say softly before tying the headband on, and I look in the mirror. I must admit to myself that I do look rather handsome…

I give myself a ‘thumbs-up!’ before running off to the Academy. Today we’re getting assigned to our Jonin sensei and are getting placed in teams! I’m leaving home early today just to make sure that I make it there on-time! I need to make a good first impression as a true shinobi, after all!

“Hey, Naruto!” I hear my name as I run past the Ichiraku Ramen stand. I stop and run over to the stand.

“Hey, Old Man Teuchi! Hey, Ayame! What's up?” I ask them. “Oh, and thanks again for the ramen yesterday!” I say with a smile and my arm over my shoulder.

“Oh, it was our pleasure! I just wanted to invite you and your team here after you guys are done. A free bowl for everyone.” He says, drying a plate with a towel.

“Oh, man, really? That’s awesome! Buy, why?” I ask. As a ninja now, I always have to be suspicious of things that seem too good to be true…

…Even if it is about ramen.

“While I would be giving away free food, if they like it like you do, they’ll be coming back for more in no time, which means more money for me!” Teuchi says and laughs, rubbing his fingers together like he’s rich. I laugh along with him.

“You people are always obsessed with money!” I joke. “Alright, then. Thanks, Teuchi and Ayame!” I say and wave before continuing my run to the Academy!
I get to our classroom and sit in my normal seat. The room is mostly empty, save for a few individuals. One of them is my friend Shikamaru Nara, whose head is down, snoring and drooling a little bit on his shirt’s left sleeve. I’m a bit surprised to see him here so early, but I am not surprised to see him sleeping already! I would try talking to him right now, but I don’t want to wake from his ‘beauty sleep’ as he calls it. My seat happens to be near the left end of one of the back rows, anyway, so I’d have to move back before we start.

Others that are here are Kiba Inuzuka and his ninja hound and companion Akamaru. He happens to be reading a manga from his backpack while Akamaru lays on his head. Among them are a few other people whose names I never bothered to learn because they never bothered to try to be nice to me when I tried to make friends in the past.

I look at the clock in the room and I have arrived fifteen minutes early, which is about fourteen minutes earlier than I usually would be. I wanted to make sure to change my ways starting today. I’m no longer going to be that prankster who causes trouble so he could be recognized. No, I am going to be the best damned ninja The Hidden Leaf Village has ever seen and I am going to be Hokage! Believe it!

Soon, people start piling into the room. Sasuke Uchiha silently takes his seat next to me on the very edge, and in no time I feel a punch on my head.

“Move, Naruto! Sit somewhere else! We don’t have assigned seats anymore and I’m calling dibs on the seat next to Sasuke!” I hear shouted into my ear. I know that voice all too well.

“Sakura! Why would you even want to sit next to him anyway?” I say, glaring at Sasuke who just barely glances our way, expressionless.

“Naruto…” Sakura growls, raising her fist again, and I quickly take the hint to move to another seat. I decide to move to the very back at the edge, not saying anything anymore.

I don’t get it! Why is she always so mean to me? I know I’ve been kind of annoying at times in the past, but I didn’t even do anything this time. I was literally just sitting there and minding my own business. Why did I used to like her so much? She can be so sweet when she wants to be, but why doesn’t she try to be a little nice to me sometimes? Doesn’t she realizes how much she hurts my feelings?

Hopefully this will all change. Maybe once she sees the new me, the one who’s going to take being a ninja seriously, she, and everyone else!, will start treating me like a person rather than just some sort of emotionless thing.

Thing…

It all makes sense now after last night. What Mizuki told me…it explains why so many of the villagers hate me, and why so many parents never let their children play with me. I have the Nine-Tailed Fox sealed inside of me. But that’s it! It’s only inside of me, it isn’t me.

I’m Naruto Uzumaki, and I’ll do whatever it takes to show the entire village that I’m Naruto and only Naruto!

In just a few more minutes, Iruka-sensei walks into the room. He scans the room and nods at me with
a smile when he sees me. I give him a small thumbs-up before he starts to speak when everyone else shows up.

“Alright, everyone. Congratulations on now being shinobi of the Hidden Leaf Village!” He says and everyone starts clapping. “Because I am no longer your teacher, starting today, you guys are all Genin and will be part of a team under a Jonin sensei. Teams have already been assigned. I will read your names off and give you a room in which your team will go and meet your sensei. Any questions?” Iruka-sensei finishes, and I feel a couple of stares go my way, as if they assume I’ll just ask a question, or pull a prank, for make a fool of myself.

I’m a different Naruto Uzumaki, now. I am not going to be some annoying kid, damn it!

“None, alright then.” Iruka-sensei says and I don’t really pay attention until we get to the names that I actually care about – the ones of my friends, friendly acquaintances, and others like that. “Team Seven will be Sakura Haruno, Sasuke Uchiha, and Shino Aburame. You guys will be going to Room Five.” Iruka-sensei says.

“Yes! Take that, Ino-Pig! I’m with Sasuke!” Sakura says, rising out of her seat, laughing, pointing at Ino, and doing a tiny in-place dance.

“Shut up, Billboard Brow! Sasuke likes me! You’ll see!” Ino retorts, making Sakura fume. I look over to Sasuke, and he is obviously annoyed and, dare I say, embarrassed.

I’m so glad I got over my crush on Sakura. She was never any nice to me, and I eventually just realized it would do no good to like. It took time, but I did get over her. And I’m thankful I wasn’t placed on a team with her or Sasuke. Sakura would never respect me as a teammate. She would only fawn over Sasuke like Ino and most of the other girls in our class do. And I would argue with Sasuke too much.

I’ll admit that he’s talented and a good shinobi for our age with no real experience, but he has too much of an ego. He doesn’t think he could fail. Sure, I always said that I was the best whenever I went up against him, but I knew I could always be better (a lot better) than I was. He doesn’t think so – he just think he’s the best out of everyone. To him, everyone is just a ‘loser’ and that’s it.

I actually feel bad for Shino and their sensei. Shino and I never really talk or anything, but he was never mean to me or treated me like I was below him. I feel bad for them because they’re going to have to learn to deal with Sakura’s obsession and Sasuke’s ego. But, I believe there’s hope for both of them, especially Sasuke.

“Team Eight will be Shikamaru Nara, Naruto Uzumaki, and Hinata Hyuga. You guys will be going to Room Seven.” Iruka-sensei says, and I can’t contain my excitement.

“All right! Our team is going to be the best and kick some serious ass, believe it!” I say loudly out of excitement in being in a team with my two true friends! Could this get any better?

Shikamaru and Hinata are some of my only friends. Sure, I am friendly with Kiba and Choji through Shikamaru, but they aren’t really my friends. The funny thing is that Shikamaru and Hinata aren’t really friends or friendly with each other; in fact, I don’t even think they really have interacted at all with each other except for maybe knowing who each other are. I have made friends with them each individually.

I became friends with Shikamaru after he told Iruka-sensei about that trick a bully in the class played on me to pretend to let me into their friend group. If Shikamaru hadn’t told Iruka-sensei, I probably would have died then because of an enemy ninja attack. But, I didn’t! And I made sure to thank
Shikamaru after, and we just sort of started hanging out after school and stuff. He’s not that talkative, but he is a great listener and is just an overall awesome guy!

I can’t really recall when I started being friends with Hinata. We were always friendly with each other, especially after that one time where I stopped some bullies from teasing and hurting her when we were really young. After I was old enough to leave the orphanage and live on my own in a small apartment funded by the Leaf Village, I occasionally saw Hinata and we waved and stuff. Once we entered the Academy, we just started talking and now we’re friends!

These two people are amazing. I’ve been alone and hated for so long of my life. But whenever I am upset or sad I think of these two individuals, my friends. These two friends of mine are another reason I want to change – I want to be able to protect them and never let them get hurt.

“Team Nine is going to be a little different. Takeshi Sato, you are being placed in a team with two students from another class. They will be meeting you here in this room shortly. Their names are Heba Santiro and Akiko Yagami.” Iruka-sensei says, and my attention is caught for a second.

Heba Santiro…

That name is so familiar. It can’t be the same Heba, is it? Whatever, I guess I’ll meet him eventually and I’ll see then if it is him. But I don’t think it’s the same Heba. It has to just be a coincidence…

“And, lastly, Team Ten will be Kiba Inuzuka, Ino Yamanaka, and Choji Akimichi. You guys will go to Room Eleven. You’re all dismissed to go to your assigned meeting rooms. And, one more time, congratulations everybody! Make me and your village proud!” Iruka-sensei says and everyone starts getting up.

I run down the stairs and to the front of the room, waiting for Shikamaru and Hinata to get there from their own seats. It’s only a few seconds before they are both there, smiling at me and each other.

“Hey, guys! Oh man, this is going to be so sweet. Come on, let’s go to Room Seven and meet our sensei! I wonder who-” I say, but I am cut off from someone calling my name.

“Wait, Naruto!” I hear and I turn around to meet the voice.

“Oh, hey, Sasuke. What’s up?” I am being polite. I’m a different Naruto Uzumaki, and I’m not going to be a fool and just anger the boy when he did nothing wrong.

“…As a part of Team Seven, I’d like to apologize on Sakura’s behalf. She was out of line to hit you earlier, especially because you weren’t even doing anything. It was unprofessional and downright embarrassing.” He says, facing away and obviously annoyed, yet holding his hand out to me. I stare at it for a moment.

Wow. I guess I was wrong about him. Maybe his ego isn’t that big. Sure, it’s not exactly an apology from Saakura, but Sasuke does agree that what she did was wrong and actually took the time, swallowed his pride, and apologized to me. There really is hope for him, after all.

Sasuke…he’s alright. I grab his hand and shake it in respect.

“Thank you, Sasuke.” I say before he walks out of the room without saying anything else. I look over to my teammates, who only shrug at what had just happened. We all silently agree to head to our room.

I lead the way, but it’s literally only two doors down so we get there in just a few seconds. When we get to the room, I just can’t help myself with my excitement!
I run in and give each Shikamaru and Hinata a hug! Shikamaru, just being himself, lazily returns the hug while Hinata seems surprised but quickly squeezes me before we let go.

“So, am I to take it that you two are also friends?” Shikamaru asks. Just because he isn’t Hinata’s friend yet, doesn’t mean he can’t be in no time flat!

“Of course! Let me introduce you guys! Hinata, this is my very good friend Shikamaru. And Shikamaru, this is my very good friend Hinata. I now pronounce us all teammates and friends!” I say in excitement. They both laugh before they both extend their hands in a good-hearted handshake.
Chapter Summary

Naruto, Shikamaru, and Hinata meet Kurenai, their Jonin sensei. Together, Kurenai leads them through their first team meeting, which includes an exercise in trust and secrets.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s Chapter Two! I hope you guys like it! If I get questions here on AO3 in comments, I will try to respond to them. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Let me introduce you guys! Hinata, this is my very good friend Shikamaru. And Shikamaru, this is my very good friend Hinata. I now pronounce us all teammates and friends!” I say in excitement. They both laugh before my new teammates both extend their hands in a good-hearted handshake.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 2)-Trust

We’ve been sitting here for about fifteen minutes, not really knowing what to talk about while we wait for our sensei to show up. Usually, if I’m with Shikamaru, I’m the one talking while he occasionally responds or we’re both silent, watching clouds together. If I’m with Hinata, we talk equally but she’s usually always nervous, for some reason.

“I know! Let’s play a tiny prank on our sensei!” I say and jump out of my seat. I run to the board and grab the eraser there are put it on top of the already-slightly-opened door. I run back to my seat and I can’t help my giggles. “I’ve never pulled a prank with other people before!” I say, rubbing the back of my neck.

I know I’m a different Naruto Uzumaki, but this prank is truly harmless and can only make us laugh; it won’t piss anyone off or cause any damage or anything. This prank is truly all in good fun.

“This is such a drag.” Shikamaru says, slamming his head down on his desk in exhaustion. “Where the hell is our sensei?” He whines, voice muffled by his face in the desk.

A few more seconds go by and I feel a breeze. I look over my left shoulder for the source and I see that the window was open. Hmm, I guess I never noticed it. Suddenly, a twenty dollar bill flies in through the window and lands on top of the door!

“MINE! I CALL DIBS!” I shout and run to the door and pull it open to get my money. To my surprise, the only thing that falls is the eraser, which lands on my head. The money’s gone, and I am very, very sad, confused, and embarrassed. I look over to my teammates who are struggling to hold in their giggles.

I just start laughing out loud, which my teammates soon follow my lead. I know I should be a little
more upset by being embarrassed like that, but I can’t. These two are my teammates and my friends.

“What the hell were you even doing?” Shikamaru asks me, holding his sides in pain.

“What do you mean? You seriously didn’t see the money fly in through the window?” I ask my teammates, who just look at me like I’m crazy.

“N-Naruto, the window…the window isn’t even open.” Hinata says. I immediately turn to the window and I’m shocked!

“What?” I shout, and my head falls downcast. Was I hallucinating?

“Very, very interesting.” A deep, mature, female voice comes from behind us and my teammates and I already get in our attack stance with our weapons. We are always equipped with our kunai, shuriken, and other ninja tools like paper bombs or scrolls, and whatnot.

“Show yourself!” I shout to the unknown voice. Where is she? I can’t see or sense anyone besides my teammates.

“As you wish, Naruto.” The voice says, and the back corner of the room phases and reveals a dark-haired woman with beautiful red eyes in a black-and-white-striped dress.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” Shikamaru asks the woman.

“Oh, sorry. Maybe this will help.” She says and reaches behind her. I throw my Kunai at her which she kicks back at me and I just barely manage to dodge it because of its speed when I side-hop to the right and caught by Hinata. The woman reaches back to the front and I am shocked, yet relieved, to see a Leaf Village Headband. She ties it around her forehead and smirks at us. “My name is Kurenai Yuhi, and I am your sensei.” She says.

Now, I’m really embarrassed…

“Hehe, sorry about the kunai, Kurenai-sensei. I thought you were reaching for a weapon.” I say in nervous laughter. She only smiles, raised her hand, and slightly waves it off.

“Actually, that’s what I was hoping for. You didn’t know who I was, I didn’t have my headband as identification, and for all you know I could have been an assailant looking for Lord Hokage. I have my reasons for doing this, which I will explain tomorrow. But first, we’re going to go to our training grounds which will also act as our meeting spot.” Kurenai-sensei says, and my teammates and I just look to each other before shrugging and doing what the woman says.

“Well, here we are.” Kurenai-sensei says as we finally reach our destination after our silent walk. We’re in the middle of Training Ground Eight, for our Team Eight. “Come on, let’s sit down. I just want to talk to you all.” She says with a smile, and it’s…welcoming. I can hear it in her voice – she already cares for us as our sensei.

We sit down, with the three of us students in an arc with Kurenai-sensei in front of us. Shikamaru is in the middle of our arc, and I’m on his right side while Hinata is on his left.

“Alright. Let’s start with introductions. Everyone say your name, some likes and hobbies, and something about yourselves. I don’t care what it is – a favorite book, a song, a weird talent, whatever. I’ll start first, and then it’ll be you in the middle, then you, then you.” She says, pointing to
Shikamaru, then me, and Hinata last. “My name is Kurenai Yuhi. I really like doing my hobby, which is drawing, though I’m not particularly good at it. Something about me, I’m a genjutsu specialist.” She says, looking to Shikamaru now.

“What a drag. My name is Shikamaru Nara, and I like watching the clouds or playing Shogi with my father when he has the time. Something about me, I’m seen as rather lazy.” He says, yawning a little. Hinata and I cannot help our laughs that come out. Kurenai-sensei now points to me.

“My name is Naruto Uzumaki, and I love eating Ichiraku Ramen and I like looking at colorful flowers. Something about me, you better remember my name, because I’m going to be the best Hokage ever, believe it!” I say, to the slight chagrin of my teammates. Kurenai-sensei only smiles at me, nods, and points to Hinata.

“My name is Hinata Hyuga, and I like helping people. Something about me, I’m going to train and get stronger so I can finally earn the respect of my clan!” Hinata says, and I am a little shocked at how confident she said the last part. But I am also damn proud of her for it.

“That’s right, Hinata! Show them how strong you will be!” I shout, raising my hand in front of Shikamaru’s face, and Hinata slightly hesitates before returning my high-five.

“Damn it, Naruto. That was right in my ear.” Shikamaru jokes, rubbing his temples as if he has a migraine.

“Well, I’m glad to see you all getting along already. Perhaps this is why you were all put on a team.” Kurenai-sensei says, and this definitely piques my interest.

“What do you mean, sensei?” I ask her, and she just waves her hand.

“Nothing, really. It’s just that Lord Hokage changed the teams at almost the last minute, probably because not only do you all get along, but because of Naruto’s friendship with each of you.” Kurenai-sensei says, making me smile.

I’m glad that I was put on a team with my friends. I wouldn’t trade this for anything, ever!

“That makes sense. I was wondering why they broke up the would-be third generation of the Ino-Shika-Cho formation.” Shikamaru says his thought aloud.

“All right. Now that we got introductions out of the way, I need to ask you all something. Does anyone know the answer to this question: What’s the most important part of a Shinobi team?” Kurenai-sensei asks us, and I look to my teammates. I…might know?


“No, Naruto. Jutsu are incredibly important, but not the most. But that was a logical guess.” She says.

“The mission?” Hinata asks, and Kurenai shakes her head again.

“No. The mission is does go above all else in terms of priority of duty, but it’s not what I’m thinking of.” She says, and grabs her chin. “Alright, let me put it this way. There’s ‘important,’ and then there’s ‘important,’ if you understand what I mean. I’m talking about the stuff you won’t find in any textbook or scroll or lecture.” Kurenai says, looking at us.

“What is it, sensei?” Shikamaru asks. He’s supposedly a genius, and he didn’t even guess. If he can’t figure it out, then definitely none of us can.
“Trust.” She says outright.

“Trust?” The three of us students repeat in unison, and Kurenai-sensei nods her head once.

“Yes, trust. Let me explain.” Kurenai-sensei says, before taking a breath. “Let me first start my telling you why I became a Genjutsu specialist. As you may know, Genjutsu takes extreme skill in Chakra control. However, I originally wanted be become a medical ninja, which also takes Chakra control. Many years ago when I was a new Chunin, I was on a basic C-rank mission as a medic student while a Medical Corp superior joined us. The mission was going smoothly, we made our delivery and I was able to heal the little injuries that happened due to enemy ninja. However, we later got ambushed by a Genjutsu specialist.

“I had not really been exposed to Genjutsu yet. The next thing I knew, our medic had killed all of our teammates, licked their blood off of the kunai, and started running after me. I pulled out my kunai, threw it at him, and then I was suddenly grabbed and turned around. All my comrades who were killed were actually alive. And I saw…I saw that I really did throw the kunai at my sensei, and it was a critical injury.

“I froze. He was dying and I couldn’t do anything because of what I saw and how scared I was. He…he screamed my name. I snapped out of it and just barely kept him stable until we were able to get back to the Leaf. Thankfully, he made a full recovery after a few months and forgave me completely. Still, it’s one of my most painful memories that I don’t think I’ll ever fully forgive myself for.

“That’s why I became a Genjutsu specialist. So I wouldn’t be fooled by anything like that again and so I can stop my comrades from being affected by another shinobi’s Genjutsu. But that experience taught me a lesson, it taught me to trust my comrades. I should have known that my sensei would never do something like that. But I was a naive Chunin and I didn’t know. I should have trusted my sensei and my comrades to get me out of that hell I was being put through.” Kurenai-sensei finishes telling her story.

I…don’t know what I would do if I ever saw one of my friends killing my other friends. If I was Kurenai-sensei in that position, I would’ve probably killed the guy immediately. And then finding out it was all a Genjutsu…

…She must feel so guilty.

“Sensei…” I say, getting tears in my eyes at the thought of losing Shikamaru and Hinata and Kurenai. I fight back the tears and look at my three comrades. “I swear, I trust you guys with my life and I will do whatever I can to protect you three. Nobody hurts my friends, believe it! I shout, raising my hand in the air.

“Yeah! Nobody will hurt my teammates!” Hinata says, fists clenched with a smirk on her face!

“What a drag – knowing my luck protecting all of you is going to be a major pain, but I’ll do it no matter what.” Shikamaru says, making us all sweatdrop.

“Wait a second!” I shout, interrupting our moment. I think I understand, now…

“What is it, Naruto?” Hinata asks me, looking confused.

“YOU!” I shout, pointing at Kurenai-sensei. “You played a Genjutsu on me earlier with the window and the money so that eraser would fall on me instead!” I get up, getting right in her face.

“Yes.” She says simply, surprising me and making me fall before quickly getting back up and wiping
the dust off my knees.

“You watch your back, sensei…” I say in a mock-threatening way, acting like I’ll try to get her back in some way.

“Well, you guys say you can trust each other, but I think it’s time to test. I’ll start, and then we’ll go in reverse order of how we introduced ourselves, starting with Hinata and ending with Shikamaru. We’re all going to tell each other a secret. Secrets helps build trust and to test who you can trust.” Kurenai-sensei says. “Like I said, I’ll start. My secret is that I’m in love and in a relationship with a Jonin sensei of another one of the graduating teams. I won’t tell you who, though, as those are his wishes.” Kurenai-sensei says, with a tiny blush on her face.

“Aww! Kurenai-sensei’s in love!” I tease, trying to make her a little uncomfortable as a payback for that Genjutsu she played on me earlier. I did tell her to watch her back, after all!

“Yes, yes.” She says in a playful tone. “Now, Hinata, please share a secret with us.” Kurenai-sensei says, and I look over to Hinata, who looks…really scared.

“Um…” She begins, but stops. I can tell Hinata looks really sad and scared. “I’m…I’m a disappointment to my family.” She says softly, eyes looking down. “My father…he sees me as such a weakling. I’m supposed to be the heiress of the Hyuga clan because I’m the first born of the main branch, but in his eyes I’m nothing but a weak failure. He sees me like this because I’m not as skilled as my cousin Neji of the side-branch in our clan’s Gentle Fist style of Taijutsu, or as confident as my younger sister Hanabi. For years, every time he looks at me, all I have seen is shame.” Hinata says, closing her eyes, not letting one tear escape.

That makes me pissed off!

“That’s a load of crap!” I shout after a few seconds of silence. Everyone turns their attention to me. I look directly into Hinata’s eyes. “That’s not true, Hinata. Their wrong – you are anything but a disappointment. You are already so strong – you’re still fighting for their approval. That is dedication if I have ever seen it. And if it’s true that your skills are less than other clan members, so what? If you train, you’ll be better than everyone. Trust me, Hinata, if anyone is a disappointment, it’s them to you because they only keep hurting you. A dad’s job is to love his children unconditionally, and he failed you in that duty. I believe in you, Hinata.” I say, and I see the unshed tears from before start to fall, yet she has a smile on her face now.

“Naruto…” She whispers, wiping her yes. “…Thank you.” She says louder and more confidently. Shikamaru puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder as he’s between the two of us.

“Naruto is absolutely correct, Hinata. Thank you for sharing that with us. As your sensei, I promise we will help you get stronger and make them understand that they were wrong.” Kurenai-sensei says, and then turns her attention to me. “Now you, Naruto.”

I guess it’s my turn for a secret.

What the hell do I say? I don’t have any secrets, except for the one I just found last night because of the traitor Mizuki. I don’t care what Kurenai-sensei says, I will never tell anyone about the Nine-Tailed Fox being sealed inside of me. They’ll treat me just like how everyone else treats me – they’ll ignore me, shun me, and blame me for something that I didn’t do…

…I will not risk losing my only friends for some dumb trust exercise.

“Uh, I don’t really have any secrets. I’m an open book!” I say, smiling with my hand at the back of
“Is that so?” Kurenai-sensei asks in curiosity. “So we can ask you anything and you’ll answer?” She asks me.

“Damn right I will!” I say, giving a toothy grin to my teammates.

“Alright. I have a question I’ve been wanting to ask you for a long time, Naruto.” Shikamaru speaks up, and I turn my head to him. “Why do you pretend to be so happy? Don’t get me wrong – I know you’re happy when you’re at the Academy with Hinata and me and stuff, but…” He trails off, not really knowing how to articulate his thoughts, but I know exactly where he’s going with this.

I’ve often asked myself this question. When I’m alone and lonely, I still act like I have all these people around to talk to or to make laugh with idiotic pranks and jokes and stuff.

“It’s easier.” I begin, taking a deep breath. “For the longest time, I’ve been hated and not liked by anyone, except for Old Man Hokage. And after I aged out of the orphanage, it was even worse. I had no one to look after me, no one I could rely on. But I didn’t want to make myself look weak in front of all the people who just started at me, called me ‘that boy’ behind my back like I couldn’t hear them, or wouldn’t let their children play with my because they thought I was dangerous. But, when I entered the Academy, I had Iruka-sensei, and I eventually had you and Hinata. You all really cared about me – I truly was, and am, happy. Still, I guess it’s just habit now to not look weak even if I am much older and stuff.” I say, saying the words and thoughts I never thought I would say, though I guess I was afraid nobody would care enough to listen to my troubles like that.

“I have a follow-up question. Why are you so hated? I mean, I never saw you do anything truly bad to anyone, just some annoying pranks. Why are people so mean to you? Why did parents think you were dangerous?” Shikamaru asks.

Damn it…

He’s literally asking me to tell him about the Nine-Tails. How the hell am I going to get around this? Especially because I know Kurenai-sensei knows about it – if Mizuki and Iruka and all the villagers know, then it’s obvious that my own Jonin sensei would.

“I can’t tell you. I’m…I’m not-” I am cut off.

“But you said you would answer. Naruto-” Now I’m the one who cuts him off.

“Not this. I’m not going to risk losing you and Hinata as my friends. You’d hate me too if you found out. I just can’t lose two of the few people that care about me.” I say. Hinata then speaks, surprising me with her words.

“Naruto, whatever it is, we couldn’t hate you. I couldn’t hate you. You saved me from those bullies, remember? You’ve always been so strong. Seeing you never give up in your spars with Sasuke at the Academy or whenever Sakura and the other girls tried to insult you made me want to be just like you. You taught me my nindo, my ninja way. You taught me to never give up, no matter how hard things get or what other people think.” Hinata says, without a single stutter.

“No, Naruto, besides Choji, you’re my best friend. I’m only asking you this because I don’t want you to feel alone anymore. I know you have friends, but what kind of friends are we if we can’t even help you or try to be there for you when you’re in pain if we don’t know why you’re in so much pain? It truly makes me feel like a shitty friend to see my best friend hurting when I have no idea why.” Shikamaru says, and sighs. “You don’t have to tell us, Naruto. I just didn’t want you to feel so alone.
anymore. I’m sorry I ever brought this up.” Shikamaru says, looking extremely guilty.

He…he sees me as his best friend? I knew I would eventually make friends, and I have. But I never thought anybody would ever see me as their best friend. Great. I just made both of my friends feel like absolute crap for only wanting to help me. Some best friend I am…

“No, you don’t have to apologize. I know you’re both just trying to help me. I didn’t mean to make you guys feel bad. I just don’t want to risk being alone, no matter what.” I say.

One thing’s for sure – I definitely failed this trust test.

“Then I will. I’ll take a risk right now.” Shikamaru says, determined.

“What do you mean?” Hinata asks.

“This is such a drag. I was going to tell a different secret than the one I’m about to tell. How can I expect Naruto to risk rejection when I won’t do the same? So, I’m going to risk it and tell you something that can affect my entire shinobi and political career. I’m gay, and if my clan elders find out that I won’t have a child I’ll be removed as the next head of the Nara clan after my father.” Shikamaru says, and…I’m shocked!

You can lose clan status just for that?

“Wait, wait, wait! You’re telling me that you can be removed as clan head just for something like that? What if you just didn’t want kids or weren’t able to?” I ask him. Like…this is totally unfair and messed up!

“It would be the same thing, unfortunately. However, it’s normally not an issue because most families have two or more children in case one is, for any reason, unable to take the head household role. But, my father was an only child and so am I, so I have to be named not only household head, but clan head as well, rather than a cousin or something. And because I’ll be an heirless head, that’s what’ll cause issues.” Shikamaru explains.

“Why does the heir need to be a biological child? Can’t you just adopt?” Hinata asks, taking the question right out of my mouth.

“There are no issues about adopting children in the clan for a household heir, but they cannot be clan head because of the nature of our jutsu. Non-Nara can learn our secret jutsu, but it would take immense training and even then they could never be as skilled in it as a biological Nara. It’s just the way the jutsu is. And as a clan head, one has to be a master of all our clan’s jutsu, which is impossible if not a biological Nara.” Shikamaru explains that as well.

“So what are you going to do?” I ask. He’s a genius, after all. He must have some sort of contingency plan.

“I don’t know yet. I’ve been studying Nara clan dynamics and law for a while now, and I can’t find anything on passing on the head role. I know my father had an uncle, who was his father’s brother. They have had children down to this generation, so technically they are direct relatives of mine, but I don’t know if it’s possible to pass on the role like that.” Shikamaru explains. “Well, there’s always one other option if nothing else works.” Shikamaru says with a sigh.

“What other option?” I ask. If there’s an option. That means there’s no issue, right?

“You know, I’ve said it before. Marry a regular girl, two children, retire, and then die before my wife. That sort of thing.” Shikamaru responds with a shrug.
“You can’t do that! You’d be so—” He cuts me off.

“Trust me, Naruto. I know exactly what you’re going to say. Not only would I be living a lie, but I’d be extremely unhappy. But, that’s only a last resort if I’m truly unable to give my head status to a different relative of mine. And if that’s so, I’ll do it for my clan, and thus my village, as is my shinobi duty.” Shikamaru finishes, closing his eyes. “All I ask of you guys is to not say anything. I’m going to do more research of my clan law and I plan on talking to my father once I reach Chunin level, which is when I am officially clan head.” Shikamaru states.

“All right, Shikamaru. Just…if you ever need to talk, we’re here for you.” Hinata says, scooting lightly to hug Shikamaru. He returns it gladly. I just look at them, debating with myself. Both of them…shared something to deeply personal about them and made themselves vulnerable. They trust each other, and they trust me. But…can I truly trust them with this? Well, I’m about to find out.

“…I have the Nine-Tailed Fox sealed inside of me.” I say, making Shikamaru and Hinata break their hug to look at me, while I see Kurenai-sensei slightly smile out of the corner of my eye.

“Excuse me?” Shikamaru asks. He must think he misheard or something.

“Before either of you say anything, let me explain, please. Just remember…I’m Naruto.” I say, before taking a few deep breaths and telling my story to them. “I just found out yesterday, and everything suddenly made sense. Apparently, the Fourth Hokage never killed the Nine-Tailed Fox when it attacked the village a little over thirteen years ago. Instead, he sealed it into a newborn baby, that baby being me. The seal he used had killed him, but he knew it was the only way to protect the village.

“Until yesterday, I never understood why people hated me or were so afraid of me. But once the traitor Mizuki told me, it just all made sense. They weren’t afraid of me, they didn’t hate me, they were afraid of and hated what was inside of me. But, I guess everyone only saw me as a container of some sort rather than a person. Little did they know they were just casting Naruto to a lifetime of solitude and uncertainty.” I finish my speech, looking directly at my two teammates’ faces and trying to gauge their reactions.

I can tell they’re trying to look for the words to express their thoughts. They don’t look scared or angry or anything – they only look confused. A few more seconds pass before Shikamaru raises his hand…

…And puts it around my shoulders and pulls me into a surprised, one-sided hug, not unlike the one Hinata gave him earlier when he told us his secret.

“Shi-Shikamaru, wh-” I am cut off when I am feel a strong squeeze around my back, and I know it’s Hinata who just made this a group hug. They…

…They still care about me!

“Naruto…I’m so sorry you had to go through all that. I don’t care if the Fourth Hokage was protecting the village, he had no right to do that to you. Did he not think of what this would mean for you? But you’ll never be alone again.” Shikamaru says as I begin returning the hug to both of them.

“We only see you as Naruto Uzumaki, our comrade, teammate, and our friend. We will never see you as anything else, ever. And if anyone ever says otherwise, don’t listen to them.” Hinata says, squeezing Shikamaru and me even tighter. I just take a moment and take in the affection from my
friends.

“Thank you so much, Hinata and Shikamaru. I…I really love you guys.” I say, squeezing them even tighter. We don’t care that it’s uncomfortable and too warm; we’re just content.

“Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuga, and Shikamaru Nara…” Kurenai-sensei finally speaks again after all this, interrupting our hug-moment and making us separate. “…You all pass. Congratulations!” She says with a huge smile on her face.

“…Pass what?” The three of us ask at the same time.

“You passed my Genin test. The Graduation exam was like a preliminary – it was to see if you were ready for your sensei’s exam. If you guys had failed, you would have been sent back to the Academy. Though, this wasn’t exactly the test it could have been. You see, I knew about Naruto the whole time, and the test was to see if you guys were able to accept him if he told his secret, which would have been his choice to tell, and you all passed.” Kurenai-sensei says.

“WHAT? We could have been sent back to the Academy? And what if I didn’t tell my secret, then what?” I ask, surprised.

Hinata and Shikamaru look relieved that they’re safe from being sent back. I definitely feel relieved that my secret’s out to them and they still accept me, but I do feel kind of used by Kurenai-sensei, but at the same time, I do understand where she was coming from about the whole ‘trust’ thing, now. We all understand this ‘trust’ now, and that we can count on each other for anything and everything.

“Then we would have had a different test tomorrow. We’ll still have it, but it’ll only be for training purposes rather than with the stipulation of going back. So, rather than telling you about it now, you guys don’t have to worry about it until tomorrow.” Kurenai-sensei says, and just waves it off with a smile.

“This is all fantastic news and all, but I still have one last question for Naruto because I’m a little confused.” Shikamaru suddenly says, bringing the attention back to my reveal.

“What is it? Like I said, open book, especially now that you guys know this.” I say, giving him and Hinata a small smile.

“You said you found out yesterday through the traitor Mizuki. Do you mean Mizuki-sensei from the Academy?” Shikamaru asks. Hinata looks interested, so I bet she had a similar question, too.

“…Yes. I guess I’ll explain that quickly. I didn’t actually pass the graduation exam because, for reasons I still don’t know for sure, I can’t perform the Clone Jutsu. So, after I failed, Mizuki-sensei told me about a ‘special’ way to pass – to steal a scroll from the Hokage and deliver it to him. He said it was to show I have stealth and evasion skills. So, I brought him the scroll, only after learning a Jutsu from it.

“Long story short, Iruka-sensei came, told me that Mizuki was lying. Mizuki then told me about the Nine-Tails and then attacked Iruka and me. Iruka…took a huge shuriken to the back to protect me, and then I used the Shadow Clone Jutsu I learned from the scroll to protect Iruka. Iruka passed me, and here we are.

“I know I was an idiot to ever believe Mizuki, and that’s why I promised myself to not ever fall for something like that again. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my comrades and my friends, just like I did when I protected Iruka after he saved me. I’m not going to be an idiot anymore with mediocre-at-best skills.” I finish explaining my story.
“Oh.” Shikamaru says, very shocked at what I went through yesterday. “Well, I’ll protect you as well, Naruto. And you too, Hinata. You two are my friends.” Shikamaru says.

“And I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you two safe. You are the first people to truly believe in me and to trust me. What Naruto said earlier is right – my family betrayed me. But that’s fine, because you two and Kurenai-sensei are my family, too.” Hinata’s words really get to me.

“Family?” I whisper, completely amazed that someone could ever see me as their family.

“Yes, Naruto. Family. Team Eight is now a family.” Kurenai-sensei says with genuine care, and stands up. “Well, that’s all I had planned for today. I’m truly happy we all shared those secrets with each other. I know it’ll be awkward the first week or so knowing that we shared all this, but believe me, it’ll all be worthwhile in the end. Tomorrow, we’ll meet here at 8:00 AM to begin our first training session. So, I’ll be going now and I’ll-” I cut her off.

“Wait, sensei!” I shout, getting her attention before she leaves. “Old Man Teuchi said free ramen on the house for my team after our meeting today. Would…would you all like to join me for a bowl?” I ask, nervous. Sure I ate ramen with Hinata and Shikamaru once or twice before, but whenever I invited Sakura to ramen in the past she’d only insult me, hit me, or both...

“Sure! I’m kind of hungry, anyway. I had a light breakfast.” Shikamaru says.

“I-I’d love to go, Naruto!” Hinata says, stuttering a little and obviously embarrassed because she is blushing a bit. Why would she be nervous? I’m the one risking embarrassment, here!

“Alright. Let’s think of this as our first family meal!” Kurenai-sensei says and gestures her arms for me to lead the way.

“Awesome! Here we come, delicious ramen, believe it!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And that’s the chapter! What did you guys think?

I hope you don’t mind what I made Shikamaru’s secret. This story is not going to be a yaoi story, but I do plan on having Shikamaru eventually be in a relationship (though with who I am not yet sure).

I’d also like to mention to my readers at AO3 the length of this chapter. Usually, I try to make chapters for my stories at least two-thousand words, and I usually have a hard time really surpassing that (my max I would estimate as three-thousand), this chapter being an exception. But right now, it seems this story in general may be an exception, But always expect at least two-thousand words.

One last thing I’d like to point out is the Point-of-View I’m writing in. I always write in 1st-Person because I primarily write a story through dialogue while adding thoughts on the side. I might eventually try changing to 3rd-Person for fights and stuff, but I’ll still primarily stick to 1st-Person.

I do have one question, though. Do you guys think I am describing things too quickly? I think that’s one of the flaws I have with writing in 1st-Person, that I rush everything. Do
you guys think so – I would really like and appreciate your feedback.

And with that, I think that’s everything I wanted to say. And with that, I hope you all liked this chapter and will review! :) 

NOTE: This has previously been posted to my FFN account. All future updates will be posted to here and there simultaneously.
The Test

Chapter Summary

Team 8, though having passed the Genin test, now have to do their original test in the form of a training session, and Team 8 bonds more as a family.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I hope you guys enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well, that’s all I had planned for today. I’m truly happy we all shared those secrets with each other. I know it’ll be awkward the first week or so knowing that we shared all this, but believe me, it’ll all be worthwhile in the end. Tomorrow, we’ll meet here at 8:00 AM to begin our first training session.” Kurenai-sensei tells us.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 3)-The Test

Well, to keep up with my promise of being a new Naruto, I’m actually here at our meeting spot a little early at 7:45 AM. I am not surprised to not be the only one there, but I am a bit surprised that the only other one there is Kurenai-sensei.

“Good morning, Naruto.” Kurenai-sensei waves to me when she sees me.

“Good morning, sensei.” I greet and politely wave back. She’s sitting where she was yesterday, calmly reading a book. I sit where I was sitting yesterday and wait for my teammates. “Whatcha reading?” I ask her, and she looks over her book to me.

“Don’t tell him yet, but I’m learning how to play Shogi. My partner loves the game, and when I told him Shikamaru played, he gave me this book to start learning. I thought that if he ever wanted to play but his father was busy due to his shinobi duties, he might want to play with me sometime.” Kurenai-sensei says, and this already brightens up my day!

“That’s awesome, Kurenai-sensei! I won’t tell him. But that’s so nice of you!” I say, and she smiles at me before going back to the book, which I assume is either a rule book or a book with strategies or something.

We sit in silence after that. She reads, occasionally flipping the page and I just play with my kunai and shuriken in my pouches, just to pass the time. I am pretty bored. Maybe I should start bringing some sort of backpack to keep a book or two and some spare weapons and stuff. Medicine wouldn’t hurt, either. Ohh…some instant ramen would be good, too. All we would need to do is boil some water and-

“Naruto! Kurenai-sensei!” I turn my head and see that Hinata has shown up.
“Oh, Hinata, am I glad to see you! Kurenai-sensei here keeps terrible conversation!” I say, and Hinata laughs and sits next to me while Kurenai-sensei doesn’t respond to my joke. “Anyway, Hinata, I have a dilemma and I think you’ll be able to help.” I say, and her face… gets a bit red in her cheeks. What?

“O-Oh! Sure! What is it?” She asks me, apparently a bit nervous. She’s *always* nervous, it seems. I just don’t understand girls, I guess…

“I was thinking of things to bring with me on a travelling and training bag. When I got to my instant ramen, I thought it would be perfect except for the fact that I wouldn’t be able to boil water. I mean, a match wouldn’t be strong enough to actually create a large enough fire, and an actual fire would give our location away to any possible enemy ninja, and I can’t think of what else to do!” I explain my dilemma.

“I can solve that issue.” Kurenai-sensei says, looking above her book right at us.

“How so, sensei?” Hinata asks. I’m kind of glad she’s as clueless as I am…

“That’s for tomorrow’s first training lesson. Don’t worry about it yet.” Kurenai-sensei tells us, closing both eyes and smiling gently. Why do I get the feeling she’s going to just be putting our questions off like that a lot?

“Don’t worry about what?” I suddenly hear the voice of our up-to-now missing teammate.

“Shikamaru! We just trying to figure out how to make ramen while on missions, but Kurenai-sensei’ll tell us tomorrow during training!” I say excited that the whole Team Eight is here now and that we can soon get started on our original test thing.

“…What a drag. Why do you always put everything off, sensei? It’s a simple answer, isn’t it? Why wait to tell us?” Shikamaru asks, and I’m glad he agrees with me about her putting everything off.

“It’s actually quite complicated. The reason I put things off like you say is because telling you guys this will distract you from the test. I understand curiosity can be distracting, but not telling you anything is a bit less distracting then mentioning it and then leaving you unfulfilled. Trust me, tomorrow. And, with that in mind, it’s time to start.” Kurenai-sensei explains, and gets up off the ground after putting her Shogi book away in her bag.

“What was the test you had planned for us yesterday, sensei?” Hinata asks.

“Well, pretty much, you guys have to beat me in a three-on-one spar. Now, I’m a Jonin, so I will obviously not be going my full strength physically, but I won’t be going too easy in strategy and otherwise. And you guys will have the advantage: I will give you guys five minutes to plan out a strategy and I give you my word that I will not eavesdrop. The reason for this is because a team should know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and in this case I am an enemy and I want you to treat me as such and to surprise me like you would a real enemy.” Kurenai-sensei explains the test, and it’s making sense so far.

“And i-if we don’t beat you, w-what happens?” Hinata asks, nervous. We all know the *original* consequence of failing this test.

“Nothing. Like I said, you guys passed the real graduation test and I have already notified the Hokage that you guys passed. But I want you guys to take this as if you would be sent back to the Academy if you lost. And with that in mind, come at me as if I was a real enemy ninja, come at me with the intent to kill. Now, I leave you guys for those five minutes so you can plan. Good luck,
guys.” Kurenai-sensei says and suddenly body flickers out of here.

“Uhh, any plans, guys?” I ask after a few moments of us just staring at each other.

“Yes, I started planning as soon as she said we had to spar. And luckily you guys discussed some of your jutsu during the meeting yesterday. We’re going to need Naruto’s Shadow Clone Jutsu and Transformation Jutsu, Hinata’s Byakugan and Gentle Fist, and my Shadow possession Jutsu. Now, here’s what we’ll do…” Shikamaru starts explaining his plan.

“You guys got it?” Shikamaru asks us after explaining his awesome plan. Man, even if we didn’t pass yesterday, I still wouldn’t be worried about this because this guy is smart!

“Believe it!” I say, and Hinata also says she understands.

“Alright, guys! It’s time to start!” Kurenai-sensei shouts at us from quite a-ways down the field from us. “Come at me!” She shouts, immediately going into her battle stance.

“Byakugan!” Hinata activates her kekkei-genkai and takes a breath before charging in at our sensei with us following.

“Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!” I shout as we run and make a hundred clones. As soon as Hinata engages Kurenai-sensei in a Taijutsu battle, my clones start jumping in and attacking all around our sensei, making her struggle and barely able to keep up.

My eyes can barely keep up at the speed Kurenai-sensei and Hinata are going at. All I can really make out are rapid flashes of chakra from when Kurenai-sensei blocks Hinata’s Gentle Fist attacks. To make things even harder for Kurenai-sensei, my clones and I start throwing shuriken and kunai at her, and…it becomes too much to her. She slips, and she gets hit with a kunai and then Hinata hits her again with her Gentle Fist.

“Eight Trigrams, Two Palm! Four Palm! Eight Palm! Sixteen Palm! Thirty-Two Palm! Sixty-Four Palm!” Hinata shouts, hitting more and more of our sensei’s chakra points to seal off her chakra network. Once Hinata is done, Kurenai-sensei falls to the floor…and suddenly poofs away and is replaced by a log.

“Substitution Jutsu! Damn it!” Shikamaru shouts, about to go in for his diversion.

“I wasn’t expecting that. Your clones really can overpower someone, Naruto. And Hinata, great job of taking advantage of the tiniest opening already. And Shikamaru, I know what the coup de grace was supposed to be as you’re a long-distance fighter, so we need to develop your close-range skills because you were basically a spectator and a sitting duck – you were too distracted waiting for our opening that you weren’t checking for any clones I might have made or any possible enemy ninja if we were out on a mission.” Kurenai-sensei says, noticeably breathing slightly heavier.

Hinata looks over to me and I nod…

I look over to Shikamaru and he nods…

Time to really put our plan in action!

For this to work, I call up even more clones and most of them charge at Kurenai-sensei. Hinata charges at her as well. They go around from behind her, making Kurenai-sensei turn away from me.
The rest of my clones join me and Shikamaru. This is it, the distraction that we need!

We both make our hand signs and perform the Jutsu. We look over each other and we’re perfect!

He has used the transformation jutsu and turned into me, and I used the shadow clone jutsu and transformation jutsu to make a clone that turned into him. As Kurenai wasn’t looking at us, she won’t know who we actually are.

Shikamaru (as me), myself, and the rest of my clones except the Shikamaru-clone charge at her as well. Meanwhile, my Shika-clone gets into position to pretend to do Shikamaru’s shadow possession jutsu. Shika-clone makes the correct hand sign and run towards Kurenai where she can barely see him out of her peripheral vision, making her think he doesn’t think she can see him. Where he’s standing is inside a huge shadow cast by the tree she is in fighting my clones; so he doesn’t even have to pretend to make a shadow because she knows she is caught.

“Shunshin!” Kurenai shouts and I can see my clone jump when he feels a hand on his shoulder and a knife to his neck. “I told, Shikamaru. You don’t leave yourself a sitting duck. This time, it would’ve gotten you killed. If’” Kurenai stops talking and freezes. Her face is one of surprise and momentary fear before it switches to a smile.

YES!

“We win, Sensei.” I hear in my voice. Shikamaru as me walks forward, hands still in the hand sign.

“Call them off, Naruto.” He says to me.

It’s really bizarre to hear commands to me in my own voice, but I do what he says and I dispel all my shadow clones, including the one that Kurenai-sensei has trapped.

Ugh…

My head starts to hurt and I feel like I’m going to puke. The feeling only lasts for a few seconds, and as the feeling passes Shikamaru releases Kurenai from the shadow possession and also transforms back into himself. Hinata walks up beside Shikamaru, and Kurenai-sensei rises to her feet and smirks at all of us.

“Nicely done, team. I’m not going to lie, I didn’t see that plan coming. However, I must let you know that I did see the whole thing but I did play along to your plan. Because I know your skills, I was able to figure out what you were trying to do as we went along. And I must say that I am quite impressed with your plans. Especially because you came up with that in only five minutes – fantastic!” Kurenai-sensei says.

“Um…it was-it was all Shikamaru, sensei. He came up with the plan. Naruto and I didn’t know what to do.” Hinata speaks up, and she is very much correct.

“That is true, sensei. All Hinata and I did was follow his plan. He gets the credit.” I say, giving credit where credit is due.

“I understand. But you guys are incorrect.” Kurenai-sensei says, making all three of us look at her, confused.

“What do you mean, sensei?” I ask, and I see Hinata and Shikamaru nodding slightly to my question.

“I mean that no single person takes credit for a success; likewise, no single person takes blame for a failure. In a team, it’s all or nothing. You are a team; you all deserve the credit for pulling it off. If you hadn’t done your jutsus correctly, you would have failed, right? Shikamaru only had one part of
the plan. You all contributed equally. Remember this. A team is not just a group of people; a team is a whole made of parts who need the other to fully function. “Kurenai-sensei says, and that makes me happy. To know that the four of us, Kurenai-sensei included, need each other makes me feel special.

“Thank you, Sensei.” I say, and they all look at me. “What you said proves that we’re a family. Like…we’re all important. So, thank you.” I say, and Shikamaru and Hinata walk toward me. The put their hands on my shoulder reassuringly – I think they understand that I haven’t really been made to feel special that much in my life. I also put my hand on Hinata’s shoulder, because I get the feeling she feels the same way because of what she told us yesterday about her and her family.

“Part of our training will not just include ninja-training. I want to instill in you all what I feel to be the most important aspects of relationships in life. Trust, friendship, comradery. What you do later in your ninja careers could be anything, but if you ever have teams of Genin of your own, I wish for these to also be passed down. I don’t mean to sound conceited, but my sensei when I was a Genin was very wise, and I believe his views are truly beneficial to the team dynamic.” Kurenai-sensei explains.

“Yeah, that makes sense, sensei. You said that the Lord Third changed the teams last-minute, correct? And that it might have been because of our friendships? Well if that’s true then what you’re saying makes perfect sense. People who are closer and are friends will do much better working together than two people who dislike each other. And the whole thing when a whole team either succeeds or fails is good because it doesn’t cast anyone out. I like that.” Shikamaru speaks up.

“Yeah, that’s a really good philosophy, Kurenai-sensei. Thank you for teaching it to us.” Hinata says.

“Yeah, thanks!” I say, expressing my appreciation for the lesson.

During the academy, I never really payed attention to or cared so much about this kind of stuff. I only cared about technique and power and jutsu, never the stuff on politics and village dynamics or history and all that kind of stuff. But hearing that I am on this team because we’re friends and hearing Kurenai-sensei’s explanation makes this resonate with me. I’m going to have a more open mind to all this stuff!

“Hey, sensei! Did we pass?” Shikamaru asks suddenly, and I remember what the original purpose was this for!

“If this was the test, I would say you all still would have passed. Congratulations!” Kurenai-sensei says, giving us a thumbs-up! “And for today, we’re done. You guys have the rest of the day to yourselves. Tomorrow we begin our training. See you all tomorrow!” Kurenai-sensei says before waving goodbye and Body-Flickering somewhere else.

“Well then, what do you guys wanna do?” Hinata asks, and I have an idea!

“How about we go cloud-watching with Shikamaru?” I suggest, and Shikamaru and Hinata smile.

“I would love some company cloud-watching!” Shikamaru says, really excited!

“All right then! Let’s go!” Hinata says, and we all head off to the Nara compound.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I hope that what I came up with was decent, as I had not remembered the original plan I had for the test.

Also, I feel that I am making this story really cheesy and stuff. To be honest, I’m not sure whether I like it or not. But that’s what Naruto is, isn’t it? It’s full of this cheesy teamwork stuff and I like it in the show, but reading/writing it? I’m not sure, tell me what you think!

I feel like I also rushed the fight scene; I have a feeling fight scenes are not going to be the best coming from me. I am more of a story kind of writer, not action. Still, fights will be important but don’t expect long masterpieces if/when it ever comes to that.

I not have have an end goal for this story in mind. I have thought of several individual plot elements and character stuff (which I have written down!), but I highly doubt this will span all the way to the Obito stuff and whatnot like the full story goes. If I had to give a rough estimate, this story will most likely have a maximum of material up to where Part I ended.

Another question: Is there anything you guys specifically want to see in this story? Any suggestions or predictions? I appreciate all feedback and reviews, and I believe they will help a lot with this story especially.

Thank you all for reading this chapter! Hope you all liked it! And, remember, don’t forget to review!

NOTE: This has previously been posted to my FFN account. All future updates will be posted to here and there simultaneously.
**A Change of Pace**

Chapter Summary

While Team 8 hangs out at Shikamaru's compound, the newly-formed Team 7 have their own Genin test with Kakashi. Then, Team 8 has their first full day - training and a C-Rank Mission.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Trying something different here. I’ve been thinking up some more character plots and interactions, and I’m thinking that instead of doing what I’ve been doing so far, I’ll start switching it up. I hope you guys like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Naruto’s P.O.V.**

“How about we go cloud-watching with Shikamaru?” I suggest, and Shikamaru and Hinata smile.

“I would love some company cloud-watching!” Shikamaru says, really excited!

“All right then! Let’s go!” Hinata says, and we all head off to the Nara compound.

**To Be a Ninja (Chapter 4)-A Change of Pace**

**Sasuke’s P.O.V.**

“Sasuke!” I hear a distance away to me but quickly approaching.

Ugh.

Why does she have to be so annoying? Can’t Sakura get the hint that I’m just not into her? I’m not attracted to people who just fawn or obsess over another person. It makes you look weak and pathetic. I do not like weak and pathetic.

“Is it going to be like this every day?” Shino asks, who was silently sitting beside me until now.

“I hope not.” Is all I say.

I don’t even like *speaking* to Sakura. Shino I can handle speaking to in small doses – he’s a competent shinobi from one of the strongest clans in the Leaf. He won’t stand in my way of killing *him*.

“Good morning, Sasuke!” Sakura says and sits *right* next to me. She’s wearing this perfume that I do *not* find pleasant.

“Sakura, perfume could make you obvious to enemy shinobi. You shouldn’t wear any from now
“Don’t you like it, Sasuke?” Sakura asks, as if ignoring what Shino says. I don’t respond to her. I won’t respond to her if she’s always going to be like this.

She’s going to get us killed, won’t she?

Why did I even have to be placed on a team with her? I would rather be with Naruto then her. He at least wants to be strong. Dead-lasts can improve. Sakura? She just wants to kiss and ‘date’ me. She thinks she loves me and she doesn’t even know me – she doesn’t know a single thing about me. That kind of obsession can’t be fixed. And book-smarts will only get you so far as a shinobi. She better wake the fuck up.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, with the occasional grunt of annoyance from Sakura as we wait for Kakashi-sensei, who is already fifteen minutes late.

“God, where is he? What kind of a sensei is he to be late on our first day?” Sakura yells, and my eyes close from her loudness.

“If you keep that up, I might not be your sensei at all.” My eyes widen as I hear that whispered into Sakura’s (and mine due to her being inappropriately close to me) ear.

We all turn around and see Kakashi-sensei looking down at a book, Makeout Summers. I smirk slightly as I realize he’s reading one of those pornography books – Shisui snuck one from the Makeout series back to the Uchiha compound once. I didn’t understand it back then, but now that I do it’s a little amusing while he’s reading porn while scaring the shit out of Sakura.

“And for your information, my pet rock was gaining some weight and he needed to be taken for a walk. He’s a lazy rock. That’s why I was late.” Kakashi-sensei says with a serious tone, and I am able to avoid laughing out loud but it’s actually very funny.

I’m going to like him, I think. He’s strong too – he snuck up on us without any of us noticing, has funny excuses, and scares Sakura. What else could be better?

“S-sorry, K-Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura stammers, and Shino doesn’t have any visible expressions – his glasses and his collar block almost everything.

“Rule One of being a shinobi: don’t whine. I gave you orders to meet me here at a certain time - follow them. I don’t care if I don’t arrive for three more hours – do what I say. Part of being a shinobi means following your superior’s orders. Is that understood?” He asks us, serious.

“Yes, Kakashi-sensei.” We all say, and Kakashi’s eyes soften and I can see his lips smiling through his mask.

“Good. Let’s begin. Your task – get these from me. Whoever does passes. Whoever doesn’t fails and will get sent back to the academy.” He says and holds up two bells.

“Go!” Kakashi-sensei says after he finished explaining the test to us.

“Firestyle: Fireball Jutsu!” I say and blow a huge fireball at him, but he easily dodges it.
“Is that it? Come on. I would think an Uchiha would be able to grab a bell.” Kakasi-sensei says, and I am immediately angry, but I try to calm myself.

This is part of the test. He’s testing to see if I can keep my cool. I’m not going to fall for it, sensei!

I throw shuriken and kunai from him, using my speed to go all around so the weapons pelt him from all around. They all collide and I smirk before he turns into a puff of smoke and is replaced by a log.

“Fucking substitution…” I mumble below my breath.

“Sasuke!” Shino yells at me, grabbing my attention.

“What?” I growl at him. He’s wasting my time talking to him!

“Don’t you get it? He’s trying to make us compete with each other. That’s why he only had two bells for the three of us. That’s a part of the test – to see past it and to work together!” Shino says, and I look at him for a few seconds.

“Fine. What’s you plan?” I say, and he motions for Sakura and me to come over to him.

“Okay. Sasuke, I hope you have more weapons. Sakura, I know your taijutsu is decent. And I have my clan’s jutsu. Once Kakashi tries to dodge all of Sasuke’s weapons, I will track him and corner him while Sakura delivers the final blows. Ready?” Shino explains.

“What jutsu do you have to corner him?” I ask.

“You’ll see.” Shino says raises his arms. “Go!”

“Well, well, well. You guys actually did it. The first team to ever pass my test. And I honestly thought you guys would be too self-absorbed to do it, especially you Sasuke. I am very pleasantly surprised.” Kakashi-sensei says, smiling through his mask.

“What’s the supposed to mean? And we didn’t even get the bells.” Sakura screams at him.

“It means exactly what I said. The test had nothing to do with the bells. Why were you guys placed on a team? To try to teach you all exactly what Shino said. Teamwork. That was the test – to somehow get you three to work together. Though I will admit I am surprised that Shino suggested it.” Kakashi-sensei says.

“Why is that so, sensei? The Aburame clan is all about working together.” Shino says.

“That I’m aware of. But your Academy reports don’t show that – you’ve always been reclusive and rarely uttered a word. Same goes for you, Sasuke. And Sakura has shown many instances of arrogance in the Academy when it came to reports and written tests, but with a lack of ninjutsu which Sasuke and Shino excel in. All these balance out but we tested teamwork. And it really does please me to say you passed! You are now Leaf shinobi.” Kakashi-sensei explains.

“Shino…what the hell were those things? Were those bugs in you?” I ask, somewhat disturbed. I’ve never heard of anything like that before.

“Yes. The Aburame are insect breeders.” Shino says, holding out his hand as a single insect flies out and lands in his palm. “I can control them with my chakra. I have several kinds of bugs. We all share my chakra network, and I can feel it when they sense an enemy, die, get hurt, or hurt an enemy.” He
continues explaining.

“Eww.” Sakura says on a whim. All three of us immediately look at her, and I am angry with her.

“She isn’t one.” I can’t help but think.

“Anything you want to say, Sasuke? You’ve been quiet since you guys passed.” Kakashi-sensei asks me.

For the sake of the team...

“Good plan, Shino. I guess I can’t just assume I can do everything on my own. Thank you.” I say, looking down at the ground on not him. I glance my eyes over to him though and I seem him nod slightly.

This is twice in two days I’ve had to swallow my pride. The first time was with Naruto when Sakura hit him for no reason and I apologized for her. And now, to try to make Shino feel better in case Sakura hurt his feelings. Why is it always Sakura causing me to do this?

“And with that, that’s it for today. Tomorrow we will begin training and doing missions. Get here at 7 AM tomorrow. I won’t be here until 8:30. What are you going to do?” Kakashi-sensei says. We’re all silent as he says happily, “That’s right. You’ll be here at 7. I’ll know if you’re not. So long.” Kakashi-sensei finishes and raises two fingers to his forehead and body-flickers out of here.

“See you guys tomorrow morning. Good afternoon.” Shino says before walking away, not waiting for a response.

“Sasuke…!” Sakura says, scooting closer to me again making me inwardly cringe.

“Bye, Sakura.” I quickly say and start walking away in the same direction of Shino, but only faster as to get away from the pink nuisance.

Ugh. I can still smell that awful perfume. I hope it’s not in my clothes. Fuck.

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Shikamaru’s P.O.V.

“Well, here we are.” I say as I show Naruto and Hinata the Nara compound.

“It’s v-very nice, Sh-Shkamaru.” Hinata says, obviously nervous.

“Yeah, man! It’s so big!” Naruto yells, excited. I should start wearing earplugs – that boy is going to make me deaf.

We walk up to the entrance to my family’s house and I open the door.
“Mom, I’m home. My team is with me!” I shout as we take off our shoes.

“Wow…” Naruto says softly, looking all around at the vases and paintings my mother made and has up as decorations. As a civilian now, my mother took up art as a way to distract herself when Dad is away on dangerous missions, and also to sell to the village once she got compliments from her friends.

Naruto’s never been here before; we used to hang out at the park where the children go or just walk around the village. We never actually been to the other’s house.

I’m curious about Naruto’s apartment. I know he lives in one of the apartments designated for older orphans. When I was a child, I helped build them with my father. The Leaf is always building more – the village often takes in orphans from other villages and areas too, mostly from random encounters on missions.

The apartments they live in are small, but they have good plumbing and basic electricity. The apartments are adequate for living, but I can’t imagine they are the best places to spend your days. Especially when compared to the size of a clan household in a compound, they make you realize just how small they are.

At least the village treats its orphans right – decent housing, monthly stipends for groceries, access to public services like medical care and library. I’ve heard things from my Dad about other villages and countries – some just toss them into a run-down house practically falling apart at a very young age. They survive, but it’s not a way to live. It makes me happy to know that the Hidden Leaf cares about all its citizens and residents and doesn’t leave anyone out in the cold.

“Shikamaru, your house is very nice! I love the paintings!” Hinata says, excited.

I’ve noticed something with her already – when she’s excited or passionate, she doesn’t stutter. But when she’s placed in a new situation or likes something that Naruto had just done (her crush is already beyond obvious…I wonder how Naruto hasn’t noticed it yet), that’s when she stutters.

“Thanks guys. My mom painted them and made the vases.” I say. I wonder if the Hyugas hang any decorations…

“Shikamaru? Sorry, honey, I was just putting laundry away upstairs. Ahh! You guys must be Shikamaru’s teammates!” Mom says, walking down the stairs and looking at us.

“Yeah! Hello, Mrs. Nara. I’m Naruto Uzumaki!” Naruto says, loudly, and holds out his hand. My mother shakes it and Hinata holds out her hand as well.

“I’m H-Hinata Hy-Hyuga, ma’am.” Hinata stutters. My mother shakes her hand too.

“Nice to meet you both! I’m Yoshino Nara. And you have such great manners – maybe you can teach my lazy son something about them!” Mom says, making me groan. What a drag.

“Well, Mom, we’re going to go cloud watching.” I say and we start walking out toward my back door into the field of the Nara compound.

“Would you like to stay for dinner when it’s done, Hinata and Naruto?” My mother asks them.

“Hell yeah! Sounds great!” Naruto shouts, then covers his mouth quickly.

Damn it, Naruto…
“Heh, S-Sorry, Mrs. Nara…” Naruto trails off, sweat-dropping with his arm behind his neck.

“That’s quite alright, Naruto. It’s okay. And you, Hinata?” My mother smiles and waves him off with a light chuckle. If that was me…

What the hell? Whenever I say anything like that she starts screaming at me to clean my mouth out. What a drag. That’s not fair…

“S-sure, th-thanks.” Hinata stutters. We’re going to help her overcome that – we know it’s because of how her clan treats her. She’s going to show them that they’re wrong about her, that she is a great shinobi and worthy to be the Hyuga heiress.

“Alright, I’ll let you guys know when it’s done. Have fun!” Mom says, and we walk outside onto the grass and lay under my favorite shady tree.

“Thanks again for the delicious meal, Mr. and Mrs. Nara!” Naruto says, waiting for Hinata by the door. It’s pretty late and they have to get going. My Dad came home a few minutes before Mom came out and told us dinner was ready.

“Yeah, thank you both very much.” Hinata says, surprisingly not stuttering.

“You’re very welcome. Any friends or teammates of Shikamaru’s is always welcome here.” Mom says, and I smile. I’m really glad she and Dad like my teammates.

“Bye Hinata, Naruto. See you at training tomorrow!” I say, and they wave at me before getting their shoes and leaving.

“I’m glad you like your teammates, Shikamaru.” My Dad says to me, and I turn to him.

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t I?” I inquire. My Dad pulls out the Shogi set from the cabinet behind him.

“No reason in particular. It’s just that you’ve always spent time with Choji and Ino – there were going to be your teammates up until two days ago when Lord Third changed the team composition. I wasn’t aware you had other close friends.” My Dad says, and we begin our Shogi match when he makes the first move.

“I was only friends with Naruto, mostly. Hinata and I knew each other and were civil, but we weren’t really friends until yesterday. But Hinata was very close with Naruto as well. Kurenai-sensei says it’s because of our friendship with Naruto that we were placed on a team together.” I explain to Dad.

“Also, Shikamaru, I’m very proud of you. Kurenai told me about you guys passing the test.” He says, and I freeze. Did she tell him I’m gay?

“She did?” I hide the nervousness in my voice.

“Yes. I’m happy you didn’t think badly of Naruto for his secret. He’s the reason the village is even still around today. So many people just don’t understand it. I’m proud that you are sticking by your friend.” Dad says, and I inwardly sigh in relief. Then I smile.

“Thanks Dad. I only want what’s best for my friends and my team.” I say, and he hums in response.
before we continue our game in silence.

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**Hinata’s P.O.V.**

“Alright guys, let me explain how our training is going to go. Most days there will be a structure of Physical Training, followed by a lunch break, then Instruction of Jutsu and other skills, and then finally at least one mission. Physical Training will involve increasing stamina, improving chakra control, and increasing pain tolerance. The Instruction half could vary greatly – we will have to take that day by day, student by student. And today we will do our first D-Rank mission. Any questions? Alright, let’s get up.” Kurenai-sensei asks and orders.

Physical Training? I know I’m gonna be the worst here. I always tire so easily when training with my dad and Neji…

I look over to Naruto and Shikamaru. Naruto looks excited to begin training, and Shikamaru just looks bored. At least they don’t look scared like me.

I’m so pathetic…

“I must apologize in advance. My Physical Training regimen tends to be really tough, especially right out of the academy. Don’t get discouraged. That’s the purpose of all this – to train you to get to the level expected.” Kurenai-sensei says and it makes me feel a little better. “To warm-up: Run and race each other around the entire training field three times. There is no prize, but friendly competition always is good for improving. And if you don’t try your best and just slack off,” she pauses and smirks at Shikamaru, “then you will get an extra two laps. Begin!” She shout and snaps her fingers and we all start running.

Naruto takes the lead rather quickly, and Shikamaru and I are running alongside each other. Shikamaru and I look at each other, and I know what he’s thinking – Naruto is too fast for us. It must be because of the nine-tailed fox sealed inside of him; that’s probably why he can make so many shadow clones.

After about a two laps, I start slowing down a lot. Naruto has already finished, and Shikamaru is quite a ways ahead of me now.

*I’m so slow…*

I try to fight back the tears that are coming to my eyes. I’m the weakest member of my team. My family was right. I’ll never be good enough to be the Hyuga clan heiress. My sister is four years younger than me and she’ll be able to beat me soon. I’m not even a match against Neji, and I know he hates me because he’ll never be heir because he’s part of the branch family.

I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry Neji.

I continue to run as I silently sob. I know I’m slowing down even more, being harder to breathe as I cry. Another thing I’m screwing up. I screw up so bad I become a crybaby then I screw up even more.

“Hey, Hinata, are you okay?” I feel a gentle hold on my shoulders and I look up to see Kurenai-
“S-sorry, sensei.” I say while trying to stop crying. “I’m being stupid. I’m not slacking off, honest.” I try to convince her because I’m really not slacking off, and two more laps will just make me feel even more worthless than I already am.

“Don’t worry about that. Why were you crying?” Kurenai-sensei’s voice is soft and caring.

“I-I don’t know…it’s just that…I’m so slow compared to the rest of this team. Naruto was done so long ago, and Shikamaru is almost done. I’m so slow and weak – my family was right and I’ll only drag you all down.” I say, my face toward the ground trying not to cry again.

“Hinata, please don’t say that. It’s only day one of training. That’s why we’re training – to get everyone stronger. Don’t look at it as if you are bad – just see it as how much you can and will improve! I know this mindset your family put in you is hard to break, and that’s something we’re going to work on. It might be even harder than your shinobi training. But we’re in this together Hinata. Now here,” She says and puts her hands on my cheeks and I suddenly feel better. My eyes and nose do not feel like they’ve been crying. “It’s a small genjutsu I came up with to mask the effects of crying. Finish your lap and we’ll take our lunch break, okay?” Kurenai-sensei body-flickers back to where she was near Naruto, and I see Shikamaru just about done with the lap. I take a deep breath and begin running again.

Thank you, Kurenai-sensei…

Naruto’s P.O.V.

We just finished our lunch break. I was going to have a cup of ramen, but a certain sensei of mine says “Ramen can’t be the only thing you eat, Naruto. Here, eat this,” and then gives me a bento full of salad, rice, and dressing. It was actually quite good! (Not that I’ll admit it!)

…I won’t ask Hinata about why she was crying earlier during the warm-up. I’m just happy that Kurenai-sensei was able to help her feel better.

“Allright, team. Today’s instruction will begin with something you all have – elemental affinities. Every person’s chakra has at least one element that the chakra can imitate and manipulate. For example, my elemental affinity is fire,” she says and blows some fire out of her mouth like a baby dragon, “and I want to know your affinities. Most people only have one element, but some people have two, and current Tsuchikage of the Hidden Stone Village is the only known shinobi to have three elemental affinities. We find them out by using these.” She says and pulls out some yellow paper from her pocket. “These are chakra litmus papers – when you feed some chakra into them it tells you your affinity depending on how the paper reacts.” She finishes and hands us each a slice of paper. “Shikamaru, feed some chakra into the paper.” She commands, and I look at the paper in his hands.

“Okay…” Shikamaru trails off and it immediately falls to bits. “Uhh…was that supposed to happen?” He asks, and Kurenai-sensei nods.

“Yes – it means you have an Earth elemental affinity. I know only two Earth-style techniques, but I have some colleagues who use Earth and they should be able to provide me some techniques to teach
you.” Kurenai-sensei says and smiles at Shikamaru, who looks pleased. “Now you, Naruto.” She says to me.

I feed chakra into my paper and it starts to split into two halves and then both halves become soaked and droop.

“Interesting, Naruto. You seem to have two elemental affinities – Water and Wind. Water-style users are not too common in the Land of Fire, and Wind-style users are really rare. The only other Wind user in the village is my partner. I’ll ask him if he has any scrolls of Wind techniques, because I unfortunately am unable to do any Wind manipulation.” Kurenai-sensei tells me and I don’t know why, but I feel special. Both my affinities are uncommon? Hahaha I’m one of a kind! “Your turn, Hinata.”

Hinata holds her paper up and it crinkles inward on itself in the center.

“Very good, Hinata. You have a Lightning elemental affinity. Fire and Lightning are the most common here in the Land of Fire, and I know several Lightning-style jutsu and know many other shinobi that use Lightning.” She says and pauses momentarily.

“No, I am not going to be training any of you in nature transformations yet. They require chakra control way beyond any of your skill levels yet. But I did this as our first thing because one, I wanted to know what they were so I have time to begin finding techniques and/or other shinobi to train you when we do start nature transformations. Two, it is always good to know this kind of stuff about yourself period.” She pauses again.

“Now, let’s learn a very useful technique that also doubles as a chakra-control exercise. Tree walking! Tree walking involves manipulating the chakra in your feet and legs so you are able to walk up any solid surface at any angle, not just trees, but walls and ceilings too. Watch,” Kurenai-sensei starts walking up the tree next to her and it’s freaking amazing!

“I do not expect any of you to master this today. I expect it to take at least a few days. However, I also expect you to train on your own as well, not just when we meet up. You have to have discipline to practice yourselves to make sure you don’t lose anything. Chakra control is like a muscle – if you stop working it out it will atrophy. You need to be motivated to continue working on everything you learn.

“And I have one last thing to say before you guys start practicing this technique. Hinata, I ask you to refrain from using your Byakugan during these training sessions unless one, I specifically tell you to use it, or two, if you suspect there is some sort of enemy or presence that isn’t supposed to be here – I’d rather you turn it on and be wrong than to have any of us get hurt from an enemy I couldn’t detect. I trust you to be honest with this request. I ask you to not use it because I want you to try learning these techniques without seeing the chakra manipulation; I want you to figure it out for yourself. Understood?” Kurenai-sensei explains to Hinata.

“Y-yes, ma’am!” Hinata says, nodding.

“Alright. I will be watching you guys practice. After an hour and a half you will explain to me what you have learned, what you are feeling in your feet, and then we will go on our first mission. Good luck!” Kurenai-sensei tells us.

“Okay, Shikamaru. Demonstrate to me what you have learned and explain it to me.” Kurenai-sensei
“Ugh...Okay, this is all I got.” Shikamaru grumbles and takes a step up the tree and he gets his second foot on the trunk before falling on his back. “What I’m feeling as I do this is the gravity constantly pulling me down. I’m trying to channel enough chakra in my feet to counteract it but it’s not enough so far.” Shikamaru says.

That’s what he’s feeling? I guess I’m doing it wrong. He is the genius after all. I mean, in my feet-

“Naruto. Your turn.” Kurenai calls me up.

I head to the tree. I place my foot onto the trunk, and I know I’m feeling a swirl of chakra in my foot. It’s not meshing with the trunk.

“This is all I can do sensei. In my foot, there’s like a whirlpool of chakra. The trunk of the tree just isn’t mixing with it. I’m somewhat able to get it like the tree,” I demonstrate by trying to kick the tree and my foot staying attached a bit before coming off, “but not yet. But I’m probably overthinking this.” I finish up and take my foot off the tree.

“Alright. Hinata, you’re up. I saved you for last because you probably have the most experience with chakra manipulation based on your family’s jutsu.” Kurenai calls our last teammate up.

She takes a deep breath before starting. “Okay, umm, I can do, um, this.” She says hesitantly before stepping onto the tree and holding herself there for only a few seconds before audibly straining and letting herself down. “What I felt was, um, pretty much what Naruto said. My chakra and the tree’s aren’t mixing properly, and I have to mold my chakra in a way to fit with the tree’s, like a jigsaw puzzle.” Hinata explains before sitting back down.

She…felt what I felt?

“Okay, team. The reason for this is because I’m not just letting you swim blindly. Yes – I threw you in with no direction, but these talks let you guys discuss your ideas before just giving you the answer. Now, Naruto and Hinata were spot-on. Surface-walking is all one big jigsaw puzzle with chakra – you need to be able to control your chakra enough to mold it so it can meld with another surface. What Shikamaru says is not wrong – gravity is naturally opposing you, but when the chakra melds it’s like you become part of the thing you are walking on, in this case a tree is stationed on the floor so gravity passes through you.

“Shikamaru, it seems to me you may be lacking in your own chakra awareness. Did you feel that in your feet and neglect to mention it or just not feel it at all?” She asks.

“I didn’t feel it, sensei.” He admits, looking bored but still paying attention.

“I see. I would like you to ask your parents tonight on exercises you can do to improve this. You will need to work on this at home. But don’t be discouraged. Many students have this issue – I did when I was younger as well. Again, don’t be discouraged.” Kurenai finishes.

“Yes, sensei.” Shikamaru says and nods at her.

“Alright. Let’s finish this day off with our first D-Rank mission. Let’s all head to the missions office.”
“Ahh, Team 8. Here for a mission?” Old Man Hokage says, smiling at us.

“Yes, Lord Hokage. Is there anything for us?” She asks, respectfully.

“As a matter of fact, one just came in that I think would be perfect for your team. Team 8, this is your mission: the refrigerator at the Konoha Orphanage broke last night and all the food has rotten. There is a repairman there right now, but nobody is able to go shopping for new food as two caretakers got food-poisoning this morning when they had an early breakfast. Your job will be to buy the groceries on this list. You will bring this paper to the market and they will credit the bill to the Orphanage. Any questions?”

“No, sir!” I hear my teammates say. I am looking at the ground slightly.

I haven’t been to the Orphanage in a few years. I…don’t like thinking about that place much. The place was very nice – provided good food, places to sleep, and everything a child needs. But I don’t like remembering myself so young, without a family.

I did have a best friend though. Heba Santiro. When I was only about six or seven though he got adopted. I was of course so happy for him – just because I wasn’t doesn’t mean I didn’t want him to be. But I haven’t seen him since we hugged goodbye when he was taken to live with his new parents. I don’t even know if he still lives in the Leaf. But when Iruka-sensei told Takeshi Sato his teammates and a Heba was mentioned, I don’t know, I guess I didn’t want it to be him because I didn’t have any friends for so long since he left, and I didn’t want to remember it.

But now we’re heading back to the orphanage after we buy some food. I want to help the kids though, no matter how uncomfortable I may be. The children there are the priority.

“Ah, thank you so much! Here, bring the groceries over here!” The caretaker says. I don’t recognize her – she must have started working there after I left.

“Kala, can you come out here? Some nice ninja have brought our groceries!” My heart thumps in my chest as one of the nicest women I have ever met comes out.

“Thank you guys so – Naruto?” She recognizes me instantly and comes and hugs me, causing me to blush in front of my teammates. “I’m so glad to see you’re doing well, Naruto. Thank you all for bringing the groceries. The children were getting hungry. The repairman just left, so the food will not spoil. Where is the mission slip?” Kala asks, and Kurenai-sensei hands it over.

“The receipt is in one of the bags. We’re happy to help the children.” She says, and Kala signs the paper and hands it back to Kurenai-sensei.

“Well, we have to report back to the Hokage now. Let’s go team.” We turn and in the corner of my eye I see some blue out of the corner of my eye and I gasp.

“Wait…Kala, is…is that little Takato?” I ask, staring at the laughing and walking toddler. There’s no way I would forget a baby with blue colored hair.

“Yes, Naruto. He’s doing so much better now. It was touch-and-go for a few months, but he’s healthy now.” She smiles at me. I smile and nod at her, and my team leaves the Orphanage on our way back to the missions office.

“Naruto…?” Shikamaru asks after we exit.
“You guys know how I grew up here. A few days before I aged out and moved into my apartment now, there was a sick baby under care here. There was nothing the hospital could do for him, something with his immune system. Takato…there wasn’t much hope of him surviving. I cried thinking about him after I left, because I didn’t want such an innocent baby to die. But seeing him alive and healthy now, just makes me really happy.” I explain to my team and Kurenai-sensei puts an arm around me.

“We’re glad you had and all these children do have somewhere to stay that takes care of them. Let’s all report this mission successful and collect our first mission payment. Do you all have bank accounts?” Kurenai-sensei asks, and I do – it’s how I get my monthly stipend through being an orphan. Shikamaru and Hinata do as well. “Awesome, let’s go then.” Kurenai-sensei says and we all go to turn in the mission report.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: First of all, I have very strict opinions about Sasuke. I *hate* the canon Sasuke – I’m going to make him someone I actually like here. I have quite a bit of his character plot already mapped out because of how I want to make him. Right now, I’m trying to give him more of a Part I personality with actual emotions too – because to me, he isn’t a brick wall inside like everyone writes him in fanfics.

Concerning the rest of the story, again, no general direction. However, in trying to get to more interesting plot than a day-by-day thing, I think I will start doing small time-skips. Like a week or so just to get to something more interesting than training. Because training has to be done before real missions (C-ranks…and NO, this team will NOT be going to Wave. I HATE reading the Wave mission in so many stories. I have some C-ranks planned out already, too.).

(Sorry for being horrible at Hinata’s P.O.V. – I suck at writing from girl’s point of views, especially shy and timid girls).

So, with this chapter, what did you guys think? I hope you enjoyed the new backstory with Naruto, especially with relating back to Heba from chapter 1. In this story, the Orphanage was his home for his childhood – I want to explore some of that here. Same with Sasuke. Just tell me what you all think!

Also, don’t forget to review!

NOTE: This has previously been posted to my FFN account. All future updates will be posted to here and there simultaneously.
The First C-Rank Mission

Chapter Summary

Two months later, Team 7 and Team 8 have bonded and each team goes on their first C-Rank mission.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well this took forever. As of this update, I have finished my Bachelor of Arts degree and am free for a while to do things! Hope you guys like this update.

And see final A/N for more info about this fic and whatnot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

“Sasuke…!” Sakura says, scooting closer to me again making me inwardly cringe.

“Bye, Sakura.” I quickly say and start walking away in the same direction of Shino, but only faster as to get away from the pink nuisance.

Ugh. I can still smell that awful perfume. I hope it’s not in my clothes. Fuck.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 5)-The First C-Rank Mission

Two Months Later

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

One hour. We’ve already been sitting here for one hour and no sign of Kakashi. He is always late, but we know he is somewhere observing us. He told us so that first day – we will follow is orders and that’s that.

Luckily Sakura isn’t all over me anymore. She has physically backed off of me after two weeks of being a team. She is still sitting next to me on the right, while Shino is on the left.

“Sasuke, Shino?” Sakura asks, breaking the silence. We both turn to her. “Do…do you guys think I’m getting stronger?” She asks, and I have to admit I am surprised. This is the first time she has shown us an interest in getting stronger.

“Yes.” I say. She turns her head painfully fast to me and looks…stunned.

…Is it that odd of me to say such a thing to my teammate? Have I really not shown them any praise?

“Absolutely, Sakura. I can tell you’re lasting a lot longer in spars against us, and we’re getting stronger as well.” Shino says, and I know I have to add something too.
“And you have the best chakra control of any of us. Your chakra reserves at first were...small, but as Shino said your endurance and thus your chakra reserves as well have grown.” I say, and I see Sakura smile.

That...pleases me. I don’t want my teammates to be sad.

“And your Taijutsu has improved a lot too, especially against me. I know my Taijutsu is weaker due to my insects, and that’s something I need to work on specifically. You’ve improved a lot Sakura. We all have.” Shino says and I nod at Sakura and Shino individually.

“Finally you all show some goddamn teamwork. It only took two months.” We hear suddenly and immediately get in battle stances and then relax as we see Kakashi smiling at us under his mask. “You guys remember what I said the first day?” He asks us.

“Those who abandon the mission are scum...” Shino starts.

“Those who abandon their friends...” Sakura continues and I cut her off.

“...are worse than scum.” I finish, feeling ashamed.

If I had been asked at the start if these people would ever be my friends, I would have thought they were crazier than...him...but now?

They are my friends. We have trained together, eaten together, joked around with each other, and even told each other some secrets.

Shino confessed to us that he often feels invisible...that he doesn’t think anybody notices him or remembers him. We all know of Naruto’s goal to get acknowledgement from the village by becoming Hokage (he’s said it plenty of times throughout the years in the academy). Shino said he doesn’t want to be invisible.

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Flashback

“Hey...guys?” Shino calls for our attention just as we are about to leave. Sakura and I turn around, and see that he is still sitting.

“Yeah?” I say, motioning for Sakura to sit down with me in front of him.

“This has been on my mind for...a while. I’m...not that good about talking about this kind of stuff. You two are my best friends. Just...do you guys...hmm.” He pauses for a second. “Did you guys notice me when we were in the academy?” He asks, and I’m a bit confused by his question.

“What do you mean, Shino?” Sakura asks.

“Well, remember the day of our genin test? Kakashi-sensei said my academy reports described me as ‘reclusive’ and that I rarely talked. That...that wasn’t really by choice. Nobody ever wanted to talk to me. Nobody...noticed me. I felt invisible.” He admits, head down despite is not able to see his eyes through those glasses.

“I always thought you were strong. To me, you were always the one to beat in our class. If I were to be top of the class, then Shino was always the one to beat.” I say, and he turns his head and I can tell he’s looking me in the eyes.
“I always thought of you as a strong student too. I’ll admit that back then, I was...a bit too focused on not the right things...” Sakura says glancing over to me. Thank freaking God her obsession with me is pretty much gone now. “But I knew you, Shino. There are plenty of people who were in our class that I can’t remember. But you, even if we weren’t on the same team, I couldn’t forget.” She finishes, and Shino looks at her too.

“Thanks guys. I just don’t want people to ignore me because they think I’m shy or ‘reclusive.’ I like being with you two. So...just thanks for talking to me right now about this.” He says and Sakura goes over to him and kneels and hugs him.

I can see his cheeks turn a bit red as he returns the hug...

When they get up off the training field’s grass, I go over to Shino and put my arm around his shoulders. He nods at me, “thanks.” he says.

We all say our goodbyes and head home for the night.

I’ve always noticed Shino. He was the second-best in the academy, right after me. I’ve always acknowledged what he can do – after all, he comes from one of the village’s noble clans. When he confessed, I had to tell him the truth. He was always the one to beat. Shino is no slouch. He is a scary shinobi now that we know more about his insects. He never shows them in the Academy and he was the one to beat.

Now? With the insects...he is scary and I am glad he is on my team and is an ally. I would not want to ever go up against Shino ir any other Aburame.

...And he’s also a good friend. I’m glad he’s on my team because he’s a good person too.

Sakura...I’m glad she’s taking this thing seriously. I told her that she’s been getting stronger – and she has. I wouldn’t lie to my team. Though I should have realized much sooner that she has been taking this seriously.

Flashback

“Tree-walking. That’s what we’re starting today. Watch.” Kakashi-sensei says, showing up late by an hour. We watch him as he walks up a tree like he hasn’t done anything at all.

“Now do it.” He says, pulling out that fucking orange porn book, and pretends to not pay attention to us.

Each of us stands in front of our own tree and I immediately start running up it...and then falling flat on my face.

“Haha...” I hear a light chuckle from our dear sensei, and smoke comes out my nose before I get back up. Shino is just trying to get his feet stuck to the trunk, and Sakura already has a foot stuck and is placing her second foot on the trunk.

Wow...I must admit that that’s pretty good.
“Impressive, Sakura. Okay boys, listen up: Chakra control. That what you two lack. Yes, it’s a bit easier for Sakura as she has smaller reserves than you two – which, by the way is nothing to be ashamed of as it is growing – but she still is able to control it much better than you guys can. With the amount of chakra you have you need to do those control exercises even more. So, Sakura, keep working on the tree walking. Shino and Sasuke, do those control exercises for a bit and then try again.” Kakashi-sensei says, in one of his semi-rare teaching moments.

“Sakura, after we do our exercises would you mind giving us some tips?” I hear Shino ask her, and I see her blush and lose her balance form the tree before regaining it.

“Sure! I’d be happy to help!” She says, obviously excited. I nod at her along with Shino, expressing my gratitude.

She really has been working hard. The first week or so, she was just another fan-girl. After that though she just started working hard. I’m not sure what made her change, but whatever it was it was a very good thing for all of us.

“I know how you guys have gone out and stuff together like a team, but I’ve been waiting for Sasuke to show some teamwork. You all have in little ways sown teamwork before now except for him. Sakura, you asked for Shino’s opinion on where to eat. Shino, you brought lunches for the team a few times. Sasuke…you finally showed teamwork by telling Sakura she has improved, which by the way you all have.” Kakashi explains that I was the final person that had to show real teamwork.

I need to tell my team something right now.

“If…I’m sorry if I have seemed, well…like a jerk. I honestly didn’t mean to put anyone down if I have done that. If…I’m doing it again, please just tell me. I don’t want to be worse than scum.” I say, embarrassed.

“I never felt like that, Sasuke. Maybe the first few days, but I didn’t understand then that I was being very annoying. For that I apologize, too.” Sakura says, and I nod to her. “And Shino, I still regret what I said about your insects that first day too. I was stupid. I think about that day all the time and I feel bad knowing I probably really hurt your feelings.” Sakura says to Shino.

“Sakura, I’ll admit that I was hurt, but I know you have no problem now. I can appreciate the fact it was shocking and things take time to adjust to. All I ask is you not feel guilty anymore. I know you wouldn’t try to hurt me on purpose, okay? And Sasuke, I have always found you to be a reliable teammate. Personally, I never got the impression of you putting us down. You are anything but scum.” Shino says to us.

“Finally. Now, groan all you want, but this is an order. Group hug!” Kakashi says, smiling wide under his mask, and holding his arms out. I swallow and take a deep breath and…can’t help the larger smile that comes to my face as the three of us are squeezed together in our sensei’s arms.

“Kakashi-sensei…let’s not do that again.” Sakura says, blushing. The four of us laugh for a few seconds and the air is clear between us. I make a silent promise to myself to be a better teammate. They say I’ve been good but I know I can do a lot better.

“Okay team, now that our teamwork is shining through, I feel like we should go attempt our first C-rank mission. We have completed the requisite number of D-ranks two weeks ago, and I’ve been waiting to ask you guys until what just happened had happened. Well?” Kakashi asks us.
“A mission where we don’t have to catch that damn cat? YES.” I say, immediately.

“I think we are ready to do this.” Shino says.

“Yeah!” Sakura shouts, and Kakashi waves us to follow him to the missions office.

“Ahh, Team 7. We haven’t seen you here for a few days. Another mission?” Lord Hokage the Third greets us with a smile and a suck on his pipe, despite the fact it isn’t smoking.

“Yes, Lord Third. But we would like to request a C-rank mission. I deem my team ready for the responsibility.” Kakashi says, and I see the Hokage smile.

“A team’s first C-rank is always a momentous occasion. It’s usually their first time out of the village. I think I have a good one here. Your mission would be to escort a man, Tazuna, from here to his home in the Land of Waves where he will continue to build a bridge that will be used for commerce. You are expected to protect him until the bridge is complete. There is no expected shinobi presence, but protection is required from enemies of the Land of Waves who want to ruin the country for their own economic prosperity. Understood?” Lord Hokage explains to us, handing Kakashi the full briefing in a scroll.

‘Yes, sir!’” All four of us say.

“Then good luck.” Lord Hokage gives us a farewell nod as another team steps forward for a mission.

As we walk out of the office, Kakashi starts to talk.

“We will meet our client and depart with him tomorrow morning. Make sure to pack supplies for at least a week. Also, I won’t be telling you what to pack. I am trying to encourage self-learning as I supervise, and you have to learn what you personally need on a mission that the rest of us might not need. There are the essentials of course. But one thing I will say is this: whatever you feel is most important, it is good to pack extra for your teammates in case they need it. And with that I’ll leave you to it. We’ll meet at the Konoha main gates tomorrow at 8:00 AM sharp. So long.” Kakashi says as he body-flickers away in a whirlwind, and the three of us are left alone.

“…Wanna have and early lunch together?” I ask, trying to be a better teammate and inviting them out rather than just being invited.

“Sure!” “That sounds nice.” Sakura and Shino say. Shino suggests the ramen shop that Naruto was always obsessing over, and we agree on that place.

Lunch with my team is nice.

I arrive at the village gates at 7:55 AM, later than I usually show up for things. Because we’re going to be gone for a while, I decided to let myself sleep in a little more and have a calm, warm meal at Ichiraku’s (I’ll give it to Naruto and Shino – they know good ramen places) at this relatively cold morning. Shino and Sakura are already there, talking.

“Good morning, Sasuke.” Sakura tells me with a small wave.
“Good morning.” Shino says too with a nod.

“Good morning.” I respond to them, a nod to each of them. I sit down on the floor facing them, like a small triangle.

Five minutes pass and we see Kakashi walking toward us next to a man holding a large bottle of booze. Great. Our mission is with a fucking drunk?

“These are the ninja that are supposed to be protecting me? What a joke. Kids.” The old man spits and glares at us.

Bite your tongue, Sasuke.

“I give you my word, Tazuna, that these shinobi are ready for the mission you gave us. Sasuke and Sakura were the top boy and girl of their class, and Shino has great tracking skills that complement our assault team.” Kakashi defends us to the man, pointing at each of us as he mentions our names.

“Whatever. As long as I live I don’t care one way or another.” He says flatly. “Are we gonna go or not? I need to build this bridge as soon as I can.” He badgers us, though I may even call it whining.

Without words, Kakashi tilts his head towards the gate. We sign out to the guards, whose names we learn are Kotetsu and Izumo, and we begin our mission to the Land of Waves.

Outside of the nice air of the village, we quickly learn how much this guy stinks of booze. In the village there are tea shops and restaurants (and I ate ramen just before meeting my team), so I couldn’t tell until now. Sakura and Shino and I are lagging behind (we don’t need to talk to know the reason why) as Kakashi talks to Tazuna, who also never told us his name – only the Hokage did yesterday. I hope Kakashi’s mask can stop that horrid smell from getting to him.

As we walk, it starts to get a lot warmer. The sky is clear, and it’s nice. I’ve never been outside the village before, and it seems like it would be nice to travel and-

“GET DOWN!” Kakashi screams and I follow by instinct. My team follows suit and we look and see a huge chain wrap around him before he is crushed and only blood pools where he was.

“KAKASHI-SENSEI!” Sakura screams and I immediately get up and stand in front of my teammates to defend them. I see two fully-covered men with no headband. I make the hand signs for a jutsu.

“Fire style: Great Fireball Jutsu!” I scream as I unleash a huge ball of flaming chakra at them. They dodge it and I don’t let up. “Fire style: Flame Jet!” I blow flames in a 180 degree field, tracking them as they move.

“Sakura, protect Tazuna!” Shino shouts as he lets his kikaichu

Shino’s bugs surround the men but they are quickly replaced by logs. Another fucking substitution… what a cheap jutsu.

“AHHH!” Sakura screams and I turn around and feel rage building up because I see a huge spike through Sakura’s hand – she caught it to protect Tazuna’s face. Blood is dripping down her hand and suddenly the man is kicked down by Kakashi-sensei.

“Sensei!” Sakura gasps out, and I can vividly see and hear the man’s neck twist as Kakashi kills him.

“Now you. You dare hurt my students. Get ready to join your brother.” Kakashi says with so much
killing intent I freeze – the next instant the second man is lying dead next to his brother.

“Sasuke…your eyes…” Sakura, whose arm is still bleeding, says to me. I look at sensei’s headband and see the familiar red eyes I see every night in my nightmares…my sharingan. I blink and they are back to being their normal black.

“Come on guys, let’s get Sakura back to Konoha and get her to the hospital. Those blades were poisoned. Tazuna – you have a lot of explaining to do.” Kakashi says, getting out a med-kit to help Sakura’s wound until we get back home.

Shino and I run right next to Sakura all the way home, our hands around her hips. We will not let her get hurt again.

Naruto’s P.O.V.

“Okay team, before we start today, I want to say a few things. The past two months have been great. Everyone has improved a lot already. Shikamaru, you especially have caught up to the rest of your team with your chakra awareness. And you have all mastered tree-walking, and Hinata has almost mastered water-walking as well. Everyone’s speed and stamina have improved by at least double where they started. I know I’ve been tough, and I am extremely proud of you all. And that is why I want to ask you guys how you feel about taking your first C-rank mission.” Kurenai-sensei tells us.

“Really, sensei?” Hinata asks neutrally. I don’t know if she realized it herself yet, but her stuttering is practically gone, at least with all of us and to our mission clients around the village. And she doesn’t sound scared like she would have at the beginning due to a lack of self-confidence. I’m so happy for her that she’s doing better in everything since training has begun. Last week, actually, Hinata told us that her father had praised her endurance while training with him and her sister Hanabi.

Flashback

“Hinata! It’s so great to see that smile on your face. Did something good happen?” Kurenai-sensei asks her, causing Shikamaru and me to turn to her. I knew Hinata looked a bit happier today…I really should say so when I see stuff like that.

But if I do…Hinata always looks like she’s about to faint when I say stuff like that! I don’t get it!

“Yes, actually.” She says without a stutter. Her voice is amazing when she is so confident… “I was just thinking about what happened in training last night with my father and Hanabi. I was able to get few hits in on my sister and I was able to dodge all but one of hers. This has been happening more every few days. My father told me he noticed how my stamina and speed have improved and he said he was proud!” Hinata beams!

“Damn right he should be proud! You’re amazing Hinata!” I shout at her, and there she goes with those blushing cheeks. Why does this happen when I talk to her???

“That’s really great, Hinata. And that was only after two months of training. With the rate of improvement we are at right now, we will show your clan wrong. You are worthy of clan heiress.” Shikamaru says to Hinata, who nods in his direction, eyes glancing over to me again…
“Shikamaru and Naruto are correct, Hinata. Remember what I said at the beginning. This will take some time and will be difficult, but you’re already doing it. We’re all so proud of you, Hinata. I’m proud of everyone on this team!” Kurenai-sensei says to us.

I go over to in between where Shikamaru and Hinata are sitting and pull them into a hug, Shikamaru gasping and Hinata eyes wide. They both hug me back and after a few seconds we separate and begin our training and mission for the day.

When she told us…I have never seen her so happy before. Not even when we became a team and passed Kurenai-sensei’s secondary test when we all worked together well. Hinata was on a whole new level of happiness – and that was just a retelling of the story! The fact that she would have been even happier when it actually happened really warms my heart because she is my teammate and she deserves the best.

“Yes. We have completed the minimum number of D-ranks necessary a week and a half ago. But I’m not going to have us request one unless all of us feel ready, so that’s why I’m asking you if you all feel ready. Remember, C-ranks take place out of the village and usually last at least a week long. It’s unlikely, but we may face some ninja that could hurt or even kill us. I will always do whatever I can to protect you, but you have to be aware of the risks.” Kurenai-sensei says and is quiet for a moment, and I look at my team. I already trust them with my life, and I am ready to put mine on the line for theirs any day.

“I feel ready, sensei.” Shikamaru says, surprising me actually that he spoke up first.

Shikamaru has changed too. I wouldn’t say he’s less lazy…because he isn’t. But he is more determined. He still doesn’t like to put in more effort than what is minimal, but he at least is starting to care about things. After Hinata told us her story, he decided to share with us an update to his clean head issue that he told us as his secret the first day we were a team. He decided that it won’t matter once he’s clan head.

Flashback

“Hey guys!” Shikamaru comes running up to us, obviously excited as he is running without being ordered to.

“What’s going on, Shika?” Hinata asks. ‘Shika’ has become a nickname for him, and the first time he was called it (by me!) he blushed and we all laughed.

“I was up a little late reading some recent journals because I read something in a book a few days ago. I have a possible solution to my clan head issue!” He says, and we all light up.

“That’s amazing, dude!” I say, squeezing his shoulder.

“What is it?” Kurenai-sensei asks of him.

“Yeah, well it’s something called ‘artificial insemination’ where a woman can become pregnant on her own. I read it’s been done recently in Konoha and in other villages as well. It was in a medical journal and was lost on me, but it doesn’t matter. It’s a solution!” He says happily, and Hinata quickly hugs him.
“We’re so happy for you, Shika!” Hinata says and I join in the hug too. I love hugging my teammates!

“So, I’ve been looking at my dad’s clan records. Nara births have been surging – the birth rate is 1.5x what it was before, with the death rate dropping a bit. If this trend continues, and it’s only been going up, there should be enough Nara by the time I take the head-role where it shouldn’t even matter if I had a kid or not. I could always name someone else head after me if I wanted – who cares then, right? I don’t know if I want kids or not, but at least I have my options open now.” Shikamaru explains to us.

“That’s a fair argument, Shikamaru. It takes a lot of foresight to look into statistics like that. I’m proud.” Kurenai-sensei says and Shika blush-smiles and Hinata and I hug him once again.

This was his logic – the Nara clan has been increasing in size the past two generations – he has many new relatives being born. And I agree that it’s a good way to think about it. He can be clan head, know the jutsu, and then just have it be like that.

He doesn’t need a kid with all the Nara out there, and he said if he ever did want one there’s a whole medical thing with women volunteering to be pregnant or something. I don’t really understand it but Kurenai-sensei confirmed what he said as being an option too!

So, screw it! I’m glad he’s deciding to be happy in the future instead of just going with the ‘easiest’ route. Just like with Hinata, he is my teammate and he deserves the best. They all do, Kurenai-sensei too.

And, though it is really hard for me to believe sometimes because of how I was treated in the past, I genuinely believe that my team believes the same of me too. That I deserve the best. We all do.

“Me too, sensei.” Hinata says, confident. I can’t hide the smile when I hear that.

“I’m ready too.” I say, feeling a rush of pride at being a ninja of the Leaf.

“I’m glad. So this is what we’ll do today. No training. We’ll head over to the missions office right now and see what the Hokage has for us, and then we’ll prepare for the mission.” Kurenai-sensei says and she leads us to the office.

“Team 8, welcome back. Here for a mission?” Old Man Hokage greets us with that smile as we walk in the office.

“Yes, my lord. We would like a C-rank mission. I have deemed my team ready for their first.” Kurenai-sensei says.

“Is that so? Team 7 led by Kakashi just came back from a mission they accepted yesterday. Someone was injured. It turns out the client lied about the level – it was actually at least A rank after Kakashi forced the client back here and explain to me directly why he had lied. Remember this, young genin: always be alert and never think a mission will be ‘easy.’ Team 7 could very well have been killed if Jounin Hatake had not learned the true nature early on. That client came from the Land of the
Waves, a small nation we haven’t had much prior dealings with and we were trying to make an alliance. Because of the lie, all C-ranks to a relatively new land will require at least Chuunin level for all members.

“With that, Team 8, your mission will take place in the Land of Salt. We’ve had great relations with them the past few years, and lately they’ve become the head exporters of a certain commodity and their caravans have been getting attacked by bandits. There is no evidence of shinobi activity, and your mission is to protect the largest caravan from the nation’s border to the Land of Fire to the border of the Land of Wood. Any questions?” The Old Man asks us. None of us say anything – it does seem pretty straightforward.

I wonder who on Team 7 got hurt. That was Sasuke, Sakura, and (I think) Shino’s team, right? I hope they’re all okay…

“Alright then. Good luck.” He smiles at us before we leave the office. Once we’re outside, Kurenai-sensei hands us each a small piece of paper that looks like it has some sort of list written on it.

“These are a general list of supplies you all should have with you when you go on a mission outside of the village. There are obvious ones; weapons, water, food, and tents. But ones that I’ve seen many genin forget for their first time are things you would take for granted – blankets, trash bags or a good substitute, soap, among others. You have to remember to take care of yourselves – hygiene especially. We won’t have the luxury of plumbing. We have ravines. And if you were wondering, Chuunin and Jounin are able to carry much more things by way of sealing scrolls. Tomorrow morning, we will set out. But before we do, I would like to inspect all of your packs to make sure you all have what you need. This will be the only time I will be doing this. One more thing, remember to pack some extra just in case your teammates or a client or whatever needs something.” Kurenai-sensei explains.

After we all say our goodbyes, we head to our homes to start packing for our mission.

“Alright, I think it’s time we set down for the night. It’s going to be dark soon and we need to set up traps. Shikamaru, you and I will set them up tonight. I will show you guys individually how to set up traps. In future missions, I will observe as you set them up yourselves. Let’s go Shika.” Kurenai says, and Shikamaru groans slightly as he gets up to follow Kurenai-sensei.

“What a drag…” Shika whines before leaving with her. Hinata and I are left alone to set up our tents as well as Shikamaru’s.

After a few minutes…ugh this is embarrassing…

“Ummmm…Hinata?” I ask, knowing I am blushing.

“Y-yes, N-Naruto?” She stutters. Why is she like this when she talks to me?

“I…um…need help with the tent…” I trail off, admitting that I’m an idiot who can’t even put up a tent.

“You haven’t done this before, have you? I needed help my first time a few years ago. My father taught me when I started the academy.” Hinata says happily, stuttering suddenly gone.

When she is confident in her skills, she doesn’t stutter!
“Haha yeah it’s my first time. Thanks Hinata!” I respond, no longer feeling stupid. If someone as smart as Hinata had trouble too, I shouldn’t feel bad (though I doubt Shikamaru ever had any trouble as he’s a freaking genius…).

After setting up our tents, I go through my bag again to be aware of what I will be taking with me on future missions. I get to a ramen carton and remember something.

“Hinata, Kurenai-sensei never told us how to cook it!” I say to her and I can see the shock in her face.

“We’ll ask her when she gets back!” Hinata says, and I nod at her. That is an outrage!

“Kurenai-sensei, I just remembered earlier today as I was finishing my packing before we left, but two months ago you promised to explain something to us. So tell us – how do we prepare this without enemies noticing us?” I ask her, holding up a carton of delicious instant ramen.

“That’s…unlike me. How could I forget?” She asks, smirking and tilting her head up at the sky to nobody to deliver a playful message… “Anyway, the day I was supposed to,” she says as she looks up at the sky again, “was the day I introduced elemental chakra. Basically, you put the ramen in some water and you use fire-style jutsu to heat up the water and cook the ramen. It’s that simple.” She says and grabs a pan of water we have and one of my ramen cups and dumps it in and in moments the smell of cooked ramen hits us.

We all take out our food supplies (and though it’s small, I split the ramen carton four-ways so it’s fair) and we begin cooking the actual food when Kurenai speaks to us.

So, have you guys ever been out of the village before?” She asks, making conversation as our food cooks, with her fire-style jutsu.’

“I have not, sensei.” Shika says, staring at the food. He looks very hungry!

“I assume I’m not from the village but I can’t remember being out of it before.” I say, honestly. I don’t know where I’m from. And since Kurenai-sensei told me both my elemental affinities are uncommon in the Land of Fire, I’ve concluded that I’m not from here at all.

The Leaf Village is and always will be my home. But one day…I just hope I get to learn more about myself. Who were my parents? Where am I from? Who am I? I am Naruto Uzumaki, but there is so much about me that I do not know.

“Have you ever been outside the village before, Hinata?” I ask her to break the silence. She hasn’t said anything since I answered the question. She suddenly looks very sad and I instantly regret it. “F-forget I asked, Hinata. I didn’t-” She cuts me off.

“It-it’s okay, Naruto. Sensei. I guess…I guess that I can’t hide it from my team forever. I have been out the village, once. It was about seven years ago, when I was six years old. I was kidnapped and held hostage. The shinobi who took me did it out of revenge because my father killed one of them, and they wanted my father’s head in exchange for me.” She explains, trying and successfully holding back tears.

I don’t feel it’s wrong to be able to admit to myself that I am proud of her for being able to hold those tears back. If that was me I don’t think I could.
I feel my eyes watering right now, even…

“W-what happened?” Shikamaru asks, looking horrified. I am afraid to know as well. I know her father is still alive, but that’s all I know about her clan pretty much except for her sister’s name and her cousin’s name and the weird seal thing on the ‘branch’ family members that Hinata wants to abolish when she is clan head. She told us that that is the one thing she needs to do before she dies. The one thing she needs to do as a shinobi.

“My uncle Hizashi, was my father’s twin brother. He was killed instead and his head was given because they couldn’t tell the difference, and the caged bird seal locked his Byakugan. I was returned, and my cousin Neji, Hizashi’s son, has been the way he is now since. It destroyed him and he hates me so much.” Hinata finishes, wiping her left eye of one lone tear. “Neji and I used to be so close. I know it’s not my fault…but he’s in so much pain and I was kidnapped that I still feel like it is my fault.” She finishes, wiping her eyes once more before re-gaining her composure.

“I’m so sorry, Hinata. That…it’s all so wrong. Bad things happen to so many good people. You, Kurenai-sensei, Naruto…why you guys? You guys all have had things that drive you…Naruto needs to prove to the world who he is and that he is not a demon. Kurenai-sensei is trying to teach teamwork and trust to prevent what she experiences as a chuunin from happening again. Hinata is trying to change her clan…no, she’s trying to save her clan. But me…what am I doing?” Shikamaru speak out, in a tone of voice I have never heard from him before.

“Shikamaru, do you feel guilty that you haven’t had something go wrong?” Kurenai-sensei asks suddenly, and I look to Shimamaru’s face.

“…Yes.” He breathes out, and I can tell now that he’s fighting back tears.

He cares about us so much that he’s about to cry because of the pain we have…

“Don’t. Be thankful. It’s not selfish to be thankful for you to not have experienced pain. Pain is everywhere, Shikamaru. As shinobi, we cannot take life for granted. Everyone, listen to me.” Kurenai says and pauses for a second. “If something good happens to us, we need to appreciate it. We could die any die on any mission – our friends and loved ones could die on missions. We could get sick. And yes, we will all experience pain, and only more in life. But we can’t let it destroy us.” Kurenai-sensei finishes.

“All I know is that…if I have any say in it, I will not let you guys get hurt again. These past two months…you guys really are part of my family. I love you all.” Shikamaru says, rubbing his arms in a comforting gesture I have done to myself in the past.

“I love you guys too. I’ve never had a family before. And that first day when sensei called us all a family…it was a scary and amazing feeling. And every day since you guys have become that much closer to me. We are a family, pain and all.” I say, wiping my eyes from the tears that have since escaped from my eyes and are falling down my face.

“Okay, guys. Group-hug, and then we eat and then we decide on who’s on first look-out for the night. Tomorrow we’ll be at the border between the countries and we’ll meet up with the caravan and begin the escort.” Kurenai-sensei says before standing up and holding her arms open.

The three of us do what we know to do already (we’ve had many group hugs the past two months…) and we all squeeze tighter than we usually do.

That squeeze signifies our love for each other and our promises to each other to keep us safe from even more pain.
“Hello, we’re the Shinobi from Konoha assigned to protect this caravan.” Kurenai-sensei says with such a professional tone we haven’t yet heard from her – in all the D-ranks we’ve done she’s never talked like this.

It just reinforces the fact that when outside the village, things are serious.

“Thank you for coming. My name is Hosan and I am the leader of this group. We are traders of goods made in our home country, and they are quite high-quality and we have attracted bad attention from other countries and people. This is our final part of our journey and we appreciate the help. Let’s head out!” The man, Hosan, says.

The four of us head into the caravan and we start moving.

“Sensei, should I activate my Byakugan? It would help sense any enemies.” Hinata suggests after a few minutes of silence.

I don’t think it’s a bad idea!

“While it’s an acceptable suggestion would be helpful, I do not believe that it is necessary. Your Byakugan uses a lot of chakra. Your reserves and control have increased, but we shouldn’t use chakra unnecessarily.” Kurenai explains to Hinata, with a smile.

“Understood, sensei. Thank-” Hinata is cut off.

“However, like during our training sessions, if you feel that there is an enemy that I haven’t detected, then use it.” Kurenai-sensei adds, and Hinata nods with force.

“Of course, sensei. Thank you!” Hinata says, eyes focused.

“May I ask a question to our clients, sensei?” Shikamaru speaks up.

“That’s up to them.” Sensei says with a wave of the hand.

“What is it, young man?” One of the female client, who we don’t know the name of as only Hosan gave his name, questions Shika.

“What kind of goods do you guys trade?” Shikamaru asks.

“Weapons. Our country is developing cutting-edge weapons. Our scientists have made a breakthrough and have gotten our country a lot of business… but a lot of bad attention too.” Hosan cuts through, sending a kind-of…glare… to the woman that was originally answering.

“Weapons? You’re allied with us… who are you trading these weapons with? And for who? And why did you give that woman that sick look? Just who-” Kurenai-sensei cuts me off.

“Naruto! Stop right now!” Sensei shouts at me, and I look at her with anger and confusion, and she nods at me in understanding.

“Naruto, it is not our place to question their motives. Our job is to fulfill the mission which is to protect them.” Kurenai-sensei says, nodding her head rhythmically to show that she isn’t angry with me.

“Sorry, sensei.” I say, embarrassed and still angry. Hinata and Shikamaru come to sit on either side
of me. They wrap their arms around my waist to try to calm me down.

They don’t even have to say any words and I know exactly why they came to me. My family…they are so good to me.

After a few minutes of sitting still, their arms still around my waist (and my head on Shika’s shoulder and Hinata’s on mine), I start sensing something…

I left my head, and Hinata and Shikamaru get their weapons ready.

“Good sensing, team! Stop the caravan!” Sensei shouts and the caravan halts. We rush out and five enemies surround us.

Fear rushes over me. I can feel my breathing quicken and my eyes dart around to my team.

How…how am I supposed to keep them safe? I-I don’t know what to do! These men will try to kill us!

“Team, focus! Remember your training. Protect each other and the client!” Sensei shouts, bringing me back to the moment. I look at Hinata and Shika and they are in their battle stances. I take a deep breath and re-take my stance.

“Go!” Sensei shouts and we go through our battle plan.

Part of our training the past two months involved how to handle groups of varying numbers; from one shinobi to ten. And now the plans are happening right now.

“Shadow clone jutsu!” I make the hand-sign and shout. I make twenty clones who engage the enemy in taijutsu – four clones for each enemy.

“Byakugan!” Hinata shouts and activates her dojutsu. I see her hands start glowing with chakra out the corner of my eye.

“Shadow possession jutsu…what?” Shikamaru begins to shout a well, but quickly ends in a disappointed tone.

“Is…is that it?” All 20 of clones say at the same time after only a few seconds of my summoning them.

“Well, the Hokade did say there was no expected shinobi presence. And Naruto, your clones are you – they do have all your knowledge Our training have made you three strong.” Sensei says, clear amusement in her voice.

“They’re all alive too. Just knocked out.” Hinata says, Byakugan still active.

“Anticlimactic. What a drag.” Shikamaru states, and I think we all agree.
“You were afraid too?” Hinata asks, and I’m surprised again!

“You both were surprised too!?” I ask, and they both look at me.

“It is always scary a bit. Even as a Jounin. But we have to learn to ignore our fear and do what we have to do. Good work, team. Immensely good work. Tomorrow we still have training, but it’ll be less physical than usual. You guys are probably exhausted. Go home and get some food and rest. I’ll deliver the report to the Hokage and give you guys your pay tomorrow after training.” Sensei tells us, putting her hands on each of our shoulders before body-flickering away.

“I’m so glad you two are alright.” Shikamaru says and comes between Hinata and me and puts his arm around our shoulders. Both of our heads go into his neck.

Why do we love these hugs so much?

“We could say the same for you too, Shika.” I say, feeling Shika squeeze my face with his neck and shoulder slightly.

“Yeah Shika. Don’t act like we don’t love you too.” Hinata says, and I would bet all my money ever that Shikamaru squeezed Hinata’s face like he did mine.

I…I wanna squeeze her face too. It’s not fair that Shika gets to be in the middle! He gets both Hinata and me, and both of us only get him! I wanna hug both of them!

“After I shower I’ll be too tired to eat. Wanna eat together or…” Hinata suggests, and Shik’s arm round my shoulder tightens slightly.

“Let’s eat!” I say, and we start walking, without saying any other words, to Ichiraku’s!

I love my team even more now!

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What a long chapter! This was originally just going to be the mission for Team 8, but I needed to include some small bits of team-building here and there because I want the characters to be a specific way (cheesy with everyone as friends lol), and I have to show that development. It’s hard for me as a writer to go slowly and into how a character feels very intimately. I’m more of a plot kind of writer than a character writer.

I didn’t want a typical ‘first C-rank mission is a disaster’ to happen. And yeah, Team 7 did not go to Wave. This means Zabuza and Haku are still alive (as of right now, this is irrelevant to the story. Also, note that the bridge will never be named after Naruto, but this is also irrelevant currently).

Also, Sasuke has his Sharingan now – he is much closer to his team right now than he was in canon so it makes sense that Sakura getting slightly hurt is enough to trigger his emotions to unlock it. Shino’s presence on the team calmed the chaos that was Sasuke and Sakura. Naruto was like fuel for the flame – Hinata and Shikamaru are Naruto’s calming presence. These team dynamics I think really work.

I would like to say that once the Chuunin Exam arc begins, there will be tons of plot. Like so much. I have spent several hours here and there over the past few months just
thinking about everything. I have a lot planned, and it all starts during the Chuunin Exams.

So, try to bear with me as I try to struggle through this beginning stuff until I get to the Chuunin Exams. It shouldn’t be more than a few chapters. I think the Chuunin Exams will turn out extremely well, and then there’s everything after too!

Also, about the whole ramen thing… I forgot to include it last chapter. I wrote it over a span of months and I forgot to include it and realized it as I started this chapter. It is embarrassing, so I had to break the fourth wall so Kurenai could tease me because with the way I am writing her, she does not forget stuff like that. Sorry!

Lastly, for those of you reading on FFN, this story and some others have been posted to A03. And to those reading on A03, I have officially added Shikamaru’s pairing (FFN readers: Naruto/Hinata, and Shikamaru/Sasuke). This is a very unusual pairing, and both pairings will be (kind of?) a slow burn.

Also, do you guys like the chapters where both teams are featured? Or would you like (shorter) individual Team 7 and Team 8 chapters?

Also, don’t forget to review and follow!
To Help a Friend

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the disaster that was supposed to be Team 7’s first C-Rank mission. The reality of ninja life hits Sakura at home, Sasuke is troubled, and Shino helps.

Chapter Notes

Not a huge chapter, but something I’ve had planned since this fic started. Hope you guys enjoy this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 6)-To Help a Friend

Shino’s P.O.V.

I can’t believe Sakura got hurt. My friend…

We knew the dangers of going on a mission. Still, it is unacceptable that she got hurt. Well, at least the ones who hurt her felt Kakashi-sensei’s wrath…they got what they deserved and were swiftly killed.

Flashback

“Okay you two, get checked out while they help Saku-” Kakashi-sensei starts to speak but is cut off.

“No! She’s our teammate. We’ll stay by her side until she’s better!” He shouts.

Hmm. I feel the same way, but I wouldn’t expect Sasuke to be acting like this. His emotions are almost out of his control.

“Guys, I’m okay…” Sakura tries to tell us, but winces and holds her hand tight.

“Sensei, I want to stay too. She’s my friend. Please le-” Now I’m the one cut off.

“While I understand the sentiment, trust me. You will only be crowding those who need to do the work on her. And the more we talk right now the more damage may be done to her. Trust me; I will stay by her until the doctors are done. I am her sensei. We’ll meet tomorrow – I promise to not be late this time – and we’ll all talk. Go to the mission return department and get checked out. Now!” Kakashi-sensei says to us.
Sasuke grumbles loudly and looks at me before taking a deep breath and tilting his head as a cue to follow him.

Sasuke and I were both fine and uninjured – just filthy. He told them to check me first, and I waited for him after I was finished. He walked me home first and before he left I gave him a hug which he returned before leaving into the direction of his clan compound.

Beside him telling them to check me first, there were no words from either of us. But I knew how he was feeling – I was feeling it too – and I thought that a hug was more appropriate than words.

“Shino...” My father says to me and gets my attention from my thoughts. I’m sitting at the dinner table right now. I got home, took a long shower, sat down and ate. After eating I’ve just been sitting here, thinking about everything that happened today.

“You’re probably tired of hearing this, but are you alright? Is there anything you want to talk to me about?” He asks me. He’s a very good father to me, and he won’t push if I don’t want to.

“No…at least, not right now. But thank you.” I say, and my father nods at me before getting up and leaving me alone.

I just really hope Sakura’s okay…

Sasuke sits down a fit further away from me than he has been lately. And he looks…tired. Like…he hasn’t slept at all.

He looks over to me and I raise my hand slightly in greeting. He gives no response and puts his head between his knees.

We’re here a few minutes before Kakashi-sensei’s set time. He said he wasn’t going to be late now. I wonder when he’ll –

“Sakura!” I shout, losing control of myself and my train of thought. I see from my peripheral vision Sasuke’s head raise from his knees extremely fast.

“Shino! Sasuke!” Sakura shouts in return. She is next to Kakashi-sensei, walking alongside him.

I look over to Sasuke again, and his eyes are a bit wide and his stare his blank.

I’ve seen this before…

“Allright my cute little genin. We’re going to talk for a few minutes right now, and then we’re going back to training. Sakura’s hand may be hurt, but the rest of her is fine for limited training.” Kakashi-sensei begins, and I barely repress the groan that builds in me.

“Sakura…w-what did the doctors say?” Sasuke speaks up, eyes focused on her white-bandaged-ball hand, yet his words unsteady. That stutter in there was barely noticeable too…

“That I’ll recover completely, except that my hand will most likely scar on both sides. It’s a result of the jutsu they used to extract the poison to keep my hand intact.” Sakura says, looking down at her bandaged hand.
“Are you…okay?” I ask, looking to into her eyes. Can she accept the scarring?

“I will be. Scars are part of the life of a shinobi. Sure, I didn’t expect one so soon, but my hand will be fine. What’s even a beauty mark?” She tries to joke, waving it off.

If she can joke about it, she must be at least handing things a little. I know it would take me some time too.

“However…my parents were against me even leaving the house this morning with Kakashi-sensei.” She begins again, looking up at sensei. Sensei’s eyes and stance remain unchanged.

“What’s even a beauty mark?” I ask.

“They…they want me to quit being a shinobi. They don’t think I’m strong enough. I tried explaining to them that if I didn’t take the hit, Tazuna would have died. I’m not sure if either of you guys saw it, but I help my stance with chakra to not get pushed back. My hand was at Tazuna’s face-level and it intercepted the weapon.” Sakura says.

I had…no idea she saved our client.

“Sakura’s right. Her quick thinking saved the client, the lying bastard that he was. She was able to come up with a plan on the spot to save someone from dying to two A-rank missing-nin. That is the definition of strong in my book.” Kakashi-sensei says after Sakura explain what happened.

“They’re…just worried about me. After I said I wasn’t going to quit, they said they never expected me to actually finish the academy. They thought I wanted to go just because Sasuke was there and that I would drop out when it got ‘physical.’ Maybe before Sasuke was a huge part, but that’s not it. I’m a shinobi. And I have a team.” Sakura says, eyes determined.

“That’s right, Sakura, You do have a team. Aaaaaand now, it’s time for that team to train. Sakura, as your feet still work, let’s increase those chakra reserves. Tree-walking until those feet are like bricks. Sasuke and Shino will be doing taijutsu training with me.” Kakashi-sensei says, and it seems simple. I’m glad Sakura can still do training so she won’t fall much behind.

“All three of us let out a collective groan.

“Good, Shino! Your insects are helping you predict my moves. That’s an excellent use of them. But what if I did…this?” Kakashi-sensei says with a playful tone and I cringe when I feel the kikaichu that were on him die.

“What…did you do?” I suppress my anger. He’s never killed any of them before.

“I’m sorry Shino, but you have to prepare for some to die. I covered my entire body in heat using fire-style jutsu and they couldn’t take it. I know they are a part of you, but I know you are angry. You have to learn how to deal with that. When an enemy figures out how to kill them – because you will always have to assume they will die – they won’t pause to let you grieve. I will do my best to prevent killing any more, but I cannot make any promises. Do you understand, Shino?” Kakashi-
sensei tells me.

I do see where he’s coming from. But…I don’t know if I can just ‘deal with it’ like he wants.

“I can’t just not care that they die.” I respond back, tone neutral. I am trying to hide my anger, even though I understand the point he’s making.

“I’m not saying to not care, Shino. You are human. Dealing with it means to not let it affect you. Do not let it give your enemy an advantage. Control the anger. If you let it control you, you die.” Kakash-sensei bends and gets level with my eyes.

My eyes dart over to his covered eye…I wonder if he’s trying to silently tell me something.

Then Kakashi-sensei nods and stands back up.

“I understand, sensei.” I say, and Kakashi’s smile returns.

“Good. And what you were doing really was good, Shino. Being able to predict an enemy’s move is an amazing skill. But you cannot rely on it. That’s where I was getting at. So, right now, no kikaichu. Just me and you, okay?” Kakashi sensei gets in a stance.

“Understood.”

After two hours of grueling training without my kikaichu, Kakashi-sensei ends our training for the day.

“Sakura, until your hand gets better training will be exercises like the one today – ones that improve both chakra reserves and control. Of this team, you have by far the best chakra control. If we hone that even more, you can start doing nature transformations. Maybe even start a specialty.” Kakashi-sensei says.

“That’s amazing, Sakura. Good job.” I say, praising my teammate.

“Shino, taijutsu is your weakest skillset. However, you made some good progress today. If you keep up at this rate, you will be in great shape.” Sensei tells me.

I look to Sasuke, as now it’s his turn.

“And Sasuke…I’ll admit I was not impressed. You were sloppy and downright careless. This is not how you protect your team.” Kakashi-sensei says, and I am shocked.

Sensei has never said anything like this about any of us. Even when we first became a team and we still had our hang-ups, he never talked quite like this.

Sasuke is silent. His eyes are open but are looking at the floor. Kakashi-sensei stares as Sasuke, then sighs softly.

“…Alright. Sakura and Shino, you guys head home. I need to talk to Sasuke alone. Before you guys get all team-work protective mode, he’s not in trouble or anything.” Kakashi-sensei says.

“Yes, sensei.” Sakura and I say before heading out. We walk along together for a few minutes without saying anything.
“I hope he’s okay…” Sakura says, breaking the awkwardness of the silence.

“Me too.” I say. Nothing else is said before I walk Sakura to her home, which is only a small detour away from my clan compound.

Kakashi’s P.O.V.

I don’t even have to ask him what’s going on. I have a feeling already that he’s traumatized from Sakura’s injury in some way. I’m not sure what exactly about it but this must be related to that.

Is he thinking about his clan? Is he thinking about what it would be like to lose Sakura or Shino – those who have made him actually feel like a person for the first time in several years?

“Sasuke, what’s going on?” I ask him, though I highly doubt he’s going to say anything without me prompting him.

Silence.

“Did you sleep last night?” I ask him.

“Yes.” He responds, and I have a feeling of his answer to my next question already.

“Did you sleep like you usually do?” I ask. I doubt his sleep has ever been amazing since Itachi’s betrayal.

“…No.” He answers. And it’s just as I figured.

Sasuke was having nightmares.

“What are your nightmares about, Sasuke?” I ask him, and he looks at me in surprise.

My team always forgets that I’m a ‘genius’ too…I am a Jounin! But…I need to focus on Sasuke.

“I keep…seeing Sakura’s hand dripping blood. Like I can hear it. As if it’s in slow motion. And then you killing both of the men. I see their blood spilling out, hearing their last gasps for air, their eyes glossy. I see it perfectly and I cannot stop seeing it. And I see my brother killing them all again.” Sasuke says, and his eyes tell me his seeing them right now.

“Sasuke, look at me!” I snap him out of whatever his mind was playing for him to see. He looks at me eye and I see his face soften a little.

“…Thanks.” He says, softly.

“Sasuke…what do you know about the Sharingan itself?” I ask him, and he furrows his eyes.

“Genjutsu and enhances senses. It’s what’s going to help us kill him!” Sasuke says, and I do take notice of him using ‘us’…because we’re his team.

I’m still truly amazed at how dysfunctional this team started and how cohesive it has become in only two months.

Obito…Rin…Minato-sensei…
…I hope I would’ve made you proud if you could see my team. I learned it all from you three.

“Let me show you something.” I saw and pull up my hitai-ate and show him Obito’s gift.

“S-sensei…?!” I can see a multitude of emotions on his face right now.

“The Sharingan and all its visual prowess is a shinobi’s gift of power. But it’s also been described as a curse. Did you know I’m known as the Copy-Cat Ninja, Sasuke? It’s because what I see when using it is committed to memory. And I have seen a lot of jutsu…and I have also seen a lot of death…death of my enemies…but also death of my friends.” I say and pause for a second to let Sasuke start to digest what I’m telling him. I lower my hitai-ate and cover the Sharingan – it’s always on and drains my chakra when uncovered.

“…Did you get nightmares too?” He asks, and I’m surprised that’s his first question and now how I got it.

“I still do. I had a lot of problems at first, Sasuke. For many years. I pulled away from my friends. I stopped talking to people. This is something you cannot allow to happen. You need to let your friends support you. Sakura and Shino…let them be your friend.” I tell my student.

“…Alright, sensei. I’ll try.” Sasuke says, and he suddenly looks even more tired now.

“And...look, just hear what I’m about to say before responding. Your report when you first became my student indicated that therapy has been being recommended to you since that night, but you declined. I can understand this – it feels like we should be able to deal with our problems ourselves. But it helped me a lot when I was forced to go. I’m not going to force you to go, but I highly encourage you to go to at least one or two sessions. If you do decide to try it, just let me know and I’ll set it up with some of my most trusted comrades.” I say, and Sasuke begins thinking.

I hope he decides to try.

“…Fine.” He says, and I smile behind my mask. This may be really good for him.

One Week Later

Shino’s P.O.V.

“Alright guys, you’re dismissed. Continue with your chakra control exercises.” Kakashi-sensei says then body-flickers away.

Sensei’s comment about Sasuke’s performance a week ago was really bizarre – the performance against Sakura and me in spars has been very lackluster when compared to those before the mission.

And after training and walking us home (always Sakura first, then me), I can feel Sasuke’s chakra heading to an area that is away from the Uchiha compound – which is also different from the pattern before the mission.

I think Sasuke has a problem, one the Kakashi-sensei knows about but neither are telling us. But I have a hunch of what it is; the way he’s been acting and looking make me very suspicious.

I need to talk to my parents when I get home. If Sasuke’s problem really is what I think it is, I think I have an idea that might help him. But I need to talk to my parents first.
I’m sitting at the dinner table with my parents. Dinner, as usual, between us is very quiet. The only discussion was my father and mother discussing my father’s upcoming schedule.

Soon, we finish eating.

“Mother, father, can we talk for a bit?” I ask as the plates are cleared. My mother’s eyes show surprise (she married into the clan and doesn’t keep her eyes covered like our tradition is). I can only see my father’s eyebrows raise.

“Sure, son. What’s going on?” My mother asks, sitting down. My father follows after.

“It’s about my teammate. It’s…my request is somewhat not a simple request. But I’m worried about him and I think I know how to help him.” I begin, being purposely vague and ambiguous.

“So it is about Sasuke. What’s going on?” My father asks.

“Remember what happened to Shima a few years back?” I begin.

Shima Aburame is a distant cousin whose entire team died on a mission and he was the sole survivor. When he came back, he couldn’t sleep and became immensely depressed. After a few weeks of getting worse, he tried to kill himself.

He eventually recovered after he was forced by some other Aburame to move in with him and therapy. Being around people helped ease the nightmares he had.

“Yes, is something similar happening to Sasuke?” My mother asks, voice full of concern.

“Maybe. All week at training he barely uttered a word and was spacing out and seemed very tired. I think he’s having nightmares. I just wanted to ask…if I can offer for him to live with us. He has no clan, no family. Being with others helped Shima, we have a spare bedroom, and I want to help my friend.” I say, and my parents look to each other.

It’s still fascinating to me how my mother can communicate with my father without seeing his eyes or without speaking or without kikaichu.

“Shino…yes you can offer. If he accepts, we would like to talk to him first.” My dad says after a few seconds of silence, with my mother nodding along too.

“Thank you.”

After Sakura goes inside the next day after training, Sasuke and I walk in silence, like we usually do.

Turning my head slightly to look at him, it pains me to just see him appear so fatigued. He doesn’t look as bad as he did a week ago, but he looks like he’s been fighting something since we came back.

“Sasuke.” I say, disturbing the silence we usually have when we walk together.

He looks at me with an eyebrow raised, but doesn’t say anything. I didn’t expect him to, anyway.

“Sakura and I are…worried about you. You seem very tired and exhausted. I haven’t told her what I think, but you’d tell me if I asked. Are you having nightmares? I ask because a cousin of mine did a
few years ago and it got very bad for him and almost cost him his life.”

“…Almost?” He responds after a silent moment, and I’ll take that as confirmation.

“Other Aburame took him in and made him live with them, to stop him from being alone all the time in suffering.” I explain, leaving out the therapy.

“What are you saying?” He asks, though I suspect he knows.

“Would you like to stay with my family and me in our spare bedroom?” I give him my offer.

He stops dead in his tracks. I do so as well.

“Shino…that…actually sounds…” He looks to the ground and doesn’t actually finish that statement, but I can presume the unsaid words.

“I already have my parents’ permission. They only want to speak to you first, if you want to try this. Do you?” I say, watching him stare at the ground still.

I get two very brief nods from him.

Good.

Sasuke ate dinner with us, and then he had the talk with them.

I don’t listen to the conversation between my parents and Sasuke, but he walks into his bedroom (to me it’s been his since I talked to my parents) after only five or so minutes talking to them and looks around.

“There’s a small guest bathroom attached to the room, but it doesn’t have a shower. You can share mine if you want to take it here. If you need anything, just ask.” I say, turning out of the room and beginning to pull the door closed.

“Shino.” He says and I pause closing the door. “…Thank you.” He says, voice a little forced.

“You’re welcome.”

My kikaichu awaken me from my sleep, and are frantic at a huge chakra buildup coming from Sasuke’s room.

I rush over there, and see my Dad coming at the exact same moment I did.

I step to the door first.

“Dad, let me. He’s my friend.” He nods, letting me continue.

I open it and see Sasuke thrashing around in his bed, audible whimpers coming from him. He’s asleep, and he’s in the middle of a nightmare.

I rush over to him and climb on top of him, pulling him into my chest and wrapping my arms around
him. He tries to break free, still asleep, and it’s hurting but it’s not an issue.

I continue holding him until he finally starts relaxing and stops fighting my hold. His head and pillow are drenched in sweat, and it really hurts me to know how he’s been suffering.

Though slightly uncomfortable, I lay myself down still holding him. His head unconsciously leans into my chest, which allows me to move into a more comfortable position.

I fall asleep holding him.

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

Shino is damn lucky I realized it was him holding me before I killed him. Waking up in someone’s grasp is not how a ninja should wake up when they didn’t go to sleep like that.

I am curious as to why he is holding me, but then it dawns upon me that I actually felt like I slept a little.

And I get it. I had a nightmare and he fucking cuddled with me to make it stop.

…And it fucking worked.

Goddamn it Shino. Only you would do something like that to try to help me…

…And you’re the best fucking friend I could ever have.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, exclusively a Team 7 chapter. I debated putting some Team 8 stuff in here, but it wouldn’t have worked with the chapter.

Sasuke just likes hugs and cuddling relaxed him. Shikamaru is not going to be happy when they start going out – that’s going to be a drag to cuddle! Hahaha!

I’m writing the two teams separately right now, but soon they will be doing things together before the Chuunin Exams (along with Team 10 as well).

Anyway, I hope you guys liked this chapter. Thanks for reading and stay tuned for more!
Hinata Awakens

Chapter Summary

On another C-Rank mission, Team 8 encounters danger and politics. Hinata learns something about herself - and it changes her. She awakens.

Chapter Notes

A/N: A short, but intense and plot-heavy chapter. I hope you guys enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 7)-Hinata Awakens

Hinata’s P.O.V.

What…what is that I’m sensing?

We’re on our way back to Konoha; we just travelled to the Land of Peas; bordering the Land of Fire and the Land of Rain. Our mission was a success; a C-Rank delivery of a message trying to open up trade routes between the Land of Peas and Konoha’s outposts.

The mission is over. But right now…this is bad. I can just feel it under my skin.

I glance over to Kurenai-sensei and my teammates, and they don’t seem to be aware of anything. But I know that there’s something.

Well, like sensei has been saying since we started training and going on missions…

I activate my Byakugan, and the figure I see begins to move – his cover blown.

“Unknown figure approaching!” I shout to my team and they all react instantly and spread out. We group up in a different spot, already in our defensive stance with sensei in the lead and me in the back. Shikamaru is weaving shadows in the distance and Naruto already has shadow clones hidden in the area.

“Sensei!” I shout, seeing the figure approaching her and she holds up a kunai against his blade.

“Do you follow Pain?” The man asks, and I can see that he’s a shinobi as his headband has four vertical lines through it, but there’s a slash across the center.

A Hidden Rain Missing-nin.

Sensei tries to kick the nuke-nin but he backs up, giving us the space we need.
“Team, this is my fight. His headband shows he is a missing-nin from Hidden Rain. Let me handle this!” Kurenai-sensei commands, and the three of us listen to her orders and the three of us jump several hundred meters away from the two Jonin.

The three of us don’t drop our guard, with Naruto and Shika standing either side of me. With my Byakugan and them in this formation, I can see everything around all of us and pull them both to safety if need be.

“I’m no traitor! To think I am must mean you follow that monster!” The man shouts, going after Kurenai again, but she uses Substitution before his blade decapitates her head and then he’s standing still – in a trance. Sensei got him in a genjutsu.

“Shikamaru, now!” Kurenai commands and Shika has shadows from all trees around us hold the shinobi.

“Hinata, go!” I don’t hesitate and channel chakra into my hands before systematically closing off every single non-vital tenketsu point on his body.

He’ll survive, but he can’t fight.

My team was right. I did get better. No hesitation, no regret. I knew I sensed an enemy my sensei didn’t and I was right. I protected them.

“Hinata, you did fantastic. I couldn’t sense that shinobi, but you did. And I think I have one explanation for this reason, and I have questions I want to ask you.” Sensei is talking to me alone, away from our teammates. The shinobi who attacked us is unconscious and bound; when he eventually wakes up he will not be able to escape has he cannot use any chakra.

“Okay.” I want to know what she thinks.

“When you are in Konoha, do you know who’s around you and where?” She asks me, and…I don’t understand.

“I’m…not sure what you mean, Sensei.”

“Tell me what wildlife there is around us right now.” She says instead, and I do so.

“There are three gophers underground about twenty meters, a rabbit in a bush about fifty meters due south, and a deer running away almost a kilometer away.” I answer her question, and I am surprised by the look she gets in her eyes.

“Hinata…have you ever come across a stranger in Konoha but somehow felt as if you’ve sensed them before? Or have you ever wanted to find someone and was always able to do so easily?” She asks me, and I close my eyes and think.

‘Have I? Her second question is a ‘yes’ because I have always been able to find Naruto…when I was too afraid to even talk to him. I always watched him. And her first question…’

“Yes, I believe so. I often went to the market or library and somehow knew they would be there because it was my erands day, but I’ve never seen them before.” I answer her.

What’s going on here? Her line of questioning is starting to make me nervous again.
“…Hinata, have you ever heard of a sensor-nin?” She finally says again, walking up to me and putting her hand on my shoulder.

The nerves from that question and the comfort from her hand make my heart skip a beat.

“Do you really think…” I trail off, but she knows what I was going to ask.

“Yes. Amegakure – the Hidden Rain – specializes in subterfuge and stealth. They are able to completely hide their chakra signature among nature. I couldn’t even be as accurate with wildlife as you are. And the fact you – a genin – could sense him so easily…Hinata I think you have a very rare gift that you never knew about.” Kurenai-sensei pulls me into a hug.

My team was right…

…I will surpass Neji. I will change the Hyuuga clan!

I’m a sensor-nin!

---

Sensei orders us to watch this. She said that ‘this is what being a ninja is like sometimes. It isn’t always about just killing or surviving. Getting information is cruel but necessary.’

The three of us are holding hands – Naruto to my right and Shikamaru to his. Naruto’s grip on my hand is hurting me, but I won’t make him let go.

She’s torturing the shinobi that attacked us.

My Byakugan is showing just how Kurenai-sensei is disrupting the chakra flow in his brain. But that is nothing compared to the muffled screams and pleas he makes at the hands of her genjutsu. With his tenketsu still closed (by my hands…), he cannot stop the genjutsu.

“I’ll tell you anything! Please! GAHHHHHHHHH!” And Kurenai finally stops the torture when he says he’ll spill.

He starts sobbing (in memory or relief – I don’t want to know) and Kurenai slaps him and pulls his hair up to look him in the eyes.

“Talk. Or you get it for another hour. Why did you attack my team?” Her voice with that question made us all shiver – it was full of so much Killing Intent that it radiated around to us.

“Pain…I needed to know if you were working for him or if you were loyal.” He says after a few calming breaths and silent mantras in his head…

…No doubt a torture coping-mechanism.

“Who is Pain? Loyal to what or who?” Kurenai hasn’t blinked since looking into his eyes.

“In Ame. He murdered Lord Hanzo and took over. I’m part of a rebellion still loyal to the old regime in Ame. I attacked because many of Pain’s shinobi have been infiltrating other villages, or pretending to be from them.” The shinobi explains. Kurenai stiffens at that before regaining her composure.

Infiltrating? We may have double agents in our ranks?

“And Konoha? Does Pain have agents there?” Sensei pulls the shinobi’s hair harder.
“I don’t know! I know he has some in Kiri and Iwa but that’s all I know for sure!” The man says, voice rising due to the extra pain.

“And *who* is Pain?” Kurenai asks, and she looks over to the three of us.

I have no idea what could be going through her head now.

“Nobody knows. All that is known is that since he took over the rains have never stopped. It is said that his ‘Angel’ is causing the rains and is looking over everyone. The resistance had to leave Ame – the Angel is a sensor-nin and knows who and where we are when in the village.” The shinobi says.

The ‘Angel’ is a sensor…like me? And they know who is against them…and *where they are the moment they enter the village*?

I…I can’t believe a sensor is *that* powerful. If they can…then I can.

I *need* to hone my skills. Especially now. I need to master my sensor abilities so I can prove to my father and my clan that I *will make a difference!*

“I see.” Kurenai says before chopping him on his neck, knocking him out. She pulls out a scroll from under her clothes (I had no idea she kept a scroll on her), and…*what????*

He disappeared?!?!?

“Team – we need to head back to Konoha immediately. Treat everything you just heard as a capital secret. I need to deliver him to T&I - we never had this much information on Ame and this news is very disturbing.” But none of us can move, or let go of each other’s’ hands.

“Sensei… what-” Naruto was cut off.

“Naruto, Shikamaru, Hinata! I am giving you a mission! We must get back to Konoha as soon as possible!” Kurenai orders us, and our training kicks back in.

“Understood!”

This was the fastest we have packed up our camp…but it is the slowest we have ever moved. Shikamaru and Naruto just cannot keep up in the dark due to darkness. Even my Byakugan isn’t helping that much.

Still, we’re half a day away from Konoha even at this speed. We should be fine if-

“Sensei! Another Ame-nin is headed for us!” I shout, and Kurenai-sensei lifts her hand in the air.

We all stop and group up in our defensive stances, me between Naruto and Shika. Naruto’s clones are already in formation around us – but Shika has no shadows to use because of the darkness.

“Naruto, make a new clone and transform into the man we captured!” Sensei whisper-orders, and Naruto does it, and it looks perfect.

The shinobi pursuing us appears in front of us a few seconds later – I notice his headband does *not* have a slash through it this time – and he tries to attack Naruto’s Ame-clone.

The sudden substitution jutsu might have just saved our cover.
The two of Naruto’s perimeter clones closest to the Nin engage in taijutsu, and the distraction is long enough for Kurenai to place a genjutsu on him.

I don’t wait for her commend – the moment he freezes I close off his Tenketsu.

“Good job Hinata. I couldn’t have held that for much longer – he was much stronger than the first one. Most of my chakra went into that one moment.” Kurenai tells me as she pulls out the same scroll and this nin disappears as well.

We have no idea what that nin wanted with us, but ti doesn’t matter.

Our mission resumes.

---

**Shikamaru’s P.O.V.**

We got back to Konoha last night, my father’s shift at the missions desk was just ending. And Kurenai-sensei’s report only made him let out a sigh and say, ‘*What a drag.*’

Typical.

We learned sensei *sealed the man into the scroll*, and the three of us were given pay for two C-Rank missions instead of one due to the information we brought back.

We still have training today, and one of my two teammates is acting different that usual.

And it’s in a good way.

And it all makes sense. Hinata noticed the Ame-nin, Kurenai took her away for a talk alone (that itself was odd – our whole team dynamics is based on trust and not hiding anything), and the way Hinata *froze* when the man mentioned the ‘Angel’ was a *sensor*.

Hinata must be a sensor-nin, and she must have just discovered it yesterday on our mission.

Right now, she is focused and I can see the determination in her breathing. Her eyebrows are slightly furrowed, her gaze is on a single spot on the ground – *thinking, planning* – and her breathing is *full*.

Hinata has improved so much since we began. No more stuttering, no more *fainting* around Naruto (though she still blushes hard…), and no more pulling her punches in spars.

But she has never been like this. She has never been this focused.

And I know that this is her turning point. This is her awakening. Hinata Hyuuga just found this Will of Fire.

And when Kurenai-sensei showed up for training, it was no surprise when Hinata spoke up.

“Sensei, I would like to share something with everyone before we begin.” She said, and I shouldn’t be surprised.

I was right.

(Don’t get cocky now, Shikamaru. That’s the one thing Dad always emphasizes – don’t let yourself get cocky or overconfident.)
Still...I was right.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It’s funny – I had no idea I was going to make Hinata a sensor until I wrote the words. I only planned on the Amegakure politics, but this chapter really wrote itself. Same with Shikamaru – his part wrote itself too because of course he would figure it out. He’s a genius!

This is Hinata. Around her team she is the kunoichi she was always meant to be. Kurenai and Naruto and Shikamaru see her for her, this allowed her to stop doubting herself.

And right now she is still riding the high of finding out about her abilities. But even then, she knows that no Hyuuga has ever been a sensor, and now she knows that what she has been craving all her life is not only a possibility but is actually in her reach now. And this changes her – and this will play a major role in later plot.

Regardless, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter!
A Meeting Between Teams

Chapter Summary

After the Three Sensei of the rookies meet with the Hokage, they are assigned a special mission. Then the teams meet, Naruto is made to feel bad about himself, but unexpected allies defend him. Thus, the training trip begins!

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s another chapter! I hope you guys like it!
Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 8)-A Meeting Between Teams

Five Months In

Kurenai, Asuma, and Kakashi are about to meet with the Third Hokage concerning their teams. It has been five months now since they have become Jonin sensei, and it is one month until the Chuunin exams.

“How are your teams doing? Kurenai, you first.” Lord Third requests of her.

“I believe my team is doing really great. Shikamaru Nara is just as strategic as his father – and his physical prowess has far surpassed what it was in the academy. Naruto Uzumaki is far more than his academy records ever could have showed. He is passionate, intelligent, and powerful. And Hinata Hyuuga is almost a completely different girl. She is confident and proud. All three are doing well in ninjutsu. Most importantly, their teamwork is seamless and natural.” Kurenai explains to the Hokage her team dynamic.

The Hokage smiles at hearing the boy he often thinks of as a grandson is doing so well on his team. He’s glad he made the last-minute change that he did.

“Kakashi.” The Hokage commands.

“I believe my team is doing really great. Shikamaru Nara is just as strategic as his father – and his physical prowess has far surpassed what it was in the academy. Naruto Uzumaki is far more than his academy records ever could have showed. He is passionate, intelligent, and powerful. And Hinata Hyuuga is almost a completely different girl. She is confident and proud. All three are doing well in ninjutsu. Most importantly, their teamwork is seamless and natural.” Kurenai explains to the Hokage her team dyamic.

The Hokage smiles at hearing the boy he often thinks of as a grandson is doing so well on his team. He’s glad he made the last-minute change that he did.

“Kakashi.” The Hokage commands.

“Sasuke Uchiha, for everything he’s gone through, is doing as well as can be expected. He is proud, but sensitive. His skills with the Sharingan are improving every day. Shino Aburame is your typical Aburame – stoic, but selfless and loyal. His weakest areas in combat are no longer a weakness. And Sakura Haruno, like Hinata, is completely different. She is cunning and driven, yet still very insecure. And though the first month was rocky, the three now have become extremely close and it is reflected in their teamwork.” Kakashi gives his own report.

The Hokage is relieved that the Uchiha survivor has actually grown. He knows of the boy’s therapy
and new living situation.

He can’t believe how he could have been so stupid almost putting him and Naruto together on the same team – two broken boys can’t fix each other. They needed to be healed and accepted by others first.

“Asuma.”

“Ino Yamanaka, though strong, is unmotivated and distracted. She still is obsessed over Sasuke. Kiba Inuzuka is a quick learner, but is arrogant and impulsive, and he takes criticisms too personally. Choji Akimichi has terrible self-esteem. He is talented, but Ino’s teasing about his weight and his timidity hide that talent so deep inside. Together, their team work is mediocre at best.” Asuma reports disappointedly, especially after hearing how the other rookie teams are apparently excelling.

The Hokage considers this information. He knew Choji and Ino have always had a complicated relationship. They have been thrust together as kids – along with Shikamaru – to try to recreate the Ino-Shika-Cho formation for the third generation.

But he broke it up by moving Shikamaru, and Kiba took his place on the team.

He knew Shikamaru acted as a mediator between the other two, but he didn’t expect that team to be in this much trouble after all this time.

They need help. And The Professor knows how they’re going to get it.

“Okay. I am ordering all three teams to a special D-Rank mission. For one month, your three teams will be training together, bonding together, living together. Team 10 will learn teamwork by immersion. Seeing Teams 7 and 8 should kick them into gear. After the month is up, you will report if you deem your teams ready for the Chuunin exams.” The Hokage orders the three Jonin.

“Yes, sir.” The three respond, obediently.

They discuss the nuances of the mission.

---

**Naruto’s P.O.V.**

*YAWWWWWWWNN*

Sensei woke me – and probably Hinata and Shika too – up to tell me that we have a sudden month-long mission that I have to prepare for.

That was easy though! Since that…*mission* with those Ame-nin…we have been using storage scrolls for many of things we think we could use but not always carry. Hinata always has collections of herbs and plants that she uses for medicines, Shikamaru now carries a *shogi* set, and I carry *all the ramen I could ever want*! I also carry other clothes and weapons, but ramen is the priority!

Getting ready was easy, and I had a lot of time to spare so I ate a nice helping of Ichiraku ramen and headed to the meeting area where sensei said to in the message.

I get there, and I am a bit shocked to see four people from my graduating class there too – Sasuke, Sakura, Shino, and Kiba.
“Oh hey, everyone!” I greet everyone, happy to see them after so long. I haven’t spoken to them since graduation or before, and only briefly saw them around the village while training or doing missions or hanging out with my own team.

“Naruto? What’s the Dead Last doing here?” Kiba says, and that happiness is already gone.

I already want a hug…

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

When the Inuzuka showed up, I was a bit shocked. Seeing Naruto come shouldn’t have been a surprise then – clearly something is going on if Inuzuka was supposed to be here.

But I could accept that. Having to work with Inuzuka, I could accept that. But what he just did?

What he just said to Naruto? Making him go from happy to hurt like that – I could see it in his face, anyone could – is not alright.

I can’t accept that.

“Like you’re one to talk, Inuzuka. You were second to last, and just barely from what I recall. So stop trying to make yourself feel better by shitting on other.” I say to the most idiotic clan heir from our graduating class.

I’ve learned friendship and trust with my team. I now live with Shino, and I do go to the therapy Kakashi-sensei suggested. It’s hard, but I have learned to trust my team.

Naruto isn’t on my team, but he doesn’t deserve to be insulted just for saying ‘hello’ to us. Inuzuka purposefully tried to hurt his feelings. Friend or not, Naruto is a comrade.

And I defend my comrades.

Sakura’s P.O.V.

That…was just disgusting what Kiba said to him. And the look that Naruto got on his face was…it just wasn’t right seeing that.

And it hurts me to know that that’s what I was like back then in the academy. Just five months, I wouldn’t have hesitated calling Naruto ‘dead-last’ or even something worse.

I was a bitch back then, I know it.

Like the day we graduated, and I hit him for sitting next to Sasuke. I’ve thought about that a lot… and I’ve wanted to apologize to him for at least three months now.

But I’ve never had the chance. I’ve barely seen him around then, let alone speak to him.

But it’s time to change that. I need to let him know how sorry I truly am.

“Fuck you, Uchiha. Stuck-up asshole. And it’s Naruto, he was the worst in the academy anyway.
He’s probably gonna screw up whatever-” I’ve had enough.

“Kiba, shut the fuck up. You don’t get to talk to my teammate like that. And you shouldn’t talk like that to anyone. So grow up.” I say, scolding him like a child. He just snorts and me and picks up Akamaru and puts him on his lap.

And then a sudden voice startles me, but what it says is very funny!

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**Shikamaru’s P.O.V.**

Hinata and I got here at the same time, and I held up my hand to keep her quiet when we heard Kiba insult Naruto.

I was about to say something when not only Sasuke, but Sakura both defended him and insulted Kiba back.

What I was going to say would still work now, and it’s probably even at a better time now.

“He’s probably trying to overcompensate for the fact that Akamaru’s dick is bigger than his.” I say with a nonchalant voice, jumping into view with Hinata, and the effect I desired happened.

Naruto smiles, and laughs.

What I didn’t anticipate was the reaction from the others.

Both Hinata and Sakura guffaw from that. Sasuke chuckles, and Shino’s mouth turns upwards behind the collar.

What has happened to Team 7 since we graduated? – They are not the same people. But it’s better – they are actually nice now (Shino always was nice, though) and defended my best friend.

And then something I never could have anticipated happens.

“Hey, Naruto…I want to apologize. The past couple of months I’ve been looking back at what I’ve done and…I was horrible to you back in the academy. I was a bitch and I was just so mean to you. I wanted to apologize sooner, but I haven’t really seen you at all. So again, I’m really, truly sorry for being mean to you.” Sakura says to Naruto, and once again I like what I see.

Naruto’s smile.

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**Naruto’s P.O.V.**

What a freaking rollercoaster of emotions! Happiness at seeing old classmates, wanting hugs from my teammates due to Kiba being a total jerk asshole, to surprise from Sasuke and Sakura standing up for me, to laughter from Shika’s joke (take that, dog-breath!), to happiness from Sakura apologizing to me.

I’ve been doing some thinking too. I think what I saw in her was someone who was very pretty, but also lonely too. I remember when she had no friends when she and Ino started fighting over Sasuke. I wanted to be her friend because I didn’t have anyone either.
But she wasn’t who I thought she was, and I held on to my imagined Sakura for much too long.

When I think about it now, the kind of girl I want in my life is someone who cares about me, and doesn’t want or expect me to be perfect. I have flaws – everyone does – and I want a girl who would love me anyway.

Like how Shika and Hinata accept me! They accept me for being the Fox’s container, they accept me for my (improving) impulsivity. I hope Shika and Hinata find guys that like them that way – because they both deserve the best.

“Fuck you, Nara! I’m about to kick your ass if you say one more-EEP!” Kiba starts yelling at Shika before he squeals like a child at Hinata’s glare right in front of his face.

Since we encountered those Ame-nin and she found out she has sensor abilities…Hinata’s been different. She’s making her dream a reality!

(But she’s also become a little scary, too! Hahaha!)

Kiba finally shuts that mouth of his after Hinata practically makes him piss in his pants.

“He…th-thanks, Sakura! And you too, Sasuke! You didn’t have to do that for me, but I really appreciate it!” I respond to them both, for the apology and for standing up for me to Kiba.

A few minutes later, Ino and Choji arrive to find their third teammate sulking with Akamaru trying to cheer him up.

“Dog-boy’s licking his wounds because Hinata practically made him wet himself.” Sasuke says to the two other members of Team 10.

“Why would Hinata do that?” Choki asks, munching on some chips.

“Because Kiba threatened to hurt Shikamaru. Why? Because Shikamaru stood up for his teammate when Kiba insulted Naruto.” Shino says, the first time he’s spoken since I’ve arrived.

“Choji! You made us late and we missed the action! And Kiba! You can’t keep that damn mouth of yours closed for one second. Always spouting off the first thing that comes to your mind, Think about the consequences!” Ino shouts at both her teammates, and I am suddenly so glad she is not my teammate.

Because that would be hell.

I see Choji just hold his bag of chips over to Shikamaru, who gladly takes a few. I sometimes forget how close the two were as children – they were supposed to be on a team together with Ino, and Shika did call Choji his best friend when Kurenai-sensei gave us our genin test.

“Forehead! What happened to your hand?!?” I look over to Sakura at Ino’s shout, and I can’t believe I didn’t see it before.

A huge scar on the outside of her hand.

“Sakura! Are you okay?” I ask her, and holds the scarred hand with her other.

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. I got injured on our first C-Rank mission, saving our lying ass of a client from losing his drunk face. And yeah. I’m fine. Just scarred, but no damage to nerves or chakra pathways.” Sakura says, and I notice Shino and Sasuke get a little closer to her.
She saved her client on her first C-Rank? Wow…we haven’t faced really anything dangerous until several C-Ranks when we encountered those Ame-nin…

“I’m so sorry that happened…Sakura…” Ino says, and Sakura’s head shoots into her direction. She nods at her, and I think this could be good for their friendship!

“Yeah, me too, Sakura. I’m glad you’re alright.” I say as well.

“Thanks Ino, Naruto.” Sakura smiles at me before looking back at her hand.

I suddenly feel a subtle pull on my body – and it’s one of Shika’s new usage for his clan’s techniques. He’s been experimenting in a way to use it for silent communication. I look over to him and Hinata, and Hinata is tapping her cheek in sets of three.

She senses three people around us, and even I can guess who they are.

Three teams here, and three chakra signatures around. Hinata isn’t going on guard, so it’s people we know. It must be our senseis.

“I wonder where Asuma-sensei is.” Choji says, fishing out a new bag of chips. He has a knack for just bad timing, doesn’t he?

“Don’t bother. If he’s like Kakashi then we’ll be waiting for hours.” Sasuke says, rolling his eyes.

“Come on, guys – they’ve been watching us this whole time!” Hinata says, and I love everybody’s confused faces as suddenly three swirls of leaves appear in front of us, revealing the three Jonin-sensei.

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**Hinata’s P.O.V.**

It’s funny just how scared Kiba got when he saw me. But he should know that when he tries to hurt my friends – *my pack* to use Inuzuka terms – then he’s gonna be in for it.

Disgraceful of a clan heir.

And I knew the three Jonin were watching since Shikamaru and I showed up, but Kiba was too busy being mean for me to notify me teammates of such. I’m just glad I was able to tell them before Choji asked that question, because those confused faces – especially among Team 10 – were too good to miss!

“Impressive of your student, Kurenai. We weren’t trying to suppress our chakra that hard, but the fact she noticed us is quite telling for her age.” Asuma says, obviously not knowing I’m actually a sensor.

Kurenai believed that my sensor status should be kept as a team secret for now. I’m taking her advice that unless I believe I have a reason otherwise, I shouldn’t tell my clan until Chuunin. And other teams certainly don’t need to know until at least Chuunin as well, as we shouldn’t be getting missions that would need my abilities.

Part of me wanted to tell my clan instantly – so I could train with Father and Neji again…but I see where Kurenai’s coming from. They wouldn’t give me a chance still – I have to show them how good I am first and then tell them.
But telling them or not isn’t changing what I’m doing. I am going to fix my clan. I am going to get Neji back on my side and get him to stop talking about ‘fate’. I am going to get those damn seals forbidden.

“It hurts how little you think of me, cute little Sasuke.” Kakashi says to the genin, who only rolls his eyes.

“I knew this would be troublesome. Three teams meeting up here like this could never be good. But the way you Jonin are acting already…what a drag.” Shikamaru says, sighing and slumping onto Naruto for (possible?) dramatic effect.

“Everything is ‘troublesome’ and ‘a drag’ for your clan.” Asuma says to Shikamaru with a smile. “But Shikamaru isn’t totally wrong – all of us are going to be doing something different for the next month.” Asuma continues, looking at Kakashi.

“Teams 7, 8, and 10 have been assigned a special D-rank mission. All of us are to work and train together. The mission itself is to build camaraderie – as ninja, you need to be able to work with other ninja from the village. Friends or not, you are comrades. And working together with other people not in your team helps to build this skill.” Kakashi says, eyeing all of us, but then focusing on Kiba near the end.

Good. Kiba definitely needs to be taught a lesson in teamwork.

“And we will be doing that away from the village. All twelve of us are to travel together to where we will be living as comrades-in-arms for the next month. Ready, teams?” Kurenai-sensei tells us, and my team is ready.

When she says that, Naruto and Shikamaru get up and we get into our travel formation – us in a rhombus with sensei in the lead and me the rear. The looks we get from the other two teams are quite hilarious – Sasuke and Sakura are staring at Shikamaru (if I were to guess, probably for not being lazy), and Kiba and Ino are staring at Naruto (she actually isn’t staring at Sasuke for once).

We’ve made our impression. We will be the best rookie genin team, and we will achieve our dreams! This is the first step to Naruto becoming Hokage, to Shikamaru being the man he thinks his clan deserves, and to me bringing peace among the Hyuuga!

“Then let’s go, believe it!” I look to my blonde teammate and my heart still flutters like always.

(And maybe it’s the start of me becoming strong enough to tell Naruto how I feel about him, too…)

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Everything’s starting to come together. My ideas from when I started this story long ago are finally starting to show themselves.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. There was a lot of setup for later chapters in this, but I hope it was still a good read.

Again, I currently planning on uploading a new chapter every Thursday until otherwise stated. I have no commitments now and I have time to do what I want – including
writing.

Thanks for reading!
The Group Journey

Chapter Summary

The Rookie 9 start their one-month long training mission. During the night of the travel, they are split into three different watch-shifts with three new mini-teams. The rookies are already being challenged.

Chapter Notes

And the next arc is officially a go! And a longer chapter! Excuse some harsh language at points in this chapter – it’s necessary for future character development. I hope you all enjoy Chapter 9!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 9)-The Group Journey

Shikamaru’s P.O.V.

“So, teams, any idea where we’re going?” Asuma asks the nine of us.

I instantly picture the map of the region in my mind. We’re off the main trail, heading due east of Konoha. As this mission is supposed to be a D-Rank, we really shouldn’t be leaving the Land of Fire at all. Meaning that there are three towns we can be heading to, and I can’t narrow it down without asking a question.

“That depends. How long do you estimate until we get there?” I ask of the man. Asuma turns his head slightly, looks me in the eye, and smirks.

I like that.

This man was probably going to be my original sensei, too. He still has two-thirds of the generational trio, and he’s the son of the Third Hokage.

“By tomorrow night, assuming there’s no unforeseen problem.”

Hmm. Assuming we sleep for the night – which at least Team 8 has done on every single C-Rank except when we captured the two Ame-nin – that leaves only one option.

“Shona Town.” I say, seeing the smirk on Asuma’s face widen.

This guy likes mind games. I wonder if he likes Shogi…

“Correct.” Asuma nods, and I feel great!
…and Dad’s advice come backs to me again when I feel that pride.

What a drag…

How am I supposed to be a good clan head, not only being gay which is already challenge enough with our laws, but if I can’t get a damn handle on the most basic Nara teaching?

‘Don’t let it get to your head. There’s always someone, somewhere, smarter than you.’

“Good job, Shika!” Naruto says and wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him for a quick hug before letting me go.

I should be able to feel good that I got it right, but I can’t.

…What a drag.

_________________________

Naruto’s P.O.V.

“You okay, Naruto?” Kurenai-sensei appears to my left, just moments after I let Shikamaru go, and I turn to her.

“Yeah, I was sad but the support I got from everyone helped. Thanks, sensei.” I say, before she nods and moves up with the rest of the other sensei.

So we’re all training together for the next month, huh? Well that’s just fine – I can show Kiba just how wrong he is about me. Calling me the dead-last.

Fuck that shit.

I’m going to be the next Hokage. And there’s no way I’m gonna let someone like him tear me away from that dream.

Kiba is someone to beat – to surpass.

Though I wonder why he would say something like that. I remember years ago, once we played together with a few other guys. I barely beat him and he said with a smirk that he would get me next time.

So what happened? We were sort-of friends…not like I was with Shikamaru and Hinata, but still. We used to ditch class with Shika and Choji too, and hang out. But now he’s treating me like shit.

Actually, I don’t care what happened. All I care about is that I prove him wrong. Kiba Inuzuka will be the next one to notice me and not treat me like dirt.

Heh, who knows? Maybe all he needs is a kick in the ass and we could even be friends.

If Sasuke could go from a bastard, to apologizing on Sakura’s behalf on Graduation day, to actively defending me now, then Kiba can too.

And as long as Shika and Hinata are with me, I’ll be fine. The three of us, and Kurenai-sensei, are a team.

…No, scratch that.
We’re family.

“Hey, they’re talking about us.” Hinata whispers in my ear, and we listen closely.

**Kiba’s P.O.V.**

Damn Uchiha. Damn Nara. They should learn to mind their own fucking business. They better watch out – because for the next month I’m just gonna keep kicking their fucking asses. I’m improved a lot since the Academy. I’m stronger now, and I can beat them all easily.

And that Hinata. Who the fuck does she think she is? Getting in my face like that? She’s lucky that I’m a gentleman and didn’t knock her out.

I wonder why she’s so pissed off anyway. Is it her time of the month?

And they must have planned that formation. No way would the dead-last be like that, especially with Shikamaru too.

“Kiba! Choji! Did you see them? That’s what we need to be!” Ino screams at us, and fuck it’s loud. With canine hearing she’s like nails on a chalkboard.

“It’s *munch* a good idea *munch* Ino, and we have to *munch* work really hard together as a team.” Choji says in between eating those goddamn potato chips.

“Yeah they looked so strong like they had each other’s backs. And what they said Hinata did… remember how nervous and shy she was back in the Academy? Whatever happened to them, they got stronger. And she knew our sensei were there?” Ino says, more hushed than her previous yelling.

Good. I don’t want those assholes to know we’re talking about them.

“And what *munch* Sakura said about *munch* saving their client’s life*munch* is insane…” Choji, PLEASE stop eating and talking at the same time. Even the pups back home aren’t as messy.

“Yeah, and she’s still going on. Like knowing she’s been through that…I wanna keep up with her. And maybe if I get stronger than her, Sasuke’ll go out with me! But we were friends once too, and I wish I could have been there to help her after that mission…” Ino has crazy mood swings. Impressed than in love, competitive, than remorseful.

Women.

“And Shikamaru only had to ask one question to know where we are going! We should be able to do that too! We have to catch up!” Ino adds, interrupting my thoughts.

“Kiba, what *munch* do you think?” Oh, do I finally get to say something?

“I don’t buy it. They must have planned that to try to intimidate us. I’m stronger than all of them, and if you guys follow my lead, we’ll be fine.” I say – there’s no way Team 8 is like that.

“KIBA! We’re supposed to be a team! And we both think we have a lot of training to do to keep up with the two other teams.” Ino sounds…actually concerned and serious.

Ino…?
“Yeah, I wanna keep up with Shikamaru. He’s still my best friend, and I can’t let him surpass me!” Choji said…and he didn’t eat anything while speaking.

That’s…a first.

“So come on, Kiba! Let’s do this! We need you!” Ino says, slapping my back with her hand.

You know what, maybe she isn’t so bad. When she’s not going on about Sasuke, she’s actually pretty smart. And Choji’s eyes show a resolve that I have never seen before.

Fuck it. I’m in.

“Yeah, let’s do this! Team 10 won’t be left in the dust!” I stop, and my two teammates do as well. I put my hand down between the three of us.

Choji follows, then Ino, and then she shouts to the rest of our traveling group.

“Here begins Formation: Ino-Kiba-Cho!”

**Sasuke’s P.O.V.**

Those idiots on Asuma’s team really need to learn to be quiet when they’re talking as a team.

And is he actually that dense? Kiba Inuzuka – he really thinks Naruto’s team just tried to make a show of something?

No, it was discipline. It’s really funny – Naruto, and Shikamaru, two of the least disciplined people in the academy, working like that. Especially with the not-so-shy Hyuuga girl.

But what Team 10 just showed actually makes me a little happy for them. They just showed some teamwork. All 3 of them.

It reminds me of the time when Kakashi-sensei told us that we finally had teamwork…after I gave a compliment to my team.

…I don’t like how I was back then. But I couldn’t help it – he did that to me.

He took everything from me. My family, my brother, and lastly myself. Not only did he take my parents from me, but he took himself – the brother that I knew and loved – and turned him into a monster.

Everything I knew and cared apart, ripped from me. And he did that so I would never get close to another person. He told me to get stronger…but he just wanted to torture me.

Killing me wouldn’t have been that – I wouldn’t know anything once I died. But keeping me alive…and making me isolated from everyone…that’s the real torture.

Well, fuck you Itachi. I didn’t fall for it. My teammates helped me see what else was taken from me. And we won’t let it happen again.

*We will kill you.*

**Kiba’s P.O.V.**
Four Hours Later

“Okay, everyone. We’re calling it a night. One member from each team will be keeping watch, with three shifts total so everyone does it.” Kurenai says after holding up her hand telling us to stop.

“I’m overseeing first shift. And for my little minions I choose…Pinky, Doggie Boy, and Loud Blonde.” Kakashi-says, and Akamaru growls on my head.

Of course.

I’ve heard about him from my sister Hana – the guy who always fails his students until this year, something about teamwork. So what did he do? Put the three of us who argued earlier together in a group.

This month is gonna suck so fucking bad.

“We have names, you know!” The dead-last…Naruto…shouts. At least Kakashi was right about his description.

“Perhaps, but it’s more fun to call you Loud Blonde.” Kakashi says, smiling at Naruto under his mask.

Now what Sasuke said about Kakashi earlier made sense – about the whole being late thing.

Kakashi lives to piss people off. One meeting with the guy and it’s obvious.

“Let it go, Naruto. That’s just what sensei does.” Sakura says to him, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“Hm, did you say something, Pinky?’” Kakashi takes out his…Porn Book?!…and pretends to ignore her.

The rest of the group gets into their tents, and the three of us and Kakashi are left. Sakura is the first to speak.

“So, how do you guys want to set up? When it’s me, usually we have Shino’s insects to help. How do you guys wanna do this?” Sakura asks.

“Shouldn’t you be asking that sensei of yours?” I ask. I mean this isn’t our team – we should have some kind of guidance. I have no idea how to do it with these two, and I doubt they do either.

“No. We won’t have our sensei when we go on our missions as chuunin or something. Something we’ve learned from Kakashi is that he lets us learn things for ourselves. We are ninja – we need to learn to do things ourselves. He’s here to make sure we don’t kill ourselves in the process.” Sakura says, and…

…it kinda makes sense.

“Well, with my team, it doesn’t matter who’s on duty. I always have some clones spread out.” Naruto says before making a single hand sign and creates clones out of smoke. That’s certainly not the Academy clone technique.

“Hey, what kind of clone is that? We were never taught that at the Academy with smoke!”

Sakura reaches and pokes one in the shoulder, and it wincs.
“Is that…a shadow clone?” Sakura asks, sounding amazed.

“Hehe, yeah. Apparently, I have too much chakra to use the Academy close jutsu, and I was…taught this and graduated with it instead. Hehe.” Naruto says, laughing a little…much…in response to Sakura.

“Let’s go! See ya, boss!” A clone says before they all take off in separate directions.

I’ve heard of Shadow clones. They were mentioned once in the Academy. Something about being almost like a Forbidden technique.

“Too much chakra? How could someone have too much?” I ask, thinking his whole story is sounding like a bunch of B.S.

“I’m not sure, actually, hehe. It’s probably some kind of bloodline, but I don’t really know…” Naruto looks sad and holds his stomach.

“Oh, yeah I guess that makes sense. Sorry…” I know he’s an orphan, and I can’t imagine what it would be like not knowing my parents or my sister and having nobody to look after me. Despite what happened between us earlier, I can still empathize with his situation.

“Still, that’s a huge advantage, Naruto! I struggle with my chakra reserves, even after training with Kakashi-sensei. My control is great, but my reserves still have a lot to work on.” Sakura tries lighting the mood, and Naruto seems to perk up a bit.

“That’s great Sakura! I’m the opposite – my control is kinda crap. Anyway, what about you, Kiba? What do you do when it’s your turn to keep watch?” Naruto asks, turning to me.

He’s acting like what happened earlier today never happened. Tch…

“I have a very good sense of smell. So I’m able to use that to sense things nearby. Akamaru helps Ino and Choji when it’s their turns because of his sense of smell.” I answer the boy who seems to be able to forgive-and-forget pretty easily.

“Then we’re all set then, no? I don’t add much to the table in terms of natural abilities, but with Naruto’s clones and Kiba’s smell, we should be good.” Sakura says, smiling at us.

Hey, Sakura, what’s the book Kakashi’s reading?” Naruto asks, and Sakura’s face instantly goes beet red.

“Porn, man. How have you never seen that series before? In stores being kept away from children and in sensitive areas of the library.” I say in Sakura’s stead, and he gets a frown on his face.

“Oh…well, I don’t go into many stores. I…usually have what I need. And the library’s never really interested me for the most part…” Naruto says, but I don’t believe it.

He’s never been good at hiding his emotions, not since back at the Academy when he would get upset when Sasuke beat him in spars, when he answered questions wrong, and when he always declared that he’d be Hokage.

“Huh, whatever. Don’t tell the real reason, I don’t give a shit.” I say, because I really don’t. He’s not my friend – I don’t care about petty lies like that.
“Kiba!” Sakura scolds me, but I just roll my eyes.

“Why did you wanna know what the book was, anyway?” I ask Naruto.

“…Because the way he looks at it. Always giggling like a little kid. I wanted to pull a prank…” Naruto explains, and I see Sakura’s face light up.

“Yes, please! Let me guess – taking it from him?” Sakura asks, giddy. What a mood swing…

…Time of the month. It must be. Her and Hinata. Maybe Ino too – it would explain her mood swings earlier too.

“Haha, yeah. Now I’m no Shika, but I think I have a decent plan.” Naruto says and tells us.

I guess I’m in, without even being asked.

Again.

At least Ino and Choji finally asked my opinion earlier. But I hate being left out of the decisions. I fucking have opinions too!

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Naruto’s plan seemed decent…but it failed.

And now he’s stuck in the ground, head peeking out. Kakashi caught him in one of his earth-style jutsu.

“Maybe I should call you Loud Dirty Blonde instead…” Kakashi teases, patting Naruto’s head with one hand and holding the book open with the other.

In retrospect, we all should have seen this coming.

“Though I’ll give you credit – that plan wasn’t actually horrible. Obviously that Nara kid has been rubbing off on you. It probably would have worked on a Chuunin. And, also, it may have gone better if I didn’t hear every single word you all said.” Kakashi says, with a smile (I think…his voice sounds happy but that mask makes it impossible to tell).

Then he tilts his head and Naruto comes out of the ground, unharmed but filthy.

“And because I’m feeling nice!”

He says before raising his hand up to his face and hosing Naruto off with some kind of water-style jutsu before any of us can tell what’s going on.

“Fuck, that was cold!” Naruto says, annoyed. “But thanks for that, hehe.” He has mood swings too, obviously.

Is everyone around me just insane then?

“Ne, Kakashi-sensei, can you teach me that jutsu? I have a water affinity.” He asks, already forgetting the embarrassment he just went through.

But…what the fuck?
He knows his affinity? How?

“How the hell could you possibly know your affinity?”

“Oh, Kurenai-sensei had this weird paper or something that let us know our affinities. I’m water and wind.” Naruto says, and that pisses me off.

Not only does he know his, but he has two affinities?

“No fucking way someone like you has two affinities. Bullshit.” And now Naruto looks pissed at me.

“Hey asshole, what’s your problem with me anyway? You know, I tried to forgive and forget what you said earlier. Yeah, I sucked in the Academy. That’s no secret – I admit it. But that doesn’t make me less of a person or ninja. So if you’re gonna keep treating me like some rat or bug, I’m gonna act like one and bite.” Naruto says, looking me in my eyes.

…Why do I always do this?

Why do I always piss off everyone I meet? Everyone I’m supposed to work with. I always have. In the Academy…I wasn’t great either. As that fucking Uchiha pointed out, I was barely above Naruto.

So why do I do this?

…I think I need to talk to Asuma-sensei.

I don’t say anything, just roll my eyes and sit down as Sakura goes up to ask Naruto if he’s alright.

Tch.

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Sasuke’s P.O.V.

Since I started living with Shino and his family, sleeping has been easier. Maybe it’s the therapy-jutsu my counselor uses too that’s helping me.

So when I get up for the middle shift (which sucks – instead of sleeping for two straight shifts and waking up once to leave, you get waken up twice between shifts), I don’t feel that tired.

I only woke up to…cuddling…Shino a few more times early on before that stopped. Sleeping easier initially made sleeping continually be easier.

Though I have woken him up and asked him to sit with me a couple times as well…

I still have nightmares…but just not as often or as intense. Sometimes I even have somewhat-pleasant dreams.

“How’d it go?” I ask Sakura before she goes into her tent.

“Rough. We kinda had some fun trying to steal Kaka-sensei’s book, but then Kiba said some stuff to Naruto again and it went all downhill from there. He was upset that Naruto has two elemental affinities.” Sakura says, shrugging her shoulders.

Two affinities? That’s pretty rare.
Maybe he could be someone to keep my skills in line. Like Gai does to Kakashi.

“Kiba’s an idiot. We learned this earlier. Let’s just hope that this month kicks some sense into him.” I finish before Sakura begins to get ready to sleep.

I see Shikamaru coming from his tent, and…ugh…Ino coming from her tent.

“Sasuke!” She squels…ugh…running over to me.

“Ino, leave him alone. And weren’t you just saying earlier that you wanted to compete with our teams? Sakura doesn’t do that anymore.” Shikamaru says before Ino even reaches me.

Thank you, Shikamaru!

“…Ugh, fine. I’ll try. Hello, Sasuke. Hello, Shikamaru.” I can just hear it in her voice how hard that was for her.

I see Asuma come out from peeking inside Kiba’s tent – Kiba thinks like a dog, so maybe some discipline and scolding will help him learn.

“Okay, guys! Everyone needs to think of a way we should set up. Shikamaru is last. You first, Ino.”

Into looks at the ground and puts her hand to her chin, thinking. She then…looks at me for too long for me to be comfortable with, then looks to Shikamaru and Asuma.

“Well, I think we should just be set up in a triangle formation, able to cover all directions within out field of visions.” Ino says, and that’s actually not that bad. It’s simple and it makes sense. I’m glad she didn’t just think I could do everything, because I can’t.

“Alright. What about you, Sasuke?”

I instinctually enter the pose my therapist has deemed my ‘self-comforting’ pose – elbows on my thighs and hands crossed under my nose. This does make me feel good, and it also helps me think.

Well, what do I know about them all? Ino is a Yamanaka and specializes in mind techniques (like my therapist…). She was medicore-at-best in Taijutsu and Ninjutsu back in the Academy, but I’m sure that’s changed.

Sakura changed, after all.

The Nara is a mystery. I know vaguely of their Shadow techniques, but he didn’t do anything in the academy. But if he’s anything like his team…where Hinata knew our sensei were watching us…then he has skill.

My own skills are good. Not great, as I may have used to think before Shino and Sakura helped me escape Itachi’s psychological hold on me. But I’m good. I know how to do fire manipulation of chakra, and I have good chakra control enough to water-walk.

And I also have my Sharingan.

I uncross my hands and speak my plan. “It’s going off of Ino’s plan. Field of vision is always essential. But we should focus on the abilities we have. I don’t know much about either Ino’s or Shikamaru’s jutsu, but I think something can be done where if one of us can see something, we can let each other know secretly and Ino can do some…mind stuff…or Shikamaru can trap them if we make some light, and my Sharingan can maybe help see a weakness we can all exploit.”
“Good. And Shikamaru?”

I look at him, his eyes are closed and he looks like he’s about to fall asleep. Typical Shikamaru.

“Well it’s night time and I’m at a disadvantage because I have no shadows I can manipulate. But Sasuke is proficient in fire-style jutsu, as he shown back at the Academy. If he does it in the sky, he casts light all around and I can control shadows – exactly like he said. I capture them, Ino mind-transfers, and we incapacitate without harming Ino.

“But both of them were right – field of vision is essential. And we could always create a small source of light that would let me create small shadows to communicate with you two – it’s something I’ve been creating with my father and it’s been working with my team.” Shikamaru explains, then sighs loudly.

He’s…already creating his own jutsu? That’s…actually pretty impressive. That whole team is starting to seem like that.

“Very good, everyone. You all did good. Ino, you had a great foundation but you didn’t go beyond that. Try to think of what your teammates abilities are, within reason. Sasuke, you did good and you did have reasonable assumptions of the team’s abilities but it wasn’t actually a plan. Shikamaru, that’s a really good plan for a genin. Going off of skills you already know and just going from there. You all did really good in this exercise. We’ll do what everyone had in common – triangle formation!” Asuma explains.

I appreciate his comments. Looking back, I realize I didn’t make an actual decision. Only observations but not a usable set-up plan.

We get into formation, sitting on three logs around a very light campfire. I’m twirling a kunai in my hands, and Ino pulls out some magazine and Shikamaru pulls put a…scroll?

“I already know how Ino feels. But what about you, Sasuke? Do you play Shogi?” Shikamaru asks out of the blue.

I actually used to really like that game. Mom and Dad used to play it with me – one of the few things Dad and I actually did together.

I…wouldn’t mind a game, actually.

“Sure.” I respond, and he smirks before unrolling his scroll. And…what the hell?

Where did that Shogi set come from?

Shikamaru’s P.O.V.

That was fun. So much fun.

“That was one of the best matches I have ever played not with my father.” I tell Sasuke. I won, but it took me a long time to figure out the strategy he had. It was…exhilarating not knowing and being on my toes.

“I did rather enjoy that. Thanks for the match.” Sasuke says, smiling and nodding at me.
I want to play again. This was totally worth getting woken up for middle shift. It’s usually such a drag, but it turned out to be amazing.

“Wanna play again?” I ask, hoping he’ll say yes.

I’ve never been this excited playing this game – ever. I’m way out of my father’s league still, I know that. And even though I beat Sasuke, it was still challenging to get into the way his mind works in this game. It was such an unfamiliar feeling, and I want to feel that again. I want to be challenged again.

“Heh, sure.” He smiles, and…

…Oh my god, please tell me I’m not turning into Ino.

I think I felt my mouth go dry when he smiled at me. His smile was…beautiful!

“You guys are so boring!” Ino complains, knocking me out of my reverie.

Thank you, Ino. There’s no way I might…like Sasuke.

He makes his move, and the game begins.

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**Choji’s P.O.V.**

Ino-Kiba-Cho. I love sound of that. I’ve been repeating it in my head since Ino spoke it earlier today. Finally, Ino and Kiba finally include me. I mean…I try. I really do. I’m just not that good.

My parents tell me on the time…our size isn’t us being unhealthy – it’s our physiology for our jutsu. Ino knows this too…so why does she always say stuff about me?

And Kiba…I heard what he said to Naruto while they were on watch. I couldn’t get to sleep. I keep thinking of everything the kids back in the Academy said to me, calling me ‘fat’ and ‘tub of lard.’ Saying I’m too big to fit through the door. To not ‘eat them.’ To not ‘sit on them.’

I used to come home crying to my parents, always holding the tears in until I got out of class. My mother tried speaking to Iruka-sensei but there’s just nothing he can do. He’s not allowed to interfere in matters outside of the classroom unless it gets physical.

I wondered once a year ago on a particularly bad day, years after my mother sought help from Iruka, if it would it be considered physical if I just tossed myself off the roof? Would the other kids get it then?

I asked Shikamaru this, and he slapped me on the head and yelled at me for being so stupid to believe that that was a solution. He hugged me, practically crying, that I’m his best friend.

I felt horrible that day and vowed to never think that badly again.

I regret never having hung out with Naruto. I know how often he and Shikamaru did, but I never felt confident enough to ask Shikamaru if I could join them.

I feel like I’ve lost my best friend. Since teams were picked, today was the first time I even saw him. Five months, and nothing.
I miss him.

“Hey Choji, Shino.” Hinata says, bowing slightly to the two of us.

Though I didn’t witness it, I am intrigued about what Sasuke and Shino said about Hinata. She intimidated and threatened Kiba? That’s…scary.

Hinata was the nicest girl in our class. Super shy, super sweet. And she threatens Kiba Inuzuka? It’s…gonna be interesting this month.

“Hello, guys.” I say, taking a bite of some chips after.

I always feel bad whenever I eat in front of others, which is more often than not. I need to keep my caloric intake constantly high – the way our clan jutsu works puts a perpetual strain on our chakra networks. Our body modification jutsus just take such a heavy toll – so we need constant calories to maintain the heavy burden without hurting ourselves.

Still, I hold out the chips to my two comrades.

“No thank you.” Shino says. “And hello to you both as well.”

“Thank you.” Hinata says, nodding after taking a single chip and eating it. She probably accepted it not to seem rude.

I appreciate that. They aren’t actively trying to hurt me.

Kurenai suddenly body-flickers in front of us, smiling.

“Okay, guys. What I have planned for you three is a little different. I picked you three for a reason, and it will soon become apparent to you all. We’re going to have a talk. And I’m going to be asking some tough questions out of you guys. So, before we begin I have a single question I want to ask Shino and Choji. Hinata already knows the answer as she was asked this before.” Kurenai begins tells us, ushering us all into a circle on the logs around the campfire.

She asks her question.

“What’s the most important part of a Shinobi team?”

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“Us Jonin-sensei met and we talked about things we hope to accomplish in this month. And part of it was building self-confidence and esteem within our students. Hinata was once in your position. She told you all about her clan and the struggle she is still currently facing.” Kurenai says, turning now to look into my eyes.

“Choji, don’t let the fact people used to, or maybe even still, bully you change who you are. We’re ninja – we understand. And even if it wasn’t a ninja thing, you can’t let people hurt you so bad. Remember who matters in your life – family and friends. Random strangers don’t matter. “

I know she’s right. It’s the same kind of stuff Momma used to say to when I was a kid. Still…it’s hard. But if Hinata, and Naruto as she told us too, can do it, then I can too!

“Shino, some would say it’s a good thing to be overlooked and invisible. Keep their skills to themselves. But I don’t agree. But my advice is the same as to Choji – know what matters. You said that you asked this to Sasuke and Sakura a few months ago, and that they didn’t overlook you.
They’re your friends and comrades. So if your friends, comrades, and family acknowledge you, you’re good. That’s what matters.” Kurenai finishes.

“I understand. Thank you.” Shino says, standing up and bowing to Kurenai.

“Yeah *munch* thank you, Kurenai-sensei! You too Hinata, Shino! *munch*” I quickly add, saying in between mouthfuls of chips.

“Well, it’s almost time to get everyone up to keep moving. Let’s get an early start packing up.” Kurenai-says, and we all get up.

It was very difficult at first telling them all some of my fears and anxieties. I didn’t tell them about that passing suicidal thought last year, but it doesn’t matter. I haven’t felt that low since, and after today I think things will start to get better.

I know I’ll have good days and bad days. But On the bad days I’ll have support. My friends and family. My comrades.

I trust them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, that was a monster of a chapter. Many P.O.V. shifts, and it was probably confusing to follow. I apologize.

Still, I wanted to cover a lot of Team 10 in this chapter. And start the building of the two relationships this story is tagged as.

I almost didn’t get this chapter out on time either. Finished it in the middle of the night, trying to get everything I wanted to written down.

I hope you all enjoyed this one and stay tuned for the next! Thanks for reading!
Thoughts During the First Night

Chapter Summary

A look into the heads of the Genin and Jonin during the first night after arriving at the destination for the training month. Friendships start developing, and perhaps the goal of the month-long mission is already starting.

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving to all those who celebrate it! I hope you all have a great holiday and enjoy Chapter 10!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 10)-Thoughts During the First Night

“Welcome to the Nomi Memorial Dojo.” Asuma says to the nine genin, who are exhausted after the journey here. They only stopped to eat, drink, and attend to personal matters for only ten minutes before they were off again.

“This place was donated to my father – and therefore Konoha – by his late friend Kulish Nomi. I never met the man personally, but I know that he wanted my family to be able to use this dojo for students to learn in both body and mind – to come together.” Asuma says, clearly emotional about what this place signifies to him.

The three genin of Team 10 has never seen their sensei acting like this. To sound wise and regretful, makes his students consider his last words – to come together.

“And with that, let’s say what’s going to happen. Mornings, afternoons, and nights, we eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. Everyone. Sharing meals is a great way for everyone to come together. After breakfast, there will be group training – endurance training, chakra control, and spars. Then we have lunch. Then it’s individual or small-group training, depending on your individual needs. Then we have dinner.” Kurenai says, to the genin, who have mixed feelings at knowing this.

“No only that, but you will be sharing rooms – every week, the boys will share a room with someone not of their team, for four weeks. And the girls will all share a large room together, due to their odd numbers.” Kakashi says, to the almost unanimous displeasure of the group.

Inwardly, Asuma is beyond grateful for this ‘mission.’ He and his father may not always get along, but they both want what’s best for the village and her people. The Dojo was suggested by his father, meals my Kakashi, and rooming by Kurenai.

Even as competing Jonin-sensei – potentially for the chuunin exams, or just bragging rights in general – they are still helping each other.
And hearing the conversations before and after the journey to the dojo, the other jonin were more than happy to help. Asuma’s team is currently in teamwork-crisis, and it’s time to solve that now before it becomes a risk to lives.

“Now, let’s eat!” Kakashi says, holding up two chopsticks he seemingly pulled out of nowhere.

Shikamaru Nara is excited. When he heard they’d be rooming with everyone from other teams for a week, he already looked forward to the week he would be rooming with Sasuke.

A week with Sasuke means a week of intense Shogi matches.

Dinner is…quiet. Twelve people around a not too-large dinner table, full of people who are friends, acquaintances, and who-knows what (Shikamaru won’t try to explain what’s going on with Kiba and the other teams – he needs more information, so he won’t waste time until he has enough to go off of).

As people sat down instantly when they walked into the room, and him naturally being the last in line due to everything being such a drag to the Nara, he finds himself in the only seat remaining – between Ino and Choji and across from…the person he’s thought about most within the past 12 or so hours.

…Sasuke Uchiha.

And Shikamaru’s excitement about being next to one of his best friends, the slight awkwardness of being between both his would-have-been teammates, and being across from the best Shogi player in his age range (and the first guy to make Shikamaru’s heart rate actually increase at seeing a smile)…all that goes away when he sees Sasuke right now.

Sasuke just looks…uncomfortable. He’s looking down at his plate of food (which does not go unnoticed by the Nara that there is a tomato on this plate, which none of the others have), body turned slightly to his right to Shino (probably due to the fact that on his left is Hinata, who is not on his team). His hands are somewhat in the position they were during their matches, but his elbows aren’t quite on the table due to the lack of space brought on by the food.

Shikamaru remembers how isolated Sasuke kept himself back at the Academy. Barely uttered a word to anyone – except to tell his fangirls to leave him alone and to call Naruto a ‘loser’ because he was complaining after losing a spar.

He never hung out with friends at lunch, and Shikamaru couldn’t remember him leaving or coming to class with anyone either. He never voluntarily answered a question Iruka-sensei asked unless he was called on specifically.

This leads to Shikamaru considering two things: either Sasuke is shy, or he has a problem around large groups of people.

He instantly rejects the first hypothesis, though – Sasuke was open to playing Shogi the night before and didn’t seem reserved at all, when everyone around him were not his teammates.

So without having reason to consider a third hypothesis currently, which he is still open to if new evidence comes to light, Shikamaru right now thinks it’s the second. That Sasuke has issues around large groups of people.
And it makes sense to the Nara why this may be. Sasuke lost his entire clan. One of the largest clans in the village – gone. Always being surrounded by family, going to no family.

Shikamaru decides to take a risk. He normally doesn’t play risky – but if last night’s Shogi match was any indication then he has to sometimes.

Shikamaru uses his new shadow-pulling technique on Sasuke, who begins to fidget in his seat. Shikamaru pulls the shadow to his own direction, and Sasuke looks him in the eye.

Shikamaru just raises both his eyebrows at Sasuke, sending just a simple greeting at him.

And Shikamaru is extremely happy he decided to take a risk.

Because he receives a light smile in return before Sasuke grabs and takes a bite out of the hearty tomato.

Despite being aware of his heartbeat again, Shikamaru can only think of this as a success.

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Naruto Uzumaki went from being excited about this training month to dreading it in the span of one minute.

And that’s because of the times that will be unrelated to training. Specifically, all of them.

He’s never spent such intimate times with people who weren’t his closest friends. Mealtimes he loves to share…but with so many people he doesn’t know all too well is a bit frightening to him.

But he’s most anxious about bedtimes. The Uzumaki has never had a sleepover or anything like that. He’s never slept close to any other person before outside of missions since he was a child back in the orphanage sharing a room with Heba until his once-best-friend got adopted.

Naruto doesn’t know how to share a large meal like this, or how to share a room with someone.

It doesn’t help that he’s somehow stuck sitting at the corner of the head of the table, between Kurenai-sensei and Kakashi, and across from Sakura.

All three of the people closest in vicinity to him have either hurt him, insulted him, embarrassed him, praised him, taught him, or a mix of them all. And here he is, eating a very nice meal summoned from storage seals – which Naruto notices preserve freshness after two days so he can preserve a lot of fresh ramen – like these people haven’t seen him at his worst and/or best.

His team is one thing. A team’s relationship is supposed to be deep, and ugly, and raw, and beyond the worst and surpassing the best. He doesn’t mind being around Hinata or Shika or Kurenai because he’s seem them in the same positions too.

But two of his three comrades around him he just can’t share these experiences with. All Naruto can feel is shame and embarrassment and knowing what they’ve seen of him. All the failed spars and jutsu demonstrations in the academy, failed pranks and their punishments, successful pranks and their punishments, getting insulted by Kiba twice, failing graduation twice – technically three times!, as Naruto reminds himself.

Though he won’t ever be rooming with Sakura or Kakashi, it’ll be the same thing with everyone else. Everyone here has seen his failures. But only his team has seen his successes and progress.
He just hopes he doesn’t have to room with Kiba already…

Choji Akimichi thinks it’s kind of ironic how his roommate for the next week happens to be Naruto Uzumaki.

Naruto, the one who—unknowingly—stole Choji’s best friend from him. The one who made Choji too nervous to ask Shikamaru to hang out with them when still in school.

Choji was initially nervous about getting dressed into his pajamas, but when Naruto took out his own froggy-jammies, then Choji realized that this is Naruto.

Naruto would never make fun of him. Naruto might have a foul mouth, might hold a grudge over petty issues, but Naruto would never be mean.

Choji remembers too clearly how Naruto and Shikamaru, or Naruto and Hinata would laugh and hang out—eat lunch together, laugh when working on group assignments, or talk for a few minutes before leaving class for the day.

But Choji now remembers what he had forgotten—all the tears Naruto spilled when sitting alone on that swingset, or getting picked on by Ino and Sakura whenever he lost to anyone—especially Sasuke—in spars, how miserable Naruto looked.

Choji was lonely too, and bullied too. They were both victims of kids being cruel to each other. But Choji realizes now, sitting alone in a room with Naruto in awkward silence before bed, how jealous he has been of the blonde.

And then Choji feels guilty.

He’s guilty because while he and Naruto have been bullied and miserable, Choji has had some support. He’s had Iruka-sensei for as much as he was actually allowed to do, he’s had his parents, he’s had Shikamaru, and he’s had the rest of his clan.

Until Shikamaru and Hinata, Naruto didn’t really have anyone. Maybe Iruka-sensei and the Hokage—barely—but he definitely had no parents or clan or other friends to support him.

And Choji wasn’t blind to the fact that the villagers tended to treat Naruto with more malice than they ought to, but he has no idea why and has never given it much thought.

And as sure as Choji is about not being able to forget about the things he’s been called, he’s sure that the cruel things from other students and the villagers won’t be soon forgotten by Naruto either.

So how is one to heal? Perhaps it’s what this whole trip is about—comradery, solidarity, to ‘come together’ as Asuma-sensei was saying.

“Hey…Naruto? *munch*” The boy who has just had a major paradigm-shift asks.

“…Yeah, dude?” The slight pause was not unnoticed by the eating genin.

“How…what did you think about dinner?”
“Was that the shadow communication technique you mentioned you were creating with your father last night?” Sasuke asks of the Nara when heading into their shared room for the next week.

“It was.” Shikamaru responds, seemingly nonchalantly.

Inside, Shikamaru is nervously excited about this conversation.

“Why’d you use it on me?” Sasuke immediately asks the million-dollar question to the other genius.

“You seemed to be uncomfortable. I just though after last night’s game, that we can be friends. And friends help each other. And it’s helped my teammates feel comfortable, like I’m there with them even if I’m not right there.” The shadow user responds.

“I see. Well, thanks. It, uh, it grounded me from some thoughts and I appreciate it.” Sasuke has no idea the effect his words have on his roommate.

“Of course. So after you get settled in, wanna have another match of Shogi?” Shikamaru asks, raising his eyebrows at Sasuke who snorts.

“I think we’ll be playing this a lot this week.” Sasuke doesn’t notice the pink tint on his roommate’s cheeks.

Hinata Hyuuga is impressed by the size of the room she and the other girls get for the next month. Three beds, one bathroom, and one dresser for each person.

There’s a window on the opposite side of the room from the door, and Hinata knows she wants the middle bed – a good vantage point in case an enemy comes through one of the two entries into the room, she can get herself and her comrades out altogether.

She’s happy neither Ino nor Sakura complain when she walks to the bed and immediately starts putting things away.

But she’s not quite happy about who she’s rooming with, though. She hasn’t had much interaction with either of the kunoichi, but her teammate and crush has.

Sakura, the one Naruto used to like. He used to ask her out, and she would hit and reject him. Ino, someone who just routinely make fun of him for being inferior to Sasuke Uchiha.

Part of Hinata knows she shouldn’t focus on the past and what these two did before they were all even technically ninja, but it’s hard. Naruto – and Shikamaru – brought her out of the meek little girl she was. Naruto’s friendship is the reason they were even put onto a team; Kurenai-sensei said so when they had their Trust test.

But she loves Naruto. He doesn’t know it, and she’s thankful that he’s a bit dense in that area – though she feels guilty about that too as it’s probably due to emotional neglect – but she wants to tell him. She wants to protect him from all the pain that he’s known.

And to her, a lot of that pain is in this room right now, with the two kunoichi from Teams 7 and 10.

“Say, Hinata, you guys all looked like you’ve improved a lot since the Academy. Especially Naruto and Shikamaru. How did you guys do it?” Ino asks the Hyuuga, who is stunned at the question.

Hinata could understand Sakura asking something like that – she apologized for how she treated
Naruto. Ino never did such a thing.

“Well…we have something to protect. Each other. And we have dreams to fulfill, and we can only do all that by getting stronger.” Hinata answers, staring directly into Ino’s eyes. Ino stares back, eyes determined.

“Well then, looks like I need to kick my teammates’ asses into gear. We need to protect each other, too.” Ino says, and Hinata’s impressed.

‘Maybe…this month won’t be as bad as I thought.’

Kiba Inuzuka has been mostly speechless since the night before. His ‘talk’ with Asuma-sensei when he went back into the tent – if it could even be called a talk to begin with and not some sort of cliché one-liner – hasn’t helped him.

He still feels like shit. He still feels guilty, alone, angry, and embarrassed.

“Asuma-sensei, can we talk? I need some help. I’m feeling really angry and I just lashed out at Naruto again.” The Inuzuka said to Asuma as he walked by, who then stuck his head in the tent.

“Well Kiba, I think you just need to try calming down and focus on the consequences of what you say.” Asuma-sensei says before leaving, Kiba feeling even more dejected now than he had.

‘He’s giving up on me too…’ Kiba thinks, turning onto his side and hugging a pillow.

“What’s wrong?” The voice of his roommate, Shino Aburame, speaks up suddenly. Kiba actually kind of forgot Shino was there – he was so caught up in his own head and Shino hadn’t made any noise at all.

It happened just a day ago – Kiba hasn’t forgotten how Shino’s entire team went off on him just for calling Naruto a ‘dead-last.’

Akamaru makes a whining sound from the floor, sleeping in a doggy-bed Kiba brought for the month.

“Do you actually care?” Kiba asks in return, suspicious at Shino suddenly treating him like a good guy.

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t waste my time by asking.” Leave it to Shino to say that he cares by responding like that.

“Heh. Well…It’s just that…I feel like my team’s always been ignoring me. Never considering my opinion and just do what they want – mostly Ino actually.” Kiba says, turning over to face Shino on his bed.

“What happened specifically?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to Asuma-sensei after another thing with Naruto earlier…” Embarrassment is evident in his voice, but he continues. “…And he didn’t even listen to what I was saying. Just ‘think before you talk’ or some shit like that.” Kiba finishes, and Shino considers this for a moment.

Shino knows this feeling all too well. At first he was worried that his team was ignoring him or not considering him, but then he talked to them that day when his whole team dynamic changed. And last night, too, the Aburame was told to think about only the important people.
Shino’s important people are his family and friends, like Kurenai said. His team are like his family, and the Aburame felt *invisible* when he thought his team was doing the same thing as those other kids in the Academy.

So Shino knows exactly how Kiba is feeling right now. It really sucks, to put it lightly. And Kiba needs to fix this immediately if he and his team hope to be successful in anything.

“You need to talk to your team. Tell them all how you feel and how it’s affecting you. It’s not healthy to keep feeling like this, and I’m sure they will help you. *Ino-Kiba-Cho*, was it?” Shino speaks, and the last part really resonates within the dog-user.

“Ino actually *did* ask me if I was ‘in’ then…” Kiba mutters, but due to how quiet Shino is, he hears it anyway.

“I felt the same thing about my team too. Talking to them helped me feel so much better. Just the relief of that was enough that I improved in everything.” Shino finishes, and wait a few seconds before turning on his side to face the wall and pulling open his vest to go to sleep.

He doesn’t want Kiba to see the openings where his kikaichu roam out around his body at sleeping time. He barely even got it on when he had to hug Sasuke from that nightmare when he first moved in with him and his family.

Kiba understands this want of privacy.

“Yeah. And thanks… …goodnight.” Kiba says, and Shino doesn’t move.

“You really weren’t kidding, Asuma. Your team needs work.” Kakashi says, alcohol in his glass disappearing. Pure speed to lift the mask and drink that fast without being seen.

“But I really think this’ll be good for them. There was already the team declaration by Ino.” Kurenai says, putting her arm around the man whose team is in question.

“I may not always agree with my father or his choices, but this one I back completely. Also, thank you both for helping.” Asuma says to his comrades.

“Konoha thrives on teamwork and the Will of Fire. This’ll benefit *everyone.*” Kakashi says, downing yet another pint of poison before letting out a *belch* to break the mushy tension.

The other two laugh and follow Kakashi’s lead and drink as well.

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**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Not that much action happened in this chapter, but there are a few seeds for future
stuff in here. But there was ShikaSasu development! Honestly, I kind of find it funny just how many of these characters’ worries and problems somehow involve Naruto. I truly didn’t plan this – it just happened!

This arc is moving a little slow, but this is more of a character arc than plot. I estimate only 2-3 more chapters left in the arc before the Chuunin Exams begin.

Also I tried something different this chapter with the 3rd person perspective. I’ll probably be using this format in the future a bit, but I expect next chapter to go back to 1st person.

I hope you all enjoyed Chapter 10 and stick around for Chapter 11 next Thursday! Again, Happy Thursday and/or Thanksgiving! Thanks for reading!
The first day of training begins! Teams 7 and 10 find out their elemental affinities and all genin split up to train. Conflicts and friendships arise.

Late update this week, sorry. See final A/N for details. But I hope you guys like Chapter 11 still!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 11)-Letting it Out

*BRING* *BRING* *BRING*

An alarm resonates throughout the entire dojo, waking up nine annoyed genin. It’s not a horrible time – 6 AM – but everyone got to sleep a little late when trying to adjust to their new roommates which aren’t their teammates.

All the genin are dressed and out of their rooms, except for one genin who can will himself to sleep through anything.

“I’ll get him.” His roommate, Sasuke Uchiha, says before retreating back to his room.

“Get up, lazy ass.” Sasuke says with no malice in his voice – their shogi matches last night were extremely enjoyable to him – and pulls him up by his ponytail.

“What a drag.” The not-so-sleeping roommate says, annoyed and tired.

“Now that everyone is here, we’re going to be starting with some exercises!”

The nine genin go through the motions of their exercises – stretching, jumping jacks, and running (which made Hinata so happy to know she finished 5th place instead of last).

In the races, of course Naruto and Kiba were first – all of Naruto’s fox energy, and Kiba’s canine lifestyle propelled them to be in front of their fellow genin (though, Kiba was upset that Naruto did beat him by more than just a slim margin).

Sasuke came third, panting but still looking stable. Ino, surprising to most of the genin except Sakura, came fourth place, but having absolutely exhausted herself. She couldn’t even stand after
finishing – but she was determined to do as well as she can and give it her all. She didn’t want to be right after Sasuke – she wanted to just do her best!

Both Hinata and Shino paced themselves, instead of going all-out. They knew they had to work the whole day and didn’t want to waste all their energy now when there’s still training later.

Sakura and Choji were next. Sakura held back a bit too, but she was never the fastest. She thinks if she went all-out, she probably could have come fifth, but she didn’t think it was worth it. Choji was tired, but wasn’t out of energy. He definitely could have beaten Sakura if he went all-out.

Shikamaru was last, because he just didn’t care. He was still practically asleep despite Sasuke getting him out of bed. Despite taking his training more seriously to protect his team, he still under-performs early on because he is just too goddamn tired to care.

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**Naruto’s P.O.V.**

Heh, Kiba did good keeping up with me in that race! And classic Shika – coming in last. He better not let everyone think he’s actually bad in the future. Come on, Shika! WAKE UP! Ha ha ha!

“Okay, everyone, now it’s time to find your elemental affinities. Who knows theirs?” Kurenai-sensei asks, and only the three of us in Team 8 raise their hand.

“I’m Wind and Water.” I say after sensei points to me.

“Lightening.” Hinata says next.

“What a drag – Earth.” Shika says, and is hit lightly on the shoulder by Sasuke.

I found it funny how Sasuke went back to get Shika when he slept in this morning. Shika also mentioned on the way here yesterday – the day after we had watch shifts – how he and Sasuke played some Shogi and actually had a lot of fun. And now this? Heh, I hope they’re becoming friends…maybe more!

The thought of that is actually just hilarious! If it happens, then of course I would support them. But I just cannot imagine Shika actually liking Sasuke like one of those fangirls, ha ha ha!

Regardless of who he likes, though, I just want him to be happy.

“Alright. Team 7 will be up first.” Kurenai-sensei says and then gives the three genin from that team a piece of that chakra…something…paper.

“Just channel chakra into the litmus paper and depending on your affinity, something different will happen to the paper.” Litmus! That’s the word!

So Team 7 does as instructed, and I see that Sasuke’s crinkles inward – just like Hinata’s. Lightning! But then Sasuke’s paper also sets on fire and then crumbles into ash.

Lightning and Fire – two affinities. Just like me.

“Interesting, my cute little student. Two affinities is quite rare.” Kakashi says, and I can feel Sasuke rolling his eyes at his sensei’s words.

Sakura’s takes a few moments before it crumbles into bits – like Shika’s! Earth!
“Okay, Pinky, that’s earth. We can definitely work with that.” *Ugh,* him with the *nicknames*!

And Shino’s becomes sopped with water, just like mine did. *Water!*

“And that’s Water for Glasses. Ironic because you hate swimming.” Kakashi is just so *infuriating*!

And now it’s Team 10’s turn.

Ino gets Fire (and I actually feel bad for Sasuke – their probably going to have to train together…), Choji gets *both* Lightning and Earth!, and Kiba…

…gets Wind. Just like me.

*Fuck.*

“All right, now that everyone knows their affinities, we’re going to be splitting up by them to work on it. Fire and Earth, go with Kakashi. Lightning and Water, go with Kurenai. And Wind, with me.”

Asuma says, and something just comes to me!

I remember…when Kurenai-sensei was talking about our affinities the first day of training, she said her *partner* was the only Wind user in the village (except for me, and now Kiba).

That means that Asuma is her *boyfriend*!

“Wait! Does that mean your Kurenai-sensei’s boyfriend!?!?” I ask, and I see Kurenai-sensei blush and Asuma only looks down and sighs.

“And she spoke so *highly* of her students, too…”

All nine of us genin laugh before splitting up.

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“Okay, guys, for a good part of the next month it’s just going to be the three of us working on getting you working with Wind elemental manipulation. And I have a question for Naruto – has Kurenai explained to you just what the Shadow Clone Jutsu was originally used for?” Asuma begins immediately.

“Maybe, but I honestly don’t know.” I can’t remember *everything.*

And then he sighs.

“Okay, the Shadow Clone Jutsu was used for spying – whenever a clone dispels the original gets its memories and experience. But, and this is for Kiba especially, this is a *dangerous* technique. I’m aware of your circumstances, Naruto, that allow you more…*liberal*…use of this technique.

“But Kiba, you are *not* to even attempt the technique until you’re at least a Jonin. It’s technically a forbidden technique due to the danger of chakra exhaustion with its use.” Asuma says, and I *know* that isn’t going to settle well with my fellow Wind-user.

And I was right. He *explodes.*

“What the *fuck,* sensei? What ‘circumstances’ allow *him* to use such a dangerous technique? How in the hell did he even *learn* it then? *Of course* you’re not going to let me get an advantage – I *never* get it. Forget it, I don’t want to do this.” Kiba just looks…*empty.*
“Kiba, stop acting like-” Asuma is cut off by his student.

“Akamaru, let’s go.” And they just walk out, leaving me there alone with Asuma.

“It’s only the first day…” Is muttered by the man before he makes my favorite hand-sign, and I know he’s about to make a Shadow Clone.

“Stay here and start training him.” The original Asuma says to his clone, tossing him something before leaving.

Though what he said was mean, I still hope Kiba’s gonna be okay…

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**Kiba’s P.O.V.**

“No, we’re not leaving the Dojo Akamaru. Doing that might as well be leaving the village label us as rogue ninja. I’m pissed – not a criminal.” I say to my pup, my only real friend it seems.

Well, Shino was okay last night, I guess. His advice was good, but I didn’t follow it. What Asuma-sensei was saying to **Naruto** just pissed me the fuck off.

“Kiba, obviously you’re upset about something and we’re going to talk right now.” Asuma-sensei says, throwing open my door.

Maybe I can follow Shino’s advice now.

“Fine.”

Asuma sits on the bed next to me, moving his toothpick around in his mouth.

“Why did you leave like that?”

“Because I was pissed off. Again I’m left behind.”

“What do you mean ‘left behind’?”

“Come on, sensei. I’m not stupid. I know I was never supposed to be on your team – it was supposed to be the Nara. I was just put there because you needed a third student. It’s just like my clan all over again…” I say, and it wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be to vocalize.

“Kiba – that’s not true! Yes, it was supposed to be Shikamaru and you were put on the team instead. Why – I have no idea. But don’t think for one second I didn’t care about you! You’re just as important as the rest of the team – I swear with my life!” Asuma-sensei says, putting an arm around me.

Can I believe him?

“Then why do you never help during training? You say things to Ino and Choji, we go where they want to eat, we always focus on where they are lacking. It feels like I’m just there and that’s it.” I say, finally getting everything off my chest.

There’s silence for a few seconds, probably Sensei trying to think of an excuse.

“…You’re right, actually. I have been doing that – but I didn’t realize it. Perhaps I’m just used to
working with some members of your clan and forgetting that you are not them. I apologize, Kiba. I promise that I will make this up to you, and earn your trust. But, what was that earlier about your clan?"

Oh shit. Did I say that?

“…I’m supposed to be clan heir. And yet, all my mother and clan elders do is just criticize me. Saying I’m not good enough for this level, that I should be better than Hana was when at this age, that Akamaru isn’t strong enough for his age and that it’s my fault for a lack of training. But Kuromaru doesn’t think so – and he’s Akamaru’s father! And Hana, well she’s not so bad, she tries to console me when they really get on my case but then she says shit like ‘train harder and they’ll leave you alone’ and that pisses me off because I’m trying but you won’t help me either. I’m just fucking stuck like this!”

Perhaps I had a lot more in me than I thought I did, and I let my temper get the better of me, again.

…But Asuma-sensei hasn’t removed his arm from my shoulders. And then he pulls me in for a hug.

“I’m so sorry Kiba. I’ve been a bad teacher. I promise I will help you get to where you need to be – not to make your clan feel better but for you to be happy with yourself.” Asuma-sensei says, and I finally wrap my arms around him and return the hug.

“And…sensei. How should I apologize to Naruto? I’ve been an asshole to him. I was just upset because he seems to just be excelling and I just felt stuck. I’m sorry for not telling you sooner, and…” I trail off, not knowing how to continue.

“Just apologize. You can’t make him forgive you if he doesn’t. But all you can do is try.”

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**Naruto’s P.O.V.**

I am exhausted. These chakra blades that Asuma-sensei’s clone (he is my sensei now!) gave me are supposed to help me with fine-tuning my chakra control in order to start using wind chakra.

But these blades take so much control. I have the chakra, but not the control I need. And trying to control this is so freaking exhausting.

Hinata and Shika are probably having a better time with their training than I am – they have much better control than I do.

“Again!” Sensei’s clone commands, and I’m about to when I see Kiba and sensei walk back in. I look at Kiba, and he looks…ashamed.

I know that feeling all too well from Academy days.

“Naruto… I’m sorry. I know it’s not an excuse, but I was frustrated. With myself and with my clan. They keep telling me I’m not good enough. And then I see you – going from worst in the class to being probably one of the best genin between us, and I got jealous. I truly am sorry – Asuma-sensei and I talked and I just needed to get everything off my chest.” Kiba says, and it’s like what he’s telling me is my own story.

I was only told I wasn’t good enough. By other students, teachers, adults around the village. I had nobody to help me. Kiba did, but I can’t hold that against him. Being constantly told by the people
that are supposed to love him unconditionally that he isn’t good enough – it would be terrible.

“You know, Kiba, you and me aren’t that different. I was told I would never be good enough by almost every teacher at the Academy, except for Iruka-sensei. He’s the only one who believed in me. So, what do you say? How about we work together and prove your clan wrong?” I say, echoing what we told Hinata the day we became a team when she told us about her clan troubles.

Kiba’s eyes light up, and Akamaru’s tail wags. I hold out my hand to the Inuzuka.

“Yeah! Thanks, Naruto, Asuma-sensei!” Kiba says and grabs my hand.

Let’s do it Kiba!

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

“Follow me, you two.” Kakashi-sensei made a shadow clone for Ino and me to train with away from the Earth users. It leads us into a neighboring room.

Two nights ago with Ino and Shikamaru, when we were on watch, it wasn’t that bad. Ino was a little fan-girly, but she somewhat got a hold of it. Though, I can’t ignore Shikamaru’s part – he instantly calmed her down and it was one of the best things I have ever seen.

…Well, not really. But still, Shikamaru saved me then.

And he’s not a bad guy! I truly have fun playing Shogi with him, and what little we’ve actually talked so far is nice. And yesterday during dinner – when he used his clone-pull technique on me – it felt similar to when Shino and Sakura are close to me. When I touch them, I feel safe.

And Shikamaru helped me feel the same. Being in large groups like that…it brings back bad memories of my family. How we used to eat together – with cousin Shisui and his girlfriend, or some of my other cousins. Once every few weeks, there would always be a huge clan barbecue in the center of the clan compound. I always liked being with my family…

…and then they all were murdered by my brother. In large crowds, I can’t function. I just start imagining all those bodies – metallic stench in the air, lifeless eyes, blood all around…

And Shikamaru brought me back. All the teams were separated – I wasn’t near Sakura or Shino. I don’t think it was coincidental either – barely anyone was near their teammates.

This whole month is dedicated to forming bonds with others, and it seems like it’s going to happen one way or another.

And because I wasn’t near my teammates, I couldn’t ground my thoughts before they went insane. I was already smelling the blood when Shikamaru made me focus on him.

Part of me feels like I should be upset at him using that on me without asking me first. But he helped me, and there’s no way all three sensei would let him use it on me if it would hurt me. They knew it was happening – they’re Jonin for a reason.

Shikamaru really wanted to help me, and I appreciate that so much. In my book, he’s a friend. He’s great to balance ideas off of, and he’s a damn good Shogi player. He beats me every time, but it just makes me want to play again because of just how much I am actually learning.
I think this week is going to be fun while we’re roommates.

“So you both have the Fire elemental affinity. Well you’re in luck because I am naturally Fire and Lightning, like you Sasuke. But I can perform jutsu from all affinities except for Wind. So Sasuke, I know you can already do basic Fire manipulation. While we work on improving your control and stability, I will be teaching you, Ino, how to begin to moulding and manipulating fire chakra.” Kakashi says, and I look at Ino and I see determination in her eyes.

What was it that changed since two nights ago? Was it the Ino-Kiba-Cho declaration from before? Was it seeing Shikamaru and his detailed plan for watch? Did something happen when she was rooming with the other girls?

Whatever it is, I can see that Ino isn’t doing this for me or anyone else except herself. She has the same look Sakura did when I spoke my acknowledgement of her.

“Let’s do it!” Ino says, excited.

I’ll admit that I feel the same way!

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**Choji’s P.O.V.**

I can’t believe it…

…I have two elemental affinities. It’s rare…kind of.

How rare could it be if three of us genin out of nine have two affinities? Coincidences happen, but it doesn’t sound that rare.

“I’m not going to lie – this wasn’t planned. For the three of you to be here with me this time.” Kurenai says, and it actually is the three of us.

Hinata, Shino, and myself. We were together when it was our shift to keep watch two nights ago. Kurenai taught us about only thinking about who matters in our lives and ignoring who doesn’t matter.

“It is a peculiar coincidence.” Shino says.

I’m honestly a bit relieved that they are here with me. They know what I’m feeling right now. Hinata and Shino know what I’m going through – they have/had self-esteem issues…

“And Choji – you have two affinities! That’s amazing! You’re totally gonna show everyone just how powerful you are!” Hinata says, and… I didn’t think of it like that!

Yeah! Who cares if we’re a statistical anomaly! But what Hinata said is true – I can prove myself by mastering two elements and perhaps even combining them for my own kekkei-genkai!

“Hey, yeah Hinata! Thanks!” I say, and then we begin our training.

You can do this, Choji. Do it for Ma! Do it for Pa!

Do it for me!
A/N: Sorry for the late upload! This past week we’ve been preparing to move – packing up, driving back and forth to look at houses, and all that. I barely had a free day yesterday to write this chapter.

The Kiba sub-plot was supposed to happen next chapter, but that’s fine. He alone is pretty much the reason for this whole mission to begin with, though, as he’s one of the main issues on Team 10.

Just for the record, I love Kiba as a character! But Part I Kiba seemed too mean-spirited, so I’m kicking that in this story now.

And responding to a review: No, I will not make ShikaSasu one-sided. They will be together! :)

I hope you all enjoyed Chapter 11 and stick around for Chapter 12 next Thursday! Thanks for reading!
Coming Home a Month Later

Chapter Summary

One month later, the group heads back home to Konoha. However, they cross paths with two mysterious shinobi who seem to be after Naruto. In the fight, people are hurt, someone is overcome by rage, and they all rush home after.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s the last chapter of this arc! This chapter marks the start of extreme canon divergence, and one of the things I have had planned for so long as well. Hope you guys enjoy!

For information on how the events of this chapter fit into the meta-story, see final A/N.

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 12)-Coming Home a Month Later

Two Weeks Later

It’s been two weeks since the nine genin and their Jonin-sensei have started training at the Dojo. Each genin has progressed in their training – and relationships with the other students – in their own ways.

Naruto has learned that he is a natural at Water manipulation. Even though his main affinity – as evident by it being the first element to show when using the chakra litmus paper – is Wind, he has excelled at Water.

But he has had no progress with Wind. He just cannot even grasp the feelings Asuma-sensei is telling him. Even with hundreds of shadow clones, he isn’t getting it.

Training with Asuma and Kiba has really improved his friendship with the dog-user. Kiba has turned his animosity into a rivalry of sorts.

Kiba has been making good progress in Wind manipulation. He is able to shape the chakra but not control it – but he got the hardest part down after only a week. But Kiba has yet to talk to the rest of his team about what he’s been feeling, and it’s weighing heavily on his mind.

Ino has rekindled her old friendship with Sakura, to the delight of both kunoichi. Like Kiba and Naruto, they are rivals by day, and best friends at night. Ino still likes Sasuke, but she realizes it isn’t the ‘love’ she thought it was – the more she got to know him in training, the more the image she had of him was shattered and a real Sasuke was known.
Ino and Sakura both have excelled in their elemental training – the fastest of all the genin (except for Sasuke who could already manipulate Fire). Kurenai noticed this and knew it was due to their superior chakra control and has begun instructing them in medical ninjutsu. The two kunoichi took to it immediately after Kurenai told the story of how medical ninjutsu had saved the life of her mentor when she was under a genjutsu.

Choji has made a bit progress with both of his elements, and now has to work at building both individually. His ability of being able to mould two elements in only two weeks has made his confidence soar! Both his teammates said they are extremely proud of him and that they’re going to be the best team ever!

Shino has quietly, yet impressively and successively, mastered the first step of water elemental manipulation. He also has been sparring often with both his teammates – as his element is weak to Sakura’s and strong against (one of) Sasuke’s. His teammates and their elements are great to test and improve himself and them.

Sasuke, while helping Ino initially with Fire and then being her main sparring partner (and the first to admit how fast she and Sakura have come in their training), took more time to mould Lightning chakra than he would have liked. It took him twelve days – the slowest of all genin except for Naruto – to mould chakra. But when he did get it, control came almost naturally.

Sasuke has also been spending a lot of the time that isn’t with his team/training by playing Shogi with Shikamaru. They’ve gotten better, but the daily large group meals still affect the Uchiha and Shikamaru’s quietness is a relief.

Hinata has become scary. After daily lightning training – which she was able to mould in only four days, second to Ino and Sakura – she was working one-on-one with Kurenai-sensei and honing her sensor skills.

She’s starting to learn how to recognize chakra traces. Chakra loses most of its identifiable features when it leaves the person who used it, like when placing chakra in an exploding seal or infusing it into a shuriken. Paired with her Byakugan, Hinata is starting to see the traces.

Shikamaru has been busy with both Earth training and trying to find time to play shogi with Sasuke. He, like all other genin except for Naruto with Wind, has successfully been able to mould chakra of his element. Working hard by day, he’s been more than exhausted by night.

And it didn’t help that he lost his nightly Shogi partner after the first week. Though he was able to get his fix and help a friend when Sasuke requested matches. The Uchiha was frustrated over not being able to mould Lightning chakra, and the shogi matches acted as a sort-of meditation where he could calm down.

Two weeks in, and the genin have all made progress. The Chunin exams are just over two more weeks away, and it looks like the Hokage’s wishes for this mission are coming together.

Another Two Weeks Later

“Good work this whole month, everyone. I know I speak for all of us when I say that we are so proud of all of you.” Kakashi says, his hands on Kiba’s and Shikamaru’s heads. He’s smiling at all of the genin in the three-team group.

“I think we definitely ‘came together’ as Nomi-san would have wanted in his Dojo.” Asuma says,
knowing that he’s gonna have to admit to his father that the old man was right…again.

“But our time here is up. It’s time head back home to Konoha…after one last breakfast!” Kurenai says, to the delight of the hungry students.

At one end of the table, it’s seating Asuma, then Sasuke, then Shikamaru, then Naruto, Kiba, then Shino. On the other side of the table sits Kurenai, then Hinata, Sakura, Ino, Choji, and then Kakashi.

Asuma takes note of the seating arrangements – everyone is sitting with people from other teams. Kiba and Naruto are sitting together, and so is Shikamaru and Sasuke. Shino is next to and across from Choji and Kiba. Ino is next to Sakura.

Everyone has made friends with each other.

The mission was beyond successful. These genin – these children – have found friends that will make the life of a shinobi bearable. Not just to complete missions or to survive, but to live despite the job.

Asuma really enjoys his breakfast this morning…

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_Two Days Later_

The trek back to Konoha is just as long as it was to the Dojo – two days. The first day and night went off without a hitch, and there was no need to make people from different teams work together like there was a month prior.

The group is just a few more hours away from reaching Konoha – and that’s when Hinata senses two people.

Immediately activating her Byakugan, she sees two unfamiliar chakra signatures heading towards them at a fast pace.

“Senseis! Two shinobi heading towards us!” Hinata says, and all twelve shinobi in the group are on the defensive.

Hinata and her two teammates get into their defensive stance with Naruto making his clones. The other two teams follow their lead, with Sasuke and Kiba as the centers due to their visual and olfactory prowess.

Suddenly, two shinobi drop down in front of the group. Both seem to be around 18 or 19 years old, and both are wearing a black cloak with red clouds. One of them is also carrying a body…and according to the headband it’s of a cloud-nin.

“Heh, well recruit, it seems to be your lucky day. Number 9 looks weak. If we can nab him, you’d definitely be allowed in!” The one with blonde hair – who’s carrying the body and who everyone is thinking looks surprising a lot like Ino – says to the other.

The other robed-nin, who has light purple hair and is carrying a large red scythe, smiles and licks his lips.

“It’s been much too long since my last ritual.” He says to the blonde, and cuts himself with his scythe and draws a…weird kind of circle on the floor in his own blood.
“Who are you? What are your intentions?” Kakashi asks, not moving from his position.

“I’m the artist known as Deidara! And my partner here is Hidan, and you probably know what we’re after. We’re after Number Nine!” Deidara says, smirking and glancing at Naruto.

Fear fills the young jinchuuriki as he knows exactly what that means. He unconsciously grips his stomach.

“Like hell you’re gonna get my student!” Asuma says. He’s taken quite a liking to everyone in the group, but he trained Naruto for a month in Wind manipulation, despite his lack of progress.

“Well you’re not going to have a choice!” Hidan says and swings his scythe at Naruto. However, it is slowed down when a bunch of kikaichu fly in front of Naruto, giving Hinata enough time to pull Naruto down as he ducks.

“I don’t know what you want with my friend, but we will stop you.” Shino says confidently. His heart is pounding in his chest, but he can’t mourn the loss of his kikaichu until the battle is over.

“Kurenai! Asuma! We’ll take the blonde leader. You all fight the ‘recruit.’” Kakashi says, pulling up his headband and exposing his Sharingan.

“Break!” And everyone splits up.

“...is an EXPLOSION!” Deidara immediately throws three of his exploding clays at the ground in front of the Jonin, making them step back.

The Jonin can tell Deidara is the real deal and they’re going to have to give this one their all. He may be young, but he is strong. He acts like a fool, but he is cunning.

And are those mouths on his hands?

This will be tough.

Hidan never moved from the circle he formed, and Deidara led the Jonin further away. The genin kept their distance from the ‘recruit’ while forming a nine-man circle around him.

“Which one of you cowards wants to first to see the true gift of Jashiin?” Hidan says, licking the blood off his arm where he cut himself to draw that circle-thing on the ground.

“I’ll go first.” Naruto says, but all the genin know that it’s actually a clone he substituted himself with. They know Naruto wouldn’t actually put himself in the line of fire like this anymore.

The Naru-clone, due to the size of Hidan’s scythe and how slow he is swinging it, is able to predict its movements enough to weave around and immediately try to kick Hidan in the balls.

He succeeds.

But instead of falling, Hidan moans and swipes at Naruto, hitting the clone and causing it to dissipate.
“That hurt you little fucker. Jashiin is going to love you all!” Hidan says, to the worry of the genin. “And I’m going to start with…YOU!”

Hidan lunges slightly out of his circle, aiming his scythe at Shino. Eight of the nine genin were too slow to react – Hidan being slightly faster than even their sensei – except for one.

Sasuke Uchiha, only because he had his Sharingan activated, was able to see the attack coming in time.

Pushing Shino, the Scythe misses his torso, but it does nick his arm slightly but not dealing any vital injuries.

“Aww, nice try fucker. But I still got him! Hehehehe.” Hidan says and laughs minaically. Then, to all nine genin’s collective disgusts, he licks Shino’s blood.

And then his skin turns pale white and gets black markings on his body…with a black dot in the middle of his forehead.

Naruto vaguely takes note that this looks odd enough to be some kind of sealing jutsu, like the one on his belly…

“Now feel the wrath of Lord Jashiin!” Hidan yells and then stabs himself in the leg.

“GAHHH!” Shino suddenly yells in agony, falling to the ground with his leg bleeding.

“SHINO!” Sasuke and Sakura yell at the same time, concerned over their teammate.

“What…What did you do to me?” Shino grits out, trying to keep his composure.

“Hahahahaha!” Hidan laughs before stabbing himself all over his abdomen.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” Shino screams, and Sasuke has had enough.

“Leave him the fuck alone!” Sasuke’s rage overpowers his though process, and he goes attacking Hidan straight-on. He avoids the scythe’s initial swing, and Sasuke kicks Him in the leg, trying to knock him down.

“BWAHH!” Shino yells again, and Sasuke freezes as he realizes what he’s done…

…Then the scythe hits him too.

Licking the blood of Sasuke, Hidan smiles wickedly at the Uchiha and then rips the scythe into his own arm.

“AHHHHHHHH!” Sasuke screams, now the victim of Hidan’s…Jashiin’s…cruel jutsu.

“SASUKE!” Everyone screams, except for Shikamaru. His eyes are focused on Hidan…when something clicks in his brain.

Hidan continues stabbing Sasuke in both his arms, and the genin continues to scream in agony.

“Guys! The circle! That’s it! Move him out of it!” Shikamaru suddenly yells, and the six other genin not injured begin thinking of a way to help Sasuke and Shino before they die.

But nobody can think of anything. Of Earth users, they are nowhere near the level they need to be yet. Even attempting to change the earth like this would result in chakra exhaustion. Shikamaru is
Naruto has never felt this kind of rage before.

He’s gotten angry. He’s gotten furious. But he has never felt like this…never wanted to kill someone before.

Naruto stares at the unconscious form of Shino and his kikaichu trying to heal him. He looks at Sasuke trying to stand up, but only looking at his teammate.

Then all their eyes look towards Naruto. They see dark orange-red chakra pooling around him, his canines turning into fangs, his eyes becoming red. They also see a tail of chakra behind him.

Hinata and Shikamaru know what kind of chakra this is, and they’re afraid of their own teammate right now.

Suddenly, there’s a swirl of leaves.

“What the hell’s going on?” Out of nowhere, Kakashi is here asking. He sensed the Kyuubi’s volatile chakra, and needed to help his sensei’s son, Kurenai and Asuma saying they can hold off Deidara. Even though Kurenai is his sensei, she believes Kakashi would better handle this because of his history with Kushina.

And what Kakashi sees what happened to his students…he can’t even get his thought straight. Flashbacks of Obito’s and Rin’s faces before they died…

Kakashi stares at Hidan, ready to grab the scythe at any movement. Hidan stops moving out of curiosity and intrigue at the situation.

Maybe he can even sacrifice the Hatake too!

“Naruto! Can you hear me?” Kakashi asks to the enraged jinchuuriki, who turns his head to look at him.

“Y-Yes.” Naruto stammers out, barely keeping himself in check.

“I need you. Get the ground. Understood?” Kakashi asks, receiving only a nod in response.

“GO!” Kakashi yells and all genin, especially Naruto’s teammates, are stunned by how fast he just moved. The entire ground below Hidan cracked due to the punch Naruto dealt to it.

“FUCK!” Hidan yells, his skin suddenly turning back to his normal tone, losing the black marks and pale complexion.

Hidan jumps away to avoid a raging jinchuuriki he still wants to hunt, and jumps straight into an instantly-charged chidori.

It was so fast nobody even heard the screeching sounds of it.
“That fucking hurt!” Hidan yells with Kakashi’s arm still through his chest.

“What…what the hell are you?” Kakashi asks in shock, pulling his arm out of the man’s chest and kicking him in the head.

“You can’t kill me! Only Lord Jashiin can but he needs sacrifices before my usefulness is gone!” Hidan says, smiling.

But then his partner has to show and ruin the party.

“You idiot, dude! You weren’t supposed to make him like that!” Deidara appears, scolding Hidan for Naruto’s one-tailed cloak state.

“Fuck off. I was having fun and doing my rituals.” Hidan says, making Deidara scowl.

“Too bad. We’re leaving now. We still need to collect the bounty for Leader.” Deidara says, and Hidan just scowls before walking away.

“Well it was fun while it lasted. Let’s be sure to do this again, eh?” Deidara says, the body he was carrying earlier back over his shoulders, before he disappears.

Seeing them both gone, Naruto relaxes. Then he passes out.

They were out of their league. Deidara was too much for three jonin to finish off. They were at a standstill, and neither side was making any progress.

And seeing what Hidan was capable of with that…technique…it could kill anyone with just a drop of blood. He survived a chidori through the heart…no Kage could survive that.

Kakashi and Asuma could only watch as Kurenai frantically tries to heal both male members of Team 7. She gets them both stabilized, with Shino’s kikaichu helping both of them as well, but there’s only so much she can do. She was still training to be a medic-nin when she switched to genjutsu.

“We need to get them back to Konoha, now. Asuma, carry Shino. Sasuke’s wounds are more serious and I have them.” Kurenai orders, and Asuma knows better than to argue with his girlfriend at a time like this. When she gets like this, she is 100% logic and her reasoning is always sound.

Asuma picks up the Aburame, and Kurenai follows with Sasuke. They leave without saying anything else.

“Kakashi-sensei…couldn’t…couldn’t they put Sasuke and Shino in sealing scrolls? It keeps food from rotting…” Shikamaru asks, blushing over the outrageous question.

But Kurenai-sensei did put two men in a scroll on that disastrous return when they met rouge Rain ninja.

“No. The chakra of people interact too much with the preservation seals. They’re just not good enough.” Kakashi answers, rubbing his face.

He walks over to Naruto and lifts the unconscious boy, whose skin is burnt.
‘He looks so much like them…’ Kakashi thinks before taking a breath and focusing.

“I’ll carry Naruto. We need to get back to Konoha too. Fast as we can.”

And they all take off running.

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One Day Later

Sakura is sitting by hero two teammates. They are awake, but they are all wrapped up in bandages and are restrained so they don’t move. Nobody is saying anything.

The medics were amazing and were able to find a way to prevent any muscular or dermatological scarring. But they cannot move or else they will scar. If there had been poison on that blade like when Sakura was hurt in her hand…the scarring on her teammates would be quite severe.

Sakura is beyond relieved that her teammates will be okay. But she felt so useless as both her teammates were getting hurt.

She knows it’s not her fault. It could have happened to anyone. But now she knows she needs to advance her medical ninjutsu. The training during their month-long mission was a good start, but nothing substantial.

“I’m so sorry.” The voice of their sensei says. None of the genin are surprised by the fact he’s suddenly there, but by the fact that he’s blaming himself.

“It’s not your fault sensei.” Shino says whole-heartedly.

“It is. If we hadn’t split up. If one of us stayed with you all…” Kakashi trails off.

“He was the weaker of the two – the lacky. You were needed against the other one with Asuma-sensei and Kurenai-sensei.” Shino continues to speak rationally.

“I was going to recommend you all for the Chuunin Exams that start in a few days. But you two are in no shape to compete.” Kakashi says, knowing that the Chuunin Exams were part of the reason for the entire mission to begin with.

“Sakura, you should still compete. You’ve improved so-” Sasuke speaks up, looking into her eyes. But he is cut off by her.

“No way. I don’t care about promotion if it’s not with you two. We’re a team. Forever.” Sakura immediately says with every part of her being, and for the first time in a day Kakashi smiles.

“It’s good you think that…because only teams of three are allowed to enter anyway.” Kakashi says, and the three genin smile at him.

“Sensei…I need a teacher for medical ninjutsu. What happened…and what Kurenai-sensei did to help them…I need to do that. I need to be better than that. I want to be the best medic in Konoha to protect my teammates.” Sakura says, and Kakashi looks at her.

It’s still so hard to believe that it was only six months ago that she was that fangirl. And here she is, practically declaring herself to be the next Tsunade Senju.

“I’ll see what I can do,”
‘Naruto…’ Naruto awakes and finds himself in a dank sewer, with water up to his calves.

He has a sick feeling what that voice is.

He continues along the water and finds himself in front of a cage. A very large cage. One locked by only a piece of paper with the word ‘seal’ on it.

And, of course, the Nine-Tailed Fox looking at him with snarled teeth is inside the cage.

‘Did you like my power?’ The Fox asks, moving his forward in a bit of the air.

And Naruto wakes up, in the hospital, surrounded by Kurenai-sensei, Hinata, and Shikamaru.

“Naruto!” Hinata cries and pulls him into a tight hug.

She was so afraid when the Fox’s chakra surrounded Naruto. She actually thought that he might hurt her. But when Kakashi-sensei talked to him, he…was still Naruto. Demon chakra or not, Naruto is strong. He would never hurt her or Shikamaru.

Hinata could sense the malevolence in that chakra. Never had she felt chakra that was so evil and different. It was a terrifying experience for her – seeing the boy she loves surrounded by such evil chakra, burning his skin – then seeing him pass out with such little chakra activity in his body.

“Good job Naruto. Kakashi filled me in on what happened. You helped save Sasuke and Shino by stopping that…monster’s…jutsu.” Kurenai tells her student.

“I couldn’t have done it without Shika. He figured it out what needed to happen. And…I just did what Kakashi-sensei said.” Naruto says, nervous to bring up mention of anything related to the Fox.

Naruto didn’t know what was happening in the moment. He could barely think. He listened to the voice of his sensei – the one voice he could hear about his own bad thoughts in that state.

“Sensei…I think…It talked to me.” Naruto begins, and Kurenai’s normally focused demeanor is replaced by shock.

“When?” She asks.

“Just before I woke up. It might have been a dream, but…it was so clear. It just said my name and asked if I liked ‘its power.’ I didn’t…at all. I wanted to kill him, sensei. I’ve never wanted to kill before…” Naruto trails off, pulling Shikamaru into the hug Hinata still has him in. Shikamaru gladly pulls them in.

“That’s good Naruto. Nobody should want to kill. We do it out of necessity. I’m proud of you for sharing this with us.” Kurenai says.

“Shika…how did you figure it out?” Naruto asks his best friend.

“Well…he made his circle at the beginning and kept talking about the ritual. I knew they were tied to it, but after he got Shino she stepped back into it. I just knew then.” Shikamaru says, speaking for the first time since Naruto awoke.

Shikamaru, like Hinata, was afraid when Naruto started transforming. But he wasn’t afraid of him; he was afraid for him. He gave off so much Killing Intent – he knew Naruto would never hurt him or
Hinata or their comrades, but he was afraid the evil chakra would turn him into a different person.

He’s beyond relieved that his teammate is alright.

“Naruto, the doctors estimate you should be able to be out of the hospital by tomorrow, two days latest. The Chuunin Exams start in four days. Who wants to take it?” Kurenai asks, and all three of her genin look at each other before nodding heavily.

“Good. Teams of three are required to take it. I’ll give you the application papers tomorrow.” Kurenai says.

Shikamaru and Hinata climb into bed with Naruto – it’s cramped but they all like laying together. They’re safe, they’re home, and they have each other.

After a couple hours laying there enjoying each other’s company, Shikamaru says that he wants to visit and check on Sasuke and Shino. Hinata agrees, and Naruto would go if he could.

Four days from now the Chuunin Exams Begin. Team 10 will be taking the exams as well as Team 8, but Team 7 is out.

They have no idea what to expect, but all Team 8 knows is that they have to protect their friends and each other.

Four days.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the ‘Training Arc’ is complete. ! Like I said, this chapter begins major canon divergence. Akatsuki is here and Naruto knows and has to keep his secret; two members of Team 7 were critically injured and the team is out of the Exams.

Regarding Akatsuki – they need money. Bounty-hunting mission galore. The bounty they just hunted was in the Land of Fire. Because our group was outside Konoha, Hidan would have loved to sacrifice multiple people. And then they saw Naruto – part of their main objective.

If they never left Konoha, they never would have met Akatsuki. They left because of teamwork issues (which wouldn’t have happened if Team 10 was Ino-Shika-Cho like in canon).

Just changing team compositions can do this much…!

Side-note: Next chapter might have to be delayed a week. It’s almost moving time and things are getting hectic. I will try to keep on schedule though.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and stay tuned for Chapter 13! Thanks for reading everyone!

Also, don’t forget to review!
The Exams Begin

Chapter Summary

The Chuunin Exams begin. Following lunch together, Teams 8 and 10 meet some people they agree on avoiding, and they create a pact. At the exam location, they meet another questionable person.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Short chapter instead of skipping a week! And the Chuunin Exam Arc officially begins! Hope you guys enjoy this chapter!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 13)-The Exams Begin

Shikamaru’s P.O.V.

Two Days Later

Hinata and I have been busy.

Naruto is getting out of the hospital today! Unfortunately, Shino and Sasuke are still being kept there due to how severe their injuries were, but at least they are allowed to move now. I could tell they both hated the whole situation, but Sasuke really didn’t like having to dictate where his pieces would go when I had to move them in our Shogi matches.

Today, we’re having a lunch get-together with Team 10. It was Hinata’s idea – I think it’s a good idea, but there’s no way I’d ever let my name be associated with an idea like that. I’m way too lazy to organize something like that.

Kurenai-sensei gave us the application papers for the exams earlier today, before she helped us check Naruto out of the hospital.

“It’s so good to be out of here! I’m starving!” Naruto says as we walk out of the hospital together, immediately on the way to Team 10’s usual eating spot – a barbeque restaurant that Choji recommended and gets them (and us now) a group discount for!

“Guys, over here!” Ino calls to us, waving. We follow her into a separate room that is clearly meant for parties than it is for regular guests. And to my surprise Sakura is here too – I thought she would have wanted to stay with her teammates.

“Sakura! Glad you could make it!” Naruto greets her, and she smiles at us.
“Yeah, Shino and Sasuke said I should come, that they’ll be alright for a few hours alone.” She says, and for a second I hear their screams of agony from that day.

It was horrible. I’ve never heard such screams before – even the Ame-nin that sensei tortured with genjutsu didn’t sound like that. He probably had training to endure it, but still. Shino and Sasuke’s screams were horrible.

They don’t actually remember much of the pain – Shino was passed out and Sasuke said he was too worried about Shino to process it once Hidan let up. It’s good that they don’t remember – the mental scars would be awful.

After those two shinobi left and Shino and Sasuke were being rushed to Konoha – I realized something. Something that I didn’t want to accept at first a month ago.

I like Sasuke.

And…I’m okay with that. What I’m going to do with this realization though, I don’t know. Things are different now than they were a month ago when my feelings started. All of us, we’re not just friends. It’s as if all nine of us, plus our sensei, are one big team now. Seeing how Shino so easily came to Naruto’s defense…that was just one example at how we’re no longer just three separate teams anymore.

“What would you guys like to eat?” Choji asks, getting the party menus from the holder and handing them to us.

My thoughts re interrupted for some time while we eat, and I’m appreciative. Thoughts can be a real drag sometimes.

“Can…can I ask you something, Naruto?” Ino speaks. We’re all pretty much done eating, and we’re just sitting and talking. Up until now, I’ve been laying down with my head in my arms filtering out the unimportant talk. But Ino’s tone brings me to full attention.

“Of course you can!” Naruto responds with confidence, but we all know what this is going to be about.

“What…what happened to you? The chakra…the feelings in the air…” Ino trails off.

We’ve talked about this as a team with Kurenai-sensei. Knowing the others would have questions, we have a simple and plausible excuse.

“I…really don’t know. When I asked Kurneai-sensei…she never heard of anything like what happened to me. All we can think of is that it’s some sort of bloodline. It’s probably related to why my chakra reserves are so large. But I’m an orphan and we just don’t know…” Naruto says, and his delivery is believable. It doesn’t sound fake or rehearsed.

“Do you…think it’s why those guys were after you? Calling you ‘Number 9’?” Kiba asks.

“Maybe, maybe not. I always had questions about where I was from and who I am, but now I have more questions than ever.” Naruto says, and he’s not entirely lying. He really wants to know about his heritage.

“Whatever the case is, you’re one of us. If those guys, or anyone else, comes after you again, we’ll
fight with you!” Kiba says, clearly over his issues from weeks ago.

“Yeah! Us too!” Sakura says, including her team in Kiba’s declaration.

“Th-thanks guys. That really means a lot. And of course the same for all of you too.” Naruto says, voice breaking at the beginning.

I can never truly know how he felt before we became friends, how alone and miserable he was. But he’s clearly accepted being loved by all of us.

“I think this calls for some desert!” Choji says, breaking the emotional tension.

Good call, dude.

Naruto’s P.O.V.

I had no idea I needed to hear Kiba and Sakura say that to me – that no matter what, they’re going to protect me.

They said I’m one of them.

It’s not just my team now – there are other people who truly care about me. And I’m so grateful for them.

“We’ll see you guys when the Exams start, right?” Ino asks as we’re about to part ways from the restaurant.

“Oh course! We’re going to do very-” Hinata is cut off.

“HEY, LEMME GO!” I hear a very familiar child’s voice scream, and I run immediately to it.

I run around a few corners and I see Konohamaru being held up by…someone that appears to be wearing a black-cat suit and has paint going down his face in streaks.

“Let him go!” Moegi and Udon shout, but too afraid to actually try to make him do so.

“No – how else are you brats going to learn where you’re going?” The guy who’s holding him – who looks just to be about my age – raises his arm.

“Unless you Sand Ninja want to be responsible for causing an international incident by striking the Hokage’s grandson, you will let him go.” I turn around and I see Shika there, already having the guy captured in his shadow.

The guy’s face is priceless as he looks on in horror at Konohamaru.

“There you go again, Kankuro. Always starting trouble. Let him go.” A blonde girl jumps down, and I’m not at all worried. If I needed to be, Hinata would have spoken up as Shika’s shadow is in use.

“You’re lucky I don’t kill you Kankuro. Disgracing our village.” I hear a raspy deep voice, and out of the shadows steps a boy – red hair, with the word love tattooed on his face.

I see Shika’s shadow leave Kankuro, as he was called. And then I feel it land on me and give very
many pulls.

That means danger. A lot of it.

(And thank goodness he’s been practicing on manipulating the thickness of the shadow – it can’t even be seen anymore for the communication technique if he doesn’t want it to be.)

“Ugh!” Konohamaru lets out as Kankuro drops him in front of his friends.

“S-Sorry Gaara!” Kankuro stammers, and all three leave without saying anything to us.

“Thank you, big brother Naruto! Big brother Shika! Big sister Hinata!” Konohamaru says, bowing to the three of us.

Konohamaru is never that respectful. Never since we met him have we seen him acting so polite. Hell, when we met him he was trying to escape that trainer of his Ebisu and trying to steal fruit from vendors as a ‘ninja exercise.’

“Happy to help! Now you guys go and find your teacher and get him to teach you some basic offense. It’s never too early to learn how to kick a dude in the balls if it’s your only option.” I tell them, knowing that’s exactly what I would have done if I was a little kid in his position.

“Yes sir!” They all say before running off.

Kids.

“You’re friends with the Hokage’s grandson?” Kiba asks us, and I forgot they were even here. I saw them when I turned around and saw Shika but put it out of my mind.

“Yeah, but by random chance. Like 4 months ago we caught him trying to play ninja and then he got caught and it was such a drag trying to calm the tensions between the vendors, the teacher, and him. He and his friends kinda stuck around because we helped the kid, and yeah. It’s alright, but he is pretty exhausting and troublesome sometimes.” Shika explains, and I couldn’t have said it better myself.

“That’s not what’s important. That…Gaara kid…he’s dangerous. Extremely.” Hinata speaks up, eyes fixed on the spot where he was.

“Yeah…Akamaru and I got a bad feeling about him…” Kiba says, and Akamaru is still shaking.

“Whatever happens, we all need to stick together in the Exams. Pass or fail, our friendships and lives aren’t worth it. Avoid him at all costs.” Hinata says, and for a moment I am shocked at what she is saying.

She said she never gives up no matter the odds and that she learned that from me. But if she’s saying this…

She must sense something in him that we can’t. If she’s saying to just avoid him flat-out even if it means failing…I have to trust her. And I do – completely.

“Yeah. No matter what. The six of us are one team when it matters the most!” Kiba says, and we all agree.

Once again, I didn’t know I needed to hear that so much.
“That Gaara’s chakra…it’s odd. Naruto, it’s not unlike yours.” Hinata tells me as the three of us are in Shika’s clan compound, looking at clouds. Our heads are all resting against each other on the grass.

“W-What?” I stammer out, turning my head to look at her upside-down.

“I saw it. This month’s training lets me see more detail, and I see that his chakra is being filtered by something on his abdomen. Almost like…a seal. And there is a lot of volatile chakra in his system too. I don’t know what this means, but the closest comparison is the Kyuubi’s chakra when we saw it. Hinata explains.

Could there be…others like me? Others with demons sealed inside them?

“I remember reading once of something called the Tailed Beasts. I distinctly remember is was plural – so assuming that’s true then Naruto having the Kyuubi means he only has one of however many there are.” Shika says.

“There are…others like me? I wonder how many of them were hated, scorned at, spit upon for even existing like I was. And maybe that’s why Gaara seemed so murderous – he hates everyone because he was hated.” I say, and I feel Shika grab my hand. Hinata grabs the other.

“That’s why I said what I said – he obviously has no qualms about killing. The exams aren’t worth our lives if we fight him.” Hinata says about earlier, and I was right to trust her.

“Maybe there are others like you. We don’t know anything yet about him for sure. But Naruto, remember that you’re not him. Despite everything you’ve been through you’re still the most caring person I know. Just even worrying about Gaara after what we saw…that proves it. You’re not like him, and you will never be.” Hinata says, and I let the tears fall.

“I love you guys.” I say.

Nothing else is said as I cry silently for the childhood of people I don’t even know actually exist.

“Remember you three, from here on out this is a competition. The pact you made with Asuma’s team is great and I couldn’t be more proud, but it’s still a competition. Good luck, guys.” Kurenai-sensei says then body-flickers away before we enter the building for the exams.

We go in, climbing the stairs to the second floor, yet we see so many genin crowding around Room 311.

I feel Shika’s shadow, and I can guess it means this is a trick. And as this is supposed to be a competition, we just go up the next flight of stairs and go to another Room labeled 311.

We wait a few minutes in silence. Our backs are against a wall, and Hinata is between us and is holding my hand and Shika’s hand out of sight from everyone. There’s a much smaller amount of people on this floor than the one below.

“They’re here!” Hinata suddenly says excitedly, and I look to the staircase and see Team 10 walking up the stairs.
Her sensor abilities are so freaking cool!

“The test has already begun.” Shika says as we walk away from the wall to meet with Team 10.

“Good observation!” A new voice sounds from our right, making all of us turn to it.

I see a guy with a Leaf headband, silver hair not unlike Kakashi-sensei’s, and who looks to be a few years older than us.

“You know, it’s never wise to sneak up on a shinobi – even a fellow one of the same village.” Shika says, and this guy only smiles at us innocently.

“Sorry, sorry. My name’s Kabuto Yakushi. This is going to be my fifth time taking the exams, so I just wanted to give some advice to you young ones.” Kabuto tells us, and that’s a red flag.

Fifth time? That means four fails. Even I didn’t fail the academy that many times...

“The exams sure must be tough then for you to have to take it so many times.” I say, and his smile never falters but he does wink at me.

“Yes, I would think so. So, I wanted to tell you guys that you should know your opponents for the exam. So, what’s your name?” He says and looks to me.

“Naruto Uzumaki.” I will never, unless in a mission, use a fake name. That is my name and I am proud of it.

“See, I have these ninja information cards. Naruto Uzumaki – teammate of Hinata Hyuuga and Shikamaru Nara. 25 D-Rank missions, 5 C-Ranks. You’re a rookie! Very nice for your first exams.” Kabuto says, and I feel Shika’s shadow pull.

Okay, how can he know that? 4 of those C-Ranks are official, but the fifth one was pay for capturing those Ame-nin that attacked us. There shouldn’t be any record of that.

“Wow, that’s pretty useful stuff. How about tell us about that Gaara kid from Suna.” Shika says, and knowing how accurate he was about us, I really want to know about Gaara.

“Gaara of the Desert – teammate of Temari and Kankuro of the Desert. 5 D-Ranks, 20 C-Ranks, 3 B-Ranks. No failed missions – never even an injury reported. They’re going to be formidable!” Kabuto says with excitement.

And I feel a bit afraid. B-Rank missions? As a genin? No injuries at all?

“Yeah, thanks for the information!” Ino says happily, but something tells me she doesn’t mean it. Her father isn’t the head of T&I for nothing.

“Of course. However I am disappointed to see Sasuke Uchiha isn’t here.” WHAT? “He has a reputation due to being top of his graduating class. His card says he’s currently out of active duty due to injury. What a shame. Anyway, good luck with the exams. Gonna go back to my team now.” Kabuto says, holding up his hand as he leaves.

“Okay, that had so many red flags.” Ino immediately says, turning to us. “That happy façade was too good to be real. And you guys told us about that C-Rank where you were attacked. And mentioning Sasuke out of nowhere and that he’s injured? How can his cards know that? I think we should avoid him like that Gaara kid – I don’t care if he’s from Konoha or not.” She explains, and I am getting a bad feeling about these exams already.
“I agree. I used my Byakugan for a moment when he walked away…and I saw some weirdness in his chakra. Almost like there were snippets of another person’s chakra in there too. It was disturbing.” Hinata says, and that’s another person with strange chakra in addition to Gaara.

“Remember our pact. We’re friends among all else. Pass or fail – we stick together and we survive.” I say, putting my hand between the six of us. Hinata and Shika follow, and then so do Ino, Choji, and Kiba.

The door to Room 311 opens up just as we separate out hands. We walk in, knowing that we’ll pull through if we all stick together.

These exams are no longer just exams. This is the real deal.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Instead of skipping a week, here’s a shorter chapter. This chapter was meant to include the entire first exam and intermission as well, but that’ll have to be next chapter. I really don’t want to skip a week, and I had to cut it off here.

Despite the short chapter, I hope you enjoyed reading. I love writing this story and getting feedback, so if you have anything to say I would really like to hear it!

Stay tuned next week for Chapter 14! Also, don’t forget to review!
The First Exam

Chapter Summary

The first phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams begin. Naruto struggles, but his team is able to support him. And Shikamaru comes up with an idea to keep their pact with Team 10 viable during the second exam.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s Chapter 14! Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 14)-The First Exam

Naruto’s P.O.V.

“Everyone take a number than sit according to the chart!” A man, who I’m not ashamed to call ‘intimidating’, that has two large scars running across his face yells at us. He’s frowning, dressed in all black, yet is wearing the Leaf headband.

I’m number 18, and Hinata and Shika are numbers 19 and 20.

And when I see Hinata’s and Shika’s seat is way from mine, I get a bad feeling. Kurenai-sensei said that only teams of three take the exams together…so why are we being separated?

I’m sitting closest to the door on the right side of the room. Hinata is on the left side of the room, a few rows down. And Shika is sitting in the very back, dead center column.

Splitting us up as much as they could. They’re doing the same to Team 10 too…

“Alright, bugs. Welcome to the Written phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams. I am your proctor. You don’t want to know my name – seeing my bingo book entry would turn your stomach. Here are the rules. Answer the questions, and don’t get caught cheating. Getting caught too many times will mean your whole team fails and it’ll be your own damn fault. Ready? Too bad if you’re not. Beg—”

“I have a question!” Someone from Konoha shouts from the left side of the room across from me, and he’s had his arm up for a while.

“Too fucking bad. And that outburst causes your team to FAIL! I gave all the instructions you needed. You three get your asses out of my room RIGHT NOW!” The man roars, giving out so much Killing Intent. Many of the other genin shiver out of fear.

His team scrambles out of the room, leaving the proctor to only laugh at them.
But this is a written test? Fuck – I can’t do crap in written tests. Except for when we trained on the first day and I explained what I felt during tree-walking, I’ve never been able to answer questions.

I didn’t exactly try my hardest back at the academy, but I did try. And I never knew the answers, or I only knew a small part, and I always failed those tests or just barely scraped by.

And now there’s a written test too. And if I fail this, then we all fail. That much is beyond clear how a whole team failed for wanting to ask a question.

I’m so fucked right now.

“Cowards. Wouldn’t have lasted an hour in the next phase. Three second-years still not ready to be a fucking chuunin. Maybe they won’t be pussies in six months. And as I was saying – begin!” The proctor says, immediately scanning his eyes across the room as papers appear on everyone’s desk.

Man, this guy is sick.

And I need to ask Hinata after how they did that…I bet she can tell as a sensor. Knowing how to make things appear like that, depending on how it works, can probably be useful to know. Shika would totally be able to think of something for it to be of use.

I don’t try to at either of my teammates, because this proctor guy might think of it as cheating.

Instead, I take a deep breath and open the first page and read.

*With three examples, explain briefly how chakra exhaustion is diagnosed and three remedies for it out in the field.*

What. The. Hell?

I know what chakra exhaustion is…kinda. Early in our Wind training with Asuma-sensei, Kiba passed out and sensei said that he was nearing chakra exhaustion. But that’s literally all I know about it except for one mention of the phrase from class in the Academy…but I don’t remember anything from that. Just the phrase.

Okay, question two might be better, right?

*Please be better…*

‘You’re given an assassination mission. There are four guards surrounding the target in each of the four cardinal directions. How do you kill the target and escape, leaving no witnesses or traces to your identity?’

FUCK!

I can’t answer this one either. And an assassination mission? I don’t…ever want to kill. I know I did when the Kyuubi’s chakra…affected me…but I don’t want to kill. I don’t want there to be violence.

I want to be Hokage to help people. To help orphans, to make sure nobody falls behind in school. To make peace in the ninja world.

The Fourth Hokage is the Hokage that I look up to the most. The youngest, but considered the most powerful. I’ve probably spent more time studying him than the stuff in school. But I know the Stone Village hates us because he killed a lot of their ninja.

It was said he didn’t like killing. But he did it to protect his comrades and his village. I can
understand that, totally.

But I want to be the kind of Hokage where I don’t have to kill at all. I want to believe everyone has good in them. Even…those Hidan and Deidara guys.

How did they get to that spot? To be hunting me for the Kyuubi? What went wrong in their lives for them to turn out so bad?

What happened to that Gaara guy to make him so willing to kill at even our age?

What happened to Sasuke’s brother Itachi for him to kill his whole clan?

I want to be the Hokage to let none of these bad things even happen. To make my village – and the other villages – thrive with peace.

Everytime anyone looked at me hate in their eyes, like I was nothing, I wanted nothing more than to prove them wrong. And to prove them wrong, would be not only to be Hokage but then to help people like me.

Back then, I didn’t know I had the Kyuubi in me. I thought they hated me because I was an orphan. In the orphanage, I only had Kala looking out for me. And my only friend was Heba until he got adopted. I always envisioned myself able to help kids in my position. Especially kids like Takato, who almost died as a baby because medics couldn’t even help.

And that evolved into Hokage, into peace. And that’s what I want.

If there was peace, not as many people would die and there wouldn’t be so many orphans being left behind. If there was peace, doctors could work harder on developing new medicines and treatments, right?

So…how can I even begin to answer this exam question? Not only would answering it go against my entire nindo, but we didn’t even cover assassination techniques in class or while training.

I’m ruining this for my team, I just know it.

I’m sorry Hinata, Shika. I know what you guys said, that we’d always be a team. But…I’m failing you guys right now. You’re depending on me to get through this exam but I just can’t. I just don’t know the answers and you guys probably do and –

Sh-Shika!

He’s used his Shadow Possession Jutsu on me. I know it’s him – he’s practiced on Hinata and me so much that I know he has a plan right now. I don’t fight it.

I watch as he controls my arms, turns back to the first page, and starts writing on my paper.

‘Chakra exhaustion is only diagnosed through symptoms. Three of such symptoms include fatigue, overused chakra coils, and slow electrical signal response time throughout the patient’s body. Three such field remedies include soldier pills, chakra transfusion from a donor, and if it is safe to do so, rest and stimulation of the hypothalamus while in REM sleep from a medic-nin.’

Yeah, I definitely don’t remember this stuff from when Iruka-sensei mentioned chakra exhaustion in class.

Shika starts answering question two as well.
‘To kill target, either come from above or below, depending on the environment. If indoors, above. Outdoors, probably from below. Because they have guards, genjutsu can be used on all four of them.’

“YOU! Number 7! You and 8 and 9 GET OUT! You FAILED!” The proctor yells, going over to the girl’s table taking her paper, and ripping it up and throwing it in her face. She looks like she’s about to cry before one of her teammates grabs her arm and leads her out of the room. I see Suna headbands on them, like Gaara’s team had.

“Damn fools. They obviously didn’t think Konoha could see through simple puppetry jutsu. BACK TO WORK!” He commands, and I feel Shika begin writing again.

‘-to make them leave. Or, all four of them can be killed. Either means we wouldn’t have witnesses. To mask tracks, no usage of unique kekkei genkai – no village or shinobi is identifiable with only pure elemental jutsu.’

As he writes this, I can’t help but think what we’re doing is puppetry. But it must be different if they can see Suna’s but not this.

And I could not have come up with anything like what Shika just wrote on our papers. Not only is killing just not in my nature, but his answers were way beyond any planning I could do. He really is a genius.

“NUMBER 32! GET YOU AND YOUR PATHETIC ASS TEAM OUT OF HERE!” The proctor yells, and after scurrying out, Shika begin writing the answer to question three.

He’s written my entire exam for me so far. And there were no questions I would have been able to answer. All nine of them were way beyond my level.

During this time, the proctor has kicked a few more teams out. And when one defied him and said they weren’t cheating, his response was not pretty. I guess this guy works with Ino’s dad in T&I – his threats with torture and the ‘mild’ (so the proctor says) genjutsu he placed on the Grass-nin was enough to make the girl cry for mercy and then pass out, needing her teammates to carry her out.

I’m so glad that Shika’s jutsu is not being detected. Or else not only would we fail, but we would probably be traumatized too.

“Alright you little fuckers, pencils down. You wimpy genin really tested my patience – especially that last team. Having the nerve to call me a liar. Here’s a tip for the rest of your life – learn to pick your fights. And with that advice, it’s time for the tenth question. But there are conditions. Don’t answer it, you fail. Answer it but get it wrong, you will never be able to take the Chuunin Exams again. Not only if you’re in Konoha – all villages.” The proctor says.

Never be able to take the exams again? How could I be Hokage then? How could any of us reach our dreams? Hinata and Shika need to advance for their goals too. And so do Kiba, Choji, and Ino!

Should we wait until the next exams then?

“You can’t do that! That Kabuto guy said he’s taken the exams many times!” Some guy with a Konoha headband says, and though I feel bad for him, even I know now that he’s an idiot for trying to make a comment.
YOU DARE QUESTION YOUR EXAM PROCTOR! YOU AND YOUR TEAM FUCKING FAIL!” The proctor yells and this time actually body-flickers to this person and _picks him up_ before _throwing_ him out the door into the wall.

Every time he does this, his punishments get worse.

No…no, we can’t wait. This guy is our proctor, and he’s been scaring everyone. Gaara’s team, and Kabuto…they might _truly_ be dangerous. The six of us made a promise to each other – our lives are not worth a promotion.

I don’t care if I will only be a genin for the rest of my life. I can become Hokage another way. But _we need_ to stay in these exams, if not only to potentially back up Team 10. Chuunin rank be damned – I will _not_ leave my friends alone with these stakes.

Without thinking of the consequences, I begin to raise my hand and draw a breath to speak when I _freeze._

_Thank you, Shika!_

Once again, Shika saves me from failing. The proctor eyes me, but them smirks and doesn’t say anything.

“If you want another shot in six months, leave now.”

A few teams leave, but Team 10 doesn’t.

After everyone leaves, the proctor stands in the middle of the room, looking _angry._

“And the tenth question, you poor sons of bitches is…YOU PASS!” He says, immediately smiling at us.

_Huh?_

“I want to show you guys something.” He says before taking off his cap and…_holy fuck_ does that look awful.

His scalp looks like an experiment gone _wrong_. He’s clearly been through immense torture to get scars like that…

…which already makes me want to be even stronger so make sure that doesn’t happen to my friends.

“This happened on a mission. Double S-Rank. Deliver information by any means necessary. I could have opted out – Lord Hokage never would have forced me into this kind of mission, but I chose to do it knowing that this was a real possibility. That’s what the 10th question was – do you have the courage to serve your village no matter the personal cost? A Chuunin knows their life belongs to the village and their Kage. The first nine questions were to test your ability to gather information without getting caught, but the real point of the test was the last question.” The proctor says, and as he puts on his cap, the window _bursts_ open, sending glass everywhere.

So…we would have passed anyway? The first nine questions didn’t…_even matter_ in the first place?

That’s messed up! All that stress for nothing?!

“Wow, Ibiki. You weren’t kidding when you said you could get these numbers down. Still high, but lower than it’s been.” A purple-haired woman says, holding a stick of dumplings.
“Anko, for once you’re not early. Unlike me, you’re losing your touch.” The proctor – Ibiki – says, finishing tying his cap back on.

“Yeah, yeah. Shut it. Anyway, brats, I’m Anko and I’m the proctor for the second exam. Gather with your team follow me to Training Ground 44!”

“Welcome to Training Ground 44 – also known as Konoha’s Forest of Death! Here, the Survival Phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams will take place. And due to the shit that’s in there, including you little monsters, you’re going to need to sign these release forms. If you don’t sign them, you fail. They say Konoha won’t be held responsible in the chance that you get injured or die.” The proctor Anko says, holding up a stack of papers.

Forest of Death? That doesn’t sound like a place we really want to be.

But the exams are here. And these release forms just make the pact between Team 10 and us even more worthwhile. A promotion, if it comes down to it in there, really isn’t worth our lives.

“You have 1 hour to decide to continue forward. Use this time to piss, shit, eat, I don’t give a fuck really. If continuing, sign the release with your team. If not, then get the fuck out of my sight because you’re not my problem then.” She announces and body-flickers away.

Ino, Choji, and Kiba find the three of us really easily. Each of them are holding their release forms.

“So, how’d you guys pass?” Ino asks and Choji takes out a bag of chips and begins eating.

What? It’s like she didn’t believe we could answer the questions!

…No way in hell am I gonna admit that to them!

“You first.” Shika says, raising his eyebrow.

“Mind transfer. Barely enough time to scribble a coherent answer for three tests. Thank goodness Kurenai started training Sakura and me in medical ninjutsu and that my dad works in T&I – I wouldn’t have known anything about that stuff unless I got both kinds of training.” Ino says.

So they cheated too? Heh, Ibiki did say it was about information gathering, but she knew it all already, like Shika did too!

“I used by Byakugan. I was able to see the person behind me and what they were writing.” Hinata says, and we all cheated!

If this was still the Academy, she never would have cheated!

“I knew cheating was allowed because the proctor said if we get caught too many times we would fail. Not for cheating just once. I was able to Shadow-possess Naruto and answer both of our exams at the same time.” Shika says, yawning and putting and arm behind his shoulder.

“Nice, Shikamaru. That guy is my Dad’s Number 2 in the office, so I knew he had something up his sleeve for this exam. I didn’t know what though. Good job, guys! We made it here!” Ino congratulates us, and I hold my hand up and all three of them give me a high-five. Choji offers us some chips too, which I take one and enjoy the salty crunch.

“Hinata, I wanted to ask you, do you know how he made the tests appear on our desk like that?” I
ask her, because if it’s something cool we might be able to use that!

“It was a genjutsu on everyone. Very strong one, too. I could sense the chakra and that it was his, but I couldn’t break it. The papers were there the whole time.” Hinata says, shrugging.

Damn, I was expecting some cool teleportation or mass-substitution or something. Not a genjutsu.

“Guys…I thought of something just now and I wanted to hear your opinions on it. First, we’re all continuing in the exams, right?” Shika suddenly is serious.

What’s going on?

“Of course! Yeah!” And variations of which are said by the five of us.

“Then this is my idea. Because he can do so many, I think Naruto should give Team 10 a shadow clone for emergencies. We learned during our training trip that he gets their memories when dispelled. If you guys keep one with you, like as a rock or something, it can dispel if you guys are ever in danger.” Shika says, and…wow!

That’s brilliant! That’s how we can protect our friends!

“I’m giving you my word as part of Team 8 that we won’t cheat with it. But we saw that Gaara guy threatening to kill his own teammate. And how sketchy Kabuto was. And now we have to sign release forms for an exam. It’s too risky. Not to say you guys can’t handle yourself, but we agreed to always protect each other. You guys can’t create clones – he can.” Shika continues.

“Please let me give you one. Remember what we said – we stick together pass or fail and we survive.” I add, wanting nothing more than to be able to protect them.

“I…really appreciate this. Thank you. What do you guys say?” Ino says, looking to her two teammates.

“If they are willing to, I don’t see why not.” Kiba says, with Akamaru yipping in agreement.

“Yeah, *munch* let’s do it! *munch*” Choji says in between mouthfuls.

“Perfect!” I say before creating a transformed shadow clone; it transformed into a dark green kunai.

I hand the clone to Ino – she seems to be the team leader in all this. Heh, I like this Ino much better than Academy Ino. It’s so amazing how much we all changed last month!

For the remainder of the break, we all sit together and eat lunch. We talk, and we enjoy our time together before we are called back to the entrance to the forest by Anko.

“All right brats, hand in your release forms. It’s time to go over the rules for the Survival Exam!”

We can do this. We will survive.

We must survive.
A/N: This chapter was pretty easy to write. I decided to make Ibiki more menacing, and I think it makes for a more entertaining read. And Shikamaru was the hero of this chapter – I honestly don’t see Naruto making a speech and not failing. I feel like Team 7 should have failed in canon because of that – he ruined the entire point of the exam to begin with!

It’s getting closer and closer to moving time (and Christmas), so next chapter might be delayed a week. I’ll still try my best to get it (or part of it) out on time, though!

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed reading! Stay tuned (hopefully next week!) for Chapter 15! Also, don’t forget to review!
Chapter Summary

The Second Phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams begins...and things start out relatively well but it goes downhill from there. An encounter with another team gets disastrous.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for no updates for the past two weeks, but this week gets two chapters! Next chapter will be out tomorrow! Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 15)-The Second Exam, Part 1

Naruto’s P.O.V.

“Now that all the release forms are in…welcome to the Survival Phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams. The exam is simple: complete the mission.

“There are two scrolls: a Heaven Scroll and an Earth Scroll. Each team is given one of the two, and the mission is simple: get one of the other and bring both back to the center of the Forest of Death within three days. Do this, you pass. Miss one or both scrolls, don’t make it back in time, opening a scroll, or letting a team member die means you fail.” Anko announces, and that…sounds simple enough.

Simple…but dangerous. There really are chances of death here – it’s in the rules even and not just in a stupid waiver.

“All teams will also be given a white scroll. All three members must hold hands before opening it on my command – or else you fail. Now, everyone line up and-”

“What DID YOU JUST SAY?” I know that voice anywhere now.

“What’s the matter, lover boy?” Anko asks to Gaara, who looks absolutely pissed. At the order, or the nickname, I couldn’t tell.

Though, probably both, if I had to take a guess.

And if I had to take another guess, I’d say that anything and everything pisses him off. Especially things that are alive – they probably really piss him off.
“I have to touch these…teammates. I ought to kill you for even suggesting that. Mother would love you.” Gaara says, looking absolutely maniacal now.

“Alright, just who the fuck do you think you are? I ought to fail you now for even questioning my orders…but you must have some pretty big fucking balls to threaten me. And you know what…” Anko says and then appears right next to him. “I love men with big balls!” She says in his ear, but loud enough for everyone to hear, before sand pops up and she jumps away before throwing a kunai at it.

“Damn, I love it when a guy fights back! Call me in a good six years kid!” Anko says, winking.

*What the hell* is going on right now?

“I think you dropped this!” Suddenly, a Grass-nin says and then picks up the kunai with her tongue and stretches it all the way to Anko.

“You too girl! Call me in six years!” Anko says, clearly impressed by that tongue.

…Is this an exam, or something that should be in Kakashi-sensei’s book?

“All right. Line up for your scrolls!”

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“All right! Line up for your scrolls!” Anko shouts to everyone.

Like the instructions she gave us earlier, we all hold hands before Shika opens the white scroll.

Suddenly, a flash of white light blinds us and we are suddenly inside the forest.

Wow! That’s pretty cool!

“How did we get here?” I ask, because I have no idea what could even do something like that.

“Must have had a transportation seal to put us in the forest without knowing which teams had what scroll or where they are.” Shika says, looking around us.

Sealing, huh? First *me* and the Kyuubi, then storage seals, and now *teleportation*? Seals sound freaking awesome! Like they can do anything it seems!

“Hinata, do you sense anyone nearby?” Shika asks to our teammate.

“Yes, several teams. Two very nearby as well. Also, Team 10 is just within my range, but Gaara’s team is not at all. And Kabuto is far away too.” Hinata says, mentioning everyone we should avoid.

“Good. Let’s go to the closest team and try to gauge their strength and see what scroll they have before attacking. We have an Earth scroll. Naruto, just how much smaller can you transform a clone than that kunai we gave Team 10?” Shika asks me.

“Pretty small. What are you thinking first?”

“The size of a bug. So you can spy on them from a distance and they won’t notice us. We’re all still not the best at masking our chakras – and I don’t want to have a confrontation until we know something for sure.” Shika explains, and it sounds good to me.
“Yeah I can do that! Shadow clone jutsu!” I make the hand-sign and four bugs appear.

My chakra control really has improved in the last month!

…But that damn Wind Chakra just isn’t working with me!

“Over there about a kilometer away. My Byakugan shows them kneeling and talking right now.” Hinata orders to my clones and they immediately fly off.

“Okay, I say we lay low until we get some info from the clones. And maybe we should send some to the other teams in the area too. Naruto?” Shika suggests, and I make the clones as asked.

“All right. Let’s get some cover until the clones can get some intel. We have three days – let’s not rush things.”

_Third Person P.O.V._

Team 8 goes up high in a tree in the middle between the two teams Hinata saw on her Byakugan. It was never really discussed, but Shikamaru is the de-facto team leader for this. During C-Ranks with his team, he was always good at coming up with plans and strategies with Kurenai-sensei’s approval of those plans. And though he’s still quite a bit away, he’s getting closer to beating his father at Shogi.

So, Naruto and Hinata have no problems giving Shikamaru the reigns on this one.

And so they wait. For an hour and a half. Four of Naruto’s bug-shadow clones spying on one team. The first one dispelled when it found out they also have an Earth scroll and decided to move on to the other nearby team.

So they wait another two hours, silent in the tree. Only 69.5 hours remain in the exam, and finally another clone dispels and reveals they have a Heaven scroll.

However, Shikamaru says now they have to wait for information on skills. So far, all they see is one kunoichi with a sword. Kenjutsu can be deadly even in mediocre hands.

Naruto _knows_ that Shika is right. He does. But he _hates_ sitting still. It makes him go _insane._

(He feels especially sorry for his kunai-clone stuck in Team 10’s bag. But, they might be _doing something_ at least.)

When Naruto is sitting still, he’s just left alone with his thoughts. And being still – with almost no discussion between them so nobody hears – for already three and a half hours with an untold number more, makes Naruto think _a lot._

He thinks about everything that’s happened the past few days. Sasuke and Shino – almost _dying_ because shinobi he doesn’t know are after the Kyuubi inside him. Gaara, after threatening to kill his own teammate, threatening a _Jonin_ and with zeal. Kabuto, with those ninja information cards, and oddly bringing up Sasuke. And Team 10 – his friends – having to deal with all this too while the two teams also look out for each other.
When he was in the Academy, Naruto wanted to be skilled and acknowledged. He wanted to be Hokage to help people. He didn’t think he would ever have what he has now – his friends, his team – that’s worth protecting.

He knew the Hokage was the strongest ninja in the village. He always knew the Old Man was called the God of Shinobi. But he didn’t know the love and fear in his heart.

*Love* for his village and for his people. *Fear* for his village and his people.

Naruto loves the people in his life. But he’s also so scared that something will happen to them. He needs to get stronger. But not for acknowledgement anymore.

He needs to get stronger for his loved ones. For his village. For peace among the Shinobi World.

Caught up in his thoughts, he received a memory from one of his clones that just dispelled.

“They’re getting ready to attack another team that’s not us. Hinata, do you sense them?” Naruto relays and asks to his team.

“Yes. Two kilometers south. They must have some way to track. What do we do, Shikamaru?” Hinata confirms.

“We follow, but not engage until after the battle is over. Both teams will not be at full strength – we can get the scroll from whoever wins it after.” Shikamaru says after a moment of consideration.

Silently and masking their chakra to the best of their ability, Team 8 trails slightly further behind the target than they originally were, thanks to the Byakugan.

When the target team reaches their target, Hinata observes that they seem to be talking for a while. Then, suddenly, they begin fighting. As Hinata is the only one able to observe until the last of Naruto’s clone dispel and he can see after-the-fact, she tells her teammates what’s going on.

And Hinata does a good job at giving her play-by-play. A good kenjutsu user with their sword making multiple hits on the other team, the other team using fire jutsu and burning one of the target’s right arm, two taijutsu users pummeling each other.

Though in the end, the target wins when the burned one throws a kunai at the taijutsu user, hitting their temple and knocking them out.

(Hinata thinks they were being merciful. They threw it with the handle hitting, not the blade. They were trying not to kill).

They hand over a scroll, and that’s when one of Naruto’s bug-clones dispels and reveals it’s another Heaven scroll and they are *not* happy and need to retreat to treat those burns.

“Alright, we follow and attack when they land.” Shikamaru orders, and his team follows like a well-oiled machine.

In less than a second after landing, Shikamaru shadow-possesses the sword-wielder. Get the strongest one immobilized and they *crack.*
“Give us your scrolls, and we don’t have to fight.” Hinata says, looking towards the taijutsu user, who is bruised but keeping the scrolls in her bag.

“Just do it, Nisha. We need to help Ejimi.” The sword-weilder says, more concerned about her teammate than the exam.

Naruto gets a bad taste in his mouth thinking this is an exam. Because exams shouldn’t be like this.

“You assholes saw us get that other scroll didn’t you? Were watching the whole goddamn time with those fucking eyes of yours, huh? Bitch!” He growls the last in anger at Hinata, but he does also throw the two Heaven scrolls to Naruto.

“You know, you should thank me. I’m gonna give you something to help your friend.” Hinata says before quickly taking out her sealing scroll and unsealing a jar of medicine she made. “It helps with burns.” She says and throws it to the burned guy – Ejimi.

“Let’s go!” Hinata orders this time, and they all leave. In and out in mere moments, like true shinobi. And possibly costing that team the entire exam.

That whole experience was sickening to Naruto.

They’re travelling to the center of the forest, already having both scrolls, to finish their ‘mission’ and complete the exam.

But Naruto just can’t help but feel dirty by what just happened.

The bargaining for points in an exam while someone’s life could be on the line. That arm could easily get infected in the forest, and could cost Ejimi his arm or even his life.

And Hinata – though she didn’t say it, her tone made out like she might not have given that mud-nin the cream if they continued to insult her.

Naruto knows that Hinata was just putting up a face. That she wouldn’t be that cruel, especially to people just wanting to protect their friends.

But Naruto doesn’t like this. It’s all wrong. It’s all deceit, all cruelty, all shit.

Is this what being a Chuunin, Jonin, Hokage is like? Always lying, always trying to look like you’re higher than everyone else?

If it is, then too goddamn bad!

Naruto Uzumaki will change things. This will not be the norm. Yes, he needs to get stronger and stronger, but not to use his power like that. He will use his power to protect. The norm will not have everyone be on their toes – it will be holding a hand out in friendship...

…and then Naruto just got the memories of a clone he hoped wouldn’t dispel.

“Guys! Gaara’s team found them! Come on!” He says, and then he turns to another direction away from the center. Hinata and Shikamaru turn as well and go follow at full speed.

And Naruto leads the way – he’s not going to let that psycho hurt his friends!
Team 10 and Gaara’s team were no longer in the Byakugan’s range when Team 8 went after the Heaven Scrolls from the team they took them from. Hinata blames herself that she wasn’t paying enough attention to get back in range – she should have let her team know.

But then Hinata realizes that it isn’t her fault. It’s nobody’s fault – except Gaara and his team. They’re the ones threatening to kill.

So she and Shikamaru follow Naruto, and she is relieved when she senses all three of her friends again and sees them when in range with her dojutsu.

The three of the Sand-nin are standing in front of her friends, and then suddenly she sees chakra surround the shortest of the sand-nin.

She knows it’s Gaara and his sand – the same thing he tried on the proctor Anko.

Based on the speed they are going right now, they should reach Team 10 in less than 9 seconds.

8 seconds. The sand swirls around Gaara.

7 seconds. It tries to whip Kiba, but he and Akamaru dodge.

6 seconds. The sand hits Ino into a tree, but not rendering her unconscious.

5 seconds. Choji enlarges his right arm and tries to punch Gaara.

4 seconds. The sand knocks the fist away into nothing.

3 seconds. The sand surrounds Choji.

“NO! CHOJI!” Hinata screams, knowing they can’t get there in time. Shikamaru and Naruto can only imagine the horror she is seeing right now.

2 seconds. The sand encloses on the Akimichi.

1 seconds. No movement. She can’t see Choji’s chakra.

0 seconds. They arrive, and Hinata can’t sense Choji’s chakra at all.

‘No, please no…Choji…’ Hinata can’t imagine her friend dead like this.

“CHOJI!” Kiba and Ino scream together, on the verge of tears.

“BODY EXPANSION!” They hear from the sand around the Akimichi, and then the sand explodes away and Choji is alive!

He’s definitely alive, but Hinata’s eyes can see how disrupted his chakra network is. Clearly getting out of that sand trap took nearly all his chakra and now he’s dangerously close to chakra exhaustion.

But he’s alive.

(Hinata is also aware that the training from the last month might have saved his life – he had nowhere near the chakra reserves as he does now.)

“You…you monster.” Naruto growls, and all of the other Konoha-nin are having a dangerous
feeling with that voice. It’s bringing them back to just a few days ago when coming back from their most recent mission.

Naruto is shaking once again, red chakra surrounding him and burning his skin, canines turned into fangs. This time, though, there is no tail of chakra.

‘Yet.’ Hinata thinks, hoping he can hold on and not let it get that far.

Then he attacks, moving incredible fast – the same speed as he did when Hidan was trying to torture Shino and Sasuke.

All three sand-nin are caught off guard – a Naruto punches each of them in the face. Even Hinata couldn’t see him make his shadow clones at that speed.

The two clones, who appear to be full of Kyuubi’s chakra and look to be just as berserk, continue punching Kankuro and Temari, not letting up. Naruto is having a standoff with Gaara’s sand – after the first punch, it seems as if the sand was alive – Hinata doesn’t know what to make of it, but it looks like a completely different chakra source.

She’s terrified to think it might be a Tailed-beast, like Shikamaru pointed out there might be multiple.

“Gaara!” His two teammates call out to him – the sand having just taken care of the two shadow clones when their backs were turned.

“I’M GONNA KILL YOU NARUTO UZUMAKI! MOTHER! CAN YOU SMELL HIS BLOOD?” The sand-nin shouts, completely focused on just killing Naruto.

“FUCK YOU!” Naruto shouts, red chakra pooling into his fist before aiming at Gaara’s face again.

Like the very first punch, it connects.

Gaara is knocked back, caught by his two teammates. His face is cracking, dust falling off like sand.

“This isn’t over you little assholes.” Temari warns them before disappearing in a whirl of sand with the maniac in tow.

Naruto turns and looks at his friends, the red chakra disappearing and his teeth returning to normal. His skin is burnt and raw, but doesn’t look as bad as it did before.

“Cho…” Naruto tries to say the Akimichi’s name before passing out. Hinata quickly catches him, half-expecting it to happen like it did before.

“Shit! Okay…” Shikamaru curses in frustration, then immediately closes his eyes and tries to formulate a logical plan.

Plans never work when one is distracted.

“Alright. This is what we do. We stay together, for one. Ino – do you guys have your scrolls?” Shikamaru asks.

“No – we offered them so they leave us alone. They took them, but…” Ino doesn’t need to finish as everyone knows what exactly had happened here.

“Okay. There are 67 hours left in the exam. We have an Earth Scroll and two Heaven Scrolls. We compete the exam together – tomorrow. We let Naruto and Choji rest and heal, and then we go after another Earth scroll together. Then we complete the exam together. No more splitting up. One team.
Hinata, find a spot far away from other teams and I’ll carry Naruto.” Shikamaru says after taking a deep breath.

How many of their friends are going to face near-death like this? How many times is that demon fox going to affect Naruto – yet save their lives?

It’s only been five hours into the exam – and all of the conscious genin are afraid of what is to come. They are weakened and injured and practically down two shinobi. Not only do the four of them have to defend themselves, they also have to protect Naruto and Choji.

They’re going to have to stay low the next 24 hours – but they’ll do what they have to do to protect each other.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the hiatus. Other things beside the move came up and I couldn’t write. But Chapter 16 will also be up tomorrow, and I think you all will really like that one!

I did have a lot of fun writing this and the next chapter, as there is quite a lot of plot advancement. With this chapter, I had always planned on them running into Gaara, and I think Choji was a good fit based on how I wrote him so far. Using everything he had to survive Gaara’s jutsu that no other genin could beat so far – I felt like that was a good way to take this. What did you all think?

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned tomorrow for Chapter 16!

Also, don’t forget to review!
To Be a Ninja (Chapter 16)-The Second Exam, Part 2

Third Person P.O.V.

One Day Later

Teams 8 and 10 had a rough 24 hours.

Hinata and Kiba have both been keeping watch, without any rest, to protect the group – their enhanced senses being critical. Shikamaru and Ino, also without any rest, have been discussing possible courses of action – Shikamaru wanting to speak aloud his thoughts to bounce off ideas.

One idea they considered was forfeiting. Going to the center of the Forest without all the scrolls (leaving the Earth scroll behind so there is no complete pair for either team). This would be the safest option – nobody would be in any more danger. As the mission ends there, that’s probably where the proctor is.

But that idea was quickly rejected. Nobody wanted to just give up. And with Naruto unconscious at the time, Shikamaru knew his teammate would feel a little betrayed. It’s completely against his nindo. Ino agreed too, but because this is what being a ninja is like. They have to follow through with this mission no matter what.

Ino and Shikamaru also discussed how they would get the last remaining scroll. Either they try to get it with Choji barely conscious with Naruto unconscious and still burned from his bloodline, or they wait until they can act as a six-man strike team.

Considering Naruto is known for healing fast, Shikamaru opted for waiting. And with Hinata’s medicinal cream – the same kind that she gave to the team they got their two Heaven scrolls from – Naruto just needed to wake up at that point, his skin doing much better.
So among other plans that were considered and rejected by the two and then the rest of the group, it was decided that they wait until Naruto wakes up and Choji’s body stabilizes, at least as much as it could.

Choji is in bad shape right now. In the past 24 hours, he has probably lost at least 25 pounds and counting. The chakra needed to body-expand out of Gaara’s Sand Coffin was too much for his system, and his body is burning itself trying to replenish it.

Hinata thinks that if Choji didn’t have all that extra energy stored as fat, he would already be dead.

And Ino, at hearing that thought, regrets everything she ever thought or said about Choji’s weight. It’s true – his family jutsu really does require all that extra energy and it saved his life.

As he continually slips in and out of sleep for eating from his large snack supply, Ino rubs his head and cleans the sweat from his forehead. She whispers to him how sorry she is for everything she said, how she never apologized even when they were bonding at the dojo, and that she’ll be an even better teammate from now on.

‘Naruto…’ Hinata hates that she can’t do anything to protect Naruto from the Kyuubi’s influence. And she hates how, at the same time, the Kyuubi is saving them with the power it gives him.

She thinks back to not even a week ago how in the hospital, he said it spoke to him. The fear in Naruto’s eyes was almost enough for her to confess. Hinata was so close to just telling him how she felt and that it’ll all be okay.

She’s applying her anti-burn cream to Naruto’s body, like she has been every three hours, watching in morbid curiosity just how the cream and the Kyuubi heal Naruto. The chakra going through his system is beautiful in her eyes…yet evil…yet still miraculous.

“Gchch” There’s a sudden noise coming from Naruto’s throat and Hinata is immediately at his side, supporting his neck.

“Guys, he’s waking up! Naruto, can you hear me?” Hinata calls out to her group as his eyes open to meet hers. The rest of the group surrounds them.

“Hin…ata…” He breathes out, smiling at seeing her teammate. The relief in her eyes at seeing him awake actually makes Naruto blush because it’s him causing the happiness in her eyes.

Even after all this time at being a team and knowing just how loved he is, it still is hard for him sometimes to truly feel and understand it. And it’s things like that that truly make Naruto happy to be where he is in his life.

Hinata puts a cup of warm water to his lips, and he grimaces as he swallows. He gratefully accepts the water, despite the uncomfortable feeling that accompanies swallowing.

“How’s…Choji…?” He breathes out, still recovering after being unconscious for 24 hours.

“As good as can be expected. He’ll be alright, but we need to be careful.” Ino responds.

“How are you feeling?” Shikamaru asks to his best friend.

“…Alright. Is there any food?” He asks, stomach grumbling loudly.
And for a moment, everyone smiles because of course Naruto would want some food.

Ino helps boil the water for all the ramen Naruto and Choji eat with her fire-style jutsu. Hinata suggesting it, after remembering Kurenai-sensei explaining this method long ago.

After they eat, Naruto is fully charged. His skin is still a little raw, but Hinata saw an increase in healing as he ate.

Evil chakra…but miraculous.

“So what’s the plan, Shika?” Naruto asks, slurping some more ramen up.

“We do what we did the first time – we stake out and collect intel with your clones. Then when we find a team with an Earth scroll, we attack. A five-man attack squad should be enough to handle three people. It’s risky, but there are teams that are probably already finished and that’s less of a selection pool so we can’t wait like we did before, especially because we need to get Choji out of here.

“And Because of Gaara’s attack leaving him in his current state, Choji would stay a bit behind being guarded by a bunch of your shadow clones.” The Nara explains the plan he and Ino came up with and the rest of the group agreed upon.

Choji feels terrible that he can’t do anything to help, but he was told this last night by Ino: “Choji, you survived – and that’s enough. You’re helping us just by being alive. So let us take of you!”

“Alright. Hinata, just point to the teams and I’ll send some clones!” Naruto says, drinking the last of his ramen broth.

Three teams are in the vicinity of Hinata’s Byakugan, and two of them have only Heaven Scrolls.

Shikamaru thinks that there are more Heaven than Earth for this exam to weed out numbers. It would make sense, at least if they had a higher ratio of one type of scroll to other in one given area. This area seems to be mostly populated with Heaven scrolls and very few Earth scrolls.

So the team decides to go after the team that has both scrolls, whose members are currently resting after having just gotten their Heaven Scroll, as Naruto’s clones were able to hear.

Travelling at a lighter speed because of Choji’s condition, they pounce on the team just as they are packing up and don’t even say a word as they begin fighting, having an attack plan already laid out.

It’s three-on-one for each person. Ino and Shikamaru with a Naru-clone, Hinata and Kiba with a clone, and Naruto with two of his own clones.

And it’s another team from Suna, so they don’t feel too bad about taking their scrolls.

Naruto and his clones fight a wind-style user, which does not make him happy at the reminder that he sucks at Wind manipulation.
Blowing cutting air out her mouth all around them, his clones dispel but Naruto is able to kick him in his groin as the smoke from the clones is still there. Naruto covers his face as the wind passes him, only scratching his jacket and not getting his still-raw skin hurt even more. The sand-nin hunches over in pain, but moves both his hands on either side of Naruto’s head and explodes wind chakra around him.

Or, so he thought. Naruto ducks, rapidly punching his stomach and stopping momentarily to summon three new clones.

“NA-” The first clone shouts, kicking the guy into the air.

“-RU-” The second clone shouts, now kicking him to the side.

“-TO!” The third clone shouts, this one kicking the sound-nin even higher in the air.

“UZUMAKI BARRAGE!” Naruto, using his clones as stairs, finishes off his new signature move (that he came up with on his own and worked on with Asuma- and Kakashi-sensei), kicking the Suna genin deep into the ground. He lands with a loud thud, coughing up blood.

He can’t help but think all his sensei would be proud of that move. He’s gotten a lot stronger! And this exam is one step closer to changing things!

He is a bit disappointed, though, that this guy isn’t carrying either of their scrolls. ‘Oh well,’ he thinks, because his team will get them instead!

Ino and Shikamaru, with the Naruto clone, all work flawlessly together.

Using his shadow-communication technique and thinning it down so much that it can hardly be seen, Shikamaru was able to communicate to both his fighting partners that they are to attack the shinobi in two ways: her bottom left, and her top-right. This means she only has one direction to go: backwards.

So Ino and the Naru-clone follow instructions, and she does jump backwards…right into the middle of five intersecting shadows.

The more shadows, the more strength is had and the less effort the Nara needs to exert to be able to shadow-possess. And considering how weak everyone is due to the events of the last day and a half, the more energy he conserves the better.

“Shadow-possession, complete. Ino, search!” Shikamaru orders, and Ino launches her mind-transfer jutsu on the Suna kunoichi.

Because they are being held still, Ino successfully uses her jutsu and immediately begins searching this kunoichi’s bag for the scrolls.

She finds some things she would want to keep for herself, but she’s not here to really steal – only to pass this exam.

…I’m not here to really steal you. I’m not here to really steal you.

…Unfortunately, she finds only another Heaven scroll. That means one of the other two Suna-nin has the Earth scroll. She tosses the scroll to Shikamaru, who puts it away, and then she releases the mind-transfer and gives the girl control of her body back.
Kiba and Hinata, along with Akamaru and a Naru-clone, thought this would be easy as it’s four-on-one with this.

Except it isn’t four-on-one. It’s four-on-three.

As the Suna-genin sees he’s surrounded by three enemy shinobi and a ninja-hound, he makes a hand seal and up from the ground rises two Earth-clones.

Kiba and Naruto learned a lot about elemental clones when training with Asuma-sensei. When Kiba apologized to Naruto for storming out when they started training, Asuma explained to them both how shadow clones worked. Dividing the chakra supply of the user in half, creating a clone that is used for spying and reconnaissance.

That’s why he warned Kiba that he shouldn’t use them – Naruto’s bloodline gives him a lot of chakra and diminishes how much chakra is needed than other shinobi need. Effectively, due to this bloodline, Naruto uses only a small fraction of the amount of chakra other shinobi need to create shadow clones. Because Kiba doesn’t have this ability, he should not use Shadow clones until he is a much higher-ranked shinobi, where he can truly weigh the pros and cons of using the technique and the danger.

Other elemental clones, though, are not nearly as dangerous. They don’t require nearly as much chakra – so that’s a pro to using them. A con, though, is that they are a husk. No memories, no personality. Only can do one basic thing when they are summoned – commands such as ‘evade’, or ‘distract’ and that’s it.

Kiba was disappointed to learn that there is no ‘Wind’ clone, but he said that he’ll find a way to create one. He doesn’t want his affinity to be the only one without a clone – so he wants to create the jutsu! There even exists fire and lightning clones – but they are not solid and explode on contact like kamikazes, and are much closer to being as chakra intensive as shadow clones are. So Kiba wants to be able to make a clone using his affinity – wind.

Here, facing two Earth-clones, he knows the Suna-nin must be getting weak. Earth clones are probably the least chakra-intensive of all elemental clones and the earth element is all around them, so only making two to fight four enemies gives a look into how tired they are from the rest of the exam.

“They’re weak. Akamaru and Naruto, handle the clones. Hinata, we get him.” Kiba calls out, and they attack.

The Naruto clone, like the other clones that are assisting their teammates, begin a flurry of punches on the genin’s face and body. And as Kiba said, the Earth-clone is weak, and cannot dodge the punches or get a counter-attack in to dispel it. The Earth clone falls backwards and then crumbles into dirt.

Akamaru, wanting to help more, uses Dynamic Marking and pees on the Earth clone he’s fighting and on the genin – he’s too distracted from trying to dodge Hinata and Kiba that he couldn’t dodge the dog urine.

Having done a lot of training himself during the month-long trip, Akamaru is a lot faster than he was before. And it shows now – he’s able to use a version of the standard Academy Clone Jutsu with his speed and confuse the Earth clone where he is – letting him bite the Arm of the Earth clone and use
his hind legs to kick him backwards into a tree.

Having finished with his own assigned Earth clone, the Naruto-clone appears next to the tree where Akamaru kicked him, and Naruto jumps up and lands a kick down onto the Earth clone’s stomach, instantly crumbling it into dirt.

Hinata and Kiba immediately advance on the main opponent, who is even weaker (even if minutely) now at having produced those clones. His taijutsu is strong – able to knock way Hinata’s Gentle Fist in such a way that he doesn’t get his tenketsu closed. Hinata continues to engage him in taijutsu, while Kiba goes underground.

Thanks to Akamaru’s Dynamic Marking, Kiba is able to track him from underground and launches up beneath his feet, making him lose balance and sending Hinata’s Gentle Fist right into his kidneys, closing off some of his most major tenketsu.

“Eight Trigrams! Two-Palm!” She begins at the kidneys.

“Four Palm!” Then his calves.

“Eight Palm!” Then the triceps.

“Sixteen Palm!” Then the pelvis.

“Thirty-two palm.” His entire midsection.

“Sixty-four palm!” Lastly, she hits everywhere but his heart. She’s not trying to kill the genin – only incapacitate for the scrolls.

She finishes her strikes, rendering the Suna-nin unconscious. She takes his bag off his body and finds the Earth scroll right there – not even hidden. Perhaps they were in a hurry to finish.

“We got the scroll! Let’s go!”

Meeting back up with Choji and all of Naruto’s clones, Shikamaru orders the shadow clones to set up points along the path and Transform into bugs like before. He wants them to dispel if there is danger along the way for them to avoid.

Things seem to be finally looking up for the six genin. This hellish exam’s end is within their reach – they have Two Earth Scrolls and Three Heaven Scrolls – enough for both teams to finish and an extra, in case they need to bargain.

When, suddenly, a Grass-nin drops down in front of them, riding upon a rather large snake.

“Well, well, well, look what we have here. The rookies from this year absolutely dominating in this competition!” The Grass-nin says, sticking out her long tongue and taking Shikamaru’s bag – which has the storage seal containing one set of the scrolls (with the other set being held by Ino).

“Fuck! Give that back!” Naruto shouts, forming three clones around him ready to attack.

“You’re that freaky chick from before the exam started – giving the proctor her kunai from when that psycho tried to attack her!” Kiba says, clearly remembering that odd scene with Anko.

“Ahh yes, I see you remember me. Well, I’m here for a reason, and if you guys make it worth my
time doing all this, you can have your precious little scrolls back and finish the exam.” The girl says, giving the bag to the snake she’s…which then promptly swallows it.

Silence from everyone.

“Who are you, really?” Shikamaru asks after a few moments of thinking about what just happened.

She said she’s ‘doing all this’, meaning that they aren’t just here competing in an exam. There is something else, and they are not who they claim to be.

“I see your clan’s reputation doesn’t fail to deliver. Very well. Let me show you who I really am.” She says, then then grabs her cheek and then begins to pull.

It’s disgusting. Fluid leaks everyone, blood and who knows what else, spilling from her face as she literally pulls her skin off and reveals a pale-faced man with purple tattoos around his eyes and nose.

“I am Orochimaru. Pleased to meet you.” A much deeper voice sounds out of her…his…mouth.

Four of the six genin have never been so scared before. It’s Orochimaru. The other two aren’t as frightened only because they just don’t know who Orochimaru is.

“I see my reputation precedes me.” He giggles out at seeing their faces, unleashing waves of Killer Intent.

“Who…who’s Orochimaru?” Naruto asks, able to make the words come out once Orichimaru stops the Killing Intent – the fear growing inside Naruto was almost too much for him to bear, even for just those few seconds.

“Damnit Naruto. He’s one of the Legendary Sannin. Considered to one of the most powerful ninja in the world. Student of Lord Third – and traitor to the Leaf Village!” Ino says, wishing Naruto paid more attention back in school. Kiba, though he didn’t say it, was grateful for the explanation as well.

“I tried to help the village! The old fool just couldn’t see my brilliance!” Orochimaru spits back at them after hearing Ino’s words. He really believes he was trying to help the village.

“He experimented on kids – orphans. Using them as guinea pigs to try to make other shinobi stronger at their expense.” Shikamaru adds, having looked into the topic himself when he was in the Academy. Orochimaru was hailed as a genius of his time, and during the unit on the Sannin, Shikamaru’s interest was piqued.

He was thoroughly repulsed by what he learned.

“Acceptable losses! We would have been the most dominant village with my research!” He spits again, not liking at all how a bunch of snot-nosed brats who can barely throw a kunai when compared to him are acting all high-and-mighty.

“What happened to your teammates?” Naruto asks, changing the topic. A Konoha missing-nin is taking the place of a Grass-nin in this exam – and to get this far Orochimaru would have needed teammates via the rules.

“Disposed of. They were no longer of any use to me, not that they knew what was even happening to begin with. But they served me well, got me into this phase without rising any suspicion from dear
old Anko.” He muses, thinking about his marked ex-protégé. He did have a bit of fun teasing her before, though. If Anko wasn’t as naïve as she is, then Orochimaru might have had some trouble getting this far.

All six genin are sickened that he could kill those two genin so easily.

“What do you want from us?” Hinata speaks up, eyes fixated on the strange chakra flow in his body. All broken up and disjointed – at least three different unique chakra signals within him. One feels oddly familiar to her too – like she came across it but not exactly. Like how you see someone in a mirror – it’s them but not them. She doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Nothing too unreasonable…I just wanted to have some fun!” Orochimaru says, sticking his tongue out and spinning it, disturbing all the genin.

“What…kind of fun?” Choji asks, afraid as he’s already so weak.

“Nothing involving you, Fatty. You’re too weak for even me to be wasting time talking to you. I’m talking about little Naruto-kun.” Orochimaru’s eyes lighten up as the blonde hears his words.

Choi is too scared to be angry for being called ‘fat.’

“Me???” Naruto asks, bracing himself for what could possibly come. He’s still in his battle stance, surrounded by some shadow clones, but he knows he cannot fight this guy. He knows, even if all his friends were at full strength they couldn’t fight him.

But the exam has weakened everyone – Choji’s still recovering from Gaara, Hinata and Kiba have been using their tracking skills non-stop for the past day trying to protect Choji and a then-unconscious Naruto, Ino and Shika have been up discussing plans, and everyone was fighting to take those scrolls.

“Yes. You’re the strongest one out of your puny friends. You have a gift! I want you, and if you must do it with your pathetic little friends, deliver a message. Let me ask this first: have any of you heard of one Itachi Uchiha?” Orochimaru smirks at the genin, who all look at him in rage.

Itachi…the one who destroyed Sasuke’s life until Shino, Sakura and Kakashi-sensei managed to put some of those pieces back together.

“So you all do know of him. That makes sense – having spent a month with little Sasuke out of the village. Well, I met him during my travels. Curious little man – strong, but boring. Dreadfully boring. Well, he told me about this group that he’s in, one that almost took out his brother and his weak little teammate!” Orochimaru tells, almost drab about the whole thing, as if he’s talking about the weather!

Itachi Uchiha…is a member of the group trying to hunt Naruto. All of the genin realize this as soon as Orochimaru says it.

“And I found out that you, Naruto-kun, managed to put a stop to that attack. Imagine that – a rookie genin not six months out of the Academy – managing to stop an A-Rank shinobi. I just had to come and check you out – a man with such curiosity for the peculiar such as myself needed to see it with my own eyes. And I got a nice little picture when that Suna kid almost killed Fatty over there.” Orochimaru continues.

“So, I want you to deliver a message to little Sasuke. I see how hate makes people powerful. You and Itachi – and even my own old teammates – are testament to that. Sasuke can grow more powerful than you, or even his brother. If he should accept, and he should, I could give him the power he needs to take revenge on his brother for slaughtering their family.” Orochimaru finally says
what he wanted. His whole gambit is out.

“He doesn’t need you! He has us and his team!” Naruto screams back, getting angrier and angrier the more this goes on. Sasuke is not just some spectacle for power that Orochimaru claims he and Naruto are! He’s their friend!

“Get real! You think you can give him what he wants? The single goal that Itachi put into his mind as a child? No – he needs my power! And even now he can see what it’s like! Have a little gift, Naruto-kun! Be sure to tell Sasuke it can all be his too!” Orochimaru counters, teeth turning into fangs and neck stretching out like his tongue has before.

He stretches out towards Naruto, whose clones try to attack but his neck just weaves around them. Naruto jumps away, while the others try to attack his neck and/or body, but he just jumps out of the way or knocks any kunai and shuriken out of the way effortlessly.

Naruto continues to try to dodge, but it’s futile. Orochimaru catches him and sinks his fangs into his neck, marking him.

Naruto feels the worst pain he has ever felt in his life. More than when his skin was being burned by the Kyuubi’s chakra even. This is unimaginable.

“NARUTO!” Everyone shouts as Orochimaru removes his fangs from Naruto’s neck, leaving a curious Heaven symbol in its wake.

“Enjoy the taste of my power. Let Sasuke see what it can do!” Orochimaru says before disappearing with his snake, leaving the genin alone. Shikamaru’s bag, containing the scrolls, is on the ground where the snake stood.

Naruto falls to the ground, holding his neck and writing in pain. He can’t think right now – it feels like his entire body is getting kicked in the groin, only one thousand times worse.

“Naruto! Can you hear me?” Kiba asks, having no idea how to comprehend what just happened.

“It looks…like he injected some kind of chakra into Naruto’s body through a seal. I can see it with my Byakugan…Naruto’s fighting back! It must be his bloodline! Like an infection almost, it’s being pushed back to his neck!” Hinata exclaims, thinking that once again the Kyuubi is somehow helping.

“We…need to go!” Naruto says, taking a few deep breaths and looking at his friends. The pain has already let up, but only slightly, though still enough for him to think again.

“But Naruto! You’re-” Ino starts, but is interrupted.

“No, he’s right. The sooner we go, the sooner we finish this exam and we’ll be safe!” Shikamaru says, going for his bag containing the scrolls needed to get out of this hellhole.

“Yeah, you’re right. Then let’s go!” Ino says, holding on tightly to her bag with her own team’s scrolls, and looks at Naruto one last time, who Shikamaru just picked up to carry.

“Th-thanks, Shika…” Naruto gets out, still trying to tolerate the pain he’s feeling.
And the six genin rush as fast as possible to the center of the Forest of Death, desperate to finally complete the exam. All of them have different thoughts swarming through their minds, but they all share a common theme:

What’s going to be the next phase of the exam?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And that was a lot longer than I expected this chapter to be – practically large enough to be two small chapters! I hope this and the last chapter made up for my small hiatus.

I actually came up with giving Naruto the cursed seal right before writing that part, actually. But Orochimaru’s explanation and story about Itachi, changing his methods to get to Sasuke via Naruto I think made sense, right?

Orochimaru couldn’t get to Sasuke right now – he’s being guarded by the hospital staff and Kakashi in some way, so he had to do this while he has easy access to his friends.

I think this chapter went rather well, though. What did you all think? I would like to hear your thoughts!

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 17!
**Fallout**

Chapter Summary

Teams 8 and 10 deal with the fallout of the events that transpired during the second exam, while Naruto starts to experience some of the cursed seal's power. Also, the next phase of the exam is announced.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And here’s another update! Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**To Be a Ninja (Chapter 17)-Fallout**

**Shikamaru’s P.O.V.**

How did this become such a shitshow?

We were in the clear. We had the scrolls, both pairs, and then everything just blew up.

Orochimaru…what the fuck did he do to my best friend?

It’s so hard to think clearly right now. I can’t…I can’t focus. And I need to be able to focus. Just breathe, Shikamaru. You breathe so you can think.

None of this was supposed to happen. Shino…Sasuke…Choji…Naruto…

All of them have been hurt. All of them were almost killed. A week ago, we were all bonding and ‘coming together’ in the Dojo. We were all good. Improving our skills, and becoming better friends.

Becoming one team.

I take a deep breath, needing to be able to clearly think about what I’m doing in this moment.

“Hold on, Naruto, we’re almost there.” I tell him, as I carry him in my arms. According to Hinata, we’re less than one minute away from our destination at this speed.

In my arms, Naruto’s eyes are clenched shut in pain. He’s holding his neck, and there is sweat forming all over his face.

“Ugh!” Naruto groans, clutching his shoulder even harder from whatever disgusting thing Orochimaru did to him.

And I think the worst thing is that he did it to Naruto, just to send a message to Sasuke. Sasuke, whose brother is in the same group that tried to kill him, Shino, and tried to capture Naruto for the
Kyuubi.

When did everything become so complicated? Not six months ago, like Orochimaru pointed out, were were all just Academy students. Things were so simple then – and I wouldn’t trade anything for my friendships with my team or the other teams – but I do wish that we could all just…

…I don’t even know what I want. I just want us all to be safe and happy.

But being a shinobi just isn’t like that. I know my dad didn’t get that scar on his face by being reckless – no, he almost died when that happened. And he got hurt protecting his own teammates, saving their lives. Saving Ino’s and Choji’s fathers.

And, even though I’m not actually on the same team as them, Ino and Choji are still like my teammates. They’re not like Naruto and Hinata…but they’re still my teammates. Team 7 are my teammates too.

This dangerous group is after one of my teammates. Gaara seems to be after him too, and maybe another teammate too. Orochimaru is after another one of my teammates.

Sasuke…

I don’t buy it for a single moment that Orochimaru wants to help Sasuke get revenge on his brother. Because if that were true, he could kill Itachi with his own power. And why would he care about it anyway? He said Itachi was boring – yet Naruto was peculiar – so why does he even care about Itachi?

And this power…does he plan on giving that…seal…to Sasuke? Biting him in the neck trying to inject chakra into his system? I never thought I would think this since he told us, but…thank goodness Naruto has the Kyuubi to keep that thing from spreading. Because if it’s this bad on him already and it’s being contained by the Kyuubi…

…Who knows what it would be like on Sasuke? Probably the same, if not worse, amount of pain at least. And I know enough about biology that foreign chakra all over the system can be deadly. Even medics need perfect concentration and skill to not kill their patients, and that’s healing chakra. What would Orochimaru do to him?

Is this…how Hinata feels about Naruto? She likes him a lot. I know I like Sasuke, though I know it’s not as strong as Hinata feels to Naruto. I want to get to know him more, and I would like to ask him out. My feelings aren’t as advanced because I’m just not that close to him yet. But, I’m worried about him. About them both.

“5 more seconds!” Hinata shouts to us, and then we’re done.

Clutching Naruto closer to me, we go as fast as possible and land in front of the tower. As I carry Naruto, the five of us run inside the tower, throwing the door open and stopping in front of a chuunin at the door.

“Congratulations. Your teams passed the second exam.” The Chuunin says, giving us a nod.

“We need a medic, now! Two of us need medical attention!” I yell to the Chuunin, who looks at us with sympathy.

“Sorry, but you are not allowed to receive outside help, as the exam is still not over. But as you passed, both of your teams are each allowed a room to stay for the remainder of the exam time. And I am instructed to give you orders to open both your scrolls at the same time. But, I am sorry. Good
luck.” The chuunin says, and he’s a Leaf-nin too so I can tell he is actually sorry, and goes back to his station standing at the door.

But we don’t get any help? Choji is still rapidly losing weight, and Naruto was attacked by Orochimaru.

“Let’s get into a room!”

We set Naruto and Choji down on the bed because they clearly need it the most. I take the scrolls out of my sealing scroll, and I set them down next to Ino’s.

“Now!” I say, and Hinata and Kiba each open one scroll while Ino and I open the others. There’s a large release of smoke, and…

…Iruka-sensei! Kakashi-sensei!

“Congratulations!” They say at the same time. They must not be aware of what happened during the exam, as they would be focused on Naruto and Choji.

“Naruto and Choji need help!” Kiba yells at our sensei, and they turn over to the bed.

“What happened? We’re shadow clones that were sealed before the exams began. Tell us everything.” Kakashi-sensei says, headband lifted to reveal his Sharingan, presumably to try to see what happened to Naruto.

“Gaara from Suna attacked Choji and almost killed him. Then we were attacked by Orochimaru and he bit Naruto’s neck. Hinata says his bloodline is fighting back the foreign chakra into the entry point.” I say, summarizing the events of the past two days.

“Orochimaru? Fuck! And we can’t call a medic because it’s against the damn rules!” Iruka-sensei exclaims, and that’s the first time I have ever heard him swear.

“They can’t receive medical attention from a licensed medic…but the rules don’t say anything about getting looked at by a top med-student. I’m gonna call over Minotia Hyuuga.” The Kakashi-clone says and summons Pakkun and asks him to get the aforementioned nin.

Huh, I didn’t know Shadow Clones can summon. I have to remember that – it could be important one day.

And Minotia Hyuuga? From Hinata’s clan? She did mention in the past not everyone in the clan believed her to be a failure like her parents and clan elders feel; hell, she said not everyone in the side branch felt like that. I just hate how she has to make so much sacrifice to please stodgy old people that probably haven’t even been in a fight in decades.

And I realize the similarities between my resolve and hers, and not to mentions Naruto’s. All of us are trying to please people. I’m trying to please my father, though he never really pressured me, because of my preference. I have to show him and the other clan elders that even though I am gay and won’t have biological children, that I can still be a competent clan head.

“Is there anything we can do to help at all? Or do we just have to keep watching Choji get weaker and Naruto in pain?” Ino asks, and Kakashi just shakes his head.
“Naruto! Can you hear me?” Kakashi-sensei calls to him.

“Yes, damn it!” Naruto gets out, teeth clenched in agony…and sounding angry.

Naruto has never yelled at any of us before. Yeah, I know about how he defended himself when Kiba insulted him early last month, but from his description from then that was nothing like this. He’s yelled at others, but never us.

“Just hang in there, Naruto.” Iruka-sensei says, clearly worried about the student he took under his wing and looked after like a little brother; Iruka is one of the few people that truly cared about him before we were put on a team.

After a minute of silence (probably from shock due to the fact that Naruto sounded mad at us), someone appears by Pakkun, bandaged around his forehead with clear eyes like Hinata.

“Kakashi-san, Lady Hinata. What do you need?” Minotia Hyuuga asks, looking at our friends on the bed.

“Examine, but not treat, these genin. They’re still participating in the exams.” The Kakashi-clone says, with Pakkun unsummoning himself.

“A Alright. Will everyone except Kakashi and Iruka please leave the room?”

Presumably, Minotia Hyuuga knows of the Kyuubi. Otherwise, there’s no way Kakashi would just get someone to spill that secret to. He’s a top med student from what sensei said, probably making him a candidate for a top position after getting licensed.

“He’s the only Hyuuga who’s ever gone into medical training. The clan didn’t approve of it, of course. They’re too stuck in the old ways. The thought of that seal being on someone as nice as him, or anyone else like Neji, makes me sick.” Hinata says, Byakugan on the entire time we’ve left the room.

She is probably almost completely out of chakra now, but I’m not going to say anything to her. I’d be using it too if I had it.

“It is sick. But if anyone can do it Hinata, then you can. You’re a sensor. The first ever Hyuuga sensor-nin.” I say, because she is. She’s just so amazing already, and we’re only rookie genin.

“I know, but I just – NARUTO!” She suddenly yells. “He’s fighting with them! No! Kakashi just…knocked him out!” Hinata says and Iruka comes out of the room holding Choji, followed by the Kaka-clone and Minotia.

“What the hell just happened?!” I ask my sensei.

“The seal that Orochimaru put on his neck…it’s starting to have psychological effects. I believe it is part of how his…bloodline…is fighting back the seal. Think of it like a side-effect of medication. But I can confirm that the seal is weakening. Even with my few minutes in there, I could feel the foreign chakra very subtly decreasing in amount. But he got aggressive, so Kakashi-san knocked him out.” Minotia says, and that’s…a relief.

But he got aggressive. That’s not Naruto. I just hope…these psychological effects aren’t permanent.
“And Choji’s chakra system is stabilizing. I recommend he eat a lot of calories to replenish what was lost. But otherwise he is doing well. He’s just experiencing typical overexertion of his clan jutsu, which looks worse that it really is.” Minotia explains.

That’s another relief. He’s going to be alright, thank goodness.

“Thank you, Minotia. That’ll be all.” Kakashi says, shaking the man’s hand.

“Of course. Lady Hinata, I wish you and your comrades good luck on the rest of these exams.” Minotia says before body-flickering away.

“I suggest you guys leave Naruto alone for a bit. If he wakes up, who knows what he’ll do. I think it would be best if you take Choji into another room and wait there. And I have to go alert the Hokage if he isn’t already aware of Orochimaru. Good luck, all of you. I am so proud you made it this far, especially considering everything. So long.” The Kakashi-clone says and dispels, giving us a one-hand wave.

“I can stay with you guys for some time. After we get settled into another room, how about you guys tell me everything that happened?” Iruka says, and it sounds like a good way to pass the time while waiting.

“It was the hardest I have ever pushed myself before. The strength of his sand was almost too much for me. It felt like I was imploding as I was expanding inside that closed space. But I knew I couldn’t die there and gave it everything I had just to have a chance to see you all and my family again, and then Naruto took care of the rest after I broke free. And I know it hurts him, but his bloodline likely saved my life.” Choji tells us his experience and thoughts during that moment with Gaara.

“And then after a day of recovery for them both, we got the second scroll and that’s when Orochimaru came to us. Took some scrolls and wanted to play a twisted game. He wants Naruto to give some sort of sick message to Sasuke about power for revenge.” Kiba finishes, as Iruka-sensei was already a bit briefed on the whole Orochimaru situation.

“I can’t believe you all went through that. I’m a Chuunin and even I haven’t gone up against a missing-nin like that. To think that you all survived with only six months of experience, and that you’ll all be okay, is simply amazing. It really says something about all your skill and teamwork. I couldn’t be more proud of all of you!” Iruka-sensei says to us.

Six months ago, we were still sitting in his class. And now we’re fighting S-Rank rogue ninja in our Chuunin Exams.

“Hey, Iruka-sensei, could you tell us more about the Sannin? I don’t remember much of that lecture…” Kiba asks, embarrassed.

And it’s good, because for once, we all have a laugh.

“Of course! As you all know, they were the students of Lord Third. Tsunade Senju, granddaughter of the First Hokage. Jiraiya, sensei of the Fourth Hokage. And Orochimaru, the orphan genius and prized pupil of Lord Third. When they defeated Hanzo of the Salamander during the Second Great Ninja War, they were hailed as the Legendary Sannin…” Iruka-sensei begins telling us about the Sannin, refreshing my memory on the topic and helping the rest of the group get caught up.
Naruto’s P.O.V.

“Hey, guys!” I call out to everyone. It’s another group training session with all three teams. Even though our training mission is over, it was beneficial to everyone so we keep doing it! It’s awesome being around my friends and getting stronger.

“Oh, it’s you.” Sakura says, and…that’s not like her. Did I do something to make her mad at me?

“Yeah, hey Sakura! Good morning!” I respond. Maybe she’s just had a crappy morning?

“It would have been, but not anymore.” Kiba says, with Akamaru growling.

What…what’s going on?

“Naruto, I’ll just say it and stop delaying things. You’re loud and annoying, and sometimes you get on our nerves.” Shino says, and I just stop.

How could he say that to me? Is this some sort of sick joke?

“Shino, stop joking around.” Sasuke says, and I’m instantly relieved. I knew there was no way he would ever say that to me. “He always gets on our nerves. And he’s not just loud either, he’s obnoxiously deafening. He’s more annoying than nails on a chalkboard.” Sasuke says, and I feel the tears come to my eyes.

How could they…my friends…say that to me?

“Yeah, Shino! If it weren’t for him, then you and Sasuke wouldn’t have gotten put in the hospital! He almost got you both killed!” Ino says, spitting in my direction.

“Guys…” I say, trying to hold my tears back.

I look to my two teammates. Hinata and Shikamaru aren’t saying anything…but why?

“Don’t look at us, man. It’s all on you.” Shika says, and shrugs his shoulders.

What the hell is going on?

“Hinata?” I ask, my voice cracking because I don’t know if I could take any more.

“You know, Naruto, with these eyes I can see a lot. And inside you I see nothing more than a weakling. A freak. You put everyone at risk because you’re a monster. Did you tell everyone your little secret yet?” Hinata asks me, pointing to her stomach.

“No…please…please don’t do this, Hinata. Please! We’re teammates! You guys said we would always protect each other!” I beg, tears now freely falling from my eyes.

“Protect you? Are you freaking kidding me? Time after time you’re putting us at risk. You screw up on missions. You attract murderous sand ninja. You literally are a monster, and it’s time everyone knew.” Shika says, and I can’t believe this.

“Please! Stop this! Why are you guys doing this?” I beg, betrayed by my closest friends.

“Because we never actually liked you. We were placed on a team with you because of our ‘friendship.’ It’s called pity. We pitied you, Naruto. We never really liked you. The Hokage must
really be getting old if he thought this was a good idea. And now, we just don’t not like you. We **hate** you. And now everyone will know why everyone else hates you too. Because you, **Naruto, are the Kyuubi. You are the Nine-Tailed Demon Fox.**”

No, no no!

*I run away, tears blurring my vision until I can hardly see where I’m going.*

I can’t believe my friends would turn on me like this. Everything – the past six months at the very least – all a lie. What about Kurenai-sensei? She probably feels the same too then. Nobody likes me…

“I DIDN’T ASK FOR THIS!” I scream out into the forest as I run with no end in sight. “I DIDN’T ASK FOR ANY OF THIS!” It’s not **fair**! I never asked to be the container for this evil.

“Well, well, well, here he is again…” That **voice**. No…

“How does it feel, Naruto-kun? Use it, use my power…get **revenge**!” Orochimaru whispers, but I don’t know where he is.

**Revenge?**

*On all those who hurt me over the years. On my so-called ‘friends’ who have been leading me on for months.*

I feel myself losing control. It’s not like when the Kyuubi’s chakra leaks out – it’s different. On the side of my neck, it burns, yet it’s **amazing**. I feel it running through me…

“Water style: Water Bullet!” Feeling the need to test this power, I make the hand signs and say, aiming it at a tree. And the bullets are **gigantic** and they make the tree **explode** on contact.

I’ve never felt so powerful!

“Use it, Naruto-kun. You think that Sasuke deserves this power to avenge his clan? No – he betrayed you. They all betrayed you. Kill them…kill them, Naruto.” Orochimaru continues to speak…but it all suddenly seems so **wrong**.

I don’t want to hurt them! No matter what they do to me, no matter what they say to me, I could never hurt them. I love them!

“They’ll only hurt you more!” The Sannin says, fighting with my thoughts.

“**GET AWAY FROM ME!**” I shout to Orochimaru, though I don’t know where he is. Suddenly, everything around me, the trees and grass all explode into burnt ash.

**This power…so intense.**

I open my eyes, and I find myself where I found myself just a under one week ago, in this dank sewer that I now know is where the Kyuubi is being held inside me.

I…**really** don’t want to be here.

I continue along the sewer-like path, the water feeling heavy in my shoes. After a turn, I find myself back in front of the cage containing the Kyuubi.
'You’ve done it now, boy.' It says, gnarling its teeth at me from behind its sealed cage.

“What…have I done exactly?” I ask…actually speaking to it for the first time. Last time it talked to me, I never got any words in.

‘You let that damn Snake bite you. You should be so lucky to have me or else you’d be dead, punk.’ The Kyuubi says, hitting the cage with its paw and some of its tails, making me back up.

I have a vague recollection of what happened after we encountered Orochimaru. All I remember is pain…a lot of pain…and Shika carrying me. The rest is a blur.

“Why would you help me?” I ask it, because it did try to destroy Konoha, and it even killed the Fourth Hokage, Iruka-sensei’s parents, and so many more people.

‘You act like I have a damn choice – the Fourth’s seal is siphoning my chakra to treat you, and it’s hurting me. So next time, do us both a favor don’t be so weak and get yourself cursed. And, Naruto, I know you liked my power.’ It finishes, frown turning into a smirk.

“AHH!” I scream, bolting upwards. I’m…in some kind of room in a bed. I do have some memory of this too, I think Shika put me here? But…where’s my team? Where’re Team 10?

The pain in my neck has lifted quite a bit, and I can feel like I can actually breathe. My door suddenly opens and hits the wall behind it, and I look up to see….everyone!

“Naruto!” Hinata shouts and runs over to me, pulling me in a death-grip of a hug. I don’t care though, and I gladly return it.

“Hinata…” I say into her shoulder, so relieved that she – and everyone else – still like me.

That…nightmare…was terrible. I dreamt they all hated me, that they blamed me for everything. They were saying the cruelest things. They were saying…

…and all the things I really think about myself.

I still worry, even now, that they will hate me. That they will hate how loud I can be. I know I can get a bit too…excited…sometimes, and I worry that they’ll just tell me to shut up like everyone has for years in school. I do blame myself for Sasuke and Shino getting hurt trying to defend me. If I weren’t there, or if I didn’t have the Kyuubi, then they never would have gotten hurt because those shinobi wouldn’t have had a reason to come to us.

And then, something was telling me to get revenge. Telling me to kill them – my friends. How could I even dream that? Am I really so sick that I could even have something in my head tell me to kill my friends?

“We were so worried! You were unconscious for over a day and a half!” Ino says, and I’m relieved to see Choji up and standing next to her. He’s recovering!

It’s been how long?

“You attacked a medic Kakashi-sensei brought in to examine you. He said the seal Orochimaru put on you was causing psychological side-effects, but that it was being fought slowly by your bloodline. And Hinata’s been keeping an eye on you too, and even she can see a big difference now in the chakra in the seal.” Shika explains to me, and…I don’t think I should be so happy to hear it was causing side-effects.
Those side-effects mean that it wasn’t me thinking those things in my nightmare. It must have been the chakra and the seal making me think horrible things.

It must have been part of the ‘power’ Orochimaru promised it would give me and Sasuke. And the power…it was so intense in the dream. Disgusting, overwhelming, but oh so powerful. It truly did feel quite amazing to have such power, but it was corrupting. That power is evil, in some ways more evil than even the Kyuubi’s chakra. At least with Kyuubi, I never wanted to kill my friends, only my enemies.

And it spoke to me again, and it was different this time. It’s hurting because of this seal. It’s hurting and it asked me for help, in the weird way that it did.

I know I shouldn’t care about it. It killed so many people! Yet…it spoke to me and asked me for help because it’s losing chakra against its will.

And I’m not so stupid that I don’t realize it’s probably the reason all of us are even alive to begin with. Its power made Hidan and Deidara leave and stopped them from killing Sasuke and Shino. Its power let me hurt Gaara and his team as to not let them hurt Choji again or the rest of us.

I shouldn’t care about it, because it caused me so much pain in my life. So much loneliness, tears, and pain. But it is also the reason we’re alive. And all that, especially because it asked me for help…makes me do care. As sick and twisted as it may be – as murderous as it was in the past – I do not want it…him…to be in pain.

“What’s happening with the exam now?” I ask, everyone. The exams are the whole reason we are even in this situation to begin with.

“There are five hours left until the end of this Phase. As to what’s next, we have no clue. But we’ve all been resting. A few other teams have passed, but not much. Hinata sensed Gaara’s team enter a few hours after us, the next team to finish. And would you know – were the first two teams to finish, and despite everything we went through too.” Shika says, sitting next to me on the bed and pulling me in for a quick hug too.

“Wow, really? That’s kinda sweet! We’re amazing! And Choji, I’m so glad to see you’re standing!” I say to my friend, who smiles at me and eats some chips.

And, now I just realized how hungry I am. Seeing those chips makes my stomach growl.

“We should all eat, actually. We need to have our energy for what’s next in the exam.” Shika says, pulling out his sealing scroll from his bag. He reaches over to grab my own bag too.

Yes! Ramen!

“You!” We hear a terribly familiar voice, and I turn around to see the disturbed stare of one Suna team that tried to kill my friend!

There is one hour left in the exam. We just finished relaxing and talking, taking some time to breathe after eating, and all teams who finished were asked to return to the main entrance.

“YOU WILL DIE!” Gaara shouts, sending sand flying at us.

“Shadow clone Jutsu!” I make my hand signs and create four shadow clones, and the five of us jump
up and kick the sand away.

Then, Orochimaru’s damn seal starts burning again.

“Naruto! Don’t use any chakra!” Hinata warns me, and that sucks. No chakra?!

“STOP RIGHT NOW!” The purple-haired proctor Anko jumps down in between us, stopping the fight. “I warned you little fuckers. And I’m really not in the mood right now. If you so much as even speak one more sound to me, you Sand ninja are gone from this exam.” She says, throwing a kunai at Gaara’s feet – and if looks could kill, Anko would be dead right now.

“And you six – as proctor of this exam, I have to apologize for the unwelcome…visitor you met. I should have known who that was before the exam started, and that is my fault. No matter the outcome of the exam, good job at protecting each other. Above all else, we are Konoha shinobi. Now leave me the fuck alone and don’t let Ibiki know that I got soft – I’ll never hear the end of it.” She winks at us before body-flickering away as my clones dispel.

Why do so many adults do that? All of our sensei do it, and now the proctors do too. Our sensei better teach it to us too!

“Let’s go guys.” Kiba says, interrupting the silence left from Anko’s interruption of the fight. The six of us stick together and go to the other side of the main room.

I never quite realized how big this tower was when I was brought here under all that pain, which the burning in my shoulder has gone away again. But it’s going to be such a bitch that I can’t use chakra until Kyuubi is…forced…to get rid of the seal. But this tower is rather large – there are two floors. But there are only a few teams here that made it. Including us two, only five teams made it. That means there are only three other teams that made it through, and there’s only one hour left.

“Wow. With literally twenty seconds to spare, another team has made it. Well, sucks to be you because you guys get no rest time. Follow me, punks!” Anko says, more cheery now than she was an hour ago.

We all walk through a door in the back of the room, and it looks to me like some kind of arena.

“Welcome to the Preliminaries for the Third Phase of the Chuunin Selection Exam. *cough*” A new man says, on the floor of the area. Higher up in a balcony, sits Old Man Hokage! And on the upper left I see Kakashi-sensei, Kurenai-sensei, and Asuma-sensei too! “My name is Hayate Gekko, and I am the proctor. *cough*”

A proctor with a cough? If he’s the proctor while sick, he must be super strong even while weakened!

*cough* *cough* *cough* *cough*

“The following are a series of one-on-one battles to see who makes it to the Third Phase as there are too many of you to continue as you are right now. As of now, you are no longer competing as a team. You will not be matched against someone from your own team, however. But if you feel you are too weak to continue, speak up now.” Anko says, appearing next to Hayate, probably because he was coughing too much to speak.

“We’re out!” A familiar voice calls out, and I turn around to see Kabuto raising his hand before
turning and walking out with two people who were next to him.

“You’re leaving just like that?” Someone with a Konoha headband asks. “You don’t even look tired! What about that advice you gave us?” They continue, and he must have spoken to another team as well and not just us.

What is his deal? After all his failures, why go through the whole exam to just give up without trying? That’s another red flag from this guy…

“Anyone else? You can stay with your team if you wish, but either speak up or get ready. If so, so we can begin. *cough*” Hayate says, then coughs.

Three more people leave, all with Konoha headbands. One of them looks genuinely hurt and tired, hugging their teammates – is that Takeshi Sato from our Academy class?

“Sorry, guys, but I’m too weak to fight. But I’m not leaving – I’m gonna stay and support you all.” Choji says, raising his hand. I can’t say I’m surprised after what he’s been through, but I’m glad he’s going to stay with us.

And if Takeshi is here, then is that…

“Alright. Let’s look at the screen above and see the first match.”

It is him.

‘HEBA SANTIRO v. NARUTO UZUMAKI’

My old best friend from the orphanage. He’s my opponent.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And another long chapter! I know that not much happened here in terms of plot, but I think it was a decent transition chapter until the preliminaries. And I wanted to show a bit on what the Curse Mark is doing to Naruto has his system fights it off.

And I do have the entire preliminaries and third stage pairings already planned out, so now it’s just a matter of writing the fights (which I am bad at, so I apologize in advance if next chapter doesn’t read the best).

Side-note: The reason Gaara’s team wasn’t the fastest like in canon was because Gaara was too unstable to finish the exam. His siblings had to calm him down before they could even think about going in, because he would have tried to kill anyone and would have gotten themselves disqualified. And it took longer than the day it took for our group to recover as well.

Plus, if anyone’s familiar with it, that is the same Minotia Hyuuga from my other story “To Save a Friend, Slay a Snake”. I always wanted to write more about Minotia in that story, so I decided to include him here.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 18!
Also, don’t forget to review!
The Third Exam: Preliminaries

Chapter Summary

The preliminaries begin, starting with Naruto having to fight his childhood best friend. After that, the rest of the genin have their matches too and some are just as emotional for them. The final tournament opponents are revealed.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s a gigantic chapter – with a lot of plot and character development! Hope you guys enjoy reading!
Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 18)-The Third Exam: Preliminaries

Third Person P.O.V.

Naruto’s been through a lot this Chuunin Exam. From being made to feel like an idiot and failure in the first exam until Shikamaru came to help him, to losing control over his emotions and using the Kyuubi’s chakra again when he thought that Gaara killed Choji, to getting Orochimaru’s cursed seal, and now having to fight his first friend that made a large part of his childhood bearable.

Yeah, the past four days have really sucked for Naruto Uzumaki.

“Do you…know that person, Naruto?” Ino asks at seeing the look on his face – like he has just seen a ghost.

“Yeah…he was my best friend when we were kids...” Naruto says, leaving out the orphanage origin. The moment he saw the boy’s red hair when Takeshi Sato quit the exam was confirmation that the Heba on Takeshi’s team was in fact the same Heba he knew.

His time in the orphanage is one part of him that he hasn’t shared much with anyone, even his team. Aside from their first D-rank mission there, he hasn’t spoke about it to his team except for small mentions every now and then. They could tell by his entire demeanor then that it’s something that he just does not want to talk about due to mostly bad memories.

When he was there at the orphanage, the only adult there that really cared for him was Kala. She thought the other caretakers were awful for practically neglecting a child in their care, so she was the one to cook for him, feed him, play with him, and read to him until he was old enough to do some of those on his own.
Kala was the one who taught him how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic in the first place. And he’s so grateful that she did too, because after he aged out he got no further education in those areas as the Academy assumed a student knew those already.

The other caretakers never abused him, though. Sure, he got spanked every now and then for discipline after pulling a prank, but that was it. And other kids got spanked too when they misbehaved, but it did still suck because the only reason he pranked to begin with was because he wanted attention.

None of the other kids would ever play with him. All the caretakers except Kala, based on how they treated him, indirectly told the other kids that he was bad. That they shouldn’t play with him because then they would be bad. And especially when he pranked, that told everyone even more that he was bad.

Naruto did his best to never try to prank Kala. She understood why he did it, not that she approved. She did tell him that it needs to stop, but whenever it was her turn to ‘discipline’ him she didn’t do it. She just hugged him and told him that she’s sorry and that she wished she could do more.

She couldn’t spend all her time with Naruto. They were understaffed as it was, and there were always more children coming in than there were children getting adopted or aging out.

And one day, when Naruto was feeling especially terrible at not having anyone at all to play with or talk to, when he was crying on his bed in the fetal position at only four years old, someone came up to him and asked him if he was okay.

He told Naruto his name was Heba.

When Naruto lifted his head and wiped his eyes from his tears, he saw a kid with dark red hair and a worried look on his face. And it took Naruto a moment to realize that the worried look was for him.

Heba just came to the orphanage, having come from another kind of care facility outside Konoha. One of the caretakers told him to take whichever open bed he wanted, and that’s when he saw a boy shaking when he looked like he was sleeping.

And so Heba picked a bed next to Naruto (as both beds adjacent to him were empty because nobody wants to be near the bad kid…), and then they became friends!

For the first time, Naruto was happy. He had someone to talk to, to play games with, to run around with, to hug when he was sad. And Naruto had someone who needed him back too. Naruto was there to support Heba just as much as he supported Naruto.

Sometime when Naruto and Heba were both seven, Heba got adopted. Naruto was so happy for his friend. He knew Heba deserved a family that would care for him. He wasn’t jealous at all, but he knew he was going to lose his best friend.

A day later, they cried and hugged while saying goodbye. That morning when Naruto was taking a shower, Heba had wrote him a letter and gave it to him when they were saying goodbye. After one ‘be good’ to each other, Heba left with his new parents and Naruto has never seen him again.

‘Be good’ for Naruto meant for Heba to behave as to not get unadopted or something – that’s happened before to children in the orphanage there in Konoha. ‘Be good’ for Heba meant for Naruto to (not really) let up on his pranks, but it was mostly a joke because he actually thought the pranks were funny.

But Naruto kept the letter Heba wrote. And he still has it in a box in his apartment. However, he’s
only read it a few times on that day. But the memories were always too painful to read it since. He barely can remember anything specific on it now except that he was Heba’s best friend and that he’ll miss Naruto.

“Really? I’m sorry, man…” Choji tells Naruto, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Hinata, what did you see when I used my chakra?” Naruto asks her, surprising her at the complete change in topic. He wants to know the specifics of her warning after he tried to make Shadow Clones when Gaara tried attacking again an hour ago.

“The seal…it looked to me that it was pushing against your chakra.” She says, trying to emphasize ‘your’ to really mean ‘Kyuubi.’ “I don’t think it made the seal stronger, but it’s definitely what hurt you.” She finishes, and Naruto closes his eyes.

“I’ll try not to use any…” He mumbles out.

He has no idea what to think right now. He’s supposed to fight his first friend, who actually cared about him. And not only is he supposed to fight him, he supposed to fight him without chakra – and that will be tough as Heba’s team must be skilled for actually surviving that hellhole of a forest they call a ‘Training Ground’.

“The contestants are to get down in the area. Their teammates are to go up the stairs and meet with your Jonin-sensei if they are here.” Anko says as Hayate has another fit of coughing.

Things such as ‘Good luck, Naruto!’ and ‘You can do it!’ come from Team 10. Hinata gives Naruto a quick hug, and Shikamaru pulls on his shadow to comfort him, much like he did with Sasuke during their first group meal.

And Naruto did feel a little bit better after that and the hug. He loves his team so much!

All Naruto and Heba could do are look at each other. It appears that Heba’s team were the ones to barely pass at all; he is filthy and appears to be bleeding on his upper arm.

Then Heba smiles and nods at Naruto – a silent show of sportsmanship, and recognition.

And Naruto smiles back too, giving a nod and then getting in a stance for battle. Heba follows suit.

“The rules are simple: anything is allowed except attacking anyone not in the match. And when I say stop, you stop. *Cough* *Cough* And…begin!” Hayate says and then jumps out of the way.

Taijutsu only, huh? It’ll be tough, but Naruto thinks he can work with that.

Naruto runs up to Heba and aims a kick at his injured shoulder, which Heba blocks with his hand, leading to Naruto then aiming a kick at Heba’s other shoulder, connecting.

But to Naruto’s surprise, Heba’s arm just collapses on itself, as if there was no bone at all. Naruto jumps away – part confused, and part worried he just seriously injure his old friend – and sees that it is back to being solid.

“Confused? I call it Rubber Style. It’s a bloodline I have – discovered it about a year after I left.” Heba says, not saying ‘the orphanage’ but Naruto gets the message.
“That’s really cool! Very useful.” Naruto says, trying to think of a way to be able to beat rubber limbs with only Taijutsu.

Naruto grabs a few shuriken from his pouch and then tosses them at Heba, who ducks around them and then stretches his arm all the way across the distance between him and Naruto, holding a kunai to try to swipe at the blonde, who kicks it out of his hand that was decidedly solid.

Rubber arm…then solid hand.

Naruto isn’t that smart – he’s certainly not stupid, but he’s not at Shika level of intelligence or planning (is anybody actually at that guy’s level, though?), but if there’s anything he learned about battles and fighting, it’s this:

Every jutsu has a weakness.

He knows of the Byakugan’s blindspot (which was the only thing Hinata was somewhat reluctant to share with her team since their ‘Trust’ test way back); he knows of the chakra drain of the Sharingan; he knows that any elemental-combination kekkei genkai has two elemental weaknesses and not just one.

So Heba’s Rubber Style has a weakness too. And perhaps it’s that only one body part can be rubber at a time.

But to make Heba use Rubber Style first to then be open to attack…he’s going to need to use some chakra.

Heba runs after Naruto, aiming a punch for his face, which Naruto blocks, but then Heba uses his other arm to bend around the back of Naruto’s head and punch the back of his neck, momentarily distracting Naruto. This lets Heba get in some good kicks to both of Naruto’s sides and another punch to the head.

Jumping back away from the attack, Naruto knows what he has to do if he has a hope of winning this battle. His taijutsu alone just isn’t good enough to handle this fight. Naruto makes his favorite handsign, and braces for the pain.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto focuses his chakra and three clones appear.

His neck burns, but he doesn’t let it show on his face. This is a fight – he’s not supposed to show weaknesses in battle.

But Naruto isn’t done with pain, as he needs to use more chakra.

“Water Style: Water Bullet!” Naruto calls out, and notices that the water bullets are much larger than usual, just like in his nightmare right after he got the cursed seal. But Heba moves out of the way of them, letting two of the shadow clones move in for an attack.

One of them aims for his neck, the other aims for his medsection. Heba uses Rubber Style on his neck, letting the clone hit it but not damage him. He uses his hands to block the hit for his midsection.

But the third shadow clone then slides under and kicks Heba up, setting Naruto up again for his signature move.

“NA-” The first shadow clone kicks Heba to the side.
“-RU-” The second clone kicks him backwards into the wall of the arena.

“-TO” The third shadow clone kicks him up even higher.

“UZUMAKI BARRAGE!” Naruto shouts as he uses the shadow clones as stepping stones and then slams Heba down into the arena floor, leaving him in a giant crater, unmoving. Naruto’s clones dispel, leaving him in intense, burning, stinging, corrupt pain.

“Naruto Uzumaki wins.” Hayate says, Naruto clutching his neck in pain while medics come out to get Heba. A man with a Konoha headband, presumably his Jonin-sensei, makes a shadow clone and it jumps down.

“Yeah, Naruto!” His friends and teammates cheer for him from the stands. They know the fight must have been difficult for him – emotionally and physically – but they are still proud of him for winning.

“Naruto!” Heba calls out, now conscious, as they carry him away.

“Yeah, Heba?” He responds, relieved his voice didn’t break.

“Great fight. And…be good.” Heba says, and Naruto closes his eyes so the tears don’t fall. The memories of their last time seeing each other coming back fresh in his mind.

“Yeah…Yeah! You too! Be good!” He calls back excitedly. As Heba gets carried away, Naruto knows he’s going to have to reconnect to him sometime. Unfortunately, this just isn’t the time or the place for that.

“You did great, Naruto. I’m so proud of you – for everything.” He feels a reassuring hand on one shoulder, and he instinctively leans into Kurenai-sensei’s touch.

It’s the first time he’s been able to see his sensei since the exams began. And after Anko told her that Orochimaru bragged about marking a boy in the exam, it took most of her willpower to not try to go after him herself. She thought him using the Kyuubi’s power a second time was the most he was going to go through, but then Orochimaru happened. And if that wasn’t enough, he then had to fight his first friend ever.

She knows the kid has had a rough Chuunin Exam. But she also knows that he will get through this because he is strong. He got through everything from his childhood and came out on top. He persevered and now he has everyone that he does – his team, Iruka, his friends on the other teams, and their sensei.

Kurenai also spent some time with Asuma. As his girlfriend, she’s a lot of his emotional support network, and when he found out that Choji almost died – he was frantic. She listened to him saying that he failed Choji like he almost failed Kiba, that he was a bad sensei.

But she was quick to counter that he wasn’t. He did talk to Kiba and that fixed the teamwork issue – and then they excelled. That’s why Choji survived in the first place!

“Thanks, sensei…” Naruto breathes out, the pain in his neck fading a bit after two chakra-utilizing techniques.

“Do you want me to take you to a doctor? You made it – you’re done with your part now.” She asks her student, knowing how much pain he might be in as her best friend is also marked.
“No way. Later. I’m gonna stay and support everyone!” Naruto says, and Kurenai isn’t surprised at all.

“The next match will be determined on the screen above. *cough* *cough*” Hayate says, and everyone looks up at the screen.

And now Kurenai Yuuhi has another reason to be worried.

‘HINATA HYUUGA v. NEJI HYUUGA’

“Neji? Your cousin? They can’t make you do that!” Ino cries out, because that is just plain *fucked up*.

“That’s bad luck. *cough* But will both contestants enter the arena? *cough*” Hayate asks, doing his job and disregarding the huge can of worms this matchup will bring.

“Hinata? You okay?” Shikamaru asks to his teammate, as Naruto and Kurenai walk up the stairs together with worry on their faces.

Hinata can’t say words, because she is not okay. She’s anything but okay right now.

She went from being so happy from Naruto’s win, to devestated because now she has to do what she planned on doing much later.

“YES! YOU CAN DO IT NEJI! GIVE IT YOUR MOST YOUTHFUL TRY!” Everyone looks across the room and sees a green suited…guy…cheering on Neji. Everyone figures it must be his teammate.

“YES NEJI! I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT MY YOUTHFUL STUDENT!” A much larger clone of said teammate says, and that must be his Jonin-sensei.

“Hinata! Listen to me! Everything we’ve been through since we became a team, everything you’ve accomplished, it’s been transformative. I know you can win. You’ve always had the skills, and now you have the confidence. I’m so proud of you, and all I ask is that you try your best.” Kurenai says, putting both hands on her student’s shoulders, and kneeling to look her in the eyes.

“But, sensei…i-if I don’t win…” She asks, stuttering for the first time in months.

“You can’t think like that Hinata. Focus on trying your best. Neji and the rest of your clan hasn’t seen your skills. He’s going to underestimate you. Use that to your advantage. You’re so smart.” Kurenai reassures her student before giving her a quick hug.

Hinata begins to walk down the stairs and into the arena and stands at the starting position.

“This is a waste of time, Lady Hinata. Fate has already decided that I will be the victor, why else would we be matched together? You don’t have the skills to beat me. I do not wish to hurt you, and I suggest you forfeit now.” Neji says to her, and she has to fight back the tears coming to her eyes at his words.

“N-Neji…I’m better now and-” She is cut off.

“DON’T LISTEN TO HIM, HINATA! WE BELIEVE IN YOU! KICK HIS ASS AND SHOW HIM THAT ‘FATE’ IS A BUNCH OF BULLSHIT! YOU’RE AMAZING!” Naruto yells down
to her, and that’s exactly what she needed.

It’s Naruto. He was the inspiration for her nindo, he and Shikamaru supported her so much, and she actually is kinda awesome!

She sensed those Ame-nin when even Kurenai couldn’t. She helped Sakura and Ino, when they roomed together, find the drive to improve by telling them her team wanted to protect each other. She started using Lightning elemental chakra. She warned the group when Deidara and Hidan showed up. She found the teams to take the scrolls from during the exam. She and Kiba were able to protect Naruto and Choji when they were recovering in the forest.

She’s been instrumental in everyone’s survival and victories!

“Yeah, Hinata! You can do it!” And the like is called down from Shikamaru and Team 10. They’re all supporting her.

She activates her Byakugan and looks Neji in his eyes.

“I’m not going to give up. I would be betraying myself and my team. And maybe we were put together for a reason, and maybe that reason is for me to show you how much I improved.” She says, and he scowls and activates his own Byakugan.

“Fine, if that’s how you want this to happen. I am not responsible for whatever I do to you now, Lady Hinata.” He warns and looks to the proctor.

“*cough* Begin!” Hayate says and jumps out of the way.

Hinata and Neji rush at each other – going right at each other in textbook Hyuuga combat. Hinata blocks Neji’s hits, and Neji blocks Hinata’s.

And it continues like that. Block after block from both Gentle-fist style users. After a full minute of back-and-forth of the Hyuuga form of Taijutsu, Hinata decides to change it up.

Suddenly, Hinata takes a swipe at Neji’s legs with a kick, making him aim a fist downwards to try to block of tenketsu there. Hinata sees this though, and blocks that with her hand. To prevent Neji from hitting that hand, Hinata jumps with her other leg and gets a hit on Neji in the back of the head, using him as a step stool to jump away.

He gets his bearings and looks at Hinata, fury in his eyes.

“I’ll admit that you did hit me, but I get now that I was underestimating you. Even the weakest little termite can seem mighty if not taken seriously. Let me show you now how fate wants this to end – I will be victorious and show you the side branch is not to be overlooked!” He speaks charging at her.

There’s so much Hinata wants to tell Neji about what he just said – that she think he’s right, that she wants to unify the clan, that she wants to fight with Neji – but she can’t focus on that as she has to focus on this match against him.

Their arms instantly become a blur to most of the audience, hands moving so fast – just like how they were trained to. Both of their calls are the same.

“…FOUR PALM…EIGHT PALM…SIXTEEN PALM, THIRTY-TWO PALM-SIXTY-FOUR
PALM!” They both call out.

The difference is that Hinata targets different tenketsu than the order she was trained to. She knew which ones Neji would be targeting, and knew which positions his arms would be in to not be able to block.

But that also meant Hinata was defenseless too.

So they block off each other’s tenketsu, but Hinata getting the first strike in and having just that slight advantage.

At the end of their rotation, both Hyuuga have most of their tenketsu closed off – Nejo having just one more closed than Hinata. But it’s enough.

“No…This isn’t…Fate…” Neji whispers before collapsing, unconscious. Tears come to Hinata’s eyes. She beat Neji. She’s happy, but she’s also devastated because of the emotional pain he’s in. Pain that’s not her fault, but he’s blaming her and her father for nonetheless.

But she’s still standing.

“And the winner is-” Hayate begins when Hinata suddenly falls to the floor, unconscious.

“...*cough* It’s a draw.” Hayate says, looking at the now two unconscious genin.

“WHAT? YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING! SHE BEAT HIS ASS DOWN!” Naruto yells down, furious because she beat him. Neji fell unconscious first. Hinata won, damnit!

“*cough* *cough* *cough* She fell before I announced the winner. Technically the match was still going. *cough* Therefore the outcome is a draw.” Hayate says, and four medical shinobi come out and get both of the Hyuuga.

“It’s okay, Naruto. Everyone saw that she still beat him. He knows it too. Hinata did it.” Kurenai says, reassuring him.

“But after everything we went through…for it to end like that…” Naruto begins.

“She’s a better shinobi for it. And now her clan will know her skill.” Team 8’s sensei finishes, but that doesn’t lighten the mood for anyone still there.

Kurenai makes a shadow clone and has it stay with the remaining genin and she goes off to be with Hinata as she is being treated.

“The next match is *cough* shown.” Hayate announces.

‘INO YAMANAKA v. TEMARI’

“Now I get to show you assholes what happens when you mess with Suna.” Temari says as soon as Ino steps down into the arena.

“You can do it Ino! Kick that bitch’s ass and show them the Ino-Kiba-Cho power!” Kiba yells
down, and Ino looks back at him and smirks.

“Begin!” Hayate says and lowers his arm and jumps out of the way.

Immediately, Temari swings her fan and unleashes a windstorm upon Ino. It spreads all around her – and she is unable to dodge it as she lunges to the right, getting cuts all over her face and arms, instantly bleeding.

“Weak, just like I expected. How does it feel – to know you’re so weak the only reason you even passed the exam at all is because of that other blonde idiot up there?” Temari taunts, unleashing another wave of wind from her fan and cutting Ino some more, more blood on her face and arms than there even is clean skin already.

“You…shut up!” Fire style: Great Fireball Jutsu!” Ino uses the Uchiha signature jutsu – the one that Sasuke helped teach her when training together last month – when Temari swings her fan, and it causes a conflagration heading straight towards Temari.

Fire beats Wind – basic chakra theory.

Temari’s fan crumbles and becomes unusable, as well as burning Temari’s skin and hair, and some of her clothes catching on fire.

“Yeah! Come on Ino!” Her friends call out as she wipes the blood out of her eyes, also while Temari pats down the fire on her clothes.

“Mind Transfer!” Ino shouts as Temari is distracted, and the attack lands.

Ino’s body falls to the ground and her body starts burning slightly too due to the effect of her previous jutsu still lasting on Temari.

Still, Ino manages out an, “I, Temari, forfeit!” And looks to the proctor.

“The winner is Ino Yamanaka!” The moment Hayate says this, Ino releases the jutsu and returns to her body and falls unconscious.

And just like that, from being completed dominated and underestimated, Ino was able to turn the match around with one single jutsu.

She’s cut, she’s bloody, she’s burned, but she won!

“HELL YEAH!” Kiba shouts, and Choji yells in happiness too. Medics immediately come out and rush to the two kunoichi in the ring, getting them on gurneys and carrying them to the back.

Kiba and Choji are somewhat worried about her being hurt, but Asuma doesn’t seem worried. If he isn’t, then they shouldn’t be.

Though Asuma does make a shadow clone and follows his student, like the sensei before. However, the Suna sensei doesn’t do anything of the sort for Temari.

“That was Sasuke’s Jutsu too!” Choji says, munching on some chips.

On the other side of the viewer’s level, the group can hear Gaara talking. “She was weak. You both are failures.” Gaara says to Kankuro, disgusted after Temari lost to such a showing. And he’s already
believed Kankuro to be weaker than her as it is.

Shikamaru and Kiba hope they don’t go up against him. Anyone but Gaara.

“The next match is shown!” Hayate says and everyone looks up.

‘AKIKO YAGAMI v. GAARA’

Akiko…that’s Heba’s teammate. Naruto somewhat remembers the name from the day after graduation, but he has never spoken to her, and the look on her face and the look on Heba’s sensei’s face says that she actually is on Heba’s team.

She’s shaking her head at her sensei, and he sighs.

“I forfeit. I’m not fighting that psycho.” She says, looking at Hayate and glancing at Gaara as well.

“Are you *cough* sure?”

“Yes. He attacked that proctor lady before the last exam. And I saw him kill a whole team without mercy. I forfeit.” She says, and the mental picture of that is all too easy to imagine in the minds of the rest of Teams 8 and 10.

“Very well. Gaara wins. *cough* *cough* The next match is *cough* shown.”

‘SHIKAMARU NARA v. KANKURO’

“What a drag. Naruto’s the only one who won but hasn’t needed to get medics. Exception to a pattern. Goddamnit.” Shikamaru says at seeing the names on the screen.

“Come on, Shika! Show them that you’re stronger than them!” Naruto says, putting his arm around his best friend’s shoulders.

“Yeah, dude! Use that brain of yours!” Kiba encourages, and all Shikamaru does is sigh and raise his eyebrows at Kurenai in annoyance (who only winks at him because she is confident in his abilities) and walks down the steps where Kankuro is already waiting.

“You Konoha losers are really starting to piss me the fuck off. Now you’re gonna get it!” Kankuro says. Kankuro still hasn’t forgotten what it’s like to be trapped by the Nara’s shadow possession jutsu when they stopped him from hurting Konohamaru before the exams began.

“How troublesome.” Is Shikamaru’s only response.

Though he’s acting calm, he’s somewhat nervous. But he’s also already thinking about strategy and formulating some ideas.

That gourd on his back is an outlier in this – that much is obvious. Throughout their fight in the Second Exam, Kankuro had never used it once. Not when they were attacking Team 10, not when Naruto was beating them up, and not when Gaara tried attacking inside the tower two hours ago.

If anything, during his fight with Naruto, he was avoiding it getting hit.
And it looks clean. Not too unusual as they passed the exam soon after Team 8 did, and he could have done repairs and maintenance, but still, it’s unusual. Two days with not many supplies (unless they have sealing scrolls) makes that unlikely.

And it looks like that it has hair – that’s the oddest part of it all. The rest of the gourd, whatever it is, appears to be sealed tight. The point of that is to not let air in or out, but hair complicates that. It is not air-tight – it is open.

Why leave part of it open? It’s too large to come out of that opening due to the tape used elsewhere. So it would have to cut through – so why is there an opening? What needs an air opening for long periods of time?

Living things.

And what did Ibiki say to those Suna-genin he kicked out during the written exam? Puppet jutsu?

That’s it!

Shikamaru isn’t sure – he’s never totally sure – but he has a good idea that thing Kankuro is carrying is alive and is most likely himself, and that the Kankuro he sees right now is actually nothing more than a puppet.

Now, how is he going to get the real Kankuro out?

“*cough* *cough* *cough* Begin!” Hayate says and jumps out of the way.

Immediately, Shikamaru launches his shadow over to try and get Kankuro. Puppet or not, his jutsu works on him as seen from prior encounters. But Kankuro is prepared for it this time and is able to jump up and out of the way.

Shikamaru knows that if he wants to get the shadow possession in, he’s going to have to limit Kankuro’s maneuverability.

Grabbing some kunai out of his pouch, Shikamaru begins running at Kankuro and Kankuro starts running to his left.

And as a Shogi player, he thinks he has a good idea on how to read and predict moves. So when Shikamaru throws a kunai in the direction Kankuro is running, he also throws one up in the air and one more to the right as well. Based on his first jump when dodging the shadow, Shikamaru threw them at that altitude and distance.

And he’s not disappointed when it hits Kankuro straight in the chest.

“Fuck you!” Kankuro shouts, as if only annoyed there is a kunai in his chest.

And Shikamaru thinks he was right when concluding it was only a puppet. (He’s somewhat relieved, the kunai is pretty deep and could potentially kill - dealing with that would be quite troublesome and would be a major pain).

“How about you show you real self instead of that ugly puppet?” Shikamaru asks, trying to bait out the real shinobi. If he knows exactly what he is fighting against, he can create a better plan than drawing this out wasting chakra.

“So you figured it out? Surprised someone was able to. You Konoha-nin tend to be quite dumb based on prior experiences. Well since you asked so nicely…” Kankuro says, when the gord
explodes out comes Kankuro…looking exactly like he currently does once he pulls his hood over his head and covers his hair.

Except that the puppet, now that Kankuro is out, looks cracked and its shell falls to bits much like how Gaara’s sand seemed to when Naruto fought him in the forest.

“Meet Karasu, my own design.” Kankuro says, and he actually sounds like he has pride at that.

Passion and pride can go a long way. If this particular Suna team hadn’t been horrible to them, Shikamaru might feel a little good for Kankuro at having a passion – but right now it just means that Shikamaru has to be extra careful because when there’s passion and pride, there’s talent and danger.

Suddenly, Karasu shoots out needed from its hands and legs, and Shikamaru rolls on the ground to dodge, grabbing three shuriken mid-role and throwing them at Karasu and Kankuro. Two miss Karasu completely, but one almost hits Kankuro before he dodges.

‘There it is.’ Shikamaru doesn’t smirk – he has a poker face and he isn’t going to let Kankuro know he has a plan.

However, the plan is risky. It’s going to take most of his chakra to do this sequence. If he’s right, he will win. If he’s wrong, then he’s probably going to have to forfeit.

Shikamaru puts his hand signs together for his Shadow-Possession jutsu and the shadow moves, but instead of using that hand seal, he switches it to start a sequence for an Earth-Style Jutsu, doing the Shadow-Possession Hands-Free.

A hands-free jutsu requires precise chakra control to not be taxing on the user’s system. Shikamaru has good control, but nowhere near the control required to do this perfectly. That’s Jonin-level stuff.

But, he trained a bit on it with his dad and he knows how to do it and can do it without rendering himself unconscious after.

Kankuro jumps out of the way of the shadow that’s coming for him, but he can’t do that and react for Karasu when two slabs come out of the floor and move together and crush Karasu.

“NO!” Kankuro screams, mourning the loss of his finest creation yet.

Now it’s the time for Shikamaru to smirk. He is not going to have to forfeit here.

Grabbing a soldier pill out of his bag and swallowing it, he feels the rush of chakra flood him.

Shikamaru rushes towards Kankuro and engages him in Taijutsu. Punch after punch, kick after kick, Shikamaru is able to completely overwhelm Kankuro (he absently thinks Kankuro focused so much on his puppets that he hasn’t properly trained himself).

Kankuro does manage to actually get in one kick to the thigh, but it doesn’t help him at all.

When Shikamaru knocks him on the back of the neck with his elbow, he makes a quick hand-sign and shadow-possesses him.

Bending down so Kankuro grabs a kunai from the floor from earlier, Shikamaru makes Kankuro hold it to his own neck. He moves the blade against his neck, drawing more than just a mere sliver of blood.

“Well?” Shikamaru asks Kankuro, trying not to breathe too hard as it would show just how
exhausted he really is after that fight.

“Goddamnit! Fine! I fucking forfeit!” Kankuro curses, trying to kill Shikamaru with his eyes.

“Shikamaru Nara wins. *cough*” Hayate announces, and Shikamaru releases the shadow-possession and Kurenai’s clone jumps down to be with him.

“YES, SHIKA! THAT WAS AMAZING!” Naruto shouts, happy and proud for his best friend absolutely destroying in that match – literally!

Shikamaru takes much need deep breaths, almost out of chakra already. That soldier pill helped, but the chakra that it gave was almost entirely consumed by the lasting effects of that hand-less jutsu he used prior.

“Congratulations. I’m so proud of you – all of you. Another great showing, Shikamaru. Come on, let’s get up there and you can rest.” Kurenai says, patting Shikamaru on the back as he takes one more deep breath and starts walking to the stairs.

“The next match *cough* is shown.” Hayate says, making everyone look up.

‘ROCK LEE v. KIBA INUZUKA’

“YES! IT IS MY TIME TO SHINE!” The green-clad nin from Neji’s team starts shouting, and that must be Rock Lee.

“LEE! SHOW YOUR YOUTH TO EVERYONE AND LET THEM SEE JUST HOW MUCH HARD WORK AND DEDICATION PAYS OFF!” His sensei shouts back.

“YES, GAI-SENSEI!” Lee shouts, tears rolling out of his eyes.

“LEE!” Gai shouts back, also crying.

“GAI-SENSEI!”

“LEE!”

Asuma, Kurenai, and especially Kakashi are used to these kind of outbursts by Gai. But Naruto, Shikamaru, Choji, and Kiba are bewildered by what they are witnessing. The two green-clad shinobi are hugging each other, crying, and just saying each other’s name.

The lone kunoichi on their team just looks embarrassed.

“Come on, Kiba! Get down there and show them who’s top dog!” Naruto says and slaps his friend on the back. Choji offers his teammate some of his chips.

“Hell yeah. Let’s go, Akamaru!” Kiba says, taking a few chips and popping them in his mouth.

Kiba and Akamaru jump down rather than taking the stairs, and so does Lee.

“I am honored to be fighting you. All your friends have had really great matches! Let’s try our best!” Lee says and holds out his hand.

‘Is this guy really on the same team as Hinata’s jerk-ass of a cousin?’ Kiba thinks.
But Kiba sees no malice – only the desire to succeed and have a good fight. He actually reminds Kiba a lot of Naruto, actually.

Smiling, Kiba walks over to Lee and shakes his hand.

“YES! OUR YOUTH WILL SHINE IN THIS MATCH, KIBA INUZUKA! GOOD LUCK!” Lee shouts after their handshake ends.

“You too, Lee!” Kiba says back, and Akamaru yips in agreement. They walk back to their starting position, ready to begin the match.

“Begin! *cough*” Hayate says and jumps out of the way.

Lee immediately rushes on Kiba, who didn’t see Lee coming due to his sheer speed.

But after a swift punch to his face, Kiba is barely able to keep with with Lee’s punches and kicks. And though Akamaru jumped in as soon as he could, all it took was one hard kick to his snout to knock him clear across the area.

Kiba is completely on the defensive right now, but he sees Akamaru coming back, fangs ready to bite Lee’s arm and (feeling sorry for the genin) knees him in the groin when he his only slightly distracted as he turns to kick Akamaru. Kiba’s knee hits metal rather than the flesh he was expecting, however.

“GREAT BREAKTHROUGH!” Kiba shouts and performs his only Wind-style jutsu. Lee flinched from the groin attack, but jumped away in time to avoid the wind.

“Hahaha! As ninja, we have to be prepared for dirty tricks like that! But that was very clever of you to do that. Very good, Kiba!” Lee says, fist in the air. “But, I think it’s time we take it to the next level, huh?” Lee asks, and then looks to Gai.

“DO IT, LEE! TAKE THEM OFF!” Gai says, smiling and giving Lee a ‘thumbs-up.’

Lee bends down and undoes something on both ankles, and then throws them to the side of the area and practically burrows a gigantic hole in the wall.

“What was that?” Kiba asks incredulously.

“There were my ankle weights. You see, Kiba, I am incapable of using ninjutsu or genjutsu. Therefore I can only fight with Taijutsu, and I aim to be the greatest Taijutsu master anyone has ever known. I eventually aim to surpass even Gai-sensei. And ankle weights are a great way to improve speed and stamina.” Lee explains in a much more different tone than he has spoken so far.

“Wow, Lee. To be that good with only Taijutsu…you must be amazing! And if you’re taking things to the next level, how about I do so too?” Kiba asks to Lee, whose eyes light up.

“Yes, Kiba! I would love to see what you can do too!” Lee exclaims.

Kiba takes a pill out of his pocket and throws it over to Akamaru, who eats it and starts to transform. His fur grows red, his fangs lengthen, and his senses are amplified ten-fold. Kiba takes a pill as well, and his nails lengthen and he also gets the sense enhancement.

“Ready?” Kiba asks, voice more grisly and throaty.
“Yes, Kiba! Let’s let our youth shine!” Lee says and begins running at Kiba again.

This time, Kiba and Akamaru are ready for this and are able to keep up…for a few seconds.

The speed increase Lee got from removing his weights was just phenomenal – and Kiba knows he only has one shot at this.

“Akamaru, Dynamic Marking!” Kiba shouts as he continues to try to block Lee’s attacks as some slip through.

Akamaru jumps in the air and pees all over the area where Lee will go, his senses telling him how Lee is moving based on the change of the direction of his scent.

And the dog piss connects!

“Man-beast clone, Akamaru!” Kiba shouts when Lee recoils in disgust at the previous technique, and Akamaru turns into a mimic of Kiba.

“FANG OVER FANG!” Kiba commands their signature technique, and based on his scent in the air they aim where Lee is going.

And they were right…but Lee jumps and hits both Kiba and Akamaru with both a leg and a fist at the same time, halting them in their tracks and sending them to the floor.

Though they are conscious, they cannot move from that blow. Lee packed that dual kick-and-punch with so much force.

“Rock Lee wins. *cough*” Hayate makes his announcement after a few seconds of no real movement from Kiba.

“Kiba! That was such an amazing match! Thank you for the challenge! Lee exclaims, moving to help Kiba and then Akamaru up from the floor. “Your youth is so strong!”

“Hehe, thanks Lee. You were fantastic! I really have to train some more – I would love to fight you again when I get stronger!” Kiba says. Yeah, he’s not too happy about losing, but Lee is being such a great sport about it and Kiba lost fair and square.

“Yes, of course! Your youth is shining through!” Lee says and smiles at him and gives him a ‘thumbs-up,’ much like Gai did earlier to Lee.

“LEE! CONGRATULATIONS, MY BOY! THAT WAS SUCH A FANTASTIC DISPLAY OF THE SPRINGTIME OF YOUTH! I COULDN’T BE PROUDER!” Gai jumps down and yells to Lee!

“GAI-SENSEI! THANK YOU SO MUCH!” Lee yells, crying, with a fist balled up.

“LEE!”

“GAI-SENSEI!”

“LEE!”

“*cough* *cough* Umm…the final match is *cough* announced…” Hayate says as Lee and Gai continue to shout each other’s name.

‘TAICHI KIRIGO v. TENTEN’
“TENTEN! I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT! SHOW YOUR YOUTH!” Lee shouts, not taking a breath between shouting for his sensei and then his other teammate.

“YES, TENTEN, MY STUDENT! THE SPRINGTIME OF YOUTH CALLS YOU!” Gai shouts to her, as she blushes and jumps down into the arena as Kiba goes back up to his side using the stairs.

“That was a fantastic match, Kiba. You have nothing to be ashamed of for losing.” Asuma tells his student as he comes up the stairs.

“Nah, it’s fine. Yeah I’m kinda bummed, but that just means I have to train harder.” Kiba says, patting Akamaru who is now sleeping on top of the genin’s head.

“At least one of us is moving on – Ino did great!” Choji says, offering more chips to Kiba, who gladly takes some.

“And two of you guys are moving on too.” Kiba says, referring to Naruto and Shika.

“Yeah, and chances are that some of us will fight each other. What a drag.” Shikamaru groans out, wanting this fight to finish so Naruto and Choji could go to a medic and so he can check on Hinata and Ino.

“True, but we’re all friends. Like we said at the beginning, our friendship always comes first over a promotion. We try our best and that’s it.” Naruto reminds everyone, and that seems to calm everyone down enough to watch the final match of the preliminaries.

“*cough* Begin!” Hayate begins the final match and jumps out of the way.

Taichi Kirigo is an unknown to everyone here – both his teammates left before the round began, but he is a Konoha shinobi. His Jonin-sensei is spectating.

Tenten doesn’t waste any time at all and doesn’t want to find out what Taichi is capable of. She pulls out a scroll and bites her hand and unseals a set of swords, a pair in which one goes with each hand and complements the other.

“Lightning style: Volt Wave!” Taichi calls out and sends a wave of lightning shooting out both his hands across the entire arena.

Tenten quickly sticks her blades in the ground and balances in the air on them – the lightning on the blade itself but not hitting her due to the rubber grip on the hilt.

(She vaguely acknowledges to herself that she might have lost if she weren’t using these blades to begin with – not all of them have rubber grips.)

Throwing one of her blades at Taichi, she also throws a kunai in two directions and Taichi has to roll then dodge the kunai, which Tenten then proceeds to throw her other blade as she grabs the first one from the floor.

Her second blade cuts Taichi’s arm, causing it to bleed but not currently life-threatening.
“Lightning style: Tracking Rod!” Taichi shouts and points his finger at Tenten, gathering chakra in it. Tenten sees his finger brightening and she is suddenly aware of what this jutsu might be.

Quickly unsealing another weapon, she holds in in front of herself just in time to avoid getting hit. Instead of her, the lightning hits a reflective shield and is reflected back at Taichi. Moving out of the way but keeping the jutsu active, Taichi aims at Tenten’s feet, then head, then anywhere she isn’t holding the mirror; however, she is able to predict his moves, only putting Taichi on the defensive from his own attack.

Taichi stops the jutsu, taking a few breaths, and Tenten decides to end this before letting him get off another jutsu.

Putting more blood on the scroll, she tosses it in the air and unseals all her weapons – a massive downpour of weapons all aimed at Taichi and his surrounding area.

In order not to get killed by all the weapons, Taichi’s focus is completely on dodging them, leaving him distracted and completely open to attack. Tenten runs up to him with one well-placed punch to the temple, and knocks him out. She then proceeds to stop the weapons from unsealing and keeps them from falling onto Taichi.

“*cough* Tenten wins.” Hayate announces the decision of the final match.

“YES, TENTEN! THAT WAS A BRILLIANT DISPLAY OF YOUTH! I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT!” Lee shouts, excited his teammate won.

“TENTEN MY BRILLIANT STUDENT! I AM SO PROUD!” Gai shouts as well, crying and hugging Lee in happiness.

Everyone in the whole arena thinks those two are strange.

“This concludes the Preliminary matches for the third *cough* exam. All victors that are here are *cough* *cough* asked to take a number to determine your opponent in the final tournament. *cough*” Hayate speaks, and gives a moment for everyone to line up.

Naruto, Gaara, Shikamaru, Tenten, and Lee are lined up – the only victor that is not there is Ino, who is still getting treated and is being supervised by Asuma.

Hayate walks the line with a bag, and each victor takes a piece of paper from the bag and reports a number on it.

“One.” Naruto says.

“Three.” Gaara says, angry that his number makes it that he won’t fight Naruto, at least at first.

“Two.” Shikamaru says, relieved that his number means that he won’t be fighting Gaara, at least not at first.

“Three…” Tenten says, now nervous because that means she is going to fight ‘the psycho’ that Akiko said before she forfeited.

“One! Yes!” Lee announces, excited that he is fighting Naruto. He did seem to be a good sport after his fight with Heba!
“That leaves Ino Yamanaka with *cough* ‘two.’ In this tournament, *cough* *cough* *cough* there will be a series of three one-on-one matches. The three winners will then compete in a triple-threat elimination match, *cough* ending when one contestant remains. The screen above will show your *cough* matchups.” Hayate says after everyone gives their numbers.

‘ROCK LEE v. NARUTO UZUMAKI’

‘SHIKAMARU NARA v. INO YAMANAKA’

‘GAARA v. TENTEN’

*Ahem…* The Hokage clears his throat, drawing attention to himself.

“These matches will take place in one month from now. Based on the matches you have seen here, you now have time to rest, recover, and plan for your opponent. Winning doesn’t guarantee you will make Chuunin. Losing doesn’t mean you won’t be Chuunin. All or none of you could get the promotion. Do your best – show off your skills and represent your village well.” Sarutobi speaks to the five genin who are here.

The genin are all thinking about different things.

Naruto is worried about Hinata and Ino after their matches, and about Gaara in general – if Naruto wins against Lee then he is going to have to fight Gaara and someone else. And beating Lee isn’t going to be easy either – Lee is fast. And his neck still goddamn hurts and he wants to see a medic now because the matches are over!

Gaara just wants to kill everyone here and feed Mother some bodies, especially Naruto Uzumaki.

Tenten is worried about fighting Gaara – after hearing he killed a whole team and tried to attack a proctor, she got very nervous. She is also worried about how Neji is taking his loss (because he actually lost, no matter if the match was officially a ‘Draw’) to Hinata.

Lee is just excited to fight and wants to train harder and harder with his teammates and his sensei!

Shikamaru is concerned for four of his friends from this exam, not to mention the two still in the hospital. And he really doesn’t want to fight Ino – one of them will lose, and then one will have to fight against Gaara. Not a fun situation for either victor or loser.

“Good luck, everyone. Your month begins now – use your time wisely.” The Hokage says before disappearing in a swirl of leaves.

One month of recovery and training. And all six contestants do not intend to waste any of their time at all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well that chapter was massive. And some interesting things happening here for plot! Especially for the finals and what’s going to go on there!

Why is Orochimaru’s team not there? Because I wanted to write something different
than canon because the same thing in every fic is just boring.

To be honest, I’m not sure how I feel about the whole thing with Naruto’s backstory as a child. I’ve always had it planned from the beginning, but I don’t know if it was boring to read or not, or if you guys are interested in more canon-divergence and exploration of this kind of stuff.

Furthermore, there’s not enough Tenten in Naruto stories. She is such an interesting character – so I wanted her to advance because I love the idea of a weapons master.

And yeah, I know I’m not the best at writing fight scenes. Still, I tried my best and I hope that doesn’t detract too much from this chapter.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 19!

Also, don’t forget to review!
Chapter Summary

A day after the preliminaries, everyone gets together and one genin receives some difficult news. After, the plans for the month are given, and Naruto meets and starts training with his new teacher.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s another chapter, everyone! This one’s a bit calmer than the last few have been. Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 19)-Of Discussions and Training

Naruto’s P.O.V.

One Day Later

Wow, those medics really know how to treat a guy right! My neck is feeling so much better – as the Kyuubi continues to fight the seal, they were helping with my pain levels with a shadow clone of Kurenai-sensei and Asuma-sensei as supervision.

Choi went with me to see a doctor, and they practically loaded him with carbs, and he said he’s feeling a lot better than he was. He’s recovered a lot of the weight he lost already, and it’s relieving to see him like he was again.

The real Kurenai-sensei and Asuma-sensei saw me a few hours later, having gotten through with making sure Hinata’s and Ino’s conditions were stable too. I was only in there for pain management; they didn’t do anything to the seal. I definitely understand my sensei being there for them first – they were in worse condition than me. And their clones did supervise me and Choji too, so it was all fine.

Hinata and Ino got released from the hospital this morning. Hinata shouldn’t use chakra for a few days while her body readjusts to having open tenketsu again, and Ino was healed except for three scars on the left side of her body.

Ino guarded her body with her left side when Temari attacked her in the fight. Unfortunately, this caused her to get scarring below her left eye, and two on her left arm.

“Guys, it’s really no big deal! They’re blemishes!” Ino says about her scars. “In fact, they kinda make me look tough! Right, Sakura? You look like a total badass with your hand, and you have a
super cool story to back it up!” Ino counters.

“Haha that’s true! Look at us – the badass kunoichi club!” Sakura laughs at what Ino said.

“Better than the Sasuke fan club…” He mutters, but which everyone hears and laughs at anyway. He then moves a piece in his Shogi game with Shika.

Coming from Sasuke, that was hilarious!

All nine of us are sitting together at the training field where we all originally met up before we left on that training mission. We’re waiting for our sensei to come – there’s something we all have to discuss and our sensei wanted to be here with us before we do it.

“Hey, Hinata?” I ask her quietly, because this is kind of personal what I wanna ask her.

“Yes, Naruto?” She responds, looking at me. She’s hunched over, probably due to the pain in her midsection after her fight with Neji.

Neji Hyuuga. How could someone in her family – her own cousin – be such an asshole? I know it goes back to the story she told us of when she went out of the village for the first time – when she was kidnapped and her uncle was killed instead of her father – but that’s not Hinata’s fault at all. He’s the older one too! If anything, he should understand that most of all!

And he was so convinced that he would beat Hinata because of ‘fate’ or some bullshit like that. But Hinata won! Yeah, she didn’t get the victory in the match – which pisses me off! – but she won and Neji knows that. She beat the clan prodigy!

“How is…everything at home?” I continue to speak quietly. It’s no secret to anyone here anymore that her clan has issues with her, but I can understand all too well that it’s difficult to discuss some things.

Like with me and stuff about Heba. And, I really need to talk to Heba again soon.

I couldn’t believe that I had to fight him. It was difficult enough to think he was a ninja too, but to actually have to fight him in the Chuunin Exams? That was tough – emotionally and physically because this damn seal made it excruciating to use chakra. And with his bloodline, I really needed my clones and water jutsu to overwhelm him to make that Bloodline ineffective.

But I did learn something – my taijutsu needs a lot of work. Seeing what that green Lee kid that Kiba fought could do was…amazing. He can’t even use any ninjutsu or genjutsu at all! And he could do all that with just taijutsu? Unbelievable and so awesome!

And his teammate with the weapons, Tenten, that looked so cool! She had so many different kinds of weapons and she knew exactly which ones to use. And when she avoided all that lightning at first by sticking them in the ground? So cool!

But how could someone as positive and friendly as Lee be on the same team as that assface Neji? I just don’t get it – especially with that weirdo sensei.

“Well…my dad actually said ‘good job’ for the first time. I know he was disappointed I didn’t win that match, but…” She says.

That’s good! Not great, but the fact he complimented her, is better than it was before.

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s not perfect but it’s something and that’s a start. As long as we keep going,
we’ll do it, Hinata.” I say to her, and she smiles at me.

Her smile…I always want her to smile. She doesn’t smile enough. Before we became a team, I only saw them a few times in the Academy. Even when we hung out and talked…there some blushes and stuff, but there weren’t many smiles.

When we did become a team, she smiled probably even less because of how weak she thought she was physically. But she’s improved so much – just like all of us knew she would. Shika even says now that he is the weakest on this team.

(I don’t know about that, though – Shika and Hinata are both amazing. And I’ve learned that there’s more to strength than just power. Shika has us both outclassed in terms of planning and strategy.)

As time went on with us training and doing missions, with our team meals, cloud-watching with Shika, run-ins with Konohamaru and his squad, Hinata has smiled more. But not enough. I want her (and Shika too, of course) to practically always want to smile.

And…Hinata’s smile is really pretty too…

“Yeah, thank you Naruto. Again, you helped me focus when I was thinking bad things.” She says and smiles at me…and I can’t help myself when I hug her. She gladly returns it.

I know exactly what she’s talking about. When she was talking to Kurenai-sensei and Neji, she stuttered. She hadn’t done that in so long, and I knew she was getting overwhelmed. But I knew all she needed was to hear her team because we care about her.

“I’ll always help you if you need it!” And I know she would help me too, and she did. When she helped me when I was unconscious from the Kyuubi – looking out for me and treating me with her anti-burn cream.

“I know. Thank you.” She says and she smiles again!

I can’t believe how relieved I feel now that we’re out of those exams for a while. It’s been a day since they ended and we were only in that forest for two, but it felt like forever – and I was unconscious for over half that time!

“They’re here…” Hinata whispers to me, and she senses our sensei here. “Come out, sensei!” She calls out, and they appear in three swirls of leaves.

“I know you’re a sensor, but that’s still so cool!” Choji says. Hinata told everyone about being a sensor before we came back to Konoha. Considering how well we all worked together and got along, it really feels like we’re all one giant team like Shika said.

“Yo!” Kakashi-sensei says, holding up his hand but not his porn book. That would be surprising if not for the fact that we have something very important to discuss with one particular genin here...

“Okay everyone, we have a few things to discuss. Let’s all get in a circle.” Kurenai-sensei asks of us, and we all comply.

I know what’s coming, but I’m suddenly nervous. This could be…very bad.

“Naruto, would you explain what was said to you during the second exam?” Asuma-sensei tells me.

Shit…
“First, I don’t blame anyone here. Not at all! This is his fault! When Orochimaru gave me this mark…he asked us to deliver a message. And…Sasuke, it was for you.” I begin, and his eyes narrow.

“…What? What kind of message?” He’s not angry, but he does look upset, understandably so.

If one of my friends got this mark just to give me a message, I’d be upset too (and that’s only a huge understatement, to say the least).

“It was about…Itachi.” I say, and immediately Sakura’s and Shino’s hands are on Sasuke. His leg and shoulder, to comfort him. And I believe I see Shika’s shadow too in an attempt to comfort him.

Sasuke half-seems to want to run, half-seems to want to explode.

Itachi is…it’s an unspoken rule, especially for us not on Team 7, that Itachi is not to be mentioned. He destroyed Sasuke, and he is dead to us too. And though I’m still not a huge fan of the idea of killing him, I would help Sasuke do it no matter what.

Sasuke’s eyes close, and his lips purse.

“First, we learned that Itachi is part of the group that attacked us when came back to the village. Orochimaru – the Sannin – said he met your brother, who told the snake that his group almost killed you and Shino. And that this mark on my neck,” I say, showing it to him (as he activates his Sharingan to stare…murderously…at it), “grants power.”

This is so hard to say. Knowing the emotional turmoil Sasuke must be going through right now at hearing this.

“And that…he wants to give you this power to help you kill your bother. Orochimaru said hate fuels power, and that your hate for Itachi could make you stronger than him even. All it takes is this…seal.” I continue, getting everything out.

Our sensei are prepared in case Sasuke wants to get away from here, from the discussion of his brother, from everything. But he needs to hear this.

We waited until now because while we have no doubt in our minds that he would never go to Orochimaru, Shika said that Sasuke might take the whole situation wrong. People who are in a lot of pain do wrong things sometimes.

“But, Sasuke, please listen to me when I say this. He is lying to you. Yes, it gives power. But this seal is a curse. Like a chakratic infection…the only reason I’m fine is because of my Bloodline fighting it. Even right now. I’m hopped up on pain meds and it still hurts. It hurts like a bitch! But also, I don’t blame you! Just like how you said you don’t blame me for you and Shino getting hurt – it’s Orochimaru’s fault. All this seal did was give me nightmares, make me attack a medic, and hurt me when I try to use chakra.” I say, thoughts somewhat disorganized.

“DAMN IT!” Sasuke screams, slamming his fists down hard onto his legs, causing him to groan.

I don’t know what that means.

“Sasuke, talk to us!” Kakashi demands his student, appearing right in front of him.

“IT’S JUST NOT FUCKING FAIR!” He yells again and looks around at everyone and then focuses on me. “Why does everyone I care about get hurt? My family, my friends, my team…” Sasuke says and then changes his position. He holds his hands in front of his nose…like how he sat a
lot in the Academy, actually.

I actually feel just how he does. Everyone I care about too is getting hurt. But at the same time he also lost his whole family, too. This whole situation is just terrible for everyone involved.

“There’s no way in hell that I’m going with that bastard. He hurt you. And I don’t need any of that power. I have…” And he doesn’t say anything more as he glances at everyone again.

And he’s trying his hardest not cry. At least, not to cry in front of everyone here.

“We’ll always be with you, Sasuke. All of us. I know this hurt, but you deserved to know the truth of what happened.” Kakashi says pulls Sasuke in for a hug.

“…I know.” He says after the hug separates.

“You alright?” Sakura asks Sasuke when Kakashi gets up from being in front of him.

“Yeah.”

After that emotional discussion with Sasuke, Kurenai-sensei pulled out a sealing scroll with lunch for everyone! She made everyone their favorites, too!

_Yummy!_

Food is always a great way to decrease tension after something serious, and I’m glad to see that Sasuke looks at least somewhat relaxed again. He’s my friend!

“Okay, now that we all ate it’s time we discuss the following month for the Chuunin Exam Finals.” Kurenai-sensei speaks up, drawing our attention.

_Yes! Training!_

“Naruto, Ino, Shikamaru, congratulations on making it to the finals. The three of us have been discussing what’s going to happen, and we came up with that we think is a good plan. First, Shikamaru, your father has requested to be your personal trainer. We believe that would be best for you. Ino, we found you a trainer from your father’s department who also uses fire-style.” Asuma-sensei says to my two friends and (possible) future opponents.

I’m just glad I’m not fighting them in the first round – but they are fighting _each other._

“And Naruto, I was going to find someone but someone else actually requested to train you. I believe they would be the perfect teacher for this month. We will meet them in a few hours when he returns from a mission.” Kurenai-sensei tells me.

Wow! Someone actually _requested_ to be my teacher? That’s sweet!

“And as Shino and Sasuke are still recovering, we won’t be taking any missions. But that means we’ll be doing some _heavy_ training!” Kakashi-sensei says, and I can _hear_ the wink he is giving Team 7.

And if their groans are something to go by, then that training isn’t pleasant.

“And Hinata, Choji, Kiba, and Akamaru will be training with Asuma and me.” Kurenai-sensei
“But that doesn’t mean our Wind training is done, Naruto. I think we were getting there at the end.” Asuma-sensei says and pats me on the back.

All right! A private trainer and more Wind training?

Kick ass!

“And as everyone’s going to be doing their own thing, we decided that every Sunday we should have group meals and relaxation days.” Asuma-sensei adds.

That sounds really good! Considering everyone has to do their own training – Shika, Ino, and I all have separate teachers now too – it’ll be nice to be able to see everyone so we don’t lose everything that we got during the month we were all together.

I can’t wait to meet my teacher, though!

“Sorry Naruto; he should have been here by now.” Kurenai-sensei tells me.

We’re waiting in a training area near the outskirts of the village. Kurenai-sensei said my training for the next month should have a bit more privacy, and these training areas aren’t even used anymore because wartime is over – whatever that means.

After a few minutes, there’s something I want to ask sensei that’s been bothering me.

“Hey, sensei. There’s something that’s been on my mind since the matches were announced. I’m concerned about Gaara. After what he did to Choji…I’m worried about everyone. The final match is a triple threat…and if I win I could team up with either Shika or Ino…but the only way I was able to do anything against him was with the Kyuubi’s chakra. And if I lose against Lee…” I tell her what’s troubling me.

Not that I don’t believe they can defend themselves, I just worry for Ino and Shika. We all agreed to avoid that team during the exams for a reason. And now we’re going to have to fight him.

If he has a tailed beast like me…and if he can use its chakra, then my friends are in trouble. Even those two missing-nin that attacked us left when I used the Kyuubi.

“I can understand your worries. I’m not going to lie and say I think everything will be okay. But I will say that it is an exam that has political roots and is a show in the very end. I swear that I will not let them die as long as I am alive. You too, of course, Naruto.” Kurenai-sensei tells me and that’s a huge relief.

To know that if need be she can interrupt the match to save us…is a relief. Yeah we’re ninja and we’ll fight people stronger than us, but we have teams for those. Not 1v1s or anything like that. And those do happen, but then there’s always retreating if things are bad – or something.

“Hey, hey, hey, now! How touching!” I suddenly hear an old man’s voice, and I turn around and the eyesore that I see…he’s here for a reason. Why else would someone randomly be here?

Oh, boy.

“You’re late, Master Jiraiya.” Kurenai-sensei says, rolling her eyes to the man.
I was right; this guy is my teacher.

“You know I have to do my research for my books! They sell like unlimited hotcakes!” He says, looking like how Kakashi-sensei does sometimes when he reads his book.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anyway Naruto, this is Master Jiraiya. He requested to train you for this month when he heard you passed and I believe his skills would benefit you much more than I could.” Sensei says, and that shocks me.

How much more powerful could he be than sensei?

“Kurenai, flattery could get you very far with me! Hahaha!” He says, rushing up to her side and touching her on the neck.

WHAM!

Ouch! – she just punched him straight in his balls. Can’t say he didn’t deserve it – he’s a pervert and an old lecher!

“Ugh!” He groans out, falling to the floor and sweatdropping.

“Despite my lack of confidence in his character, he is actually one of the most powerful shinobi in the world. I believe you were told about the Sannin, right Naruto?” Kurenai-says, wiping her neck in disgust.

Sannin?!?! That was what Orochimaru was one of!

“Yeah, Ino explained it. Students of the old man. This old perv was that bastard’s teammate?!” I ask, shocked at how different the two are.

“Yeah, that snake bastard’s my old teammate. And I know what he did to you. And I know about your tenant. You see, Naruto, I happen to be a sealing jutsu master. It’s a dying art, and I want to train you in the field. And to start I need your help – I want to figure out how to remove that bastard’s seal and help his victims.” The old perv says to me, in a much deeper and serious voice, looking me in my eyes.

He wants to train me in seals? That’s awesome! Since I became a genin I’ve become more and more fascinated in seals! They can do so much – from explosive seals to sealing demons!

And he wants to help Orochimaru’s victims. Good. And if he needs me, that must mean the Kyuubi could help figure it out.

“…Alright! I’ll be your student! Thanks a lot!” I say after a few seconds of thinking.

“Keep me updated on his progress, Jiraiya. Good luck, Naruto. I know you can do it.” Kurenai-sensei says.

“Thank you, sensei. For everything.” I say and hug her. She chuckles and hugs me back.

“See you later.” She says before disappearing in a swirl of leaves.

The area is silent for a few moments as the tone fades away.

“Wow she’s a tease. A hot piece like that, with those bright ruby eyes, genjutsu mistress. Hot damn I can work with that!” The old perv starts writing in some kind of notebook.
“HEY, OLD PERV! I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONNA TEACH ME!” I scream at him, making him drop his notebook and look around in fear.

“Jeez, kid, don’t say that! And I will – just give me a sec!” He says and goes back to obsessing over his writing.

Ugh.

“Okay, Naruto, I’m going to use a version of an examination medical jutsu. I’m going to see just how the Kyuubi’s chakra is fighting back.” The pervy old man says. I’m laying down on a log, shirt off as he looks at the seal on my neck.

Maybe it’s because I know the seal is being fought back, even though it’s slow, so right now it feels just like an annoyance. But, I’m trying to imagine how someone without the Kyuubi would feel with it, like Sasuke.

It’s violating. Orochimaru did violate me when he did this, and who knows how many others he violated as well. I could maybe also even see it as a form of psychological torture as well; knowing that it would never go away without Orochimaru’s doing so.

It’s sick.

The worst of humanity. Shika said that Orochimaru experimented on orphans, and that many died during it. All for the ‘greater good.’ No, it’s not.

There’s no redeeming him. I remember how I wondered how Deidara, Hidan, Itachi got to the point they are at with doing bad things. But Orochimaru seems to be on a whole other level. No redemption.

And I hate to think this, I really do, but from what little I already know about him I feel like he should die. And if he hurt my friends rather than me, I know I would want him dead – seal or no seal, Kyuubi influence or not – I would want him dead.

And I know that conflicts with my own want of peace. I want to change the shinobi world. But with people like him, it just isn’t possible. Orochimaru is evil.

“Allright.” I acknowledge Jiraiya.

And what he does feels just like an ordinary examination jutsu. Well, it feels like an examination except it does tickle a little. This continues on for a few minutes.

“Wow. I’ve never seen anything like this before.” He says and stops the jutsu. “It appears that the Kyuubi’s chakra is breaking apart and converting Orochimaru’s seal chakra into chakra compatible with your own system. It’s…miraculous.” Jiraiya says and he hands me my shirt back.

Breaking it apart? I don’t remember much from the Academy lectures on chakra, but what I understood it’s the most basic thing out there. Chakra is the basis of all living things and that’s that.

“How is that possible? Is there anything smaller than chakra? Like chakra cells?” I ask, because I know we are all made out of cells.

“I didn’t think so until now. There are things smaller than cells – organelles, then atoms, then
subatomic particles. What I’m think I saw is something like subchakratic particles. Naruto, I have an idea. I know it sounds strange, but would you be willing to allow some of the Kyuubi’s chakra to be extracted? So we can give it to our medics and scientists to run experiments on this.” Jiraiya asks me, and…it sounds risky.

I mean, I don’t not want to do it. I want to be able to help the scientists to be able to figure this stuff out. But, taking the Kyuubi’s chakra?

“What if it starts…affecting me again? Sometimes when I get really angry, I somehow use its chakra and power and I’m not entirely myself…” I trail off, and he nods in understanding.

“It’s called the Tailed-Beast cloak. And you are still you in its early stages, but certain parts of your brain are temporarily compromised. You rely more on raw instinct and emotion.” What the hell?

Early stages?

“How do you know all this? Are there really other creatures like the Kyuubi?” I ask, and if so then that really does explain Gaara and what Hinata saw inside him. “And what’s this about early stages?”

“Geez, haven’t you been told anything about this? I would have thought you would have been everything when found out about the Kyuubi.” Jiraiya says, and he must not know how I found out about the Kyuubi.

“Do you…know how I found out about it?” I ask him, and he looks confused.

“Didn’t Sarutobi-sensei tell you?” Jiraiya asks, and I can only shake my head as I begin the story and tell him about the Academy and Mizuki and how I graduated.

…He looks pissed about the whole thing.

I found out how there are nine tailed-beasts, each with an ascending number of tails and power. I hold the strongest of them all, the Kyuubi.

I also told him how I think Gaara had another tailed beast, which one I have no idea. He said it’s very well possible, because every major village has at least one jinchuuriki.

Jinchuuriki. That’s that I am. There’s actually a name for people who have demons sealed inside them. I can’t believe it – there’s actually an answer to one of my so many questions.

The pervert was also angry that the Old Man never told me what I contain. He said I should have known when I was eight or nine, the latest. That would have been only a year or so after Heba got adopted – another two or so years before I would even age out of the orphanage.

When I accepted his request for extracting the chakra, the procedure went by pretty smoothly. I just laid down on a hospital bed and waited while they did their stuff. There were a lot of people there – Jiraiya saying they were seal experts and whatnot – and they extracted Kyuubi chakra and stored them in some containers.

It was a little painful – mostly in my neck from the still-weakening cursed seal – but I was more than willing to endure it because it would help people.
“Okay, Naruto, our training is going to start tomorrow. But what you did today could really make a difference.” Jiraiya tells me, patting my head with his hand.

He’s…being so nice to me. Not many adults have ever been this nice to me. And he doesn’t just know about the Kyuubi – he probably knows more than anyone else because of his knowledge of seals. So he’s seeing me as Naruto.

“Hey, old perv, I wanna ask you something.” I tell him.

“Shoot, kid.”

“Why…why did you request to train me? Just to look at the seal?” I ask him.

I definitely appreciate the training we’ll be doing, whatever the reason. But I don’t want to just be trained because of Orochimaru. I want it to be because I’m me.

And Jiraiya smiles down at me and puts his hand on my shoulder, and kneels and looks me in the eye.

“I didn’t want to tell you this until later, but it started with a group named Akatsuki. The ninja that attacked you, Deidara and Hidan, are members of that group. I am one of Konoha’s best spies, and I learned that they are hunting the tailed beasts. So I want to train you so you live.” He says.

I knew there was a group after me and the Kyuubi, but to know they are after all of them – after all the other jinchuuriki like me. It’s scary.

What else does he know about them? Why are they hunting the tailed beasts? Who else is in the group? Can we stop them? Do they have any other plans except the tailed beasts? Were they the reason Itachi did what he did?

“And, call me a sentimental old man, you remind me a lot of someone very precious to me. When Sarutobi-sensei told me about your progress and career – your missions and how you’ve done in the Chuunin exams – I knew that you are the person I want to teach. Not just because of Akatsuki and Kyuubi or Orochimaru, but because you’re good. There aren’t enough good people in this world, especially good ninja.” Jiraiya continues.

So, he sees in me someone that he cared about before – and he thinks I’m good. I don’t know if that’s my skill, my character, my friends – but he did it because I’m me.

For a dirty, pervy old man, he’s alright!

“Oh…thank you. I’ll, um, try not to disappoint you!” I say, excited because this guy wants to teach me!

“You better not, kid! Or else I could have spent my time researching down by the baths!” He says and starts daydreaming.

Why must he ruin the moment?

“Okay, Naruto, the first thing we are going to do for your training is something that will help you and be by your side for the rest of your life. As I never got to give you my proper introduction, you should know something. Aside from being a great writer of adult fiction—” I cut him off.
“Yeah, I know you’re a huge pervert! Everyone knows you’re a goddamn pervert.” I say, making him flush.

“Yeah, yeah yeah, smart mouth. As I was saying, not only am I an amazing writer, I am also known as the powerful and great Toad Sage – and that means-” I cut him off again.

“So you’re a pervy sage?” I ask, smirking at him as he flusters.

“Shit, kid! You’re brutal!” He points at me, and I just shrug at him. Then, we both chuckle together.

“Tell me – have you ever heard of summoning contracts?” He asks me, and we all know about summoning.

“Of course I have! Kakashi-sensei has Pakkun and the rest of the pack!” I answer, because those dogs are awesome and they skilled and are also fun to play with!

“That’s correct. And as the toad sage, I can also summon. Watch!” Jiraiya tells me and I do so.

He bits his thumb, makes a hand sign and then –

Poof!

Like one of my shadow clones, a cloud of smoke appears before going away and revealing a rather large frog! And this frog has a giant sword on his back, too!

“Master Jiraiya, I apologize if my coming here was most ungraceful.” The frog talks to him, just like Pakkun!

“It was perfect, Mr. Gamaken. And Gamaken, this right here is my new student Naruto. You see, I’m considering letting him sign the summoning contract and I wanted to show him what it’s like.” He tells the frog.

No way!

He actually wants to let me summon? Like…seriously!?!?!

THAT IS SO COOL!

“I see. If you took him on as a student, then I trust your judgement. I just hope he doesn’t find my ungracefulness to be a mitigating factor.” Gamaken says, looking at me.

I don’t think he should talk this bad about himself…he’s just so cool!

“What’s the matter, Gamaken? You’re so awesome! And you should stop saying that you’re ungraceful – because you’re actually one of the coolest things I have ever seen in my life!” I tell him, and he just bows at me.

“…I really like this one, Master Jiraiya. Please let him sign.” He says before disappearing in smoke, also like my clones and Kakashi’s pack.

Well…that was kinda odd.

“Well I guess I have no choice now, huh? So, Naruto, wanna sign?” Jiraiya asks me with a wink.

“Well, duh! Of course I do, Pervy Sage!” I respond, and his face drops at the name I gave him. He looks so mockingly sad…but also trying not to laugh at the same time.
“…Ignoring that cruel title – disrespectful punk! – we are going to do just that. You have to sign your name in blood on this contract.” He says, pulling off his giant scroll from his back, opening it to the next open line.

I look at some of the names on the scroll. ‘Shona Himi, Arashi Kino, Minato Namikaze’

That’s…that’s the fourth Hokage!

“The Fourth Hokage signed this?” My eyes practically sparkle as I know that I’m about to have the same summons as The Fourth Hokage! He’s my favorite Hokage, too!

“Of course he did - he was my student, after all.” Pervy Sage says, nonchalantly.

NO FREAKING WAY! This pervert – and master – taught Lord Fourth?

“Okay. We are doing this now!” I demand, because I am just too excited for this!

“Hahaha, okay brat. Just bite your thumb and sign your name in blood.” He tells me, pointing to the scroll.

After signing ‘Naruto Uzumaki’ in red blood, I feel something slightly pull my right hand for a moment.

“What you just felt was the chakra in your right hand being linked to the Toads. If you ever come across another summoning scroll, you may sign that with your other hand – but not the right hand as that is permanently linked to the Toads. Now, wanna try a summon?” He explains to me.

Okay, that makes sense. I can always summon frogs…toads…with my right hand, and another with my left if I ever come across something.

And hell yes I want to try this!

“Just make these two seals,” he shows me, “and then put your linked hand onto the ground and release the chakra.” He instructs.

That doesn’t sound too hard! Making the seals and gathering some chakra – enough for one shadow clone – I release it into the ground and…

Poof!

A squirming…thing…is on the floor.

“HAHAHA! NICE SUMMON! HAHAHA!” Pervy Sage laughs at me as the thing disappears after a few seconds of squirming.

“What was that?” I ask, a little angry at his guffawing but mostly embarrassed.

“Haha! That was a tadpole – an infant toad. Try using more chakra – the more chakra you use, the more powerful the summon is.” He explains.

“But…I used enough chakra for a shadow clone. I know it’s supposed to be half my chakra without the Kyuubi, but does the fox really make that much of a difference? Or could it be the curse mark?” I ask him.

At least the curse mark doesn’t hurt any extra when I use my chakra. Now it’s just a constant, dull pain on my neck that I’m already somewhat getting used to.
Though, when we were talking to Sasuke, it hurt a lot more. Perhaps...the pain is tied to my emotions? The happier I am the less it hurts? I'm rather happy right now being trained by Lord Fourth's sensei, and I was pretty upset telling Sasuke about his brother who killed his family who is also hunting me.

“I doubt it’s the curse mark, and I do think it’s your tenant. Your body is able to make so much chakra, partly due to the seal drawing energy from the Kyuubi to be able to make all your chakra, and the chakra used for a shadow clone is a tiny part of your reserves, but is about half of most people’s.”

“Okay, that makes sense. So I just try again, with more chakra? If one clone is a tadpole, how many clones is a toad?” I ask him, hoping my math comparison was accurate. I can do math, but I do suck at it.

“Ha! That’s for you to figure out, kid!” He says, pulling out a notebook and beginning to write in it, giggling like a toddler.

“Ugh. Fine.” Just like Kakashi-sensei’s annoying...but effective teaching methods.

I gather the chakra used for two shadow clones after making the hand signs, and out pops... …A slightly larger tadpole.

“HAHA! THAT’S EVEN FUNNIER!” He yells, embarrassing me.

“SHUT UP YOU OLD PERV!” I yell in mock-anger at my new sensei, as the tadpole pops away.

I’m gonna keep trying this until I get it!

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And that’s a chapter! More plot here, some character interactions, and set-up for the future. I’m not going to go that much more into meeting the Toads – it’s gonna follow canon pretty much with meeting Gamabunta and everything.

I did want to show Naruto and Jiraiya’s initial interactions, because it didn’t feel right to me in canon. I feel like Jiraiya wants to the same kind of relationship he had with Minato, which would be full of surface jokes but deeper caring.

The first part of this chapter, with Sasuke, I didn’t quite know how to write. This was the best I could come up with. Letting him know had to be done – I feel like not telling him everything would make it seem like he wasn’t trusted, and in this story I’m writing them to be one team.

I may have to take a week off because the move is finally happening! I will try to update next week, but if not then definitely in two weeks.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned (hopefully next week!) for Chapter 20!

Also, don’t forget to review!
Chapter Summary

While everyone's training continues for the Finals, Hinata takes some advice from Shikamaru, and it's time she talked to someone extremely important to her. Also, Shikamaru asks Sasuke something.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for no updates the past few weeks. I should be able to update regularly again now, so here’s a chapter! Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 20)-Unification

One Week Later

“Ugh, I’m so tired!” Naruto whines to his eight friends and teammates. It’s Sunday and Teams 7, 8, and 10 are having their group meal and relaxation day.

“Me too! My dad has some sadistic friends and they are killing me...” Ino drones out, exhausted at her own training.

“Well, at least you guys get to rest today and have some fun!” Choji says, setting up the food he brought, courtesy of his mother’s kitchen.

“Choji, how many times must I say that I love your mother’s cooking?!” Kiba says, his nose in love with the smell of Akimichi cooking.

“Only every time she cooks for us…” Ino answers for Choji, much to everyone’s delight.

Well…almost everyone.

Hinata is smiling – sure, she is happy to be with everyone right now – but she’s been troubled since her match with Neji.

Her father had told her she should have a talk with Neji, that it’s important. And that’s all he said about that. No details, no commentary. Just that.

And it’s not like she doesn’t want to. Of course she does! She’s been wanting to talk to him for years now!
But since their draw (which everyone knows was actually a Hinata victory), he’s been even more distant. Downright avoiding being in the same vicinity as her.

And so instead of having fun with her friends and sensei, she’s only been thinking about her cousin.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Shikamaru asks her quietly as he sits down with two plates of food, handing one to her.

Of course Shikamaru, the genius, would be able to pick up something wrong with his teammate.

After a few minutes of discussing her problem, he gives one simple advice.

“Initiate when he can’t escape, like when he’s training. Force him to talk.” He says and takes the final bite of his food, lies down on his back and stares at the clouds.

Hinata considers this as she nibbles on some food as well, her glance shifting between the cloud-watching Shikamaru and her crush Naruto as the blonde laughs at one of Sakura’s jokes.

And then she smiles, because Shikamaru is so right!

“Neji, we need to talk.” Hinata walks up to her cousin as he trains with Team 7, taking Shikamaru’s advice to do it head-on where he can’t just avoid it.

As Lee and Tenten have advanced to the finals by winning their preliminary matches, Gai had taken to training those two together during this month, while Neji trains with Kakashi and his team.

And, considering Gai and Kakashi are best friends, their teams have trained together enough that this isn’t that unusual for them. Hinata, however, just didn’t know.

Hinata was shocked to sense that her cousin was training with Kakashi’s team. She had no idea at all they even knew about him, and vice-versa. It just never came up that they trained with Neji – mostly because they didn’t want to upset her when they found out how she was trying to impress her clan and make a name for herself.

“Leave me alone.” Neji says flatly, stopping his training and looking at her with murder. Kakashi and his team could only stare at the two Hyuuga – Kakashi fully ready to stop a fight if one starts.

“No, Neji. Father told me that he said something to you, and that it’s time we talked.” She tells him, activating her Byakugan looking right into his eyes.

“Last chance, or I will fight you.” Neji says, activating his own Byakugan.

But Kakashi jumps in the middle of the two teenaged Hyuuga, holding his hands apart to keep them at a distance.

“There will be none of that here. Neji, I order you to go and to at least listen to what she has to say. This is interrupting our training.” Kakashi says.

Kakashi doesn’t care at all that training is being interrupted, but he can’t look like he’s playing favorites either. He’s on Hinata’s side – only because he knows that if anyone can fix Neji from this horrible mindset he’s in, it’s the underdog Hyuuga that was looked down upon for so long.

“Fine. Let’s go.”
They only walk for a minute away and stop at a random tree in the forest. After looking into each other’s non-Byakugan eyes, Neji gets angry.

“Out. With. It.” He says, wishing he were anyone else but here.

“Father didn’t tell me what he told you, but…with everything that’s happened…I think it must be about Uncle Hizashi. Neji, please believe me when I say I’m sorry. It’s not fair what happened to your dad. If we were in that situation, I would give up my life for you without a second though. Neji…you’re my cousin. I want to be on your side. I want to change the clan too – get rid of that horrid seal. After everything that happened with us…that match we had…I wish it didn’t have to go that far. Just…please…” Hinata says everything that she’s been wanting to say to him, and she squeezes her eyes shut to prevent the tears from falling.

But what she can’t see, due to her closed eyes, are Neji’s tears that are feely falling – it’s been so long since he cried that he can’t even register that he is crying except for the blurriness in his eyes. Neji started crying the moment he heard Hinata say she would die for him…that one statement turned his whole world upside-down.

That moment, the Neji she had known as a child finally came back home.

“Lord H-Hiashi told me…the story of how my father died.” Neji says, voice breaking, and Hinata whips her head up.

After crying together, they sit down and Neji tells the story.

“L-Lady Hinata…I’m so sorry.” Neji says after their mutual cry.

Hinata can’t believe the story. It’s everything she believed in…and yet it’s so tragic because nobody deserved that. And Neji didn’t deserve the truth being hid from him.

That’s her father’s fault. Hiashi Hyuuga should have told Neji years ago.

“Just…Hinata, please.” Hinata tells her cousin, who understands what she is trying to say.

“S-sure.”

“And Neji…you know, I’ve always seen you as my brother. As much a brother as Hanabi is my sister. So...what I’m trying to say is that…from now on, let’s…” She’s trying to think of her words before Neji cuts in.

“We’re a team. You’re my sister.” Neji tells his cousin – sister – and the smile on her face lightens him up too!

“Yes! Exactly!” Is all she can say, and she pulls Neji in for a hug, like she would from anyone in Team 8, 7, or 10.

And he returns the hug, albeit hesitantly.

But he does hug back.
"I need more offensive, long-range jutsu, Dad. All I have are two D-Rank Earth-style jutsu, kunai, shuriken, and shadow possession. If I have to fight Gaara – even with Naruto – I can’t beat him. And I certainly can’t beat Naruto right now. His shadow clones alone would completely overwhelm me. And Ino I might be able to beat if she is at the level she was at during the preliminaries, but I know she’s training right now to beat me. She’s smart too – she’s going after my weaknesses.” Shikamaru tells Shikaku, whose eyes are closed.

(And as much as he wants to believe that she can win, Shikamaru is 99% certain that Tenten isn’t getting past Gaara.)

They’ve been training for a week, but it’s mostly been Taijutsu and stamina training. Both of which he needed, of course, but they aren’t his weakest areas.

“Yes, son. I would agree with your assessment. That’s why I’m going to teach you two Earth Jutsu that I think would help you in most situations. And now that you have enough stamina, it’s time for you to learn the next jutsu in the series of shadow manipulation – Shadow Strangle. Both of these jutsu require higher precision in chakra control and stamina, which is why we’ve waited until now to do them.” Shikaku explains to his son, who is already thinking about how he can use the Shadow Strangle jutsu to defeat Ino and possible subsequent opponents.

“Okay, I know the Shadow Strangle Justu – what are the two Earth jutsu?” Shikamaru asks his father, who opens one eye to look at his son.

Shikamaru has no idea, but Shikaku couldn’t be more proud of his son. Going from the lazy kid that he was to going to the finals of the Chuunin exam in his rookie year. Not only that, Shikamaru’s already doing elemental manipulation, created his own shadow jutsu (with Shikaku’s help, but still) for communication, and socializes with his friends.

“First, it is D-Rank: Manhole Jutsu. It makes the ground implode on itself below someone, trapping them in the ground. It takes a few moments to gather the chakra to do it because this jutsu is done with the feet to be inconspicuous – with no hand seals. With enough practice, I believe you can master this jutsu without needing hand seals by the end of the three remaining weeks.” Shikaku explains.

“That would be really useful. Nobody, unless sensors or maybe those with bloodlines, would be able to detect it. And the second jutsu?” Shikamaru responds, now thinking about how Manhole Jutsu and Shadow Strangle can be used in tandem.

“It is a C-Rank Jutsu. Fists of Earth. It is a continuous jutsu where you can use Earth-style on your hands – or really any body part – with the surrounding material as long as it is in a solid state, except for ice. Punch and Kick or head-butt or nudge with Earth.” Shikaku explains.

“With my taijutsu, that could really do a lot more damage over my bare fists with the skill I already have.” Shikamaru adds.

“Exactly. With these three justu, you will have a much more rounded-out arsenal for long- and short-range fighting. Are you ready to begin?” He asks, already knowing the answer by the fire in his son’s eyes.

“Yes, sir!”

“Good work today, Naruto. I really think you’re starting to get it. You’re starting to use logic.”
Jiraiya tells his student.

Jiraiya started teaching Naruto the basics of fuuinjutsu – sealing jutsu – the day after he started summoning (which is a day Naruto loves to remember and to talk about with any of his friends!).

Naruto struggled with grasping the very concept of sealing jutsu. It’s that seals are done in parts. No one part is equally more important than another. Stability in a seal is just as important as its power. Its shape is just as important as its stability. Its balance is just as important as its shape.

Seals are art. Seals are logic.

And Naruto bets that if anyone can be a master at seals, it would probably be the most logical and smart person he knows – his best friend Shikamaru. And Naruto says this to Jiraiya, but the sealing master says only four words in a counter.

‘But you’re creative, Naruto.’

Jiraiya said that the fundamental difference between Naruto and his teammate (Jiraiya making it clear that he’s not trying to speak ill about Naruto’s best friend as he says this) is that Naruto is creative.

Seals are as much art and spontaneity as it is logic and organization. And logic can be taught and learned – creativity cannot.

And really, Naruto was actually feeling intimidated by the whole thing. He really didn’t know if he had what it took to really be a student of fuuinjutsu.

And he still feels like that, even after a week. He feels he still is out of his depth, even though Jiraiya is actually being a teacher and instructing him (as opposed to what Jiraiya would normally do and ‘research’).

And Jiraiya – he can’t stop regretting just how long he went without meeting Naruto, without being with his godson. But he has responsibilities to the village, and as much as he wishes he could just drop everything and actually be the brat’s family, he can’t do it…

…Yet.

He sees so much of Minato and Kushina in their son. Naruto has so much potential that Jiraiya knows that this kid is going to be a force to be reckoned with one day.

And that makes Jiraiya that much more determined to get him ready for the Chuunin exams – so he can protect himself and his friends.

“Yes…something kind of just clicked today, you know? It just felt…easier today!” Naruto responds.

Jiraiya has had that experience before when he started learning seals too. As did Minato. It started out as the most confusing pile of crap, and then it just clicked and it all started making sense.

And he couldn’t be more proud of Naruto that it happened in only a week.

And Jiraiya is impressed!

Now, to somehow get him to be able to use his goddamn main element Wind!

‘Hmm…’ Jiraiya wonders. ‘Could that…could that work?’ And as soon as Naruto bids goodbye for the day, Jiraiya grabs a new sheet of chakra paper and begins drawing some ideas for a seal that he
Three Days Later

“Naruto, today, we’re going to be working exclusively on Wind Transformation with Asuma. The last few days I’ve been toying with a seal idea that came to me, and I think it could help you start using Wind.” Jiraiya speaks, and the look on Naruto’s face is one of amazement.

“Seals can even do that?!” Even as a student of sealing now, Naruto is beginning to think that there is just no end to what sealing can even do.

“Maybe. I have no idea. However, we’re going to try it anyway. You see, this seal I designed is a trade-off seal. Based on that name, what do you think it means?” Jiraiya’s teaching methods always include asking a question based off of inferences his students have to make, rather than just giving information beforehand.

“Umm…one thing is better and another is worse?” Naruto answers, unsure.

The tone in Naruto’s voice when he always answers questions – most of the time correctly – is lacking confidence. Not everyone can know everything, but people should still feel confident in their best guess. And Naruto is so confident in everything…except when it comes to his knowledge. It’s almost as if Naruto feels like he’s dumb, which he isn’t at all.

“Correct. While wearing this seal, the chakra of that specific region will be enhanced, while the other chakra regions will be weakened. Where is the Wind core located?” Though Jiraiya and Naruto have never covered this themselves, he should know this through his training with Asuma.

“The lungs…?” Naruto answers correctly, but unsure of himself.

“Exactly. You’ll wear this seal around your lungs, and hopefully the enhancement to your wind core will be enough for you to get the grasp on Wind Transformation.” Jiraiya finishes, and even Asuma looks intrigued by this.

“Then let’s do it! Come on!” Naruto shouts, already taking off his shirt to make his wind core accessible for the seal.

“Fine, you impatient brat! Don’t thank me or anything!” Jiraiya mock-scolds him, laughing at the kid’s enthusiasm.

‘Maybe…I can tell him then…’ Jiraiya thinks absent-mindedly as he wraps the paper around Naruto, seal directly over his lungs.

Four Days Later

“Hmm…where’s Hinata? I have something to share with you guys!” Naruto asks. Everyone from Team 7, 8, and 10 are there except for his own teammate Hinata.

It’s Sunday, and it’s another group meal and relaxation day.

Naruto sees Shikamaru and Sasuke playing Shogi (again! They must really love that game…), Ino
and Shino talking about flowers (something about helping his insect colony at home using specific plants and flowers to breed), Choji and Sakura and Kiba all playing with Akamaru, Gamakichi, and Gamatatsu.

(Akamaru was ecstatic when Naruto summoned his two little toad friends – the three nin-animals love to be around each other!)

But Hinata’s nowhere to be found. Usually, she’s at places before most others when it comes to hangouts and whatnot (Naruto thinks it’s probably to avoid her clan as much as she can).

“I don’t know, but…oh! There she is! With…Gai’s team?!?” Sakura answers Naruto, with Hinata coming into view as she started.

Everyone hears that and turns to see something none of them would believe.

Hinata is walking alongside Neji Hyuuga.

Everyone is mostly silent as the two Hyuuga, Tenten, and Rock Lee walk towards their group. It’s easy to see the discomfort in Neji’s and Tenten’s faces (either nervousness or hatred, nobody is sure of).

“Hey everyone. I hope it’s okay I extended an invitation to my cousin and his team. I really wanted you all to be able to meet him properly.” Hinata says, holding onto Neji’s arm and smiling at all eight of her fellow rookie genin.

“Of course it is!” Naruto says, jumping up from the ground and walking over to them, standing in front of Neji. “I’m Naruto Uzumaki, your cousin’s teammate! Nice to meet ya!” Naruto says, holding his hand out to Neji.

Everyone there knows what this is. This is Naruto’s equivalent of saying ‘let bygones be bygones’ – because if Hinata is accepting Neji, then of course Naruto will.

Neji shakes Naruto’s hand, causing the blonde to call over someone else.

“Shika, stop being lazy and get over here!” Naruto commands of the lazy Nara, who exaggerates a sigh and gets up from his and Sasuke’s Shogi board and walks over and greets Neji too.

‘Thank you.’ Hinata mouths to both of her teammates.

After all the awkward introductions, Choji broke the ice again and helped prepare plates of food for the three older genin.

While everyone ate seconds and thirds and fourths of plates of food, Naruto was finally able to show everyone what he wanted to, now that Hinata’s here.

“Look! Wind Style: Gentle Breeze!” Naruto shouts and blos cool wind over all the genin present, making everyone give congratulations to him, especially his fellow Wind user Kiba.

Jiraiya’s seal worked. It took a day, but with all the visualization practices he worked on with Asuma and Kiba for a month, Naruto was able to finally grasp Wind chakra. And now that he got the hardest part down, he can now do it without needing the seal.

Overall, it was a great day for everyone there!

“SORRY I AM LATE, MY YOUTHFUL STUDENTS! BUT I HAVE ARRIVED!” Is suddenly
heard and eleven of the twelve present genin (and the three rookie teams’ sensei) blanch at that sound.

One genin, though, perks up at hearing the loud, booming voice!

“GAI-SENSEI! THANK YOU FOR SHOWING UP AND SHOWING OUR NEW FRIENDS THE SPRINGTIME OF YOUTH!” Lee shouts, tears already running down his face.

“LEE! YOUR CONCERN FOR YOUR NEW FRIENDS IS MOST ADMIRABLE AND YOUTHFUL!” Gai shouts, crying too, holding onto Lee.

“GAI-SENSEI!”

“LEE!”

“GAI-SENSEI!”

“LEE!”

“Get used to this…” Neji whispers to Hinata, who only chuckles.

Team Gai and her friends have accepted each other. And Hinata hasn’t been this happy in such a long time. Not only does she have Naruto and Shikamaru on her team, she has Teams 7 and 10 as friends as well. She has three – four! – amazing sensei now. She has two new friends in Tenten and Lee.

And she has her brother back now.

“Hey, Sasuke…” Shikamaru begins quietly, while everyone is distracted from Lee and Gai.

Shikamaru’s been waiting all day for a perfect moment to ask Sasuke this. And with everyone distracted, Shikamaru finds that this…spectacle… by Gai-sensei and Lee actually makes for the perfect moment.

“Yeah?” The Uchiha acknowledges back in the same hushed tone.

“Would you wanna, maybe…go out with me sometime? Like…on a date?” Shikamaru asks, his heart thumping madly in his chest.

No beating around the bush, Shikamaru went and asked his crush out on a date. Just like the advice he gave to Hinata to talk to Neji, Shikamaru’s doing this head-on.

Shikamaru has acknowledged his feelings for the Uchiha three weeks ago, but he knows he’s liked Sasuke since they had their training mission. And after Sasuke and Shino were hurt by Hidan, Shikamaru only thought about Sasuke (until they entered the exams, when he had other things to worry about).

They initially bonded over Shogi, and then they became friends. When they were roommates for a week, they talked. Not as much as maybe Shikamaru would have preferred – but he acknowledges that Sasuke isn’t the biggest talker – but they did talk. Like friends. And they had some deeper late-night conversations too.

Shikamaru visited Sasuke a lot in the hospital as well. Of course he was visiting Shino too, but he
spent most of his time there for Sasuke. And their conversations were superficial-at-best (not being able to move at all does dampen one’s mood), but Shikamaru was there.

“…A date?” Sasuke’s voice doesn’t rise in his surprise, something Shikamaru is very grateful for.

Shikamaru is risking a lot by asking Sasuke out. If anyone else heard, they might be loose-lipped at let it slip and that could cause trouble with his clan. Or if Sasuke freaked out, that could ruin a lot of friendships among everyone.

And Shikamaru could get heart-broken too. That’s also a risk he’s facing.

Though he also acknowledges the reward. High risk, high reward. And the reward is being able to be happy.

Shikamaru’s feelings for Sasuke are not yet as strong as Hinata’s feelings are for Naruto. But Shikamaru knows that they will get there. Sasuke is unique and smart and challenging. Sasuke isn’t afraid to call Shikamaru out on his shit, and he’s smart as hell, and he’s also kind.

Shikamaru doesn’t like Sasuke because he’s ‘Sasuke’ like the girls in the academy. He likes Sasuke because he is Sasuke Uchiha. He’s a person.

“Yeah. Dinner, a walk maybe, just…a date.” Shikamaru responds, slightly-worried he might have a heart attack based on his current heart rate.

Sasuke, for one of these rare moments in recent memory, has no idea what to do or say.

On the one hand, Shikamaru is asking him on a date. On the other hand, Shikamaru is asking him on a date.

The reason Sasuke is so conflicted is because of the word ‘date.’ All the dates he has been asked on when he was in the Academy, from all the girls in the ‘Sasuke fan club’ – it was disgusting. He has come to kinda hate the idea of dating and romance.

But this is Shikamaru asking him. And that makes everything different.

Does Sasuke like Shikamaru in that way? Maybe. Sasuke doesn’t really know what he feels. He’s never thought of girls in that way before (always just thinking girls were annoying because of their constant bothering him and asking him on those accursed ‘dates’), but he’s never thought about boys like that either.

When he’s thought about his future, having kids to have a clan again, he never pictured a wife. He’s only pictured kids. Never a wife, or a husband for that matter.

But thinking about it now, Sasuke thinks he can see either a wife or a husband as a partner to raise their children (ignoring biology, of course).

And Sasuke knows Shikamaru isn’t asking him out just for a little game or whatever those girls might have. Sasuke knows that by Shikamaru asking him this, that…Shikamaru likes him.

And…it feels kind of nice! To have someone you’re close to truly like you…it feels nice!

And it’s an offer of…what? Going out to dinner, and maybe a walk together? It really doesn’t sound all that bad.
And with Shikamaru? It actually sounds pleasant!

Sasuke begins to think about his current relationship with Shikamaru. They are friends – close friends. All the rookies are Sasuke’s friends, but Shikamaru is probably his closest friend that isn’t Shino or Sakura. From their first day on their mission, Shikamaru helped Sasuke be comfortable at their group dinner by using his own shadow jutsu.

And they talk. They spend time together playing Shogi. Shikamaru made his hospital stay bearable by visiting when he could.

So…yeah. Sasuke’s gonna try it. Let himself have some fun, now that he knows that Itachi couldn’t break his spirit. He’s going to let himself enjoy something.

A few months after he killed everyone, Sasuke wished Itachi had killed him too – so we wouldn’t suffer.

That was four years ago. When he was ten. Now Sasuke is fourteen and is deciding to let himself actually do something. This is what he’s been learning since he met his team. How to be a comrade, how to be a friend, how to be a person.

“…Pick me up Thursday?” Sasuke asks, trying to flirt and blushing – he attempted to replicate those old romance movies he and his mother used to watch.

And Sasuke’s a bit proud to see the shock and blush on Shikamaru’s face. And then the smile!

“Okay, yeah!” Shikamaru says. The two rookies glance over when they hear a new voice yelling.

“That’s enough, you two!” Tenten yells and grabs both Lee’s and Gai’s arms, trying to get them to stop their embarrassing acts.

But with accepting this date with Shikamaru, Sasuke just realized something.

…He has no idea what to do on a date! His mother’s movies never showed the dates themselves!

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for no chapters in a month. I’ve finally settled down after moving and finally have some regularity in things. And with regularity comes time to write!

This chapter tries to set some things up, and I think I did a decent job with moving things forward, and I hope this was a good return chapter.

And yes, I did just age everyone up to fourteen. I think I originally had them at twelve or thirteen, but that’s all retconned and all the rookies are fourteen and Gai’s team are fifteen.

For those of you waiting for the NaruHina, trust me that it’s coming. I do have the romance plots (somewhat) planned out, so trust me that it’s coming! ShikaSasu is just happening first, is all.

And like last time when I took a hiatus, there are two chapters this week! Tomorrow’s chapter should be just light and fluffy.
Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter! Stay tuned tomorrow(!) for Chapter 21!

Also, don’t forget to review!
Tomatoes and Dates

Chapter Summary

Sasuke and Shikamaru have their night out, with Sasuke asking someone unexpected for help. Hinata starts to consider a major decision. Later, all twelve genin meet again mere days before the Final Exam begins.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here’s a relatively light chapter before getting back to the main plot next chapter. I hope you guys like it!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 21)-Tomatoes and Dates

Sasuke’s P.O.V.

Three Days Later – Wednesday

Okay…I’m in trouble.

My date with Shikamaru is tomorrow!

And I’m in completely new territory here right now!

I accepted his date offer because I think it really would be nice to go out with him! And I know he doesn’t care about a lot of the stuff other people do – shit like hair and clothes – but the thing is…that I kind of do!

I want to be my best for him! Like I don’t give a shit if Sakura or Shino, or Naruto or Ino, or anyone thinks my hair is sloppy and my clothes suck. Normally I wouldn’t even care if Shikamaru did – because that’s when we’re friends.

But this is different. This is a date. And…I know Shikamaru wouldn’t care if I came dressed like I always do – in scuffed and stained shirts (I wear them while training and on missions), messy hair, shoes a bit dirty, whatever is involved in training.

And…he likes me. Shikamaru likes me.

It’s so strange to me now that someone likes me like that. Shikamaru isn’t a dumb fan girl fawning
over me from the Academy – not at all. Shikamaru Nara – though lazy – is a competent shinobi and is my friend.

And I honestly haven’t even thought about relationships or anything all that much. I even kinda hate the word ‘date’ because of those idiot girls from the Academy. But I think Shikamaru would be a good person to date.

Shikamaru’s nice enough! He cares about all of his friends! And he’s smart and powerful – that’s a quality I kind really attractive. I could never love a weak shinobi or kunoichi.

And…he doesn’t look bad either…

So I want to try my best on this date. My first date. So I can’t believe I’m going to do this…

*knock* *knock* *knock*

I knock on the door to Shino’s parent’s room. Shino and I got home from training with our team and Neji not too long ago. Shino is taking a shower, and I’m going in after he’s done.

As I expected, Shino’s mother Muta opens the door, smiling down at me.

“You stood there for a while, Sasuke. Is everything alright?” She asks.

It’s so easy to forget sometimes that though she married into the clan, she can still use the clan kikaichu to a limited degree. They must have told her I was there.

“Um, yes ma’am, but…” I begin, nervous about this. “You see, um, I…have a…date…tomorrow. And…” I did not miss the slight surprise in her face. “And…I was wondering if you would…help me prepare?” I finish and look down at Muta’s feet.

I hope my face doesn’t look as red as it feels.

“Oh! Okay, sure! I was just, uh, not expecting that. Come in, come in.” Muta opens the door to her room, ushering me in to sit on the bed with her. “So, who’s the lucky kunoichi?”

That questions makes my face feel red again.

“Actually, it’s…Shikamaru Nara.” I respond nervously, though I say his name fully.

I know it’s not the most common thing, to be going on a date with another guy. And I know that while it’s mostly accepted, some people still think that it’s wrong because two guys – or two women for that matter – can’t produce heirs.

There was a small lesson on this in the Academy, actually. The shinobi career is dangerous, and there was such a heavy focus on heirs among people when the villages and elemental nations were first founded. So single shinobi, two men, or two women relationships all had negative stigma attached.

Most people don’t think like today. Since then, there’s better medicine, better politics, and better mental health. Clan specialties like the Yamanaka therapy (which has helped me a lot…I can’t thank Kakashi-sensei enough for suggesting I go) have stressed the important of happiness and self-care among shinobi, and the old mindset of finding a wife to have kids is mostly dead now.
When this lesson was first given to us, it was only a few months after Itachi killed my family. Only a few months since my whole life was changed. And I thought everything we were told was crap.

I actually did believe in the old mindset. That I needed an heir. But that’s not what I want anymore.

I want my clan back. But…I’m not gonna throw away potential happiness in the form of Shikamaru, because he’s good. And the Uchiha clan is more than just the Sharingan, anyway. The Uchiha is a symbol of loyalty and family.

And I’m not gonna hide the fact that I’m going on a date with Shikamaru. I’m not ashamed of him. I’m just nervous and a bit out of my comfort zone right now.

“Oh! Okay! Wasn’t…expecting that either. Shikamaru’s a good kid, I’m happy for you.” Muta chuckles for a moment and then puts her hand on my shoulder. “What do you need help with, Sasuke?”

“Well, I’ve…never been on a date before. I don’t know what to wear, what to say, how to dress, how to act.” I say, because I am actually clueless right now.

Being clueless really isn’t something that feels good. It doesn’t feel…quite as bad as I imagined it would, but this feeling is weird and I don’t like it.

“I see. And of course I’ll help you, but may I ask why you came to me?” She inquires, and it actually isn’t hard to answer.

“Well…if she were around, I would have gone to my mother. I remember how she used to love these romance movies and books and everything. And you…you and your husband have been so kind to let me live here with you guys. You guys treat me like a son. So I just…felt like I could come to you.” I answer her.

I know she could never replace my mother – I don’t want her to and I know what she wouldn’t want to either. But…Muta and Shibi Aburame have treated me more than just being Shino’s friend. They treat me like part of their family.

“Oh, Sasuke…” Muta says and pulls me into a hug. “Thank you. You can come to me for anything. So let’s get you ready so Shikamaru won’t know what hit him!”

One Day Later

I take one last look into the mirror, and…I look amazing!

Muta and I went shopping this morning, and she got me a new collared shirt (looks nice, but easy for an enemy shinobi to take advantage of), and some nice dark denim pants (my legs are uncomfortably warm because I’m used to wearing shorts all the time).

She also lent me one of Shibi’s older dress shoes that he doesn’t use anymore – turns out he and I wear the same size shoe. She didn’t do anything to my hair, as she said ‘your hair is unique – don’t change it!’.

I walk out into the dining room where Shino and Muta are waiting. I told Shino last night about my upcoming date after we ate dinner, and Shino’s response was not something I was expecting:
'I was wondering when he was going to ask you out. Why? Anyone who knows you Sasuke can see you two like each other, and that he’d have to be the one to do it because you’d be too clueless to do it yourself. And congratulations.'

My first thought to Shino was…

…Damn, that’s harsh!

I can see a response like that coming from Sakura. She often complains about the stupidity of boys (when really, it’s Kakashi-sensei who causes her to rant, not us). Sakura, however nice and awesome she is, can also be a bitch if set off right – which is something she is proud of.

With Shino…what he said feels like something a brother would say. Yes, after a while, I’ve thought of my team as my family. Never replacing my family, but they have become my family.

Kakashi’s the screwy uncle. Sakura’s the bitchy sister. Shino’s the teasing brother.

They are my family.

‘Thanks, asshole.’ Is my response to Shino, but I know he saw my smile when I said that. We both know we saw each other as brothers.

But Shino’s right. Like when I apologized to them for not knowing if I was being a good teammate – the day Kakashi told us we all finally showed teamwork – I had no idea if I was doing something bad. I just don’t know a lot about…feelings.

I discussed this with my therapist before. She said that I know more than I think I do about people and their emotions. But she did acknowledge that I was angry for so long at everything, that when I let other emotions back in they were overwhelming and confusing at first. But she also said that I have come a long way and that my emotional intelligence is at a good level.

But Shino’s right. I had no idea Shikamaru liked me until he asked me out. And looking back…it kind of makes sense? But yeah – I’m clueless when it comes to this stuff. I may be able to talk to people appropriately now, but that doesn’t mean I can tell when someone likes me, or that I even like him back.

And I think Shino’s right about that, too. I do like Shikamaru. Why else would I spend all this time with him? Not just because he’s my friend - Naruto and Kiba and Ino would annoy me if I spent as much time with them as I did with Shikamaru. They’re my friends – I’d give my life for any of them – but they can be so much to handle.

Shikamaru isn’t like that. Or, maybe he is, but I like him so I can handle it.

I decided that I’ll tell Sakura about my date tomorrow when we train – because I know that if I told her today she’d get all girly and ask me never-ending questions on a date I wouldn’t even have been on yet – then get Ino over to us – and then both of them would ask me questions about a date I wouldn’t even have been on yet. Because I know Sakura and that’s what she’d do.

*Ding*

I get a rush of anxiety as I hear the doorbell. I look over to Muta and Shino whose faces are encouraging (Muta) and nothing (Shino) as I get up to walk to the front door.

And wow.
The first thing I notice about Shikamau is that his hair is down. I’ve never seen it like that before, and it looks good.

“Hey, man…you look great! Ready to go?” Shikamaru asks me, and Muta and Shino step up behind me. “Good evening Shino, Mrs. Aburame.” Shikamaru adds now that they’re here.

“Aw, you boys are so handsome!” Muta cries out. Oh goodness…

I’m slightly regretting my life choices up to this point now. I’m Sasuke Uchiha – and I let myself get to the point where my best friend’s mother is calling me handsome in front of my date.

And it’s awesome – but it’s also so embarrassing.

“Mother, maybe it would be best if we let them go before it gets too dark.” Shino says, and I’m so grateful to him right now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Aburame.” Shikamaru says for the compliment she gave.

“Fine, fine. You guys have a nice time. Don’t be out too late – I don’t care if you made it into the Chuunin Exam Finals or that you can shoot lightning from your hands. You’re both still genin and have training tomorrow…” Muta warns us before closing the door behind us.

Oh God…

“I get it. It’s her job to embarrass you. I know my mother would have done the same if you picked me up. Mothers are troublesome.” Shikamaru says, breaking the tension.

“Fair point. And you look good too, by the way. I…really like your hair.” I say to him, and he blushes.

I’m actually making someone blush!

“Thank you. You’re…the only one outside my team or family to ever see it like this. And my team’s only seen it in passing during missions. I’m…glad you like it” He explains.

He obviously put a lot of thought into his hair, and letting me see a part of him not even his team really has.

He’s making an effort to show me I’m special.

“So, where are we heading?” I ask him as we start walking, him leading the way.

“Well, I heard my Dad mentioning this restaurant a while back that he went to and has been meaning to take us to. It’s basically a cuisine centered around tomatoes. My dad said he liked it, and it sounded perfect for our date.” Shikamaru tells me.

That…sounds like the perfect place. It’s no secret at this point to anyone who knows me at all that I love tomatoes. I always have and I always will.

And he picked a restaurant based on my favorite food?

“Really? It does sound perfect! I’m looking forward to our dinner.” I say, smiling at Shikamaru.

I like our date so far!
Dinner was fantastic.

I hate to say this…but I think I might already like this restaurant as much as Naruto likes Ichiraku’s, and I’ve only been here once!

They had so many different kinds of dishes with tomatoes! Tomato slices, dices, sauces. It was amazing, and Shikamaru really enjoyed his dish too.

Shikamaru and I both reached for the bill at the same time, and I was going to say something along the lines of ‘you planned this amazing night so let me pay’ but he said something first:

‘If you let me pay now, you can pay next time.’

So I let him have the check. Because he just asked me out on a second date and I would like to do this again!

So now we’re walking in the park. The sun is almost set, and it’s a very nice orange color. Darker than Naruto’s jacket – an orange that makes you feel warm.

We haven’t said much since we got here – we’re just taking in the moment of being with each other. But something doesn’t feel right. I’m tempted to do what I’ve seen in a movie before…

…I reach out a bit and touch his fingers with mine, trying to let him know what I want to do. But of course he does – he’s a damn genius – and he locks his fingers with mine.

We continue walking in the park, saying nothing, but holding hands enjoying the sunset.

“I had a really great time, Shikamaru. I expect you to hold your end of the deal for next time.” I say, referring to him letting me pay for our next date.

“Of course. If I learned anything from my troublesome teammates, is that I don’t break promises. And I had a nice time too. I’m glad you enjoyed dinner…and our walk.” He says, bringing up how I actually held his hand.

We walked back to Shino’s house (my home?), holding hands the whole time. We only let go to face each other when we stood in front of the door.

I know what I’m supposed to do now. This is something I learned from those movies!

“Me too. Well…it’s getting late. I should be heading in.” I say, waiting for the perfect moment.

“Yeah. We have training tomorrow, what a drag.” Shikamaru says, referring to what Muta said earlier.

“Goodnight, Shikamaru.” I say, and this is the perfect moment.

I learn forward and give him a small kiss on the cheek. That’s the most basic requirement on a first date!

“Goodnight, Sasuke…” He says softly as I open the door and close it.
I stand there with the door closed, and I’m proud that Shikamaru stands there for a few more seconds before turning and walking away to his clan compound.

“YOU DID WHAT?” Sakura screams at me before *punching me* into a tree. “HOW COULD YOU NOT TELL ME? I COULD HAVE HELPED WITH YOUR CLOTHES AND SHOES AND… GAH!” Sakura continues to scream.

So…it’s good that she didn’t mind me going on a date with someone else. That means that the crush she had on me before is completely one.

But…*fuck!* That hurt!

“C-Calm down now, Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei says – *futilely* – and he lets her run out of steam.

A few minutes later, she and Shino are helping me pick the *pieces of tree bark* out of my hair, and discussing my date with me. I guess Kakashi gave us an extended break due to her outburst.

Neji isn’t here with us today. Kakashi said he’s actually training with Hinata today – which I’m glad that they finally made up. I don’t know too much about their family issues, but I know it’s been hard on Hinata.

“It really was amazing, though. He picked a restaurant that was centered around tomatoes. He *put his hair down* for me. He also asked me out on a second date by paying last night. It was just…nice.” I say, and Sakura smiles at me.

“I’m happy for you. It sounds like Mrs. Aburame did a good job fixing you up then. But still, Sasuke, call me next time. Ino knows Shikamaru – she and I can help you dazzle him!” She says, and I can only sigh.

*Girls!*

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**Shikamaru’s P.O.V.**

*Three Days Later – Sunday*

“Congrats, Shika! You know, I actually thought once before that you might like him. I can’t believe I was right! But I’m so happy your date went well!” Naruto tells me, slapping his hand on my shoulder.

I asked both him and Hinata to come earlier than they normally would. I wanted to tell them about my date, but avoid telling Team 10 and Gai’s Team (trying to keep Sasuke’s privacy intact in case he doesn’t want others to know – though given how gossipy his own teammate Sakura is, I know he expects me to at least tell *my* team).

“Thank you, but…You did?” I ask him, and he looks up in thought.

As he looks up, I can see the curse mark on his neck a bit more faded. For once, I am so *thankful* the Kyuubi is in him because it is keeping him safe from Orochimaru, that monster. Hopefully it’ll only be a few more weeks before the seal is gone entirely from him.
“Yeah. Just a thought, when you guys just kept playing Shogi! But yeah man, I’m glad it went well – you’re gonna have a second date, you said?” Naruto explains his thought.

“Yup, don’t know when though. Only a week and a half until the finals, so my dad might be on my ass to keep training.” I say, and Naruto agrees that that’s a fair point.

After a while of us cloud-watching (that needs to be our third date!), the rest of our group starts arriving. And when Kiba and Akamaru gets here, Naruto summons his two toad buddies to play with the pup.

“Shikamaru…can I ask you something?” Hinata asks me as Naruto is distracted by playing Gamatatsu and Gamakichi.

“Of course.” I respond to her, knowing this is going to be important to her, just like that last time she asked me about Neji.

“How…how did you ask him out?” She whispers to me, and I know why she’s asking it the way she is.

“I used the word ‘date.’” I tell her.

Hinata’s considering asking Naruto out. I’m pretty sure she wants to do something like I did – and I’m telling her that because knowing Naruto, if the word ‘date’ isn’t used, then he’ll just think it’ll be as friends.

I love Naruto – he’s my best friend – but he can be a little dense when it comes to this kind of stuff (because he just doesn’t know Hinata likes him). Hinata has to be explicit if she does decide to take the plunge.

“Were you…scared?” She continues whispering.

Of course I was. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. And the risk didn’t end there. I got dressed up and let my hair down as I left my own compound. My parents might have seen; my other clansmen definitely have.

But…I don’t care. For so long I’ve been worrying about others. All my friends have been getting hurt or having troubles. And of course I’ll always help them, but I needed something for myself too.

I decided to be a little selfish and ask my crush out on a date. I did everything I could to make sure he would enjoy it. I had a nice time.

Could it come back to my clan? Yes. Could it be trouble for me? Yes. Would it be as bad as I originally thought?

No.

Maybe it’s because I have more friends now. No longer is it just Naruto, Hinata, Kurenai-sensei, or even Choji to an extent – I have everyone from Teams 7 and 10 on my side too. I even have Gai’s team, in a way. Our time during the training mission and during second exam brought us all closer. We faced S-Rank missing-nin on two separate occasions – if that didn’t bring us closer together then I don’t know what would.

I have people to support me if things go bad. And if things don’t go bad, I get to keep going on dates with Sasuke!
“Yes, extremely. You know, with my clan. And I didn’t want to ruin our friendship.” I whisper to Hinata.

“Then why did you do it, knowing the risk?”

“Because…our whole lives are based around the risk of dying on every mission we go on. We risk losing loved ones on every mission they go on. We risk our lives to protect our friends. There’s already so much risk…so much more serious, troublesome risk. But this month was a breath of fresh air. I got some clarity…so I asked him. And we had a good time.” I tell Hinata.

It’s different – Hinata and Naruto when compared to Sasuke and me. Hinata has loved Naruto for years. And we’re not kids anymore – we’re fourteen and we understand life and death and everything in between. We’re not adults but we understand enough.

Hinata has a lot to risk with that relationship, too. She’s on a team with Naruto. If he doesn’t like her back in that way (which I honestly think he does like her back), things could be different. Things would never be able to be the same, not really.

“Alright. Thanks, Shikamaru.” She says, turning away to look up at the sky.

Hinata has a lot to think about when it comes to Naruto. She knows she just can’t keep going on like this. It will eventually come out in some way. It’s up to her though how it has to happen.

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**Third Person P.O.V.**

*One Week Later – Sunday*

“Alright guys, the finals are in a few days on Wednesday. Naruto, Shikamaru, Ino, Tenten, Lee, good luck. Remember, in the end, the exam is politics.” Kurenai tells the twelve genin around.

“Yeah, guys! No matter what, we’re friends! No exam is worth our friendships or our lives!” Naruto says, reminding Gai’s team – the new addition to their friend group – of their pact.

Teams 8 and 10 (with Team 7 listening) talked with Gai’s team – specifically Tenten – and warned them about Gaara. They explained how Gaara threatened to kill his own brother, attacked proctors, *almost killed Choji*, and tried to pick another fight with Naruto.

Tenten was terrified of what she heard.

‘*Tenten…we just want you to be careful. Try to win if you can, but…we don’t want to see you get crushed to death in his sand. Seeing that almost happen to Choji…’* Ino started, but no more needed to be said.

‘*I get it. And I’ll be okay. I’ll know if it gets too much…and thanks.*’ Tenten said, expressing her appreciation for everyone’s concern.

“You all are to stop training until the exams. You’ve learned as much as you could, and now you need to give your body some rest so you’re all at 100%.” Kakashi tells the group.

“**BUT REMEMBER – WE ARE ALL SO PROUD OF YOU ALL! OVERCOMING PHYSICAL AND PERSONAL ROADBLOCKS – IT’S ALL SO YOUTHFUL!**” Gai screams and cries to the group, to the embarrassment of everyone there (except for Lee, of course).
“Yeah…what he said. You guys have grown so much and no matter how the exam turns out, no matter who does or doesn’t get promotions. You guys are some of the best groups of genin I have seen in years.” Asuma says, the last of the sensei speaking.

In three days, the Chuunin Exam Finals begins. In the first round, Naruto has to fight his new friend Rock Lee. Then, Tenten has to fight a psychopath known as Gaara. After that, Shikamaru has to fight his long-time friend Ino.

But that’s in three days. The rest of the genin – all of Team 7, Choji, Kiba, Hinata, and Neji – are supporting their friends and teammates.

The four Jonin-sensei are also prepared to do whatever is necessary to protect their students. These twelve genin have changed the lives of these four jonin, and no matter what happens, their students will live and 
thrive.

Their students have already had to deal with three missing-nin – one of which is a Sannin – a likely Jinchuuriki (all the Jonin know about the Tailed Beasts) who almost 
killed one of them and is going to fight another one of them, and one of them got a near-fatal curse mark by said Sannin and hunted by a group of missing-nin, and another one is being hunted by that same Sannin.

Their kids have been put through so much, and something tells the jonin that their kids are going to have to go through a lot more.

But they’re ready to do whatever it takes.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Overall, just some light fluff until returning back to the seriousness that is the Chuunin Exams. The true Konoha 12 is together!

And this is why ShikaSasu had to happen first before NaruHina. Hinata needs some motivation to tell Naruto, and seeing Shikamaru so happy despite the risk for him is the motivation she needed.

And to answer a review on FFN for last chapter, yes, I do have something planned for Itachi. Not going to say what or how yet, but there is something.

I guess I can say this now, I do plan on making a sequel to this story covering the Shippuden plot. And I want that plot to really diverge from canon. There will be set up in this story to diverge a lot (we just haven’t seen it yet). And once it happens, we can really have some fun with the plot.

Also, like what I did with the title of this chapter?

Finally, thank you all for reading. I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 22!

Also, don’t forget to review!
The Finals Tournament, Part 1

Chapter Summary

The Tournament begins. Naruto and Lee have their match, Hinata senses something odd, and Tenten and Gaara have their match. Also, Ino has a much-needed conversation with Shikamaru.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And here’s the start of the Finals, with a lot of plot. I hope you all enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 22)-The Finals Tournament, Part 1

Third-Person P.O.V.

On the day of the Finals, the twelve genin and their four sensei had a group breakfast together at Ichiraku’s (not that it was the favorite place between every genin, but of those fighting today, they either love [Naruto and Lee] Ichiraku’s or enjoy it enough that they don’t mind it being their breakfast [Shikamaru, Ino, and Tenten]).

Then they all walk to the stadium together, with Kakashi and Asuma having to say goodbye to their students and wish them all success. The two jonin were assigned extra guard detail and can’t stick around.

When all of them entered the stadium, they were all shocked to see just how many people were actually there – who were going to see them fight, who were going to be cheering them on or booing them, who will be taking notes against them.

It is political. It’s all political. Why else would a shinobi village willingly showcase their best genin and newest chuunin, letting their skills become public knowledge? That hurts the village overall, even if there are peace treaties in place with all other villages that were invited here.

But it’s tactical.

Show your strength, then it shows you have the strength. It’s backing up what you claim. The entire Chuunin Exams really is just one large dick-measuring contest between the villages.

A village can so easily – and way more often – hold its own Chuunin Exams only for those in its walls to find who the best shinobi are for promotion. Most promotions aren’t even through the exams to begin with. But these are held for power, politics, and to show which village isn’t afraid to put
show some of its secret powers (to an extent – they are all still only genin, but the point remains).

The twelve Konoha genin (and their sensei) are all sitting together in the Leaf waiting box, despite that only five of them are fighting. Nobody in charge tries to make the non-competitors move somewhere else – because they know they’d have to deal with a lot of yelling (from Naruto, Sakura, Kiba, Akamaru, Lee, and Ino). So they let everyone just sit together, because it simply isn’t worth the trouble of making them split up.

On the other side of the stadium, directly across from the Konoha stand, is the Suna waiting box. And there are only three people there – Gaara, Kankuro, and Temari. Their sensei is not with them. And probably because they’re not making the Konoha-nin split up, they’re not making Kankuro and Temari leave either.

(Or, maybe they don’t want to anger Gaara…)

And Gaara is looking positively murderish at all of them. But he licks his lips when his gaze lands on Naruto, because he knows that the hunt makes the meal all more delicious.

“Over there, him. He is why we can’t let this exam get between us. He’s already picturing me dead, picturing us dead.” Naruto says, and everyone understands what the blonde is trying to say, especially Gai’s team.

Gai’s team has had the pleasure of never encountering Gaara until now. But at the same time, even after being told, they still don’t know entirely what Tenten is up against – they have to see it to really understand.

But they see the look on Gaara’s face, and they understand.

But they still don’t. Not until they see their friend very nearly crushed to death, they won’t really understand it. And…

…Everyone hopes Team Gai never has to understand.

“The first match of the Finals Tournament of the Chuunin Selection Exams is about to begin. Would the first two contestants please step into the field?” A new proctor – Genma Shiranui – announces. None of the genin think too much of it – they probably figure the old proctor Hayate was just too sick to proctor this now.

Naruto and Lee rise out of their seats.

“Good luck.” Hinata and Shikamaru whisper to their teammate at the same time.

“I don’t need luck, believe it!” He says to them both, trying to relieve the tension. He walks down the stairs together with Lee after his own teammates wish him luck as well. They stand behind a line between the staircase hallway and the arena.


What’s also unexpected are the boos that Naruto gets as he walks out into his starting position on the
Naruto knows he shouldn’t let it get to him…the boos from the crowd. He’s had a lot of time now to process having the Kyuubi inside him, knowing that’s why he was hated for so much of his life.

But Naruto was surrounded my so much love and support since he became a genin. Starting with only his team and Iruka (and maybe the Hokage), his support network extended to Team 7, Team 10, Jiraiya, and even Gai’s team.

The culture-shock of going from all that support in his own world, back to the real world where he is still a monster, is heart-breaking for Naruto. He manages to hold back his tears, but it’s tough. The only think keeping him together is that he can see his friends cheering for him, but the rest of the crowd overpower them so he can’t hear them at all.

(Naruto can’t even hear the one lone cheer coming from a certain Heba Santiro sitting in the crowd.)

“And his opponent, also from Konoha, Rock Lee!” And then the cheers that Lee gets drown out everything, but Lee doesn’t look happy at all.

Instead, he’s furious. His friend Naruto – someone who in many ways is just like him – was being booed by nearly everyone in Konoha. Lee has no idea why that may be, and he just doesn’t care.

“NARUTO, MY FRIEND! DON’T LISTEN TO THESE PEOPLE – LET US HAVE A MOST SPLENDID DISPLAY OF YOUTH WITH OUR MATCH!” Lee shouts, trying to cheer Naruto up.

And it works.

And the crowd goes silent at that statement of Lee calling Naruto his friend.

“Yes, Lee! Let’s show everyone here our youth!” Naruto says back, not even caring how cringy that may sound to anyone who knows Gai.

“No springtime of youth until I re-iterate the rules, you two.” Genma says to the two genin. He’s immune to proclamations of youth now, anyway, with all the time he spends with Gai in the jonin lounge.

“The rules are simple. Do not attack me, and do not attack any spectators. And when I say stop, you stop. Understood?” Genma asks the two friends/competitors.

“Yes!” Both genin announce, getting into their battle stances.

“Alright then. On my mark…” Genma proclaims, raising his hand.

“…BEGIN!”

Naruto has known that Lee’s speed was deadly. When Lee revealed he couldn’t do ninjutsu or genjutsu, and that his speed was as strong as it is (probably way stronger now, too), Naruto knew he would have trouble as soon as their match was announced.

And he was stuck for a real solution until he got to write his signature in blood and have some toad friends.
So as soon as Genma announced the match, Naruto jumped back, did the hand seals, and put his hand to the floor.

“Summoning Jutsu!” Naruto shouts, putting a good amount of chakra into the jutsu and summoned the first toad he ever saw.

“Uzumaki, I’ll try not to be ungraceful.” Gamaken says to Naruto.

Lee looks shocked at the sight of the giant Gamaken.

Naruto didn’t hide the fact that he could summon large and powerful toads from everyone – it just never came up. He showed them Gamatatsu and Gamakichi because they are small, cute, and play well with Akamaru. He never had a reason to summon a toad like Gamaken until now.

“Mr. Gamaken, you’re awesome. So let’s be awesome together!” Naruto tells the self-deprecating toad, and Naruto makes the hand signs for another jutsu.

“Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!” And over a third of the arena space is now occupied by Narutos.

“YES, NARUTO! THIS IS THE EXCITING MATCH I WANT! LET’S GO!” Lee shouts in sportsmanship, making Naruto laugh.

“Come on, Lee! Let’s put your speed to the test!”

Hinata can’t believe what she’s seeing on the field right now. A giant, sword-wielding toad and over a hundred solid clones of her crush fighting one green blur.

And she can keep up with it. She can understand everything that’s going on in that match. She didn’t know that Naruto could summon a toad like that, but he was training for a competition. She understands the need for some secrets – if she was here in the finals, she’d be keeping things hidden too until things were all done.

The fight between Lee and Naruto is just incredible. Two young genin – who have total respect and admiration for each other for overcoming all the obstacles they have faced – are having so much fun punching each other in the face.

Lee took off his weights almost immediately – when all the clones ganged up on him he was just too slow to keep up with all of them. But when he took them off, he was able to dispel over half of the clones, but not without taking quite a few hits too.

With her Byakugan, she can see Naruto’s strategy – make weak clones (with less chakra) to distract Lee and use the stronger ones (more chakra) to hit him. The fact that Naruto has learned to vary the chakra within his shadow clones…she realizes just how powerful all of them have become. Everyone on Teams 7, 8, and 10 have become actual shinobi.

She continues watching the match in awe. It’s so fascinating to watch them. And all she knows is that she is grateful that Naruto and Lee are her friends – going up against them in a real life-and-death match would be terrifying because they are powerful.

When Lee opens the first gate…the chakra that floods his system is probably the most colorful thing Hinata has ever seen with her Byakugan. It has so many colors and-
What is that?

Hinata closes her eyes, trying to sense back what she felt. It couldn’t have been that…

…But it is. It feels just like it did a month ago when it was on Naruto.

She has to tell someone right now.

She gets up and turns around, looking directly at Gai and Kurenai. But this action distracts all of her friends too.

“Kurenai-sensei, Gai-sensei! Listen, please. I suddenly sense…Orochimaru’s chakra. Concentrated, like it was in Naruto’s curse mark. I don’t…it feels like there are four of them? I don’t know where…somewhere East I think. They’re too far away.” Hinata tells them, worrying everyone in the vicinity.

(It takes all of Sasuke’s willpower to not scream at hearing Orochimaru – the Sannin who attacked his friend and is supposedly wanting to ‘train’ him – and it takes all of Shikamaru’s power to hold Sasuke’s leg down to make him not get up from his seat.)

Kurenai and Gai take a moment and look at each other, before their faces harden.

“We believe you. We’re going to report this to Anbu. I’ll leave a shadow clone with you guys – Hinata if anything changes, tell it and it’ll dispel.” Kurenai says, and immediately makes the clone and leaves with Gai.

The ten genin look at Kurenai’s clone until they hear a loud cackle from the center of the arena.

“Water Style: Tsunami!” Naruto uses more chakra than he wishes he needed to be able to pull off this combo attack.

Water floods the arena – nearly drowning Naruto as he has to hold his breath for it all to come out – but he knows Lee is at least touching the water. There’s nowhere for him to escape.

“Lightning Style: Shock Sword!” Gamaken shouts, stabbing his lightning-covered sword into the water as soon as it stops flowing from Naruto’s mouth.

“Wind Style: Spinning Gale!” Naruto spins around and blows air continuously around himself.

The perfect combo he, Jiraiya, and Gamaken worked on tirelessly since he learned Wind Chakra. Water and Lightning pair up, and Wind makes it so he doesn’t hurt himself.

A loud cackle and zap is heard throughout the entire arena as Naruto and Gamaken continue their combo jutsu for a few more seconds, stopping then to make sure Lee isn’t seriously hurt, but definitely unconscious.

A moment later, Lee floats up from under the water on his back, completely knocked out. After checking to make sure Lee is alive (of course he is – and letting doctors know that no medical attention is needed), Genma makes the announcement.

“The winner is Naruto Uzumaki of Konoha!”
The crowd reaction is...*shock*.

Nobody in the audience expected *Naruto Uzumaki* – the demon brat, the monster, the *prankster* – to actually win, especially against a second-year genin who is being trained by one of the village’s best shinobi!

And they cheer!

...*And* they boo.

The reaction from both are so *loud* they momentarily distract the ten genin who are currently worrying about Orochimaru, who cheer along with them.

Even Lee’s own teammates are cheering...because it was a spectacular match (from what they saw before Hinata’s warning)! Both Naruto and Lee did amazing, and there had to be a winner, but both put on an amazing show.

Naruto walks/swims over to Lee, putting Lee’s arm around Naruto’s own shoulder as he wakes up, and begins to walk them back up the stairs to the stands.

“Listen to them...” Lee begins.

“Yeah...for us. Cheers or boos, those reactions are for our match, Lee. It doesn’t matter if you can only use Taijutsu, or if I’m hated by the village – we put on one hell of a match and they recognize us for it.” Naruto tells his new friend.

Naruto and Lee have no idea how lucky they are right now – to be blissfully unaware of what might be happening. To have not heard what Hinata sensed and told Kurenai. To not know about the man who’s after Sasuke and tried to mentally enslave Naruto.

When the two genin walk up the stairs, they are greeted by nine (momentarily distracted) happy faces, and one not-so-happy.

“Sasuke?” Naruto asks, wondering why his best friend’s boyfriend – the two are not official yet but Naruto knows it’s happening after their great first date – doesn’t seem happy at his win.

“Tell him, Hinata.” Sasuke says.

The last time Sasuke was told about Orochimaru, he learned that the Sannin was *after him* for some reason – claiming to want to give him power to beat *Itachi*.

Nobody has the right to speak about Itachi – except maybe Kakashi and his therapist. *Nobody else.* And to *violate* Naruto with a seal just to *send a message* – Sasuke cannot be happy for the match because he is too upset and hurt and also a little *scared* because he cares about all these people.

“Hinata? What’s going on?” Naruto asks, as Lee is able to hold himself upright. Tenten and Neji come to him in support, anyway.

“Your seal...earlier I sensed Orochimaru’s chakra in four concentrated spots like yours was. I told Kurenai-sensei and Gai-sensei already...” Hinata stops when she sees the look on Naruto’s face.


Naruto is more upset at Orochimaru for his ‘message’ to Sasuke than what even happened to himself.
Naruto’s going to heal – he’s been healing for a month now; it’s slow but it’s going (and he was able to potentially help with medical research, too!) – but Sasuke won’t get his family back, no matter if he kills his brother or not.

Not that he doesn’t understand Sasuke’s desire to kill his brother. If someone killed Naruto’s team – his family – then no matter how much Naruto would want peace and to not kill, he knows he would be after their head.

It’s a fine line between peace and war, between moral and sin.

Naruto is hurt because his friend is hurt. Naruto is angry because Orochimaru violated the blonde only after he couldn’t violate his friend. And Naruto is determined to do whatever is necessary to protect his friends from whatever Orochimaru has planned.

“It’s okay – we’ll...be okay. We have our sensei here. Our Hokage is here. Orochimaru would be stupid to come here now.” Shikamaru says, inwardly relaxing as he sees Naruto’s – and Sasuke’s – face soften at that.

But inside, Shikamaru is terrified and the only thing keeping him sane right now is his friends.

“Yeah! Shikamaru’s right! Lord Third wouldn’t let the traitor get away with anything here!” Ino says, encouraging everyone there now.

“The second match is about to begin – would the contestants please come down?” Genma announces, getting everyone’s minds off of Orochimaru.

And back to what they were originally concerned about – Gaara.

“I BELIEVE IN YOU, TENTEN! YOU ARE KONOHA’S MOST YOUTHFUL KONOICHI!” Lee screams, putting his arm around his teammate and crying.

“Yes, Tenten. I have learned that anything is possible if you try hard enough. I have full faith in you.” Neji says, smiling at his teammate.

(The ass-kicking Hinata gave him really changed him!)

“O-Okay…I’ll see you guys after!” Tenten tries to seem brave, but inwardly she is terrified.

As she begins to walk down, she hears something that does make her smile.

‘And, Naruto, that was a good match. Congratulations.’ She hears Sasuke say, because Naruto and Lee really did have a great match before Orochimaru got brought up again.

Gaara doesn’t blink as he stares directly into Tenten’s eyes from across the arena. Both genin are behind the line, waiting for their introductions.

“Advancing to the final match already is Naruto Uzumaki from Konoha. The winner of this match will join him and a third contestant. Introducing first, Gaara of the Desert!” Genma announces.

Gaara walks out, still without blinking, to a mixture of cheers and boos from the crowd. It’s not nearly as loud as it was when Naruto won, but that’s probably because the betting on that match was almost entirely in Lee’s favor – with those who bet on Naruto probably making a huge fortune.
Much less interest in Tenten’s match than the last one, but this match also has much more stake to it. This one will be dangerous. Not a spirited match between two friends trying to bring the best out in each other – no; this is going to be Tenten trying to survive while still trying to get a promotion.

Tenten’s no quitter. She’s not going to just forfeit because Gaara will try to kill her. She can forfeit to stay safe (for now – Orochimaru may be after her friends soon…), but she is still here fighting for Chuunin.

She didn’t go through a sadistic written exam proctor, a grueling forest survival exam, a preliminary fight against Taichi Kirigo, and a hellish month training with Lee and Gai-sensei just to quit now.

“And his opponent, Tenten of Konoha!” Genma announces, and Tenten walks forward with the same amount of zeal the crowd had for Gaara.

If only they knew how serious this match actually was.

“You know the rules.” Genma states, looking more towards Gaara then Tenten – rightfully so; he did challenge Anko Mitashi and doesn’t know how to take a hint. “BEGIN!” Genma shouts.

Tenten leaps away and, with her practiced hand, quickly unseals a staff.

Gaara just stands there, staring at her.

Tenten grips the staff, it wielding to her chakra and extending in length. With Gaara’s Sand, she’s has more of a chance at winning if she fight long-range than close range. And this is a decent starter long-range weapon to see what she’s really dealing with in this fight.

Taking a few test swings as Gaara, the sand just rises and knocks the staff out of the way, seemingly with no conscious effort of the redheaded genin.

“You will be Mother’s appetizer. The real meal will be Naruto Uzumaki.” Gaara says, licking his lips and eyes widening. “You bore me.” Gaara says, lifting one hand and bringing it down in Tenten’s direction.

But Tenten’s not having it – the match and/or her life – end that soon.

Tenten side-hops, rolls, and calls upon her last month of training and activates the first gate. Gai had trained her body to be strong enough for the first gate, but that’s all she can do for now. Her body just isn’t as trained like Lee’s is yet.

“Fire Style: Flame Jet!” Tenten calls out as she makes the hand-signs. The flame coming from her mouth is being amplified by the opened gate, and all the sand flying towards her gets engulfed, and falls to the ground and shatters – having been turned to glass.

Tenten sees the shock on Gaara’s face – and she knows this may be her only chance to attack, as he won’t be shocked again (and because her body is already getting fatigued by the opened gate).

Running a bit closer to Gaara in a counter-clockwise direction, Tenten undoes her hair as senbon shoot out all towards her opponent. As his sand comes up to block it, she uses a lot of her chakra reserves to do a seal-less, gate-amplified Flame Jet as she pulls another weapon out of her scroll.

A mastery of weapons is all about multitasking, after all.
As Gaara’s sand in front of him turns to glass, Tenten is at his backside and tries to attack him with her new weapon. It’s a weapon used decades ago – primarily for interrogation and torture – but she thinks this might be the only thing she can use. Standard weapons – blades, shuriken, kunai – all are too slow and his sand would recover too fast.

She her new weapon, which is a mechanical claw, is meant to grab onto something on a person. Clothes or skin, it doesn’t matter. Then, from inside the claw, are blade-tips sharp enough to cut diamond. They retract outwards and rip through anything – skin, clothes, armor. When the blade-tips come out, either Garra forfeits before he dies, or the weapon rips through his body and he bleeds out. When the blade-tips come out, Tenten wins.

The weapon does attach to Gaara’s clothes, but before the blade-tips can come out, Tenten is suddenly swept away, legs and feet being cut by the glass that was once Gaara’s sand.

‘OH SHIT!’ She thinks, knowing she screwed up. She should have waited to see if he could control the glass, but that might have been her only window of opportunity.

“Meals always taste better when they fight back!” Gaara says, eyes dilated and mouth wide-open. “GET READY, GIRL!” He screams out, and sand hovers over her entire body.

“NO! GAI-SEN –” The sand goes down over her body, and the pain is already too much for her and she passes out.

“TENTEN!” All eleven of the kunoichi’s fellow Konoha genin shout and the sand falls down on top of her, resulting in a terrifying crunch sound.

“STOP!” Genma yells at Gaara, but he didn’t need to.

Immediately, all the sand is blown away as Gai is there, with Kakashi, Kurenai, and Asuma there holding Gaara back. Gai picks up Tenten, his precious student, not letting these real tears spill.

She’s alive, but barely. There is no patch of skin on her that already isn’t bruised. Even though he cannot use any medical ninjutsu, Gai knows she is barely holding on, nearly hemorrhaging internally.

He doesn’t even want to think right now about possible brain damage.

Gai activates the first gate and speeds her off in the direction of the hospital, saying nothing to nobody, just trying to keep his student alive.

“The winner is Gaara of the Desert…” Genma announces, but even he is shocked at the sight he just saw. He’s a Jonin, former Anbu, former personal guard to the Fourth Hokage, and nothing quite compares to the sight he saw just now.

The crowd is overwhelmingly booing Gaara, at him almost having just killed that girl. No matter the bets the crowd made, they did not sign up for watching that.

“Now Mother can wait for the main course.” Gaara says as he walks back out of the area and up the stairs to his section, to the horror of Kankuro and Temari.
Speechless.

All of them are speechless. And in anguish. Too much anguish to even be angry.

It was one thing with Choji. They didn’t see him hurt. They never saw a crushed, bruised, broken body. They were scared and angry until they heard that crunch.

Then, they all were trying not to cry.

“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck...” Ino says, almost like a mantra. She just couldn’t believe what she saw.

Tenten went from *winning* to being *broken*. And Ino isn’t stupid – she knows there’s a very real chance of her new friend dying.

“No! How could this be? Neji, please tell me this isn’t real!” Lee cries out, unable to hold back his tears as his head falls onto the Hyuuga’s shoulder, sobbing. Neji, unsure of what to do here, hesitantly wraps his arms around Lee and cries with him.

“She’s still alive. There’s still hope.” Kakashi, Asuma, and Kurenai shunshin right in front of them all. The Kurenai shadow clone is still there, too. “And Gai’s already at the hospital with her. You can’t give up hope. I’ll take you both to visit as soon as we hear something.” Kakashi says to the eleven genin, but more to Tenten’s teammates.

Neji and Lee just hug each other tighter, still crying.

“The third match is about to begin. Would the two contestants please come down?” Genma announces, looking up at the Konoha box with understanding in his eyes. He knows they are Tenten’s friends.

“And Hinata…your presence was requested. We believe we found something relating to Orochimaru, but we need you and your sensor abilities.” Kurenai says, shocking her student.

They need Hinata – a *rookie genin* – to help with *something* relating to an S-Class missing-nin – a *Sannin*? She knows her skills are unique, but are they *that* unique that even Jonin trackers can’t do what she would be asked to?

“Goddamnit!” Shikamaru shouts in anger, because how the fuck are he and Ino expected to put on a match? Tenten is probably dying (hope can’t change science – and her whole body was *broken*), Hinata is appearing to be correct about Orochimaru, and they are still expected to put on an exciting match.

Yeah, when he tried to calm everyone down earlier after Naruto’s match, he was barely holding on. Now it’s the last fiber of the last thread that’s holding him on to sanity.

Shikamaru and Ino start to walk to the stairs when Sasuke reaches out to Shikamaru’s hand, making him turn around. Shikamaru grips it for a few seconds – just to *touch him* – and nods to Sasuke, before he and Ino head down.

“Don’t do it.” Ino says as they both wait behind the line.

“What?” Shikamaru asks, clearly distracted from whatever he was just thinking about. “What are you
talking about?"

“Come on Shikamaru, I come from a family of psychologists. I know what someone looks like when they are about to run away. It’s called the ‘fight or flight response.’ So don’t you fucking dare give up now.” Ino says, looking directly in his eyes.

Shikamaru really is considering forfeiting now. After everything, he has a bad sense of foreboding, and he and Ino need to save as much energy as they can. No matter who wins, he doesn’t think they’d have any chance of fighting Gaara – even with Naruto – if they are weak.

And even if they do beat him, then one of them would have to fight Naruto as well. And though the blonde would never really hurt them, their match would be painful because Naruto is strong.

And Shikamaru is scared. A part of really just wants him, Naruto, Ino, Choji everyone to just get the hell out of there until Gaara goes back home to Suna so he can’t terrorize or hurt anyone else. The small part of Shikamaru that exists in every shinobi – but the part he is having trouble fighting back at right now.

“Because you don’t think I don’t want to give up too? To stay safe at home with my clan? For all of us to get out of here, away from Sannin or psychopaths? Away from the group of missing-nin after our friends? Yeah, I’m terrified. We’re human. We wouldn’t be human if we weren’t scared. But we have to rise above that fear, for our friends.” Ino says, as Genma starts to announce.

“The winner of this match will join Naruto Uzumaki and Gaara of the Desert in the final triple threat match. And with that, introducing first, from Konoha, is Shikamaru Nara!”

Shikamaru walks out to his starting place, to a crowd that is cheering over-dramatically, trying to forget about the near-massacre they just saw.

Shikamaru won’t be able to forget, ever.

“And his opponent, also from Konoha, Ino Yamanaka!” And the crowd is just as loud and forced for her as it was for Shikamaru. When Ino reaches her starting spot, she continues saying what she was before.

“Of course we’re scared, but we have to rise above that fear. What would Naruto say? Hinata? What would Sasuke say if they knew this? Two months ago, Hinata told me that she got strong because she has people to protect. Well, we do too. So we have to be strong. So focus on what’s happening right now. Me and you. Nothing else has happened yet – no Snake, no psychos. And…don’t we want Naruto to have the strongest one of us?” Ino finishes, looking to Genma as a signal to wait for Shikamaru’s answer.

And of course Ino is right. Shikamaru knows she is, and hearing what she said was all that it took to bring him back to where he needed to be. Hearing that someone else is feeling the same way…means that he’s not alone in his feelings.

And Ino’s right when she says that Orochimaru isn’t here yet. Gaara is just spectating. And this match does need to happen – the winner would be doing their best by fighting with Naruto against Gaara. The winner would be a better teammate (temporarily – until it’s just the two of them left).

Shikamaru just needed to be reminded of who’s counting on him. His team, his boyfriend (?) they really need to have their second date soon – damn training keeping Shikamaru busy), the rest of his friends. Everyone gets scared, but they get their strength from their friends and loved ones. And Ino reminded Shikamaru of who really makes him strong.
“You’re right – I was being an idiot. Let’s do this, Ino!” Shikamaru says, getting into his battle stance.

“Yeah you idiot, let’s go!” Ino agrees, and Genma knows it’s time.

“Ready…BEGIN!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, back to the main plot. And yeah, I’m sorry Tenten…

She really is one of my favorite characters, really! But sometimes a story just begs for things to happen without you being aware of it needing to happen until it really needs to. And yeah, I had no idea, but Tenten had to get hurt like this.

There’s a lot of plot advancement in this chapter. This is the start of a really big change – one that I mentioned in last chapter’s A/N – that is going to change the rest of the story and that leads directly into the sequel.

This story is actually almost done. I still have a lot of ideas to write, but they all come close together in the timeline, and I really don’t think it’ll be that much longer. Maybe ten chapters left, max?

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed that chapter. Stay tuned next week for Chapter 23!

Also, don’t forget to review!
Chapter Summary

Shikamaru and Ino have their match. Meanwhile, Hinata and her sensei continue to search for Orochimaru's chakra. And after a short lunch, the final triple threat match begins.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Another week, another chapter! Hope you guys enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 23)-The Finals Tournament, Part 2

Third-Person P.O.V.

As soon as Genma starts the match, Shikamaru falls the floor.

Rolling around – making sure his hands, elbows, knees, feet, and the top of his head all touch the floor – he gets up covered in rock.

Shikamaru has mastered using the Earth Style: Fists of Earth jutsu. Having trained continuously since his father introduced it to him, Shikamaru has mastered the chakra output needed for maximum conservation.

And it makes his Taijutsu hurt.

Ino looks at Shikamaru with a smirk – she’s impressed at this.

“Nice new jutsu. Taijutsu power enhancement. That would be great, if only you could touch me.” She says before seemingly disappearing.

‘Genjutsu? Speed? Did she go underground? Right now I have to keep moving to figure out her game, then I can attack. Wait and observe – that’s the basic rule.’ Shikamaru tells himself, smiling at the challenge.

This match, despite all the things happening, will be fun.

“They’re masking their chakra, but it’s not perfect. I can sense traces of recent jutsu.” Hinata reports
to Kurenai and Kakashi. Gai has taken over Kakashi’s guard-duty spot (after delivering Tenten to the hospital, leaving a shadow clone of his own there), as Kakashi is needed more on tracking.

Hinata has been tasked with trying to sense out Orochimaru’s chakra, in whatever form it may be in. Though it’s not yet conclusive, Hinata senses four (maybe five?) distinct, concentrated forms of corrupted chakra, just like it was in Naruto’s neck when he was infected with the curse seal.

And, unfortunately for everyone, there is no scent or mark or any kind of trace of them except for chakra traces. And the only other sensor-nin in Konoha is off on a mission countries away and couldn’t be back for weeks.

So Hinata’s the only one who can help understand what’s going on before something possibly disastrous happens.

Though she wishes she can be supporting her teammate and other friend in their match, she knows she has to concentrate fully of this. Gai and Asuma can protect them, and they know she’s wishing them all the best in their match.

“Alright, let’s see what we can find then. Whatever you can Hinata – anything at all is more than what we have right now.” Kakashi tells her, Sharingan being re-covered as there’s nothing it can do for him right now.

Shikamaru has been on the defensive this whole match.

He just doesn’t know where Ino is, yet she is able to keep attacking – throwing kunai, dishing out fire style attacks, and just confusing Shikamaru.

But at the same time, Shikamaru is far from being done. Yes, he’s on the defensive. But at the same time he’s been…charging…an attack. Now all he needs is an opening.

Ducking and rolling to avoid another fire blast to the face (Ino knew he would dodge it), Shikamaru stomps his foot as he rises back up, jumping slightly to avoid his own attack…

…and makes the entire arena floor engulf itself momentarily before spitting back out a gasping blonde kunoichi.

His massive Manhole Jutsu, with all that chakra gathering in his feet throughout the match, has become a Vacuum Jutsu.

Not letting Ino get her bearings, Shikamaru rushes at her to kick her with his rock-covered feet…only for it to be replaced by a random piece of stone (probably a piece of the arena that broke off during Naruto’s final attack on Lee).

‘Substitution!’

On instinct only, Shikamaru falls onto his back and rolls out of the way, avoiding Ino’s attack.

“That was a great – *breath* – attack, Shikamaru! It really took – *breath* – a lot out of me!” Ino says, referring to his vacuum-like jutsu.

“It took a lot to make, too.” Shikamaru responds, before smiling and punching his way towards Ino. And having known Ino for many years, he is able to predict the way she dodges.
And then he smirks.

Because he releases his chakra in the other hand (as he couldn’t actually reach Ino from the way their bodies are positioned), letting the rock that was attached to it fly and hit her in the face, knocking her back into Shikamaru’s raising, rock-covered foot.

Then he kicks her into the wall, causing Ino to gasp in pain.

“Shikamaru is doing great! I’ve never seen either of those jutsu before!” Naruto says, focused on his best friend fighting and temporarily forgetting everything that happened after his own match.

“Yes, it seems he trained rather hard this month. I am too impressed as these jutsu – both of them seem to be at least C-Rank jutsu.” Shino says.

“Considering how he has to continuously mould his chakra to keep the rock on him that like, the chakra control must be high. They have to be at least C-Rank.” Sakura adds, her own knowledge and experience of chakra control (especially with her new medical training this past month) guiding her speech.

“Ino’s doing great too! She kept Shikamaru on guard the whole beginning of the match – we couldn’t even detect her either!” Kiba says, trying to defend his teammate (though he knows it’s all in good fun right now).

“That is true. And though Shikamaru has an advantage right now, something tells me that Ino isn’t quite finished yet.” Choji adds, muching on chips to keep his nerves down.

Lee and Neji, however, just stare on with blank eyes. They can’t top thinking about Tenten.

“She’s in good hands, you know. Gai-sensei has a way of making things just happen.” Sasuke says, putting his hand on Lee’s shoulder. “All you can do is support and hope for her. And I’ll hope and support with you.” He adds, remembering how terrible he felt when Sakura was hurt on their first attempted C-Rank mission, and when Shino (and himself) was hurt when coming from their training mission, or how he felt when he was told Itachi is a member of the group that is after Naruto.

“Thank you, Sasuke.”

Ino knows that right now, she is at a physical disadvantage. She doesn’t have the kind of Fire jutsu that can compete with Shikamaru’s Earth jutsu. With those Earth fists and feet, he can shield himself from her fire blasts.

But she has other kind of jutsu. She didn’t train with her father – the head of Torture and Interrogation – and his colleagues for a month for nothing.

So Ino starts with a more mild mental genjutsu.

Most of the month she spent training involved chakra control and genjutsu. She improved her stamina physically, but that was just basic training (but it has allowed her to continue in the match, as she probably would have been exhausted after Shikamaru’s implosion thing).
This genjutsu is a basic one, but it’s also very effective against those not expecting anything like it. She is able to make him think certain ideas in his own voice; ideas of indecisiveness, fear, regret, and other negative emotions.

The downside is that she has no idea if it’s actually working. If the victim is fighting the jutsu, ignoring it, or falling for it – she has no idea. To do so would require a sustained, physical touch between the two.

But Ino casts the jutsu, and waits to see how Shikamaru fares with his meta-psychological processes.

Their fight continues, but there is a slight – very slight – but noticeable hesitation coming from Shikamaru. Ino doesn’t let it show on her face – first rule of interrogation – but inside she knows that she has a chance without needing to overpower him.

(Sh e vaguely thinks about how powerful he is now – lazy Shikamaru from the Academy is no more. All of her friends have become so powerful – that’s why them rookies are in the finals!)

So with these hesitations, Ino swoops in and starts kicking and punching Shikamaru. Kicks to the sides, punches to the face, head-butts to the nose.

(If this were someone who isn’t her friend, she would be kneeling their groins, but Shikamaru is her friend so she’ll spare that.)

Then Shikamaru jumps away, and takes a moment before retaking his initial stance.

“That took too long for me to notice. There is no second-guessing while being logical; only other options. Thank you for teaching me to check for that.” Shikamaru says, lightly nodding his head to Ino.

“Of course! This battle is helping us get stronger!” Ino says back, thinking about her next move.

And they jump at each other, going at it again.

Hinata is not happy about what she is sensing.

All over the village. Foreign chakra traces everyone – with all having some kind of version – mutation? – of Orochimaru’s chakra.

“Kakashi-sensei…are these explosion seals? They’re all over the village? How did this even happen without anyone noticing?” Hinata asks the sensei who knows more about seals.

“Yes, they are. But I have no idea how Anbu or border patrol didn’t spot these. How old are the traces?” He asks back to one of his students.

“Some are fresh, some seem to date back to…last night? I’m not sure…” Hinata answers. She’s not an expert at using her sensor abilities yet.

“Last night? Wasn’t Hayate on guard duty?” Kurenai asks the former Anbu captain.

“Yes – and don’t even think that he did this. He is no traitor. Yuugao would have told me about anything like that. He must have been captured or…” Kakashi can’t bear to think of his friend being dead. “Summoning jutsu!” Kakashi summons Pakkun and the rest of the pack.
“Yes, Kakashi?”

“Pakkun, has Hayate Gekko been here recently?”

“No, sir.” The ninken responds after sniffing around for a few moments.

“That at least we know he’s not a traitor. Everyone, find Hayate’s last known location and tell us who was near there that spot too. Meanwhile, we’ll start deactivating these seals.” Kakashi orders, and all the ninja hounds spread out to search for the missing Jonin.

“Hinata, do you know how to deactivate these seals?” Kurenai asks her student before starting on the job herself.

“Yes- with my Byakugan it’s easy.” She responds.

But what exactly is going on right now?

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Shikamaru’s Body of Earth is weakening – bits of Earth are falling off on everywhere he’s trying to use it. He had to give up the ones on his elbows and knees entirely to keep his hands and feet still covered with Earth.

But he is starting to run low on chakra.

Ino has been letting time take its toll on her opponent. She’s been using only minimal chakra to evade Shikamaru’s attacks, but had had a few costly points where she used her Fire Jutsu when his Earth armor had finally started to break.

Shikamaru is exhausted and burned. Ino is exhausted and bruised.

Both rookie genin know this match is going to end soon – one of them is going to either run out of chakra, make a mistake, or something in between. It’s just a matter of who caves first.

Both of them have one final jutsu that could be either the coup de grace, or the final nail in their own coffin. And when Shikamaru makes a new hand-seal, they both know this is going to be it.

Shikamaru has been waiting for this for minutes. The sun, at this time of day, is helping to cast a shadow from a broken piece of area from Naruto and Lee’s match. The shadow spot is just long enough for him to cast a taxing jutsu.

The Shadow Strangle, much thicker and slower than his regular shadow capture, piggy-backs off the shadow created by the sun and nicks into Ino’s shadow, freezing her and slowly wrapping around her.

Ino, never having seen this but remembering it from some of her father’s war stories, casts her own final jutsu.

Shikamaru smirks as his shadow crawls up Ino’s body, slithering around and tightening…until he feels the same pressure on his own body.

“You feel that? What happens to me, happens to you.” Ino says, smirking back at Shikamaru.

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“There’s so many of them. Is there anyone who can help?” Hinata asks, knowing that at the speed three of them are going, that it’ll take days until they get all the seals down.

“No. All Anbu are on duty right now, protecting civilians and the Hokage. And Kurenai can’t afford to make another shadow clone, with the one with the rest of you all. And just using my Sharingan earlier took more chakra that I would have liked – we all need to conserve as much chakra as we can. So turn off your Byakugan – I have a bad feeling right now.” Kakashi says, acting in a way Hinata has never really seen before.

“Then maybe we should split up – get the most important areas first. Kakashi, take the Hokage Tower. Hinata, keep working here. And I’ll take the Orphanage and the Academy.” Kurenai orders to the other two.

“Good idea. Make sure those kids are safe. Hinata – if you notice anything else Orochimaru, contact one of us. Pakkun and the pack should be reporting back soon.” Kakashi acknowledges before leaving to his new post.

“You can do this, Hinata. You’re doing your part right now to protect the village.” Kurenai says before leaving too.

Hinata takes a deep breath, and begins to focus on her task (which is considerably more difficult now that she was ordered to keep her Byakugan off to conserve her chakra).

(Hinata vaguely wonders how Shikamaru and Ino are doing, and wishing the best for Tenten once more.)

“Seems we’re at a standstill.” Shikamaru says lazily, knowing that he lost. His best bet at winning is…hoping she loses first, and that means not expressing how screwed he is right now.

He’s just out of chakra. Even if he let up the shadow strangle immediately after casting, the chakra cost was too much to do anything else. He could have used his Fists of Earth more, but with the way Ino and he were going back and forth, it would have been futile anyway.

If he did have more chakra though, he knows exactly how he would get out of this.

“I agree. So what’s it going to be?” Ino says, smirking at Shikamaru.

But she’s bluffing too. The Reality Implant genjutsu is an A-Rank jutsu used only against prisoners who…fight back…and gain any sort of upper-hand while in custody. As much as Ino’s teacher hated to admit it, sometimes it does happen but there’s a way to fight against that. That’s what this jutsu is.

It doesn’t really make whatever happen to one happen to the other. That’s what happened with…Hidan and what he did to Shino and Sasuke.

What this jutsu does is only make the victim think it’s happening to them. That does crazy things to the victim’s psychology, and it messes up their neurotransmitters and it can be fatal if too much is done before the castor is stopped.

It’s a brilliant jutsu. But it’s also costly.

Its costs are just as much – maybe the same or more – chakra as a (non-Naruto) shadow clone. But unlike the shadow clone, using it isn’t as risky because it just cancels when there’s not enough
chakra – rather than damaging the body like a shadow clone when there’s no chakra. That’s why it’s an A-Rank jutsu, rather than a forbidden one like the shadow clone.

Shikamaru estimates he has about a minute left before he is completely chakra depleted and would be dangerously near chakra exhaustion.

“Well, what I would do right now is charge up and use another Manhole Jutsu on you. I’ve experienced it happening to me before, so I would expect either being in the Earth or just feeling it, whatever your genjutsu does. Then you’d be trapped again and completely immobilized.” Shikamaru explains.

Thirty seconds left.

“Smart. I wouldn’t be able to get out of that, not anymore. So why don’t you do it?” She asks, curious.

Twenty-five seconds.

“Because I am approximately twenty-two seconds away from chakra depletion and unfortunately, I must forfeit the match. I could try to do those jutsu and hurt myself, but I know you wouldn’t want to win – or lose – like that. So I forfeit.” Shikamaru says, releasing the Shadow Strangle and liking the relief his body feels (not just from no more chakra strain, but from not feeling his own jutsu against him any more).

“I had probably another minute left in me, personally. Close match.” Ino says, vaguely aware that she won.

“The winner of the match, joining Naruto Uzumaki of Konoha and Gaara of the Desert in the final match, is Ino Yamanaka of Konoha!”

And it’s the cheers that make her aware that she won and made it to the final round!

“Talk to me, Pakkun.” Kakashi orders. Kakashi had just finished deactivating the explosion seals on the Hokage Tower when Pakkun returned and let him to this area.

“He was here. Hayate was here with…six others? Maybe five. At least five, maybe six. Hayate’s scent is a lot stronger here than the others’ though…” Pakkun responds.

Kakashi and his lead ninken are standing out at the outskirts of the village…in destroyed buildings from the Kyuubi attack fourteen years prior. Buildings lost to time and forgotten about.

“Why here? And I don’t smell any blood. Why is his scent stronger here?” Kakashi asks, unable to smell it even with his own enhanced sense.

“I don’t know. But something bad happened here…I am picking up some of his pheromones. They contain fear. Whatever happened here – and whoever made the seals around the village – Hayate Gekko did not have a voluntary part in it. I don’t know if he’s even still alive, but if he is, he needs help.” Pakkun says.

Kakashi does not like this – at all. Not only does he consider Hayate to be a good friend, but he is also the fiancée of Kakashi’s mentee and dear friend Yuugao Uzuki – one of the first people to bring him out of himself and into a person again.
“Well we need to find him. You said five others, maybe six. Hinata also sensed something off with the numbers on her end. We need to get her here right now and see if there’s anything we can’t make out.” Kakashi says, having a feeling Hinata may be the key to solving all this.

“You both were amazing! Congrats, Ino!” Naruto says to his two friends as they walk back up the stairs. Sakura starts healing some of Ino’s biggest bruises – it’s the least she can do with her limited medical training so far.

“Yeah! You were both so evenly matched!” Kiba says, with Akamaru yipping in agreement.

“It really was a most youthful display of friendship and competition.” Lee says, trying to sound excited but his voice is still filled with grief.

Sasuke moves to sit next to Shikamaru, trying to discreetly place his hand on top of the other’s (they still haven’t told Team 10 or Team Gai about their date, though they both believe Ino knows via Sakura).

“That was a really good match.” Sasuke says, understanding that Shikamaru is disappointed. Of course Shikamaru – and Sasuke – are happy for Ino and her victory, but everyone would understand the disappointment of a defeat.

“Thank you.” Shikamaru says, squeezing Sasuke’s had as discreetly as he could. “But the match is over, and I can’t stop worrying how she was almost out of chakra like I was. She has to fight Gaara – and Naruto.” Shikamaru confesses.

So maybe it wasn’t the disappointment of a defeat…only worry for his friend.

“Trust me, Naruto won’t let her get hurt. And he won’t let himself get hurt either – or if he does, that bloodline of his will save everyone once again. Or those toads. Or those shadow clones. Goddamn your teammate is something else.” Sasuke says, and Shikamaru actually chuckles at that.

“It has come in handy, hasn’t it?” Shikamaru says, finding it ironic that the biggest disaster Konoha has seen in decades is what has saved them on multiple occasions already. “I didn’t even know about the big toads until he brought them out in his match.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about. Kurenai-sensei’s clone is still here. And Asuma– and Kakashi-sensei are still keeping watch. They won’t let…” Sasuke stops talking, because he can’t bring himself to say it, after what he told Lee earlier.

“Yeah. I hope she’s okay…” Shikamaru says, resting his head on Sasuke’s shoulder.

(Sasuke can’t bring himself to stop Shikamaru, either.)

Kurenai has just finished the last of the seals on the Academy. The orphanage had no explosion seals on it, surprisingly and thankfully. The academy had a lot though, and Kurenai had to be stealthy as to not worry any of the instructors or students – especially not Iruka. That man can be scary when his students are in danger…

…Which she is also so thankful for because that scariness is what kept Naruto alive the day he
But the Academy is safe now, and Kurenai is only able to breathe a single sigh of relief before she sees Pakkun and Hinata running to the outskirts where the Kyuubi destroyed everything.

Kurenai follows, easily catching up to the speed of her genin student.

“What’s going on?” She asks.

“Kakashi asked me to bring Hinata to where we believe to be Hayate’s last location. We’re having trouble detecting the number of people that were there, and he said that Hinata reported something similar.” Pakkun says.

“I see. Any word on the Hokage Tower? The Orphanage and Academy are clear now.” Kurenai asks her friend’s summon.

“It’s clean now. Hinata, you sensing anything yet?” Pakkun asks the genin.

“Just what I did before, except a bit more potent. Four, maybe five concentrated spots of that chakra like Naruto had.” She reports.

“We sensed at least five people, maybe six, other than Hayate. So there must be someone who isn’t connected to Orochimaru, at least not directly. Okay, let’s hurry and report to Kakashi!” Pakkun says, and everyone speeds up.

“Gai-sensei!” Lee cries as soon as he sees the Green Blur at their side.

The ten genin, being accompanied and supervised by Kurenai’s shadow clone, went to get some lunch – not only because there is a two hour break until the final triple threat match, but because food will help Ino regain her chakra and strength. They took Choji’s advice and went to a pasta and meat place – plenty of protein and carbs and calories for strength.

“How is she?” Neji asks, completely abandoning his meager meal.

“Tenten is alive. She’s in surgery right now, but there was a lot of damage. I should have stopped it before she called my name…” Gai didn’t mean to let that last part slip out loud.

“No, Gai-sensei! It is not your fault! You kept that monster from killing her! You’re the reason she’s even still alive!” Neji says, standing up and looking his sensei in the eyes.

“He’s right, sir. He’s…a monster really is the best word. If Team 8 hadn’t shown up when they did, if Naruto hadn’t used that bloodline…he would’ve killed us all. I broke free, but I was dead-weight. So don’t blame yourself – it’s all on that monster. You, Naruto, Shikamaru, and Hinata – you’re all heroes.” Choji says, never forgetting about how he almost died to Gaara.

(Though the nightmares aren’t nearly as frequent for Choji now that everyone is stronger and has been training for the last month).

“In my mind I know that, but my heart says otherwise.” Gai says, his youthful façade fading.

“Come on, Gai-sensei! Where’s your youth? I guarantee – Ino and I will show that bastard not to mess with Konoha or our friends, believe it!” Naruto says, smiling at his youthful sensei.
“Yeah, Gai-sensei! Naruto’s right! We’ll be working together to beat that creep – and then I’ll beat Naruto’s ass after!” Ino says, nudging Naruto.

“Hah, looking forward to you trying!” Naruto says, nudging back at Ino. The playfulness between them causes Gai to smile once again.

“You young people are right. I lost my youth for a moment – thank you for helping me find it again. Neji, Lee – it’s time for us to be strong with each other. There’s a lot going on right now – everyone here has to be strong with each other.” Gai says, speaking to all the genin there.

“Hey, sensei…have you heard anything on what Hinata’s doing right now? Kurenai-sensei came and said Hinata was needed for something…” Naruto asks, missing his teammate. It feels wrong to just not have her there right now.

(And, he’s a bit worried with the news Hinata initially reported, too.)

“I’m sorry, I have not heard anything. But if she’s with Kurenai, then she’s in good hands.” Gai says, smiling to Naruto and Shikamaru.

“The final match is about to begin. A winner is determined when both of their opponents either forfeit or are unable to continue fighting. If one opponent is unable to continue or forfeits, they will exit the arena and the remaining two will continue to fight.” Genma announces.

But this isn’t any normal triple threat. Right now, this is Konoha vs. Suna.

“Introducing first, Naruto Uzumaki of Konoha!” The crowd is loud with both cheers and boos as Naruto makes his way from the tunnel line – next to Ino – and walks forward to the starting line.

Though Naruto was booed when he first came out, his match and victory over Lee – a second year genin – seemed to have changed a lot of people’s minds about him. Not only did he have powerful summons, shadow clones, and two different elemental jutsus; Naruto also showed incredible sportsmanship in helping Lee get back to their sitting area. That showed a lot of people how Naruto really has nothing to do with that demon Fox inside him.

“Introducing next, Gaara of the Desert!” The crowd is composed entirely of cheers, but weak ones. Probably because they are scared of what Gaara would do to them if they booed – they don’t want to end up like Tenten did…

Gaara walks out, with Kankuro and Temari staring from their own sitting area. He walks out, standing across from Naruto behind his own line, a few grains of sand swirling on the ground around him.

“I’ve been waiting over a month for this, Uzumaki. Mother can’t wait to taste your blood.” He growls out, licking his lips.

“The only thing your ‘Mother’ will be tasting is the salt of your tears when I beat your ass all the way back to Suna. You hurt my friends – and you will not get away with that.” Naruto says, not at all scared of this guy. It’s different than it was a month ago in the Forest of Death – Naruto has his summons, new jutsu, and more strength.

(And…he and Ino always have Kurenai and their other sensei if necessary – rules or not).
“And introducing the final competitor, Ino Yamanaka of Konoha!” Genma announces, with a crowd full of cheers accompanying.

Ino walks out, eyes locked completely onto Gaara as she walks to the third starting line, which is at a point equidistant to both Gaara’s and Naruto’s on an equilateral triangle.

“Remember, when I say stop, you stop.” Genma says, looking harshly at Gaara, before raising his hand. “BEGIN!” Genka shouts, lowering his hand and jumping away from the three genin.

“Summoning Jutsu!” Naruto wastes no time, immediately summoning Gamaken again, but also another toad that nobody else has seen yet.

Another giant toad, with two dual swords in hand, sits next to Gamaken, who has his own sword and shield drawn.

“Hiro, Ken, our job is to immobilize. Ino, you know what to do after?” Naruto calls out to his two toad summons and to his temporary ally in this fight.

“Totally.” Ino responds.

“Good. Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto makes the hand-sign before summoning several tens of himself and charging at Gaara. Gamaken and Gamahiro sheath their weapons and jump in as well, going after submission.

Gaara’s sand pops up too fast for any of the Naru-clones to do any damage – they all just explode on impact (due to Naruto making them have low-chakra levels when he made them – he’s trying to conserve everything he has because he has no idea what this guy can do if he goes all-out).

Gamaken and Gamahiro strike at Gaara with their feet, the sand being slower as it rises to needing more to withstand the hit. They keep, making more and more sand come together to take the hits.

“Water Style: Water Bullet!” Naruto shouts and aims his water at Gaara’s sand, trying to soak it up to make it heavier.

“Wind Style: Hot Cyclone!” Gaara shouts, making a move for the first time in this match (the first move he made throughout the entire Chuunin exams, actually…). He blows hot air directly at his sand, heating it up so when the water hits, it just dissipates into steam.

It also has the unintended, but welcome effect of burning Ken’s and Hiro’s feet as they kick at the sand too.

But it also distracted Gaara quick enough for Ino to make her first move in the match too.

“Mind Transfer!” She whisper-yells to herself, and aims it directly at Gaara as her own body falls to the floor, unconscious.

Suddenly, Gaara’s face loses focus and stares blankly into space, causing Naruto and his Toad summons to stop what they were doing and to let Ino do her thing – the toads already know to not hurt Gaara while Ino’s there or else Ino will get hurt too.

Gaara looks to Genma, raising his hand. “I, Gaara of the Desert, forfeit this…GAH! WH-WHAT IS THAT? NO, STAY AWAY!” Gaara, being controlled by Ino, begins to forfeit before Ino begins
screaming inside.

“BREAK THE JUTSU!” Naruto shouts at her, not knowing what to do.

“FIRE STYLE: GREAT FIREBALL JUTSU!” Gaara screams, not actually pulling off any jutsu. However, his body does seem to get much redder, before Ino’s own body suddenly gasps for breath.

Ino must have used the Uchiha signature jutsu…while inside Gaara’s mind…but why did she have to?

“INO!” Naruto yells, running over to her, until both of them look back at Gaara.

“AHHHH! WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?” Gaara yells, clutching his head.

Gaara shakes, continuing to scream, before one of his arms gets covered by his sand and grows out. The sand then covers his face, and the screaming stops. Gaara’s head falls, seemingly unconscious, before the rest of the sand swirls around him before lifting him up off the ground.

“AHH!” “HELP!” Naruto suddenly hears from the crowd around, before they all become silent.

*BOOM* *BOOM* *BOOM*

Explosions go off in the distance (but Naruto and everyone in the arena have no idea that so many didn’t go off thanks to Hinata, Kurenai, and Kakashi).

“YEAH, I’M FREE!” A new booming voice yells, coming directly above them. Gaara’s sand has manifested a body and a face, and the boy is lodged in his forehead, still seemingly unconscious.

“Uzumaki, The Shukaku is free! We’ll lead him away from the village into the forest!” Gamahiro yells to Naruto, him and Gamaken already leaping to the gigantic sand creature and shooting attacks at him to lead him away.

After one giant, Earth-shaking jump into the forest, he’s gone.

And just like that, from one minute to the next, from an exam to this, Konoha is under attack.

“I can’t understand why none of us can pick up exactly how many people were here.” Pakkun says to his pack.

“There’s something off about someone, that’s for sure.” Kakashi says, trying to think.

“Why would Hayate’s trail end here?” Kurenai asks, being a tracking ninja herself she has no idea.

“Maybe…sensei, couldn’t it be like when you stored those Ame-nin in the scrolls a couple months ago? Could Hayate have been…?” Hinata asks, and everyone looks shocked at that.

“It’s…possible. He was afraid, and his trail’s gone…he was probably abducted.” Kakashi says, voice showing immense pain and sadness.

“That would mean he’s…I sense them! Orochimaru’s seals! They’re at the arena!” Hinata cuts herself off when she suddenly gets a clear sense of them.

*BOOM* *BOOM* *BOOM*
“The seals have gone off!” Kurenai exclaims, now relieved she got the Academy safe when she did. There’s already smoke rising up from all along the village’s defense walls.

“Alright, let’s go! Hinata, lead the way as fast as you can!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter was very difficult for me to write, only because I suck at writing fight scenes. And Shikamaru’s and Ino’s match was probably the hardest fight I’ve written for this story (which I know there weren’t that many in this story, but still).

And yet again, the story demanded Ino win as I wrote it. My original plan was Shikamaru to win, but the story wrote itself and Ino won yet again, despite the odds. First she beat Temari when it looked like she had no chance, now she beat Shikamaru – a genius. Ino is the underdog that I didn’t even know I was writing.

I can’t stop the invasion from happening. It is such a pivotal plot point in canon that unless I did a time-travel fic (don’t get me started…), it has to happen…but that doesn’t mean it has to happen the same way at all.

We already saw some of the way that it’s changing, but trust me when I say that there will be a huge change that’s going to make big things happen later down the road.

But that’s later. Next chapter will be the invasion and more (a lot of it’s going to be skipped because plot is same as canon, so I don’t want to waste anyone’s time – or my own – by writing it).

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 24!

Also, don’t forget to review!
Chapter Summary

The genin are split off into groups to help protect Konoha from the Sand attack. Naruto battles Gaara and the Ichibi, delivering a message. Naruto has another wonderful conversation with someone, and then lets a secret off his chest to all his friends. Hinata has something to say to Naruto.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not in ANY WAY own Naruto or Naruto: Shippuden.

A/N: Here's another chapter. There's a lot here this time, and I hope you all enjoy reading!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 24)-Crush

Third-Person P.O.V.

All eight of the spectating Konoha genin jump down to their two friends – Kurenai’s training preventing the rookies from falling victim to the area-of-effect genjutsu, and Lee being woken up by his teammate.

“Uzumaki, Yamanaka – the Chuunin exams are over. Konoha is under attack. It appears that the Sand village has gone against our peace treaty. Do what you can to protect the village.” Genma says, wishing silent luck to his old teammate Gai’s students.

“Naruto! Ino!” The eight genin shout, running up to them as Genma body-flickers away.

“Guys…what I saw when I was in his mind…it was torture. A giant, angry beast. A monster. A giant tanuki-like thing with a giant tail that almost killed me.” Ino reports, having caught her breath.

“What the fuck is going on? Suna’s attacking?” Kiba asks, observing in horror at all the fighting going on around them.

“That appears to be the case. And we all have jobs to do right now – to protect the village. Kurenai-sensei, what do we do?” Shikamaru asks the shadow clone of his sensei.

“First, nobody goes off on their own. You stay with your group. Ino, Shikamaru, Kiba– you guys head to the Academy and help with evacuations. You two are weak from these battles, and Kiba and Akamaru can help locate the kids if anyone gets lost or separated. Sakura, Neji, you guys have
amazing chakra control – start waking up the civilians. Lee, go with them and support them – they’re bound to get attacked as they’re waking up people. Sasuke, Choji, Shino – help any civilians and children around the village. And Naruto, I know you and I know you’re going after Gaara. I’m going with you.” Kurenai orders.

Neji, Lee, Sakura, Naruto, and Kurenai all go to their respective destinations. Ino and Kiba, and Shino and Choji are stopped when they see Sasuke grabbing Shikamaru’s hand for a moment to draw his attention.

“Hey, I’ll be fine. We’re just going to the Academy.” Shikamaru says, knowing exactly why Sasuke would stop him.

“You better be fine. Because when all this is done…our second date will be whatever you want. Cloud-watching. Anything.” Sasuke tells him, surprising Kiba and Choji with the information that they are a couple.

(Because of course Sakura gossiped to Ino…who somehow was actually able to keep a secret like that!)

“Yeah, and you better be fine too. It’ll be a drag cloud-watching through a window if you’re in the hospital again.” Shikamaru teases, lightening the tension around.

Sasuke’s been happy lately…but only after so much pain throughout his life. He lost everything and everyone he loved once before…and he can’t bare for that to happen again. He’s faced that feeling again twice already, when Sakura and Shino were hurt. And then a third time when he heard what happened during the second exam. If something happened to Shikamaru now?

So yeah, Sasuke’s wearing his heart on his sleeve. Pulling a move from those romance films he watched with his mother – when one of the characters went off to war, or into a burning building to save some innocent people – because…the alternative to not telling Shikamaru is just so much worse. He’d much rather have everyone know how he feels – despite the embarrassment and anxiety of doing so – than not doing so at all and facing the loss and pain again.

“Tch, of course I’ll be fine. You’re just lucky I wasn’t in this tournament because I would have kicked your ass worse than Ino did.” Sasuke responds, teasing Shikamaru back.

“Hey! Shut up, Sasuke! I’ll kick your ass after this!” Ino barks, mock-insulted at their playful banter. She worked really hard during her match to win!

Then Shikamaru pulls on his shirt, lightly bringing Sasuke forward to kiss him on the cheek, to the Uchiha’s chagrin.

“Go, we have jobs to do.” Shikamaru says, before Sasuke nods and everyone splits up to do their respective jobs.

“I feel Orochimaru’s chakra! He’s here, surrounded by four or five people with some of his chakra too. He’s also with the Hokage!” Hinata shouts, her and Kurenai and Kakashi rushing back to the arena.

The closer they get, they see the rising pile of sand, forming a giant raccoon shape.

“He lost control of the tailed beast in him!” Hinata shouts to her two sensei.
“And knowing him, Naruto’s going after him.” Kakashi says, seeing Naruto’s two toad summons chase the Shukaku away.

Hinata gets some tears in her eyes at hearing that – Naruto is very vulnerable right now, despite the massive strength in his allies.

“Hinata, don’t worry about him. My clone is still there – and I know she’ll go with Naruto. And he has his summons – I trust them completely. But right now, we have to focus, okay?” Kurenai says to her student, knowing how torn inside she must be.

Hinata is not able to support her love, not able to even to help to make sure he lives. She has to perform her first duty as a ninja – to the village.

“Yes, ma’am…” Hinata says, blinking the tears out of her eyes before focusing on the task at hand.

After another near thirty seconds, the trio of Hinata, Kurenai, and Kakashi arrive to the top of the Hokage’s spectating box, where Hinata has sensed all of the chakra sources to be.

“What are they doing?” Kurenai asks, seeing the four unknown shinobi – with Sound headbands – in a rectangular formation, holding up their hands.

Suddenly, one of the shinobi’s hands glows, spreading to the other two corners connected to it, and about to spread to the last corner…

…When Kakashi throws a kunai straight into the last shinobi’s skull, blood and brains spilling out and killing him instantly – Kakashi saw an opening and knew if he didn’t get the kill that it would be terrible for everyone.

The light arcs and is unstable momentarily as it closes the shape anyway, but in an awkward right triangle. And in doing so, a triangular prism forms all around the area, enclosing the three shinobi (and not their dead comrade) in the area with the Hokage and Orochimaru behind a dull translucent, near-opaque wall of energy.

“A barrier. We need to get the sealing and barrier corps here right now.” Kakashi says, not really explaining anything that just happened. Kurenai understands it, but Hinata is at a loss.

“What’s going on?” Hinata asks, as Kakashi holds his arm out to keep her at a distance from the barrier.

“What’s going on is that you led us here at the perfect time. The fact that the barrier wasn’t fully completed, means it isn’t at full strength and has flaws. We might be able to get it down faster now and – NARUTO!” Kakashi tries to explain to Hinata, suddenly shocked at the giant toad in the distance.

“Did he…summon that too?” Hinata asks, not quite believing her crush and teammate can really summon a toad bigger than the Hokage Tower.

“He did. And…you should go. Hinata, you were right. You helped get the barrier weak by sensing Orochimaru’s subjects. You helped save the Academy and the children there. You helped us learn that a comrade is missing and is need of help. Now you need to go help Naruto. There’s nothing more for you to do here.” Kurenai says to her student, knowing that the sealing team’s job and the examining of the dead shinobi are beyond Hinata’s skill level and call of duty right now.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, both.” Hinata says before taking off into the direction of the giant toad.
Please be okay, Naruto. I love you, and this can't be where things end.'

“Big brother Shikamaru!” Konohamaru cries, running up to the genin and hugging him tightly. Moegi and Udon follow suit on Ino and Kiba’s legs too, with Akamaru rubbing up against their legs in a vain attempt to make them feel better.

“It’s okay guys. We’re here to help. Iruka-sensei, we’re at your disposal.” Shikamaru says to all the kids in Iruka’s class.

“We’re escorting all the classes to a secure underground shelter. We’re missing some kids though in the halls or bathroom when the alarms went off and got scared – Kiba, could you and Akamaru search for anyone left behind? We can’t wait and we need to start moving everyone here. Protocol says so, as much as I hate it.” Iruka says, scowling at the ridiculous rule at leaving kids behind.

That’s definitely something he’s bringing directly to the Hokage himself when all this is done.

“Of course! Akamaru, let’s go!” Kiba and Akamaru run inside the building, splitting up to do a methodical search of the building.

“Shikamaru and Ino, stay with us and make sure nobody else gets left behind. The shelter is a bit ways away and there aren’t enough teachers to keep everyone in check. So we’ll begin and –” Iruka says, and is then cut off.

"LOOK, SOME FRESH MEAT! LET’S GET ‘EM!” Two sand shinobi say, jumping down suddenly, causing Iruka and the two genin to immediately go into their battle stances.

The Academy students run in the direction of the bunker, as the other teaches lead them away to let Iruka fight.

"Beat them up!” Konohamaru yells at them as he and his best friends get dragged away by Knohamaru's bodyguard Ebisu.

"Iruka-sensei, get the one on the left. We got this!” Shikamaru says, doing a somersault forward to cover his fists in Earth. He also immediately starts gathering some chakra in his feet.

Ino casts the self-questioning genjutsu that even Shikamaru fell to in their match.

As Iruka defends against a kunai thrown to him by his own enemy, the genin's enemy barely dodges Shikamaru's hand-rocks flying at his face, having been released from his hand. He ducks - barely - and that's enough for him to already sink into the ground, stuck in Shikamaru's manhole jutsu.

"Isn't he supposed to be a chuunin?” Ino asks as Shikamaru's Shadow Strangle travels up the guy's neck and face, squeezing until the guy passes out.

The next part sickens Shikamaru, though he knows it's necessary. Having knocked his enemy unconscious, Shikamaru gets out his sealing scroll and seals him inside, knowing he'll have to be questioned.

"Yes, he was.” Shikamaru responds to Ino's question much later after it was asked. He knows what she was saying - that was too easy for a chuunin battle. They faced so much worse on their C-Ranks, in the Forest of Death, and each other in the Finals.
And though Shikamaru knows he shouldn't think it, he can't help it as he thinks he and his friends are just that good.

Then, they hear Iruka's enemy being tossed onto the floor, unconscious and being tied up.

"Gotta start carrying a sealing scroll on me, huh? I swear - the students are already becoming the teacher. You guys were amazing! Really held your own - you deserved to make it to the Finals, all right. You know, it's a shame I couldn't have been there, but I was wishing the best for all of you." Iruka says, grabbing the scroll from Shikamaru, who offered it up without even needing to be asked.

All three of them are acting a bit calm, despite the giant Tanuki on the loose...

"Thank you, sensei. We appreciate it." Ino says, not wanting to make things awkward by mentioning what happened to Tenten, who was in Iruka's class the year before.

"Thank you both for the lesson, I always aim to learn more, and - WHAT IS THAT?" Iruka sensei says, and then beyond shocked at what he sees. Ino and Shikamaru turns around and have no idea what to think either, except the name of one person.

"Naruto!" They both shout when they see the absolute monstrous toad fighting the monstrous sand Tanuki.

"What? Naruto? How? He can summon? He's fighting the Ichibi?" Iruka is unable to comprehend this...

"I GOT THEM!" They hear Kiba shout, running out carrying two children, with one other older one running out behind him and in front of Akamaru. They stare at the giant Toad summons, but they hand the children over to Iruka.

"Kiba, thank you! I have to get them to the shelter - but if that's really Naruto fighting, then you guys need to get to him and support him. Protect each other." Iruka tells them, glancing at the children he is supposed to protect.

"Of course, sensei! He's our friend!" Kiba responds, filling Iruka's heart with pride and happiness.

He's known Naruto has had all these friends for a while now - he doesn't shut up about them during their Ramen lunches, but to hear Kiba say that really assures him that Naruto will be okay, no matter what.

"Great to hear. Good luck, you three!"

"MY BABY! HELP ME!" A woman screams, and three genin land to see a large sand shinobi standing over this skinny, short woman who is trying to jump to reach her baby, who the sand-nin is holding.

"EXPANSION!" Choji 's arms enlarge and stretch out and grab the man, keeping him still.

Shino's kikaichu fly out around him, flying over to the baby and picking it up and handing it over to the woman, who looks shocked but also grateful.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Sasuke screams to the mother as the man breaks free of Choji's arms. Sasuke activates his Sharingan and is able to knock his arms away just in time - any longer and he
would have been able to grab the baby and kill it - his hands were filled with lightning chakra. The mother manages to escape with her child, to everyone's relief.

Why would these Suna-nin be going after innocent women and children? It's sick.

"You little asshole!" The Sand ninja curses at Sasuke, spitting senbon out at him. But, Sasuke dodges easily with his Sharingan still active.

But the dodge is what he was hoping for - he places a type of explosive seal on the building they are at - a business district with many wood restaurants and shops - and sets it off.

And immediately, a fire blazes out into the restaurant the seal was placed, and quickly spreading to all the places around. The three genin are stunned for a second, and the man is able to escape.

"Damn it! Shino, this is your time to shine. Get your kikaichu looking for anyone stuck in there, and we need your water jutsu!" Choji calls out, using his enlarged hands to pat out some of the fire, but it doesn't really do any good at all.

"Understood!" Shino calls out, willing all of the kikaichu in his body to leave. He's never had to do that before, and he feels naked and alone, but he doesn't think about that as he gathers as much chakra as he can.

"Water Style: Great Tsunami!" Shino calls out, jumping in the air and blowing the water out onto the entire area - putting out the entire conflagration. The wood of the area is damaged from both fire and water, but everything's standing. And his kikaichu come out carrying one man, who is coughing but alive.

"You...you saved me! Thank you all!" The man calls out, grabbing Shino's hand and shaking it. He doesn't acknowledge as all the kikaichu re-enter his body, and Shino feels whole again...well, mostly, as some of his kikaichu did die in the fire but he can't mourn them right now, not until everyone is safe and everything is done.

"You ought to get to the hospital right now, sir. Smoke inhalation can be fatal." Choji says to the man, who nods and runs as fast as he can in the direction of the hospital.

"You okay? That was a massive burst of chakra." Sasuke asks his best friend and puts a hand on his shoulder, who sighs in exhaustion but nods.

"Yes. I am fine. But I don't think it would be wise if I do a lot more of those." Shino says, to Sasuke's relief. "But I still have a kikaichu on him - let's hurry!" Shino orders, Sasuke and Choji following him as he chases the Suna-nin.

They are able to catch up to him in only two minutes, and Choji uses a basic Earth-style jutsu to wall him off from getting any further. Shino's kikaichu blocks off the other routes of escape, and the last thing the Sand chuunin sees is Sasuke's three-tomoe Sharingan staring murderously at him before Sasuke punches him in the throat and knocks him out.

"Pathetic. Going after an innocent mother and child." Sasuke says, grabbing a kunai out of his pocket and pointing it towards the unconscious Sand ninja's neck. "I should kill you - someone who goes after civilians like that...they don't deserve to live." Sasuke says, contemplating whether he should do it.

When Sakura got hurt on their first C-Rank mission, Sasuke unlocked his one-tomoe Sharingan. The second tomoe unlocked when Shino was hurt by Hidan when coming home from their month-long training mission. The third tomoe unlocked when Sasuke saw this coward attacking a mother and
child.

"Sasuke...stop. Don't let this be your first kill. You'll hate it, remembering this. You don't-" Shino is cut off.

"Are you three okay? I saw you putting out the fire and subdue the intruder. I'm here to take him to T&I." The three turn around and see a woman in a gray suit, with an Owl mask.

"We're fine. Take him before I kill him." Sasuke says, spitting out his words and turning around, deactivating his Sharingan. The Anbu takes the Sand shinobi and disappears without any more words. "Thank you..." Sasuke says to Shino, who only nods.

"I think I would've done it. It takes a strong person to not kill him, Sasuke. Stronger than me." Choji says, eyes closed in anger.

"I almost wasn't strong enough." The Uchiha says.

"We will all have to kill one day, but to put it off for even one more day is one small kindness we were afforded." Shino says, and Sasuke and Choji have no words to say to that.

Suddenly, a colossal toad appears in their line of sight, shocking the three genin.

"What the fuck is that?" Sasuke asks, staring at the giant toad who is punching the giant Tanuki far away in the distance. "Is that...Naruto? He was going after Gaara...did he summon that giant thing?"

"It would appear so. We knew he trained more." Shino says, not quite believing Naruto could be that powerful.

"If that's Naruto, then he's going to need support. I think we should go over and help!" Choji says, and his two comrades instantly agree.

They take off at full speed, hoping Naruto's alright.

Lee, Sakura, and Neji are waking up the spectators in the stadium with immense speed. With Sakura having started medical training in the past month, her chakra control has gotten even better and she is able to release the genjutsu on two people at once.

Neji, with his Byakugan and being able to see someone's chakra network, is able to also release the genjutsu and two people at once.

And many Sand Chuunin and jumping at the two, but they pay no mind to it as Lee is able to take them down easily. Without his weights on, these Sand shinobi are no match for Lee. So they fail whenever they try to attack him, Sakura, or Neji. They are just not able to do it.

And so they go through the entire arena, waking up everyone and beating up chuunin who should, theoretically, be able to beat them. They work clockwise until they get to the other end of the Kage's spectating box.

"I wonder what's going on up there. That barrier, thing. You see anything, Neji?" Sakura asks, waking up the last person who immediately runs out of the stadium.

"No. The barrier is completely blocking my Byakugan. All I see is one dead person up there, who I think was part of the barrier based on his formation. Whoever did that ruined the enemy's barrier a
"Well at least we were able to help these people like Kurenai-sensei told us to. What do we do now?" Lee says, unsure of their new task.

"I think we should go around and see if anyone else needs help." Sakura suggests.

"That's a good idea, there was a fire a little while ago in the shops and- WHAT IS THAT?" Neji interrupts himself and turns around.

The three mixed-year genin see a humongous toad, fighting the giant sand tanuki in the distance.

"NARUTO! HE'S SO YOUTHFUL!" Lee cries out, already knowing it is his new friend and friendly rival!

"...I think we should go there." Sakura says, momentarily stunned and now morbidly curious at Naruto's summon and their fight.

"I would agree with that. Let's go!" Neji says, and the three of them start making their way to Naruto and his fight.

"NOW, KID! SEAL THAT DAMN ICHIBI!" Gamabunta screams at Naruto, who is exhausted. Naruto gathers chakra in his feet in preparation.

"NARUTO!!" He hears ten unique voices yell, but he doesn't let it distract him until the job is done.

And Naruto jumps off Bunta's head, using all the chakra in his feet to propel him through the air, and with all the chakra in his fist he punches Gaara straight in the head, waking him up.

Kurenai's shadow clone catches Naruto as he falls after connecting the punch.

"NO, YOU GODDAMN BRAT! NOOOOO!" The Shukaku yells as his sand body disintegrates around him. Gaara falls and lands on the ground with a thud, not moving but just staring at Naruto.

Naruto's hands and feet are burned from all the chakra he's used. He's sweating, breathing heavily, and wants nothing more than to go to sleep, but he won.

Taking a step forward, Gaara cowards and puts his hands over his face in an effort to protect himself.

"G-get away from me, you monster!" He screams, and Naruto can only chuckle at that.

"Yeah, I have a monster in me, but that doesn't make me one. You having one too doesn't make you a monster either. I get it now, Gaara. I understand what you've been through. You're scared, and that's okay." Naruto goes over and gets on his knees in front of Gaara and looks into his eyes.

Then Kankuro and Temari jump down out of nowhere, trying to pick Gaara up.

"Wait! Please!" Naruto cries out to them, needing to tell Gaara one last thing.

Nobody leaves, at least.

"Gaara...my sensei is a sealing master. My summons told me that your seal is...weak. I bet my sensei would be willing to fix your seal, to allow you to sleep. I could have been you...if I was as tortured
and misunderstood as you, I could have been exactly the same. Full of hate, never knowing love, always worried about being betrayed by those you care about. I was gifted with a good seal. I don't want to see you hurt anymore...and I don't think they do either. Just...think about it." Naruto says, referring to Kankuro and Temari.

They must care about him, if they're willing to stick by him after everything. Gaara looks up to them, and sees only worry in their eyes.

"I'm sorry..." Gaara says, before they take him away with no other words.

"I am too..." Naruto says, before exhaustion overtakes him and he passes out, being caught by someone very gently.

"NARUTO!" Nine of the genin cry out, as one manages to catch him.

Hinata holds him close, knowing his secret just got out to everyone.

"Good seal? He's not talking about Orochimaru's, right? There's no way in hell that's a good seal. And what did he mean he has a monster in him?" Kiba asks, causing everyone to look at him, and then subsequently at Naruto.

"No, that's not what he's referring to. And it's not important at the moment, either. You all look like you've been through hell. All of you need to get checked out at the hospital - it looks like the fighting's done and Suna has retreated." Kurenai's shadow clone says to everyone, who all agree and follow her to the hospital.

Naruto is really getting tired of waking up in this dank sewer when he goes unconscious after a tough battle...but he can't recall actually using the Kyuubi's chakra this time. During his fight with Gaara, he was using his own power and chakra, not reaching the emotional turmoil that he had before.

Naruto walks along the sewer, hating the familiar feel of water in his shoes, the smell of the musty air, and the foreboding knowing he's going to meeting the Kyuubi again.

But, throughout the entire experience of seeing the tailed beast come out of Gaara until he delivered the final punch, he did register something strange...something he plans on asking him entirely.

And when Naruto makes the final turn in his mind-sewer, and sees the Kyuubi - smirking? - at him through the cage, Naruto walks and stands right in front of it.

"Why am I here? I need to be with my friends." Naruto asks it, not afraid any more. He's been here twice before - once after seeing Sasuke and Shino hurt at the hands of Hidan and Deidara, and again after getting Orochimaru's cursed seal forced onto him - and he's not scared to be here anymore.

'You really don't get it, do you? You saw him, my idiotic brother. And you saw the power even that weakling gave to the boy. I can give you that.' The Kyuubi tells Naruto, who only narrows his eyes.

"You know you have some nerve, don't you? How many times do I have to tell you that I don't want your damn 'power'? Or do you have too much hair in your ears, you furry bastard?" Naruto says, chuckling when the Kyuubi starts growling at the insult.
'You little...! Just you wait. Those 'friends' out there heard everything you told that Suna brat. They know about me. They know about the monster you carry.' The Kyuubi says, and Naruto only frowns at that.

"Yeah, you don't need to remind me that they know. I'm well aware. But hey, while I'm here, there's something I wanna ask you. All my life I've been called a monster, because of you. They call you a monster, a demon. And if that thing really was the Ichibi - your brother - then why did Gamahiro call him Shukaku? That sounds like a name." Naruto says, and the Kyuubi roars at this line of questioning.

'YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH, YOU LITTLE INSIGNIFICANT MORTAL BRAT!' Naruto ignores him, but does look into his eyes.

"And, that got me thinking, if nobody ever called me by my name, and always referred to me as just some thing, then I would not be very happy. That's why I tell everyone to remember my name and my dream - to get them to notice me. And I remember what you said about that damn Snake and his seal hurting you to heal me. As much as I should hate you...I don't want you to be in constant pain. And being called a monster - like me and Gaara were - hurts. So, I'm asking...do you have a name?" Naruto gives his speech, and that sets the Kyuubi off.

'YOU LITTLE BASTARD! WHERE DO YOU GET OFF ASKING SUCH THINGS?' The Kyuubi roars, hitting the cage with its two front paws and all nine of its tails repeatedly, shaking the entire sewer.

Naruto awakes with only a slight gasp, and instantly he is being covered and squeezed by a relieved Hinata.

"Naruto!" He hears ten voices say, the same ten when he was finishing his battle with Gaara and the Ichibi.

Hinata lets him go, and seeing for the first time, Shikamaru is standing right at his bedside looking down, with Sasuke behind him. The rest of Teams 7, 10, and Gai (Naruto is saddened Tenten isn't there...) are there in the room. All four of his sensei are here too, except for Pervy Sage.

(Naruto really hopes Gaara asks the old perv for help with his seal...)

"Was I hurt? Is everyone okay?" Naruto asks, trying to scan everyone with his eyes for any injuries.

"Everyone is just fine. Tenten's out of surgery and is stable and recovering, and everyone else had only minor injuries that have already been treated. You too." Kurenai tells her student, who she couldn't be more proud of.

He took on the Ichibi - and he won!

"You were amazing, dude! The way you handled Gaara - you are so strong!" Kiba says, ecstatic that he's going to have such a great sparring partner in the future!

"Even Sasuke said you were, and I quote, 'something else.'" Shikamaru says, earning a light punch in the shoulder from said Uchiha.

"With praise like that, it must be true!" Ino teases, adding to Sasuke's embarrassment.
Everyone in the room laughs at that, and Naruto knows it's time to tell them everything. If they heard what he said to Gaara, they know something's up, and that his 'bloodline' isn't really a bloodline.

"Everyone...I have something to tell you. Some of you know this, but most of you don't. But, it's important. But whatever happens, just remember...I'm Naruto." He says, echoing the words he spoke when he told his team during Kurenai's trust exam.

"You don't have to do this, Naruto." Kakashi says, knowing what he's going to say.

"Yes, I do, sensei. After everything that's happened. It's why Sasuke and Shino got hurt defending me. It's why Gaara was hell-bent on destroying all of us. It's why Orochimaru gave me the seal and the message. Everyone deserves to know!" Naruto argues, and Kakashi only sighs in understanding.

Hinata and Shikamaru do put their hands on his shoulders in support, though.

"It's about my bloodline. It's...not really a bloodline. I was born on the day of the Kyuubi attack fourteen years ago. The history books lied when they say the Fourth Hokage gave his life to kill it. He sealed it...into me. Pervy Sage told me all the tailed beats - there are nine of them total - are sealed into people, called Jinchuurikis. Gaara is the jinchuuriki of the One-Tailed Raccoon, and I am the jinchuuriki of the Nine-Tailed Fox." Naruto says, explaining everything that he thinks is relevant.

Nobody says anything as Team 8 and their sensei wait for everyone else's reactions.

"So...that's why you were never able to do the clone jutsu in the academy." Sasuke speaks up, making everyone look at him.

"What?" Naruto asks, confused by the non-sequitur and the non-reaction of the Uchiha.

"It makes sense. Why you never could do it - you had just too much chakra flowing through you to control into such a tiny little jutsu. Why can make so many of those shadow clones. I was always curious why you could never make a clone then." Sasuke says, happy that he finally has an answer after all these months.

"And why Asuma-sensei told me that shadow clones were dangerous for me when we started our wind training. I'm still peeved that you have such a shortcut for training!" Kiba says, only caring that he has to work even harder to catch up.

"Wait...you guys don't care?" Naruto asks, heart beating fast because he never expected such a positive reaction.

"Should we? You've saved our asses more than once with its power." Ino says, acknowledging that Naruto has saved them all a few times before.

"We care more about the fact that there's a whole group after you to get to it. When they referred to 'Number Nine' it meant the Kyuubi." Sakura says, only worried about her friend.

"And your bravery in telling us - to face possible rejection - is most youthful!" Lee says, pumping up his fist in the air.

And just like that, Naruto's biggest secret is out and nobody cares!

And then everyone just talks to each other for a while. Not even about the Kyuubi. Just them telling each other about what they did - putting out fires and fighting alongside Iruka, and the like. But after a half-hour or so of reminiscing, the four jonin-sensei stand up.
"Okay guys, we have a lot of things to do, what with Konoha being invaded and all. Being a jonin can really suck sometimes. But we'll check in with you all again soon." Asuma says, before body-flickering to somewhere else. Kurenai and Kakashi do the same, while Gai runs out of there so quickly it's like he used the shunshin technique.

Hinata is ashamed of herself.

It doesn't matter that after everything she did during Suna's failed invasion, she still can't bring herself to do it.

Shikamaru told her what Sasuke did, telling him about their upcoming second date and basically telling everyone else about them being together. And now, Naruto having just put his own heart on his sleeve, vulnerable to everyone by admitting the truth with the Kyuubi, tells her that she is weak.

She can't do it...but she will anyway. There will never be a better time.

This is the only time she can do this.

"Naruto, I have something to tell you too. And I can guarantee this will be news to nobody in here, except for you. After everything we've been through, facing death multiple times. Sharing tears. Supporting each other. As many good things I can say about you, how you can be so oblivious - I have no clue. But I love you." Hinata tells him, and Naruto's eyes go wide.

'She loves...me? How? Why?"

I mean...I'm so not good enough for her. She deserves the world. She deserves way more than I can ever give her. All I bring to the table is danger. She's so brave now, she can have any guy she wants. But why does she want me?" Naruto thinks, unsure of what to say.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Say something back, you idiot. You never leave a girl hanging after a confession." Sasuke says, actually in pain by the idiotic look on Naruto's face. Those romance movies really have taught him a lot of life lessons, haven't they?

"Hinata...why me? You can have anyone..."

"Because I do. Because you're you. Selfless, inspiring, strong, funny, courageous, tenacious, persevering, fair, intelligent...must I go on?"

"You really...think that much of me? I never, ever thought someone like you could really like someone like me. I'm not stupid; I know my childhood caused me to have some self-esteem issues. I get that. And I do like you...and shit, that's the first time I ever told myself that..." Naruto says, finally making sense of all the feeling's he's been experiencing the past few months.

"Wh...really? You like me back?" Hinata asks...hoping that this is real.

"Of course I do! You're the best!" Naruto says.

And Hinata realizes that when Naruto has been calling her 'amazing,' 'the best,' and everything - that was him trying to express the feelings he just never understood.

"I'm sorry I called you oblivious..." She says, blushing.

"Hah, it is kinda true!" Naruto says, sheepishly. Hinata and Naruto just look at each other, not
knowing what to do.

"Oh fucking hell, how in the fuck can you be on a team with a genius and be this clueless? Kiss her, you idiot!" Sasuke instructs, causing Naruto and Hinata to both blush.

But Hinata does move in her face slowly, giving Naruto enough time to pull away if he doesn't want to.

But he doesn't.

When Hinata's and Naruto's lips connect, the rest of the genin in the room clap and cheer, relieved that it finally happened.

"Who knew Sasuke was such a romantic? You're a lucky guy, Shikamaru!" Choji says, breaking the awkwardness of Naruto and Hinata's first kiss (in front of everyone!).

"Yes, Sasuke! Your knowledge of love is most youthful!" Lee cries out, making Sasuke wish he never said anything now.

"Sh-shut up!" Sasuke blanches, embarrassed yet again. He helped to save a young mother and child today, dammit! He doesn't deserve this cruel punishment!

"You are romantic, though. And you remember what you promised? We have a date tomorrow." Shikamaru says, leaning in slowly and kissing his own boyfriend (who doesn't pull away), this time on the lips. Their first, just like their friends'.

And Sasuke just smiles after that, embarrassment and heckling from his friends be damned!

"Who would have thought everyone on Team 8 - and Sasuke - would be paired up before the rest of us?" Ino cries out, leaning onto Sakura for support.

"Come on, Ino, look how strong we got since we stopped focusing on boys! Now they they're all lovey-dovey, they'll start slacking and we'll beat them up!" Sakura says, causing everyone in the room to laugh.

Naruto, now holding the hand of his girlfriend Hinata, just finds it funny that his love-live is of bigger discussion among everyone than the news that he's actually a jinchuuriki.

(But he still has to tell his team about speaking to the Kyuubi again...but that can wait until they're alone with his sensei.)

Funny how things turn out, huh?

And Naruto couldn't be happier than he is right now. Konoha is safe. Tenten is recovering. Nobody else is hurt. They don't care that he's a jinchuuriki. And he has a girlfriend.

His life really is turning around!
A/N: I'm really excited for next chapter - why? Canon divergence! I am tired of the Chuunin Exams and I'm already sick of the Invasion (yet they had to be written), and next chapter a lot of things are changing!

Anyone trying to predict what this major change is?

The ShikaSasu moment at the beginning of the chapter was originally meant for last chapter, originally, for when I had planned for Shika to win and Sasuke would tell him that before he entered the triple threat. I loved the idea – and this story really wanted Ino to win their match – so I kept the scene but adapted it for this chapter.

And this chapter shows why ShikaSasu had to come first. To tell Hinata that she had to just do it and confess, and this was the right time because so much had happened.

But yeah, the invasion's already over (thank goodness). NaruHina is finally established, I think next chapter is going to be really huge in terms of story and plot. I'm so excited!

I hope you all enjoyed reading this chapter. Stay tuned next week for Chapter 25!

Also, don't forget to review!
Three days later, the promotions from the Chuunin Exams are given out. After, Naruto is told the truth about a lot of things in his life.

A/N: Here we go! A chapter I've been longing to write, and it's finally here! Hope you guys enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 25)-Truth

Three Days Later

Naruto's P.O.V.

"I can see why you loved this place, Sasuke! That was delicious!" I say as we leave the restaurant Shikamaru brought him to on their first date.

Hinata and I went on a double-date with Shikamaru and Sasuke to the tomato restaurant. I was a bit skeptical - tomatoes are good but to have a whole restaurant centered around them seemed a little strange - but it really was good and I'm glad we went.

"I still can't believe I never heard of this until Shikamaru brought me here. I would have come here every day - fuck, I sound like you Naruto and your obsession with ramen..." Sasuke says, laughing.

"At least an obsession with tomatoes is healthier than ramen." Shika says, and I gave him a face of betrayal!

How could he say such a terrible thing about ramen?!!

"Oh, calm down. We love you and your ramen." Hinata says, grabbing my hand and locking our fingers.

I still can't believe she's my girlfriend...and that she's loved me for years. How could I have never noticed? All the times she used to faint around me, when she didn't stutter when only talking to me...I just never made the connection.

We all laugh at that, and Shikamaru and Sasuke start to hold hands as well. The four of us start walking down the path in the direction of the park. We don't need to say any words, as we just enjoy
our partner's presence and being with our friends, when someone jumps down in front of us.

Based on the gray suit, and the porcelain sheep mask, we all know its Anbu.

"Naruto Uzumaki, Shikamaru Nara, Hinata Hyuuga - your presence has been requested by Lord Hokage. If you would come with me?" The man with black hair tells us, and we look to each other.

"What a drag. Sorry to cut this short, Sasuke." Shika tells Sasuke, who of course understands.

The three of us follow.

When we enter, we see Lee, Ino, and three empty chairs in front of the Old Man's desk. Our escort had left without a trace, and the three of us sit down in a chair.

"...What do you think this is about?" I ask.

"Well, we were all in the finals, except for Hinata. And she was off saving the whole entire village. I would have said this would be about Chuunin promotions, but Hinata never made it to the finals." Shika says, and that would have been a good guess otherwise.

"Whatever it is, I'm happy to see you all again! And that you're out of the hospital, Naruto!" Lee says, and that reminds me to ask him something.

"Lee, how's Tenten doing?" I ask.

Before I left the hospital two days ago, we were told that Tenten had woken up after her surgery, but that she still is going to be out for months while she recovers.

"She's doing amazing! She remembers all of us, and she's talking to Gai-sensei, Neji, and me. The doctors say she'll still be recovering for a few months, but that's okay because she'll be okay." Lee says, stars in his eyes.

And I'm so happy that she's okay. What happened to her was unforgivable, and I just hope that what I said to Gaara made some sort of change in him.

I still have no idea where Pervy Sage is. After all that happened, I thought he would have come to see me by now. I know he told me he does a lot of special work for the village, but I guess I just hoped he would have taken a few minutes out just to see me.

Maybe he really does just see me as someone who needs to be protected, with me having the Kyuubi. Someone who needs to be powerful to stay alive and that's it. Maybe what he said about me having the skill to learn what he knows about sealing, and all his praises...maybe he was just buttering me up.

And I haven't seen the Kyuubi since I asked him if he had a name. That reaction he had...if I had to take a guess, he does have one but doesn't want me to know. I have no idea why either - it's just a name, right? And wouldn't someone rather be called by their name than just a part of their body?

"Ah, sorry to keep you all waiting. Something came up on my way here that I had to take care of." The Old Man says as he opens the door, walking in and sitting down in his chair, taking his hat off and smiling at us.

"You must be wondering why you were called here so suddenly. I hope I didn't interrupt anything -
you young people are growing up and finding your ways, new friendships, and love, and learning
who you are. But, I digress. Call it the envy of an old man who wishes for some of that youth
back..." The Old Man trails off.

But those things he listed really do describe us - Shikamaru found love with Sasuke, and Hinata and
I found love with each other. We're all making new friends, and we're all learning more about
ourselves and each other.

But does he really know that much about us? It's kinda weird...

"Anyway, I have called you five in here because as you all know, we just had the Chuunin Selection
Exams. And though the final match was interrupted, we still had the exams and can't pretend they
didn't happen. So, as I say your name, please stand up." He says, smiling at us and opening the box
he brought in.

"Rock Lee." The Old Man says, and Lee stands up instantly. "Lee, you have demonstrated
tremendous tenacity throughout your tenure as a genin. Two years of hard-work, discipline, learning,
and bravery. You have also showed great dedication to teamwork and your fellow comrades and you
directly assisted in helping save civilian lives. Rock Lee, I hereby grant you the rank of Chuunin." He
says, handing Lee a green flak jacket.

That's amazing!

Lee totally deserves Chuunin! After everything he's been through - no ninjutsu or genjutsu - and the
only way I was even able to beat him was to use my summons. Lee is amazing and he deserves it!

"Ino Yamanaka." The Hokage says, and Ino stands up, looking determined. "Ino, from what I have
learned, you have completely turned yourself around. Your team started abysmally with team-work,
but your mission taught you and your teammates the value of each other. You have shown
considerable improvement in strength, wits, and your demeanor. And if I may say so, you were not
expected to even pass the preliminaries. You defied the odds - you made a name for yourself. And
you directly assisted with the search and rescue of Academy Students when Konoha was
vulnerable. Ino Yamanaka, I hereby grant you the rank of Chuunin." He says, handing Ino a flak
jacket too.

Ino deserves it too! She really did defy the odds! Not that I don't think she is strong, it's just that she
seemed to be paired up against opponents who had such advantages over her. Temari was kicking
her ass before Ino turned it around, and Ino was going up against a genius in Shikamaru.

But she pulled through and continued on, no matter how hard it was.

That's why Ino deserves it, and I couldn't be happier for her.

"Shikamaru Nara." Shikamaru stands up, looking as focused as he was during his matches.
"Shikamaru, you have shown remarkable instincts, shown beyond impressive analytical skills, and as
well as a physical prowess you were reported to have lacked in the past. Even though you didn't win
your match, your planning and foresight are incredible skills that very few can measure up to. You
are selfless - even as an Academy student you have aided your friends when they needed you. You
never stop helping others, and when Konoha was vulnerable you showed that gain by aiding in the
search as rescue of Academy students. Shikamaru Nara, I hereby grant you the rank of Chuunin." The
Old Man says, handing my best friend - who looks so shocked! - a flak jacket.

Shika deserves this promotion. Though I know he'll hate it with the new duties and work - because
my best friend is still incredibly lazy when he is able to get away with it - but I know that whenever
is asked and required of him, he'll do it because he's amazing.

So far, everyone here has gotten a promotion. I think I see a pattern developing here...

"Hinata Hyuuga." And my girlfriend stands up, proud.

And she should be proud.

"Hinata, what can I say? First of all, thank you. I'm not sure if you know, but you're the reason I am even alive right now. You detecting Orochimaru's subordinates allowed Kakashi to weaken their barrier, which our shinobi were able to bring down just in time. So, thank you. And thank you for helping to save many of Konoha's structures - much more of the village would have been damaged if you hadn't alerted Kurenai and Gai sooner. You didn't make it to the Finals, however I believe you did win your match in the preliminaries and deserved to go to the Finals. Congratulations, by the way. You have grown so strong, so brave, so confident. You make everyone around you better. Hinata Hyuuga, I hereby grant you the rank of Chuunin." He says, handing her a flak jacket.

But...

She saved the Hokage?

She told us about the barrier and everything, but she never mentioned this! Unless she didn't know...

But that's amazing! She deserved it before - her victory over Neji before got screwed - but knowing that it's her actions that saved the leader?

MY GIRLFRIEND IS THE BEST!

"Naruto Uzumaki." The Old Man looks to me, and only smiles.

That same smile he always has, the one that always let me know that everything would be okay.

I stand up and look at him, and this is it. I have proven myself, and even the Hokage acknowledges me.

"Naruto, you have gone beyond expectations. Your personal growth is admirable, even to an old man like me. I'm so proud that the little kid I knew from the orphanage is such a strong ninja now with all these people in his life. You helped teach teamwork to others. You teach friendship. You're selfless - always throwing yourself into danger to protect your loved ones. You helped save Konoha from a lot of destruction and death when you defeated Gaara of the Desert." The Hokage says, but then that smile goes to a frown.

...What?

Did I do something wrong?


And my own eyes start getting blurry with unshed tears.

What the hell does he mean he can't? He's the goddamn Hokage - he says I deserve it!

"Everyone - calm down. Let me explain. Everyone who was in the preliminaries had their name brought up for consideration. Only Ino and Shikamaru were confirmed between me and my council for promotion. Chuunin Exam promotions don't follow regular rules like field promotions - they have..."
to be voted on when we're not in wartime. However, the Hokage is allowed two vetoes and can promote who they want. I chose to veto Lee and Hinata, because politics would never have let them get their fair share. If I had three vetoes, I would have given one to you too." He explains, and I close my eyes and a tear falls onto the ground before I wipe my eyes.

After that explanation, I get it. I really do.

The old stodgy council would never have promoted Lee, who cannot use ninjutsu or genjutsu. And with Hinata's clan politics and her being known as a 'failure' - bullshit - would have acted negatively for her too.

And he chose them over me, because that's exactly what I would have wanted him to do if he asked.

"You knew that I would have rather you pick them over me anyway, right?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Yes. As I'm sure you will learn and have to face yourself, being Hokage means making those difficult decisions where somebody will be hurt no matter what." He says, and my head shoots up.

Did he...did he just say I'll be Hokage one day?

Does he really think I can do it?

"But you deserve more, Naruto. So I'm promoting you to a rank that hasn't been used in over two decades. This rank doesn't require anyone else but the Hokage's vote. Naruto Uzumaki, I hereby grant you the rank of Tokubetsu Chuunin." He says, pulling a flak jacket out of the box and handing it to me.

The cloth feels so...so validating.

"There isn't much different between the two ranks, but unfortunately you are not to be assigned any solo-lead missions. Your rank does allow you to take command if your co-leader is incapacitated or killed, but you cannot be an initial sole leader on a mission." He tells me...and that's it?

That's the difference between a Tokubetsu Chuunin and a full Chuunin? Leading a mission?

I can definitely live with that, then.

"Like I said, Naruto, you deserve to be a Chuunin. And you will have to make some tough decisions one day when I'm long in the grave. But I hope that this gives you some perspective." He says, smiling at me again.

I look to all my friends in the room. Everyone is smiling at me, because he said it again.

"Old Man...I understand. To hear that you really think I can be Hokage...I appreciate the lesson. And thank you for giving my friends the veto...I've proved everyone who's ever doubted me wrong so far, and I'll do it again with your old stodgy council who's probably too busy crapping their pants to understand that Lee and Hinata deserved it without you needing to do anything at all. They doubted my friends. They doubted me. We'll all show them that they're wrong." I say, and he laughs.

"Naruto!" My four friends - fellow Chuunin - berate me, but the Old Man keeps laughing.

"Thank you for making an Old Man's day, Naruto. But I'm not done yet. There's something else we need to talk about. Would everyone else please exit the room?" He asks my friends.
What?

"Wait, what's this about, Old Man? Is this a mission?" That's the only thing I can see him needing only me for.

"Somewhat. But that's not the reason." He says, and sighs. "It's about your family, Naruto. I want to talk to you about your parents." Wait...

My...parents?

"But you said...you didn't know..."

"I know what I said before. Now, would you all please leave so I can tell him the truth?" The Old Man...no, I can't call him that right now. Lord Hokage, because right now I don't even feel like I know him.

"Can...can my team at least stay? Whatever you say to me can be said in front of them. They're my family, too." I plead, and I get a weak smile in response.

"Of course."

Hinata and Shika sit on either side of me, both holding one of my hands as I sit down in the center chair, and Ino and Lee leave with a say of 'good luck' because they know this is going to be a tough conversation.

"Let me just start. Your mother's name was Kushina Uzumaki. Your father's name was Minato Namikaze."

Their hands squeeze mine.

I haven't said anything. I just listened.

To how my mother was the Jinchuuriki before me. To how beautiful she was. To how my father was the Fourth Hokage. How he gave up his own life to protect the village and for me to be seen as a hero.

To hear how much they loved me.

To hear how Mom's best friend was Sasuke's mom, who wasn't allowed to take me in as a baby even though she begged to be able to.

To hear how Dad was Kakashi-sensei's sensei.

To hear how Pervy Sage was Dad's sensei.

To hear how I had a whole clan.

To hear how my clan was massacred by Stone for our sealing jutsu.

To hear how Lord Hokage threatened death to anyone who told me the truth - Kurenai-sensei, Kakashi-sensei.
(It makes sense now why Pervy Sage was so upset I learned about the Kyuubi so late. It also makes sense why pervy Sage wanted to teach me...but it wasn't only for me...it because of my parents...

To hear how everything I was ever told about myself was all a lie.

I can't believe it.

"Why did you lie?" Is all that comes out of my mouth.

"Naruto, I know this is difficult, but-" No, fuck that.

He does not get to just pretend he didn't lie to me for my entire life.

"No, please...don't do that. Why did you lie to me? My entire life. For fourteen years you lied to me. Are there any other lies you're keeping from me, my lord? First you lied to be about the Kyuubi - which I forgave you for. Lying to me about not knowing why I was so hated. But I forgave you for that because before Mizuki, I might not have been emotionally ready to hear the real reason why everyone had hated me. I get that, and I forgive you for that lie.

"But now I find out that you have lied and continued lying to me my entire life about my parents, my entire history. Everything that I've wanted to know - you have known and kept to yourself. I have been proving myself again and again and again for the better part of a year now, my lord, sir, so is there anything else you lied to me about?" I argue back to him, and he just looks me in my eyes as I yell at him.

But I don't let him answer.

"Actually, I'm not done. When were you even going to tell me about the Kyuubi? I had to find out from a goddamn traitor. Pervy Sage said you should have told me like eight fucking years ago. When were you going to tell me about Akatsuki? Were you just gonna let me put all my friends in danger because I didn't know?

"You never even asked me how I was doing after Orochimaru violated my body to give me this seal. Is it because the Kyuubi is taking care of it, you thought I wouldn't notice you never talked to me? Your old student assaulted me and my friends - and what, nothing?

"You didn't think of telling me any of this, not until you almost died, right? I'm no different than I was a week ago, really. Tokubetsu Chuunin or not, I am the exact same person I was, and you know that." I finish my rant, my anger barely in check.

(Hinata and Shika holding my hands are probably the only thing keeping me sane enough to not go into my Tailed Beast Cloak.)

I know I'm yelling at the Hokage. I know if he really wanted to, he could kill me right now for insubordination. He could take away my rank.

I know he could do that.

But I also know that he won't.

Because I know that, despite all the lies and deceptions, he still cares about me. Not because I'm my Dad's son, but because he cares about me.

"You're absolutely right, Naruto. I made a mistake." He says after a few seconds of silence and then a long sigh.
Of all the reactions I expected...that's one I didn't expect. I expected anger, threats, silence, dismissal...not validation.

"And there are other lies. Lies that I cannot tell you the truth to. Cannot tell the truth to anyone, even though they involve you, and your friends. Like I said, Naruto, you will come to know just how tough this job is. How you will have to hurt people, just like how I have hurt you, even though I wish it didn't have to be.

"I did make a mistake in not telling you sooner. But I made no mistake in lying to you. The Fourth Hokage's child is something to be hunted. Telling a child before he's ready...he could accidentally tell the wrong people - spies. As much as we like to think so, this village is far from being safe from spies and intruders. No place is always safe. Do you understand that, Naruto? I know it doesn't make up for the pain I have caused you, the betrayal you must feel, but I hope that you can at least understand where I was coming from." He explains, and I calm down a little.

As much as I hate to admit it, that does make sense. Kids could be blabbermouths, and I might have been the same knowing that my idol was really my father.

"I...I do get it." I say, and I feel Shika and Hinata relax beside me.

"And this secret is now yours to tell, Naruto, just like the Kyuubi secret is. You are old enough and mature enough now to understand the consequences of who you tell about your lineage." He tells me, and I feel good about that.

It's my family. My parents. My clan.

I should be able to talk about it if I want to. It's a part of me. But it does feel good that he thinks I can handle it.

"Thank you, sir." I say back, grateful.

"There're two more things I'd like to tell you before I give you your time to process everything. First, there's something that Minato bequeathed to you the night of your birth. He asked me to keep it secret - away from his official storage. If I died, nobody would have ever known about it. It would have died with me. I don't know what's in it, but it's time the rightful heir claims it." He says, pulling something else out of the box he had the flak jackets in.

It would have been...lost forever? Not even Kakashi-sensei or Pervy Sage knows about it?

He hands me a single scroll, and I instantly recognize it as a storage scroll. It has a seal on it beyond the likes I have never seen, even with my training with Jiraiya, and I can't even imagine what it does.

"I would guess it requires Uzumaki or Namikaze blood to open it. I haven't tried to, nor do I intend to. It's yours now, Naruto." The Old Man says, and he puts the box on the floor.

"Thank you, Old Man. Thank you..." I say, and I have something that Dad actually left for me.

"I just regret it could have been lost. The second thing I wanted to tell you is that someone would like to speak with you - wants to have a conversation with you. Someone you know well." The Old Man says, and I am only puzzled.

"Wait, didn't you say there was a mission or something?" I ask, because he said that's part of the reason for wanting to make everyone leave.

"Yes, I did want to wait to tell you about that, but you do have a mission. C-Rank. You alone will be
accompanying someone on a mission to convince a certain someone else to come back to the village. Details will come in a few days, and you three are not to mention this mission to anyone." The Old Man says, glaring at my best friend and my girlfriend.

Then his face softens, smiling at me.

"I know today was difficult, my boy. But it was time you learned the truth. And I'm happy that you have such good friends, all of whom want to look out for you. I'm so proud of all your growth, Naruto, and I wish you luck. Now, the person who wants to talk to you is waiting outside my door. Please talk to them." The Old Man says, and he's telling us that it's time to leave.

"I understand. And though I'm still mad at you, I appreciate everything you have done for me. Thank you for Dad's scroll. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for letting my team be here to support me. Just...thank you." I am beyond words with my gratitude.

Hinata, Shika, and I walk out of the door and I see the someone waiting to talk to me, setting a few chairs down.

"Kakashi-sensei?!" I exclaim, not him to be the person waiting to speak to me. But considering what I just learned, and his history with Dad, I think I know what he wants to talk about.

"Yo!" He closes his orange porn book, and I see his eye-smile at me.

"You wanted to talk?" I ask, knowing how my sensei likes to play games.

"That I did, Loud Dirty Blonde." He says, using the nickname he gave me from our Training Trip a couple months ago.

Cheeky!

"At least my hair doesn't look older than Old Man Hokage's." I say, and all of us chuckle. "Hinata, Shika, I really appreciate you both being in there with me. You guys really are the best. But I think I need to have this conversation alone, alright?" I turn around and tell them, and they nod at me.

Out of respect for Kakashi-sensei and his relationship to my parents and their privacy, I'm asking them to go. I personally wouldn't mind having them, but I think it would be easier on Kakashi.

"Of course, man. If you need us, just ask." Shika says, grabbing my shoulder.

"Whatever you need. Love you." Hinata says, leaning in and kissing my cheek.

I turn to Kakashi-sensei, who is looking patient as ever.

"After you, Gray-Haired Perv." I say to Kakashi, who only waves his hand.

Despite our joking around, I am really looking forward to this talk. He knows so much about Mom and Dad.

Kakashi leads me out of the Hokage Tower and into the forest, and we stop at a large, beautiful stone filled with many, many names.

"Let me start by telling you about Team Minato..."
A/N: And that's a wrap for this one! I wonder how many people expected this to be the major change - which, by the way, is only the beginning...

This is the first chapter of what I am calling the 'Revelations' arc. After this arc, there might be only one or two arcs left before the story ends and I start the sequel.

I am very happy that someone on AO3 did manage to predict this change, or at least asked about it. I purposely didn't mention the Hokage because why would I have to if he were alive? ;)

In the coming chapters, there will be more changes. Some of them I only have a slight idea of how I want to do them, so that'll be fun to write!

I hope you all enjoyed reading this one! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 26!

Also, don't forget to review!
Kakashi’s Search

Chapter Summary

The village is recovering, promotions have been given out, and his students are healing and recovering. But Kakashi hasn't forgotten - unlike others already have - about his missing friend. Kakashi assigns himself a mission to find his friend, no matter what.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter's a bit different than others have been. I hope you guys enjoy this one!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 26)-Kakashi’s Search

Third-Person P.O.V.

"Tenzo, I need your help." Kakashi says to his long-time friend. Someone who's seen him at his darkest, the dark that not even Gai has quite seen (because this dark was before he let Gai into his life).

It's been over a week since the Invasion by Suna...and there's still no sign of him.

"I'll do anything for you, Kakashi. You know that. Just name it." Tenzo says, emphasizing how important their shared history is together.

"Hayate Gekko...he's still missing. There is no sign of him, yet I saw a report that he was declared dead. But when I asked the Hokage if he heard anything, he said he hasn't and that his body must still be missing under the rubble that was destroyed. Someone's lying - either the Hokage, or that report. And I need to find out the truth - I can't leave another friend out there, alone to die. Not again..." Kakashi says, mind once again filling with pictures of Obito under that rock.

He could have at least killed the poor boy so he wouldn't have been in so much pain before his untimely passing. It should have been Kakashi under there...Kakashi wishes it was himself. Obito and Rin deserved so much better...

"That does sound suspicious. All right, I'm in."

"It's too clean." Kakashi says, him and Tenzo at the part of the wall where Hinata had led them on their search.
"What do you mean?"

"Look at how the seals were placed. They weren't just placed for destruction. These seals were placed methodically, and with knowledge of our wall's weaknesses. It's placed too cleanly for an outsider from Suna or Sound to have done this." Kakashi says, his hand touching one of the deactivated seals.

"What are you saying? That someone from Konoha placed these seals?" Tenzo asks, because that would be crazy.

"Yes." Kakashi says, lifting his headband and hoping in vain that his Sharingan would give some information as to what happened here.

"...Are you sure, like absolutely sure, that Hayate wouldn't do this? Because the other option..." Tenzo mumbles the ending of that.

"What other option? Because I know for a fucking fact Hayate would kill himself before ever turning on Konoha. So, what is this other option?" Kakashi demands, his Sharingan looking directly into Tenzo's eyes.

"...The Foundation. ROOT." Tenzo says, looking around to make sure they aren't being watched.

"The what?" Kakashi asks, and Tenzo is shocked.

How has Kakashi never heard of them?

"Oh fuck, Kakashi. We can't discuss this here. Shit." Tenzo says, running a hand through his hair at Kakashi's ignorance.

"Fine. My place." Kakashi offers, and the two elite jonin travel as fast as possible to Kakashi's tiny apartment.

"What the fuck? Danzo kidnaps our shinobi?"

"Yes. You remember the reports. Chuunin gone missing during missions. Torune Aburame. Fuu Yamanaka. I knew instantly that it was Danzo Shimura's doing. Because those reports got recanted and everything and everyone has been 'accounted for.'

"And the Third just lets it happen?" Kakashi questions, honestly not believing any word of this.

"Yes. Danzo was his teammate, after all. I don't think is that he lets it go on, per se, but it's that he just doesn't stop it."

"How do you know of all this?"

"I was actually recruited to be in the Foundation before. But Lord Fourth, bless him, found out about Danzo and shut it down. He released me from Danzo's 'care' and had you teach me about being a person." 

"Which is fucking hilarious, considering you're the one that taught me about being a person..."

"We both learned a lot from each other. We both still learn a lot from each other." Tenzo immediately counters, not letting his closest friend go down his dark mental path.
"Yes, we have. But, back to the topic at hand. So you think Danzo is behind the explosion seals? Why? From what you said, isn't ROOT most loyal to Konoha?" Kakashi asks, and Tenzo sighs.

"Yes, they are. But that's exactly why they would do it. They are loyal to Konoha, but only insofar as Danzo says it's in the village's best interest. I really don't want to make an accusation of treachery...but if I had to take a guess as to how all this fits together, then perhaps Danzo worked with Orochimaru. Wanted to take down the Sandaime in order let himself become the Fifth Hokage. Again, only a wild guess, certainly not an accusation..." Tenzo says, in case anyone happens to be listening.

This is all making too much sense now for Kakashi to not believe is the truth. It's a perfectly reasonable hypothesis given the current evidence.

"And what of Hayate? How does he fit in all this?" Kakashi asks, the once piece of the puzzle not fitting in at all.

"I don't know. Maybe wrong place at the wrong time?" Is all that Tenzo can offer.

"And Orochimaru...could Danzo have let him in during the Chuunin Exams, then? Could he be responsible for why Naruto got the seal during the Chuunin Exams? Why Sasuke had to be given such a traumatizing 'message'? Why everything is so f*cked right now?" Kakashi asks, suddenly making a connection to his students.

"I wouldn't put anything past Danzo." Tenzo says, and the two men just take a drink of the sake Kakashi poured for them. "So how's the kid doing, anyway?" Tenzo asks, still amazing Naruto did what he did by fighting the Ichibi.

And for the first time today, Kakashi smiles.

"He knows the truth about everything. And we had a productive talk..." Kakashi trails off, opening up to his friend.

"Kakashi, this is suicide. Even if you can get in undetected, you'll never be able to break the seals in there. And that was from when I was there years ago. Danzo surely has had time to upgrade his security in the meantime." Tenzo says to Kakashi, who the Wood user knows is not going to change his mind.

But as his friend, he still has to try anyway.

They're outside one of ROOT's hideout entranceways. An abandoned sewer entry that was used before the Kyuubi attack fourteen years prior - repairs to the village required significant overhaul of the sewage system, and this particular entrance was repurposed by Danzo and the Foundation.

"I can't just do nothing when there's a chance Hayate might be in there. I owe it to him, to Yuugao, to Obito, to Rin, to Minato-sensei. To everyone's life I have saved, to everyone he has saved. I don't leave a comrade - a friend - behind. Not ever again." Kakashi would die in a heartbeat than to leave someone behind when he could help.

"But...what if something happens to you? I'm the only one who even knows you're going in there. You won't even let me go with you!" Tenzo offered to go in with Kakashi, but he vehemently rejected it.
'Because you mean too much to the village, Tenzo. I'm a tool. You're not. Danzo tried everything he could to get his hands on you - and we can't let that happen. You still have so much innocence in you, innocence that I had lost before I was even twelve years old.' Kakashi had said, not wanting to put anyone else in danger for his own search.

"If I don't find you in one day, then you go directly to the Hokage. Tell him everything. Even if it may be too late for me, at least Danzo would pay. As much as the Hokage doesn't want to admit it, I'm one of his best." Kakashi says.

But he also knows he can't just tell Hiruzen right now - because then he would say he's looking into it and that he forbids Kakashi from searching.

But Hiruzen's own investigation would lead to nothing, of course. He'd be protecting his old teammate.

So, to Kakashi, it's better to ask for forgiveness than for permission.

(Or, better to ask to look for his missing body rather than ask for permission...)

"I know there's no more use in trying to talk you out of this. Good luck, Kakashi. Stay alive." Tenzo says, holding out his hand.

Kakashi takes Tenzo's hand in his, grabbing it in understanding.

Kakashi *really* wishes he had Hinata's sensor abilities right now.

Because this place is crawling with seals designed to absolutely mutilate anyone who comes into contact with them.

Kakashi is pretty smart - *he's a genius*. So the seals that he couldn't take out on his own, he found some other way of going around them.

Sometimes he had to put so much chakra into them that they overloaded before they could even be set off (unrecommended - it takes *a lot* of chakra to do that, and Kakashi isn't a Jinchuuriki with practically limitless chakra reserves).

Sometimes he had to use Earth-style jutsu to go underground and come out the other side where the seal stopped detecting (also unrecommended - when he's underground he can't see when/where the seal ends and has to go based off his memory).

And once all he was able to do was throw a kunai and then use the Substitution jutsu on it, because there was no other way. And he had a *very narrow* window of timing to make sure nothing got set off.

*That* seal almost got Kakashi caught, and he knows it would not have been fun dealing with that.

But Kakashi continues on, in the labyrinth that is the Old Konoha sewer system, which so far is keeping him confused on where he is going and if he's even headed to where ROOT functions.

Kakashi is only barely able to hold back his vomit.
It's not what he sees that is disgusting, no; it's the idea that what Tenzo said is really all true, and that these young kids are the product of that.

Pale skin on everyone. No emotions on anyone, no facial expressions. Nobody is even talking to anyone unless it's about a mission.

Nobody has any friends. Nobody does anything except work.

And perhaps the most sickening thing about this is to Kakashi? Is that he was practically one of them. Give these kids some color on their skin and they'd be an exact clone of how Kakashi was after Minato died.

Kakashi wishes he could just give one hug to each and every one of these kids, because this is no way to live.

Most of them are Naruto's, Sasuke's, and everyone's ages. They all have lived so little, but they have no idea what they have been deprived of.

But as Kakashi thinks about all this, he hears something of interest to him.

'The patient appears to be doing better. Chronic, incurable respiratory infection is improving. Lord Danzo will be pleased.' One older girl says, to an equally older boy.

(Kakashi estimates them to be about seventeen or eighteen right now...still so much to live for.)

But that sounds an awful lot like Hayate. He's the only one in the village with an incurable respiratory infection. At least, the only shinobi with that. And Danzo couldn't give two shits about civilians, that's for sure.

So, it looks like Danzo has Hayate for some reason. And he's helping his illness. Why? It's...good?...that Hayate is getting help, but what does this help come from?

And at what cost does it come from?

Kakashi continues to sneak around, now set to find out where Hayate is.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck!" Kakashi says to himself as he finds Hayate alone in a room in a secluded part of the labyrinth, hooked up to all kinds of machines and medical equipment.

And he recognizes what's being put into his. He'd recognize it in an instant.

Hayate is being pumped full of Kyuubi chakra.

And Kakashi couldn't be more pissed off.

Naruto donated that chakra for medical research. Consensual, legal, regulated medical research in the hospital. Not on a kidnapped, frightened, sick individual.

And Kakashi hates that it's working only because he has to rescue him from something that might cure his illness.

But, taking a cue from Kurenai, Kakashi takes out a sealing scroll and quickly disconnects Hayate from the machines and seals him in. Kakashi also seals in the container of Kyuubi chakra, charts, and
other papers in the room and that could give insight into what's happening here.

After Kakashi puts the scroll away in his bag, he is more than ready to leave this hellhole.

The first thing Kakashi does after escaping ROOT's base (somehow Hayate not being noticed missing quick enough to cause a stir), the first thing he did was find Tenzo. He found Tenzo at their usual meeting place - inside the abandoned Hatake compound.

"I got him, Tenzo. I got him...but we need to report this to the Hokage. And I need you with me. I'm not in the right state of mind right now." Kakashi asked of his friend, and Tenzo agreed without even needing to think.

And so Kakashi uses his Anbu tattoo seal to request an immediate meeting with Lord Third, who was not happy to having been woken up in the dead of night.

"What is it, Kakashi?" Hiruzen asks, annoyed but mostly concerned. Kakashi hasn't used that tattoo in years since he left Anbu, and the Hokage knows that he wouldn't use it unless it were absolutely necessary.

"I think it's best to show you." Kakashi says, moving the chairs in the office around and laying his sealing scroll on the floor. Kakashi unseals it, and Hiruzen actually gasps.

"Where did you find him? We all believed him to be dead!" Hiruzen exclaims, happy and shocked at seeing one of his best Tokubetsu Jonin actually alive and in front of him.

"And that's the interesting part. Have you heard of ROOT - also known as the Foundation? Commanded by your teammate Danzo Shimura?" Kakashi asks, Sharingan going to Mangekyo under his headband.

(Not that Kakashi is even aware of his new Sharingan level.)

And then Hiruzen's eyes round, and then they narrow.

"Tell me everything you know, Kakashi!"

"We also suspect that Danzo and ROOT are responsible for the explosive seals around Konoha during the Suna attack. And if that's the case, he might even have been in league with Orochimaru. Why else would he be doing experiments on healing?" Kakashi adds, and Hiruzen only looks disappointed.

And Kakashi can't blame him for feeling that. Be he can blame Hiruzen for allowing all this to happen.

"I can't believe it. All these years, I let this go on. He does what he think is best for Konoha, but he has no idea what he's really doing. Minato was right. I'm a fool." Hiruzen says, taking a puff of his pipe.

Kakashi and Tenzo have nothing to say to that.

"But I won't stand this any longer. I am still Hokage, and I will fix this mess I've let go on. I didn't do anything when I could have with Orochimaru, and I will not make that mistake again. Tenzo, get Inoichi Yamanaka here immediately. Kakashi, get my two 'advisors' here. We will find out what has been happening." Hiruzen declares, trying to fix yet another mistake in his life.
"They say his lungs are better...a lot better." Yuugao Uzuki states, conflicted.

Her boyfriend - her partner - had been missing. He was kidnapped and held against his will. But they were...helping him?

She's conflicted because Kakashi rescued him, but also took him away from treatment that helped so much already in not even a week.

"Yes, but we don't know for how long. Or if anything was damaged from what was being done to him. Yuugao - I feel terrible. You know I would never do anything to hurt you, or him. And the fact is, he was a guinea pig. Stealing from the hospital, kidnapping a jonin, and using him against his will as some lab rat for a medical when accountable to nobody." Kakashi tells her, and she loses her composure and cries silently into his shoulder.

"I love him...so much." She whispers, and Kakashi knows.

Kakashi and Yuugao only want what's best for Hayate. And they really don't know if this rescue is what was best for him.

And right now, Lord Third and Inoichi (and maybe even Ibiki) are doing who-knows with this situation and his 'advisors' (Kakashi loves that Hiruzen used that intonation on those old bags).

But Hayate is under watch from some of Kakashi's most trusted allies, so he knows he doesn't have to worry about ROOT or anything else coming back to sabotage.

"I know you do. I'm sorry." Kakashi tells Yuugao, but she doesn't listen. She keeps crying, feeling so hopeless about the situation.

And Kakashi can relate. No matter how powerful he is, or she is, when you're faced with the most difficult thing you can imagine, you forget everything. You break down into the most basic of emotions.

He's been there...many times. He knows the pain all too well.

But will the pain ever end?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And that's the next part of the 'Revelations' arc! This chapter definitely changes things. What exactly it's changing for the sequel, I do not yet know. But that's part of the fun of writing, isn't it? ;)

The whole Hayate stuff I had left unsolved during the Invasion chapter. I knew I wanted to do something with it, but I had no idea what until I started writing this. And this one took me two weeks to write to figure out how I wanted to fit it in with the main story.

This chapter can be seen as slight Kakashi/Tenzo, but I didn't have the pairing in mind when I wrote it. But, relationships and people are complicated. See it as you will.

By the way, this chapter does technically take place after the next one - which might not be uploaded next week. There's been a lot of stuff going on this week and I've barely
been able to write; so I might have to skip a week, unfortunately.

Still, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. Stay tuned for the next one, which hopefully will be next week but no guarantee. Sorry!

Also, don't forget to review!
Two Talks

Chapter Summary

Naruto has two important talks to learn more about his past. He learns what is inside his father's scroll, and starts using them to his advantage. Naruto is finally given his next mission.

Chapter Notes

Here's another chapter - sorry it took so long to get out. Hope you all enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 27)-Two Talks

Naruto's P.O.V.

"I'm so sorry, Kakashi." I tell him. And...it felt wrong to just call him 'sensei' right now. He is sharing something that is so personal...at this moment, he's more of a family friend than a sensei.

He lost everyone he was close to. His teammates, Obito Uchiha and Rin Nohara. To hear the circumstances of how he got that Sharingan...he must feel sick every day, knowing he has his dead best friend's eye seeing for him.

And then, his other teammate committed suicide by his hand. And to hear that she killed herself to release the tailed beast in her...just so she wouldn't unleash it on the village...

I don't think I'd be able to live with myself if I was forced to live if Hinata or Shikamaru died - especially if both of them died. I wouldn't want to.

And then, Kakashi's suffering didn't end there. Then both my parents died, leaving me a jinchuuriki, and him alone.

The last of Kakashi's support. Gone.

"Naruto...I would have taken you in with me if I was capable of it. I was barely your age when all this happened. And I know you wouldn't feel capable of taking care of a baby as you are, and I had just lost everyone and I wasn't in a good state of mind. I was practically suicidal myself, with all outrageous the missions I requested from Lord Third. And Mikoto Uchiha, who actually begged to take you in when I couldn't, was denied by Lord Third, too." Kakashi says, and I understand.

As much as I wish he would have taken me in anyway - because part of me still doesn't feel safe with everything that's going on in my life - I understand completely and I'm actually glad he didn't
make himself any worse over me.

Though learning frist from the Old Manearlier and now again that Sasuke's mother wanted me and was denied - that infuriates me. But, that has nothing to do with Kakashi, right now.

"No...don't even think about that. As lonely as I was, I turned out alright. I had Kala looking out for me when I was in the orphanage, and I got to meet Heba. And I eventually made friends with Hinata and Shika. And sure it took a few more years, but now I have everyone that we have.

"I'm just glad you didn't hurt yourself anymore than you were already hurting. From what you've told me about them, my parents would rather have me in the orphanage than have you suffering even more. I'm grateful you're in my life, and talking to me right now. And though I'm still pissed at the Hokage for keeping the truth, I don't blame you or Kurenai-sensei or anyone." I tell him.

"I know they would have been so proud of you. Not because of your skills, your promotion, but because you're a good person."

"Thank you." I say, wiping my eyes from a few tears that managed to escape at that.

"So, do you have any questions for me?" Kakashi asks me, and I do.

"Yes. The Old Man gave me this scroll," I say, picking it up and holding it in front of us, "and he said that not even Jiraiya and you knew about it. He said it was my Dad's and that if he had died, nobody would know of its existence. It seems only right that I ask if you wanted to open it with me." I tell him, and his hand comes out slightly and it hovers near the scroll.

"...Yes. Thank you..." Kakashi whispers, and I smile at him before unrolling it.

"The Old Man said he never tried to open it, but that it looks like it will only open to Uzumaki or Namikaze blood." I say, before biting my thumb and letting a few drops of blood hit the center of the scroll, now used to blood seals after signing with the Toads.

There's a small amount of light coming from the scroll before what appears to be some books, and some kind of accessory appears with a piece of paper on top. There's also a strange three-pronged kunai on top of the paper.

I move the kunai and grab the paper, and it looks like a note. It's addressed to me!

"Dad wrote me something...let's read it together." I say, before holding the note towards Kakashi and we read it silently.

The letter reads:

Naruto,

If you are reading this, then I must have died on the day you were born. I'm sorry it turned out like that.

I'm writing this to tell you that there's so much we want to tell you, but the only important thing to know is that we love you. We will always love you, no matter what.

Your mother doesn't know I'm writing this. The doctors and her believe everything will be alright, but I have a bad feeling about this. And because you are reading this note, I must apologize to you again, Naruto, for having to take it in with you. This shouldn't be your burden to bear.
Inside this scroll are my most valuable notes and research. These notes and books are yours, Naruto. Don't feel pressured to do anything you don't want to, even learning them. I want you to be happy first and foremost.

The last thing in here is a special project I was working on and finished and was going to surprise your mother with after you were born. It's a bracelet designed in helping to search out other Uzumaki.

Your mother wanted to know if anyone survived the destruction of Whirlpool. So, I created this to help her seek out other Uzumaki when she was in a position to be able to. But as you're reading this note, I bequeath it unto you. I want you to be able to seek out your family, your heritage, if you feel the urge to know.

It works only if an Uzumaki wears it, and when another Uzumaki is nearby it will glow the famous Uzumaki red. (I loved the color of your mom's hair - I think you would, too).

Naruto, please live a happy life. Let yourself love and be loved. Surround yourself with good friends. Find a nice woman or man, anyone who makes you feel as special and loved as your mother makes me feel. Have a career that you love, shinobi or not. Have no regrets.

We love you, son.

-Minato Namikaze
-Your Father

A few tears drip onto the paper as I stare at. I feel Kakashi put his arm around my shoulder, and I lower the letter and pick up the bracelet Dad made.

It's...beautiful. The band is the most beautiful shade of red (Uzumaki red, from what Dad said) I have ever seen, and there is a round, black gem in the center. And on both sides of the gem on the band, is the Uzumaki clan swirl.

"I had no idea he was working on this." Kakashi says, removing his arm from my shoulder now.

"It was supposed to be a surprise for Mom - could you keep a secret from her?" I ask him, and I can see the blush in his eyes.

"Good point. I was always weak to Kushina." Kakashi says, and I laugh.

I open the band and place it around my wrist. As soon as I reconnect it, the black gem glows bright red for a second, before going back down to black.

"It works..." I let out.

That means that if I'm ever near another Uzumaki, I will know it! I can learn about my people!

...Which, reminds me of something, actually.

"Hey, Kakashi, I have another question."

"Shoot."

"Did...you ever tell Sasuke about Obito? Or that his mother and mine were best friends and tried to take me in? I feel like...like I know something deeply personal about him and he doesn't know at all." I tell him, and Kakashi makes a slight sigh.
"No, he doesn't. When he first saw my Sharingan I gave him a hint, but nothing directly. But you're right - I will talk to him soon." Kakashi tells me, and I'm glad.

I have to be Sasuke's friend and support him. But, maybe this will bring us a little closer. Despite all of us becoming friends since our training trip, and he and Shikamaru becoming boyfriends, I think this will bring Sasuke and me even closer.

"Naruto, I have something to give you before you go." Kakashi says, pulling something out of his jacket.

"Hmm?" I ask, taking the offered paper.

My eyes are probably visibly wide as I stare at my parents...it's a picture of them. Dad is hugging a very pregnant Mom, and they look so happy.

"Thank you, Kakashi."

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**Third-Person P.O.V.**

Naruto, after giving a strong hug to Shika and a kiss to Hinata, walks into his apartment and gets into his pajamas. He puts his Dad's scroll away with the picture Kakashi gave him, and then he lays down in bed (leaving his bracelet on) with one thing on his mind.

And he knows it's stupid, but he's going to try to do it anyway. He wants to know what happened that night with his parents, the night he was born. And there's only one real living witness.

And it's sealed inside of him.

He shouldn't try to contact the Kyuubi, especially after it freaked out last time they talked (and Naruto still hasn't told his team about asking it its name...). But as he lays down and tries to go to sleep, grasping the bracelet on his wrist, there's only one place he thinks about the whole time.

"What do you want, mortal?" He asks Naruto, turning and snarling and tails moving wildly.

Naruto just looks him in the eyes before speaking.

"Tell me what happened that day. Why did you attack instead of leaving after you got free?" Naruto asks, because that is the biggest mystery. The Kyuubi escaped his mother - so why would he stick around to let himself be captured again instead of just running away?

"HOW DARE YOU!" The Kyuubi roars, but Naruto doesn't back down.

"Tell me." Naruto demands, and the Kyuubi hits the cage with his tails before pausing for a moment.

"You really want to know? Fine. Uchiha." He says, and Naruto's face loses its demeanor and turns
"Uchiha? What did they have to do with it?" Naruto asks, not understanding.

"Uchiha and their damn sharingan. Tell me - have you ever been a puppet? Your body used in such a disgusting and hateful manner without your consent?" He asks the blonde, actually seeming calm to Naruto.

"Yes, actually. You told me off about it, too. Orochimaru's curse mark - he used me just to send a message. And again, I'm sorry for the pain it caused you." Naruto responds instantly, because he'll never forget how violated he felt.

"You're right. But what about being used to kill, to destroy, to terrify? Being aware of it all but being helpless to do a damn thing?"

"...That sounds terrible. I can't imagine. I'm really sorry you had to go through that." Naruto says, realizing what the Kyuubi just told him.

And Naruto doesn't think he's lying. Because it wouldn't make sense to stay. And the way he's talking right now, actually telling Naruto what happened...Naruto has a gut feeling that this is completely true.

And nobody knows. Nobody knows that somehow, an Uchiha let him go. But they're all dead now...

"Do you know which Uchiha did that to you?"

"No. But if I ever met him again, I would know it. I don't believe he's dead. If he was powerful enough to control me, then there's no way he died in the massacre."

Naruto has no idea how to feel about that information...because it makes total sense. To control the strongest of the bijuu...no way he would die from a teenaged Itachi.

"I really am sorry. We've both been through some shit these past few years. I don't want you to be hurt. And though I can't let you out, I don't want us to be enemies, either." Naruto tells the Kyuubi, undergoing a total paradigm shift.

"You're the most stubborn kid I have ever had the displeasure of being trapped in, I hope you know that you little brat." The Kyuubi says before Naruto wakes up in his bed, smiling.

A few days later, when everything has calmed down, Naruto finally sits down with Hinata, Shikamaru, and Kurenai to tell them everything that's happened with the Kyuubi.

From asking him his name, to the anger he received, to the story he was told when he asked about the day of his birth.

"I know you guys don't think it's wise for me to talk to him, but I think he was being sincere. Bijuu were initially sealed inside people out of fear, not inherent violence. And it makes no sense why he would stay after finally breaking free. I believe him, and he's going to be with me the rest of my life." Naruto says, to the faces his team makes at his story.

They think it's dangerous, that he might be playing some sort of trap. But Naruto would never open the seal. Would never let him go or do anything to jeopardize his friends or his village.
But Naruto is fourteen - almost fifteen - and he's a Chuunin now.

"Whatever happens Naruto, we support you and your decisions. Just please be careful." Kurenai-sensei tells him, and Naruto will.

But this raises so many more questions. Why would an Uchiha release him? To hurt the village, hurt the Hokage or his wife, to try to tame it for his own power?

So many questions, and no answers. And there are still unanswered questions concerning Akatsuki and why they want all the tailed beasts to begin with.

Could they be related?

Naruto has been busy. He's been reading some of his father's books that he was left in the scroll.

One of the journals is strictly dedicated to something his father called the Hiraishin. The first page lists it as 'space-time manipulation for teleportation' and the book includes all of his Dad's ideas, figures, theory, seals, and everything relating to it.

(At least it explains what the kunai is used for then.)

Most of it goes completely over his head, but he definitely wants to learn enough about sealing and chakra theory to understand it. That move is how his father got his reputation - why he was feared around all the elemental nations.

If Naruto could one day master the Hiraishin...then that would give him the most chance at being able to protect his loved ones, his friends, his village.

Another one of his Dad's journals was another jutsu he created, called the Rasengan. The journal explains how this mass of raw chakra is concentrated into a spinning, pulsating, orb in the palm of the hand through advanced chakra control.

The reason the technique works is because of the opposite forces the user is making within the chakra. Minato explains it like a magnet - the forces repel each other, and when they are forced together, the energy being stored up is massive and is devastating when released unto an enemy.

Naruto's Dad, in his journals, said that he's trying to work on each of the forces separately before moving onto the combination, as it would be nearly impossible to figure out like that.

Minato's journals dictate his journey and struggle with creating the Rasengan. Minato says that it would be so much easier if he could somehow split his mind's concentration to focus on both individually.

At reading that, Naruto has an epiphany.

Because Naruto is able to split his mind...with a shadow clone!

So Naruto has been practicing working on both of the opposing 'forces' that Minato described, and he's getting close. He's not there yet - definitely not even at the combining stage yet - but he's getting close with the individual parts because of his shadow-clone training that Asuma-sensei introduced to him during their training trip.

But when Naruto finished reading that journal, he was a bit saddened to hear that the technique...
wasn't complete. Minato wrote that he's still having trouble combining an element to it.

And the rest of the journal is mostly empty - so many empty pages for an unfinished jutsu.

Naruto knows he has to finish this jutsu...the pure and simple genius of this jutsu deserves to see it finished. And who better to finish the jutsu than Minato's own son?

But Naruto still has work to do. He still has to master the opposing forces, and then work on combining them.

"Congratulations to you all, once again! I'm sure you'll continue to do well by your village and your friends!" Asuma speaks up.

It's currently Sunday, and it's the group's relaxation and meal day. The first they had since completion of the exams and the invasion.

Naruto has still not heard or seen Jiraiya at all, and he doesn't know whether to be sad or worried. He had always said some kind of 'see you later' or something if he would be gone for a while, and he just is nowhere to be found.

Could it have something to do with Orochimaru and the invasion?

Team 8 went to visit Tenten two days ago in the hospital - for everything that has happened, it is a miracle that she is in such a good state. There will be months of recovery for her, but she will eventually be able to return to duty.

Neji had congratulated Team 8 when they visited, and he seemed to be taking things really well, now that Tenten is awake. It seems that the tension between him and Hinata really is gone, because a promotion could have upset the balance they had. But it didn't, and Team 8 is thankful.

Naruto told Tenten about being a jinchuuriki, as she was the only one not there when he told the rest. Just like everyone else, she took it really well and just said she feels bad that he had to go through so much pain as a child for something that was beyond his control.

So, everything is good right now.

The promotions have been named and given out, all his friends are alive and doing well, Naruto was told the truth about his heritage, and the village is recovering and rebuilding. There was very little loss of life from Konoha's ranks, and that's as much as can be hoped for.

When Team 8 arrived, Sasuke walked up to them and asked to speak to Naruto in private. Sasuke had said that he talked with Kakashi, and that he's sorry that his mother couldn't have taken him in.

'It's okay. I mean, me and you are friends now. It took us a few extra years, but this is what our mothers wanted, right? For us to be close?' Naruto said in response, and Sasuke agreed with a smile.

So everything really is good right now!

Though, Shikamaru did point out that it's odd how little the Hokage has been in the public eye since the invasion. He noted that at this point, Lord Third should have said something to the village now about their strength and resilience or something inspirational and reassuring.

But he hasn't. He hasn't said a single word to the village, or held any kind of memorial for their fallen
comrades, nothing.

But as the day draws to a close, a familiar ANBU with a porcelain sheep mask jumps down in front of Team 8.

"Naruto Uzumaki, Lord Hokage has summoned you." They say.

Naruto's pretty sure he knows what this is about. He was told he personally would be given a mission, with details to follow.

Looks like it's time for that mission - one that Hinata and Shikamaru aren't allowed to talk about with Naruto or Kurenai-sensei or even each other.

"Heh, looks like duty calls. See you guys!" Naruto says, giving a quick hug to Shikamaru and a quick kiss to Hinata before following the Anbu.

When Naruto arrives in the Hokage's office, he is first relieved to see the giant red suit of his sensei but then pissed off because he's been here and hasn't talked to him!

But at this point, Naruto knows better than to just flap his mouth off right now. And it's a good thing he didn't immediately start yelling, because after another few seconds of observation, Jiraiya looks exhausted.

Sarutobi walks in the door a minute later, looking right at two of his predecessor's most loved people - his sensei and his son.

"Naruto, as you know, Orochimaru had invaded the village. He escaped during our battle, but not before injuring me. Jiraiya has been out looking for him to no avail - he's gone right now but he's not done - one day he will come back." Sarutobi starts.

Naruto is just sitting there, listening, thoughts running a mile a minute. He's thinking about Sasuke, about Gaara, about Hinata and Shika, Choji - everything that Orochimaru talked about during the second exams - the curse mark which is still on his neck but fading little by little.

"And it has become clear to me that I am no longer able to fulfill my duties as Hokage. I am much too old now, and I need a successor. And your mission, Naruto, is to accompany Jiraiya and get Tsunade Senju here. She has been ignoring my recall." Sarutobi continues.

Now what's running through Naruto's mind is why him? He knows who Tsunade is now - she was the healer on Jiraiya's and Orochimaru's team. She became known as the world's best healer, something that Sakura says she wants to surpass.

Why should Naruto go on this mission? Because he's Jiraiya's student? Because of the curse mark on his neck? Because his Dad was a Hokage?

Well, whatever the reason, Naruto is happy to go on this mission if not for only one person: Tenten.

She was hurt bad by Gaara. And though she will recover, it will take a long time. So if anyone has a chance of helping her get better sooner, then it's Tsunade Senju.

"I understand, Old Man." Naruto says, and Sarutobi gives him a smile.

"Just that nickname proves my point. You are to leave in the morning. Do not mention this mission
to anybody." The Sandaime warns, and Naruto nods his head. "Good, now you two are dismissed. Jiraiya - get some rest. Don't torture yourself over my mistake." Sarutobi adds, dismissing the two.

Naruto and Jiraiya walk out the door, when Jiraiya says something.

"Sorry I haven't been around kid. Now, tell me, how's it feel to be a Chhunin?" The man asks, putting his hand on his shoulder.

And with Naruto is reassured that Jiraiya really was just attending to business, and did really care about him.

Naruto tells Jiraiya about the scroll, the letter, the bracelet, the journals, how far he has gotten on the Rasengan already...and his communications with the Kyuubi.

Tomorrow morning, they leave on their mission for their new Hokage. Naruto is determined first and foremost to get Tsunade here for Tenten, if anything. His friend was hurt and Tsunade can help her.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And the 'Revelations' arc continues! I estimate there will be two chapters left of this arc before one final original arc to end this particular story before the sequel begins.

Sorry I haven't updated in a month. Stuff came up at first, and I've felt really sick the past two weeks.

I don't have a lot to say about this chapter directly - just that with Sarutobi being alive things are totally different now. This scroll is just the first part of that.

And in regards to the events of last chapter, we will see the fallout of that coming. Remember, this chapter technically takes place before that anyway.

Regardless, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. Stay tuned for the next one, which I plan to get out next week like usual. Thanks for reading!

Also, don't forget to review!
New Meeting, New Journey

Chapter Summary

Naruto and Jiraiya go on their mission for Tsunade, and Naruto learns something special about Tsunade. While talking to his team, Naruto makes a surprising and worrying realization about himself. Jiraiya offers to take Naruto to a special place to continue his training, one connected to him by blood.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here's another chapter! Hope you all enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 28)-New Meeting, New Journey

Third-Person P.O.V.

The journey to Tsunade's location is, for the most part, uneventful.

Because the Sandaime is the Sandaime, he knows where Tsunade is and where she would be heading next. He was able to give this information to Jiraiya so he and Naruto don't have to waste time looking for her - only bringing her back.

Jiraiya decided to take it upon himself to finish teaching the rest of the Rasengan to Naruto, having heard of his brilliant solution of using shadow clones to resolve the inherent opposing forces that the jutsu uses.

Naruto says it was all because of his Dad's notes - and Jiraiya is quick to tell Naruto not to sell himself short. He is a Chuunin now ('Tokubetsu' and politics be damned - Jiraiya was pissed when he heard about that but knew Naruto wouldn't have it any other way as long as his friends got the promotions they deserved) - and Chuunins must have more self-confidence, because they are expected to lead and take command.

Naruto has confidence in himself and his strength, but not his intelligence. Perhaps because this was years of being frowned upon, ignored, and being called 'stupid' because of all his pranks.

But after the first three days on the road and with Jiraiya's instruction, Naruto successfully learns the two individual forces and is beginning to put them together.
And as they continue to travel and work, they stop for the night and have some dinner. Unfortunately, they're not in a town and can't use an inn tonight.

Naruto mentions something to his sensei that he's been thinking about for a while.

"Pervy Sage, I know this may sound crazy, but Gaara - the Ichibi's jinchuuriki - his seal is a disaster. He's tortured by it practically - he can't sleep, can't be touched by his own siblings, can't stop it from speaking to him constantly. Can you...fix his seal?" He asks, because the meeting after he was told about the mission was not the right time to ask something like this.

"Is that so? Why do you want to help him? He almost killed two of your friends." Jiraiya asks back, though knowing why.

"Because I could have been him. If Dad's seal wasn't as good, I could have been exactly like him. He didn't ask for the Ichibi to be put inside him. His village did it for power - my father did it to save the village. But Dad made sure that the seal is what it is to not let it define me. And, right now, that seal and that monster defines him.

"He was scared, for a second. After I woke him up. He was like a scared kid, because for once it was silent. I don't think he's evil - he just never had a chance to be his own person." Naruto says, taking a sip of his ramen broth.

"Fair enough. I'll contact Suna when our mission is finished - if they would accept my help, I'll do it." The Sannin responds, writing notes for his next 'masterpiece.'

Naruto slurps some more broth, satisfied with his sensei's answer and is hopeful for the other boy.

After another three days, Naruto and Jiraiya finally reach the town Tsunade is currently in - she had left the one she was in when Sarutobi told them, so they proceeded along to the next town with a casino.

"Naruto, before we meet her, I need to tell you about Tsunade. When you first meet her, you're probably going to hate her. She will be cruel, indifferent, and a downright bitch. But she was my teammate - she still is my teammate. She has been through quite a lot, and I cannot blame her for what she has become. Ninja cope - I'm sure Kakashi told you about how he coped with his loss?" Jiraiya begins to Naruto.

"Yeah, he did. He said he was practically suicidal...not caring whether he lived or died. I can only imagine how he must have felt, because I just can't picture losing my team..." Naruto says, trying to gather up compassion for what seems like will be a difficult encounter...maybe it'll be like how Neji was before Hinata fought him.

"She's like that, but with gambling. And alcohol. The only reason she hasn't died is because her student is almost as skilled as she is and keeps her liver intact. So, I know she'll be a bitch and be horrible, just remember the mission." Jiraiya says, sobering Naruto with this information.

Being a ninja is a tough life. He can see why his Dad said he didn't have to be a shinobi in that letter, because the life of a shinobi is surrounded by loss, death, and pain.

But if Naruto can do anything to help some of his friends feel even just a bit of less pain, then all his suffering from the moment he was born to the moment he dies will be worth it.
"Let's get our Hokage, believe it!" Naruto says, but his voice isn't convincing.

But his resolve is.

After a few minutes of walking through the large town, Naruto's bracelet starts glowing.

It's a slow, faint pulse...but with every pulse the jewel glows bright Uzumaki red.

Naruto turns to face Jiraiya, and the pulsing slows ever so much.

"Pervy Sage, is this what Dad was talking about? Is there another Uzumaki nearby?" Naruto asks, and Jiraiya smirks.

"Haha, looks like it kid. It means we're in the right place. If your bracelet can locate the Uzumaki, we locate our next Hokage." He says, seeing the confusion on Naruto's face before realization hits him.

"Tsunade's an Uzumaki?!"

"Yup. Her grandmother was an Uzumaki; it's surprising to me your bracelet is that sensitive. How interesting!" Jiraiya says.

And Naruto ignores the painful feelings in his chest - he has had a living relative this whole time - and they start moving.

The closer Naruto gets to Tsunade, his Uzumaki-seeking bracelet starts pulsing faster and faster. And it pulses its fastest when outside the doors to the town casino, where suddenly Naruto and Jiraiya hear bells ringing.

"JACKPOT! YOU DID IT, LADY TSUNADE!" They hear, followed by a loud series of oinks.

Jiraiya and Naruto - who is allowed in as shinobi are allowed to gamble - run and see Tsunade sitting in front of the biggest slot machine, staring blankly at it.

"And there it is, Shizune. Whenever I win, something bad happens. Jiraiya is here with another pathetic and lonely brat he pitied." Tsunade says, staring angrily at Naruto and his glowing bracelet.

The four shinobi, accompanied by Tonton the pig (who Naruto summoned Gamakichi and Gamatatsu as company for) went into a small diner near the casino after Tsunade collected her earnings.

"No way. I told sensei I was never coming back. That place is cursed. Kid, let me just say this, you'd be better off getting the hell out now before you're too far gone." Tsunade says, downing a shot of poison.

Naruto's bracelet stopped glowing when Tsunade grabbed his wrist - Naruto pointed at her and was about to call her out for her shit and she grabbed him, thinking he was going to attack.

And the glowing stopped, confirming she was indeed the fellow Uzumaki.

"Don't you talk about my home like that. I don't know what happened to you there, but you're
wrong. You're wrong about the village, and you're wrong about not coming back." Naruto said, and Tsunade just rolls her eyes.

"Oh, am I? And what the fuck do you think you can do about it, huh? Do you know who I am?"
She counters.

"Yeah, I do. You're the best healer in the world. And you're going to come back and heal my friend -she was almost crushed to death by the Ichibi's jinchuuriki, and you can help speed up her recovery. Honestly, I can't believe the Old Man would choose you to be Hokage. But I care about my friend, and I don't care what I have to do - you will come back and help Tenten. Do you know who I am?"
Naruto says, getting up out of his seat and slamming his hands down on the table.

"Well, you got balls, I'll say that." She says.

Jiraiya hasn't spoken up at all since telling her Sarutobi wants her to come back. The plan was always for Naruto to do it, as he is a wild card and they honestly think if anyone could change her mind, it's him. He is tied so much to her and her past, and he doesn't know it all yet.

"You know, it's really sad, Lady Tsunade. I am the orphan who lost his Hokage father," Naruto whispers that part, "and his mother only to have a dangerous monster sealed in me. For all that I've been through, I should be the sad, lonely recluse. I had nothing. And I don't know what you've been through, but I have another friend who lost his whole clan and he's nothing like you. You shame me, you shame Sasuke, you shame my parents, and you shame your grandparents." Naruto finishes, unable to look at the pathetic woman before him anymore.

Naruto begins to walk outside the cafe, when Tsunade grabs his arm for the second time today.

"You don't understand it, kid." She says, then lets him go.

"No I don't." Naruto says, turning back around to face her. "But you don't get what I'm saying either. Whatever loss you faced, you will face more if you don't help those who need you. What if Pervy Sage died? What if the Old Man died in another attack because you weren't there? I know you still care about them, they're your team. Do you really want to let that snake bastard give another person this?" Naruto cranes his neck to show Tsunade the fading curse mark.

"He marked you?" She gasps in shock and disgust.

"Yes. The only reason I'm even alive is because of my tenant - via Dad - his chakra is siphoned off and heals me. And you know what's worse than him marking me? The reason - to send a goddamn message to my Sasuke to try to lure him to take the mark. Bunch of bullshit. That's the sort of thing you're letting happen by just being here, Tsunade. Letting your old evil teammate run rampant - trying to kill your sensei, mark and kill innocent kids - did I tell you he killed others to even get to me? - and who knows what else." Naruto finishes, turns away and walks.

And right as soon as Naruto is about to leave, Tsunades says one word.

"Fine."

"These medics really need more practice, hell. Sensei really let this place go after I left, didn't he?" Tsunade complains, doing an examination on Tenten.

Naruto demanded that she see Tenten the moment she stepped into the village, and Tsunade didn't
have the heart to fight back. Because if Naruto fought this hard for his friend, he would keep fighting until he had nothing left.

Then her hands start to glow green, and she fixes a lot of the micro-fractures in Tenten's skeletal structure, tears in muscles, and bruising.

"She should be good again in a month or so," Tsunade says, dismayed by the abysmal quality of the hospital medics.

"What? Really?!?!?!" Tenten exclaims, overjoyed.

"Yes, Tenten. You can thank the blonde kid, because he wouldn't shut up about you. You're lucky to have such a good friend." Tsunade says before walking out. Naruto shouts a quick good-bye and 'you're welcome' to Tenten (who's still bed-bound) before rushing after Tsunade and Jiraiya.

"That's something for you to fix then, huh? The hospital." Naruto says, grinning to himself.

"Shut up. I already have so much work and I'm not even Hokage yet. Stop giving me more things to do, brat."

"You know, one of my friends happens to be training in medical ninjutsu right now. Our sensei have said she has some of the best chakra control they have ever seen - better than some Jonin - and she's a genin." Naruto says, telling Tsunade about Sakura.

Naruto hasn't forgotten the aspirations of any of his friends. And he's going to do everything he can to help them meet their dreams and goals - and that includes good-talking Sakura to the world's best medic.

"Is that so? Hmm, I'll have to get Shizune to scope her out." Tsunade says. "What's her name?"

"Sakura Haruno of Team 7." Naruto responds, making Sakura and her team stand out.

Little details can go a long way.

"Who's her sensei?" Tsunade follows up.

"Kakashi Hatake."

"If Hatake believes she's that good, then I'll look into it as soon as I can. If I have to be Hokage, I'm not gonna let things fall through the cracks like sensei did." Tsunade resolves, and Naruto grins.

"Oh, and considering you are the Hokage now, it's okay if I call you 'Grandma Tsunade' after the Old Man, right?" Naruto teases, because she confirmed that she is committed to this now.

"YOU LITTLE BRAT! YOUR FRIEND IS GOING TO BE TRAINING ON YOU!!" Tsunade rages and threatens, and Naruto high-tails to the Sandaime's office, chuckling to himself along the way.

And then Tsunade smirks...

...He's so much like both of them.

"Your mission is a success. You will receive pay and credit for an A-rank mission, Naruto." Sarutobi
"Haha, yeah! Thanks, Old Man!" Naruto says, happy about his first successful mission as a Chuunin.

"I should be thanking you, Naruto. If I know my student, then I bet it was you who convinced her to come back." Sarutobi says, glancing at Tsunade who just rolls her eyes in resignation. "Now, Naruto, I must ask you to excuse yourself as the three of us have a lot to talk about. Go, meet with your team for some lunch." The Sandaime suggests, and Naruto all but runs out of there to meet his girlfriend and best friend.

Because he has something he wants to show them!

"Tsunade, first, thank you for coming back. Perhaps the most important thing to talk about first is what happened to me. Then, we need to discuss what Kakashi Hatake had informed me of. And there's more..." The Sandaime says to the female Sannin.

"You met another Uzumaki?!" Hinata asks, shocked and happy for her boyfriend.

"Yup! Dad's bracelet led me straight to them. Just like he designed it for Mom." Naruto says, trying to be discrete about who he met. He's not talking about his mission objectives directly, so he thinks that's good enough until the Hokages make their announcement.

"Wow, that's really amazing. You have family!" Shikamaru states, and Naruto doesn't fully agree. Yeah, they are clanmates. But Tsunade isn't his family. Maybe over time she could become his family, but she is not really his family. Teams 8, 7, and 10 are more his family than she is.

"Hehe yeah," Naruto shifts the topic, "but that's not all. Look at this new move!" He says, making a shadow clone and holding out his palm. With the spinning bulb of chakra, Naruto charges into a nearby tree and it explodes.

"Wow, that was amazing! That's a really powerful move - it'll work great with your taijutsu!" Shikamaru states at Naruto's demonstration of the Rasengan.

Naruto had gotten the combination of the forces down two days after he started working on it. His Rasengan isn't perfect by any means - still a lot of wasted chakra and the combination isn't exact yet, but it's successful and he got it.

"Did you learn this over your mission?" Hinata asks him, and Naruto shakes his head.

"Nah, I did a lot of the work before. Pretty much when I got Dad's books." He says, and Hinata looks confused.

"Why didn't you tell us you were working on a new move?" She asks, and Naruto looks puzzled at his girlfriend.

"Huh? I just did!" He responds, sincere.

"Naruto...I know you probably don't mean to, but it seems like you're starting to hide things from us. Like...you never told us about your powerful toads summons. You didn't immediately tell us about another Uzumaki, and you didn't tell us you were working on a new move for days before you left?" Hinata says when they walk into the office, unannounced to anyone else in the Tower.
You talked to the Kyuubi several times without consulting us, not even Kurenai-sensei." Hinata states, and Naruto just thinks.

He wasn't hiding things form the, was he?

Naruto didn't think they were all too important things to mention. Because he knows what he's doing - he has his goals. He knows what he has to do to make everything right.

...Wait.

"Naruto, I think Hinata has a point. We don't mean to say you're deliberately hiding things. It's just that it does seem a bit odd that you keep doing all these things and we don't find out until after the fact. We can appreciate the fact that you were on a mission, that you wouldn't have been able to share your clan-mate information, but..." Shika trails off, and Naruto is starting to get worried.

...Because they're right.

Based on what he's heard from his family, Naruto believes there is something wrong with him.

All this started after the second chuunin exam...which is when he was infected with the curse mark. And what he just felt about himself? His goals, knowing what he needs to do...

...Sounds an awful lot like Orochimaru and what he was doing. Not nearly to the degree he was (because Naruto isn't experimenting on children), but Naruto is just doing things because he thinks they will help and he's not asking for other's opinions. He's just doing things on his own.

"Holy shit...guys, I think you might be right. I don't mean to, but...fuck. Maybe it's the curse mark...making me like Oorchimaru and just focusing on what I want or something..." Naruto says, really scared.

"Let's get you to the hospital, fuck!" Shikamaru says, and as Naruto makes a shadow clone to get Jiraiya (and Tsunade), which Naruto almost forgetting to tell them already, he and Hinata stand close and escort him to the hospital.

Jiaraiya, Tsunade, and Sarutobi were not very happy that Naruto's shadow clone interrupted their meeting, but the reason for such interruption eased their displeasure.

Luckily for them though, they already got through one major part of their conversation.

So as Tsunade examined Naruto - both Uzumaki being vague about why Tsunade was here and why Naruto seemed to know her - Hinata and Shikamaru stayed in the room along with Jiraiya, who accompanied the new Hokage. Kurenai was also summoned there and arrived just before Tsunade.

"I think I understand what's going on here. But the simple answer is yes, the curse mark is affecting you. However, it does appear to be temporary. As the seal continues to degrade and the foreign chakra is broken up, some of Orochimaru's self-modifications to his chakra are being released and broken down at a slower rate." Tsunade states, to the relief and confusion of the Chuunin of Team 8.

"What does that mean, exactly?" Shikamaru asks.

"Pretty much that until the Kyuubi finishes getting rid of the seal and the subsequent particles, Naruto's thought processes and personality will be affected. The only thing I can recommend is
something similar to reality checks: you question yourself 'what am I doing' and 'did I talk to my
team' so you don't let it get the better of you. I'm sorry that there isn't anything else I can do."
Tsunade states, truly sorry for the boy she just met in the past few days. Nobody deserves
Orochimaru's seal.

But, already, she is glad she came back. Naruto was right. Because of what they discussed in their
meeting, her being here is necessary. And being able to relieve the boy and his team - and heal their
friend - is the least she was able to do while before things become so utterly messed up.

"Great - does this shitshow ever end? I'm tired of Orochimaru always having a presence around
here." Naruto grumbles out - mostly annoyed than anything now that he knows he isn't in any real
danger.

"Not until he's dead. Orochimaru is like the worst kind of cockroach, and he just keeps coming back
and coming back." Jiraiya says, to the dismay of the Chuunin.

"I would call him as tenacious as you are, kid. But in you, it's a compliment." Tsunade says,
agreeing.

"And with that bitter note, and that your teammates are here, now's as good a time as any, especially
with this news. With your promotion, you are ready to begin training with higher-level seals. So,
what do you say about taking a trip with me?" Jiraiya asks to Naruto.

"A trip? Where? To the Dojo we went to before?" Naruto inquires.

"Nope! Somewhere you can surround yourself with all the seals you can ever wonder about. Think
about it, if you're with me then you don't have to do your self-reminders or whatever because I'm just
that good. And Suna's only a short detour from it too, so I can make that offer you asked me about." Jiraiya
continues, purposefully not answering the question.

"See, Pervy Sage, you're tempting me by listing positives but not telling me where. And you're
forgetting the fact that you'd be asking me to leave my girlfriend and all my friends again for
certainly much longer than the last mission. So, if you want me to make a decision, you'll tell me
where!" Naruto counters the Sannin.

"Where? Just a little place known as Uzushiogakure, the Village Hidden in the Whirlpools. You
know, the home of the Uzumaki clan." Jiraiya smirks at the blonde.

Naruto takes an audible inhale of breath.

"You have to go, Naruto! This is what you've wanted since we became a team!" Hinata urges
Naruto to go on Jiraiya's proposed trip.

Naruto isn't sure what he should do. He asked Pervy Sage to give him some time to think and talk it
over with his teammates.

"She's right, dude. You have to go. Not only will you learn about your clan more, you'll be training.
And, it may be possible, that Uzumaki might be living there too. There might have been those that
escaped." Shikamaru states, and Naruto thinks that it's a really good point.

"But what about you guys? Hinata, since our double date, we haven't even been on another. It feels
like something is always getting in our way now that we're together! And Shika, Kurenai-
sensei...you know that we should be training together now even more than ever with everything that's been on the line. With all the training we did, our teamwork might be out of sync and stuff with our new moves and power! " Naruto counters.

"First, our teamwork will never be out of sync. People learn new techniques all the time - you think my Dad stays caught up with everything Choji's and Ino's Dads learn? No way - they are a good team because they trust and believe in each other. We still have that - completely." Shikamaru immediately refutes what Naruto said.

"Shikamaru's right, Naruto. Teamwork isn't something that is just 'lost' with the development of new skills. Teamwork is based on trust and loyalty - and everyone here Has that." Kurenai adds.

"And yeah, I missed you when you were on your mission, but this is way more important! We'll always have time to go on another date! What's important is that we know we love each other. This training opportunity might never come again - what if Jiraiya has to leave again?" Hinata counters as well, and Naruto just sighs.

"Maybe...I'm just scared. My mom was forced out of her home to become a Jinchuuriki. Then the place was destroyed. What if there's ghosts? Or worse, what if there really are survivors out there? I mean, why hasn't anyone been able to get into Uzushio since the attack anyway?" Naruto questions, thoughts running wild.

"We don't know, but you won't be alone. Master Jiraiya will be with you. And we'll always be cheering you on and supporting you. It's okay to be afraid." Shikamaru says, sitting down on the side of the hospital bed which Naruto is still laying in. Kurenai rubs Naruto's hair for a few seconds as well.

"You have no idea how afraid I was when I was with Kakashi-sensei and Kurenai-sensei...we were looking for Orochimaru and then we came across all the explosions seals and everything. Then when we were rushing to the barrier, and then seeing your giant summons. It was terrifying." Hinata admits, sitting down as well and leaning her head into her boyfriend's neck.

"I know I have to go. But thanks for making sure I really knew it, guys." Naruto says, grabbing Shika's hand, giving Hinata's head a small kiss, and a small nod to Kurenai.

Two days later, Naruto and Jiraiya head out in the direction of Whirlpool and Suna - Jiraiya having received a response from the acting Kazekage to be allowed to fix Gaara's seal. Naruto's sealing scrolls are packed with supplies, as he has no idea how long he will be gone for.

Nobody knows how long they'll be gone for.

"We should wait until morning to act." Hiruzen says to his student, his new Hokage. "We want to make sure the boy is far enough away."

"Yes. He'll be at his most dangerous when backed into a corner." The Fifth Hokage says to her sensei.

"Indeed he will be. They always are." Hiruzen speaks with experience.
A/N: Unfortunately, this chapter didn't have much 'new' content for this 'Revelations' arc, but it was necessary. But Naruto knowing the truth about himself and Tsunade let him say things that really resonated with her, that didn't really in canon. But there are hints as to what is coming in the next chapter, so I hope I'm building that up enough (because I'm excited for next chapter!).

But about the curse mark: it's been there for a while. And I have purposely written Naruto being inconsistent with himself since the Chuunin Exams. And, I have established sub-chakratic particles in this story. Though this doesn't have any lasting effects throughout the whole story, I feel like it was a decent addition because it was something I have had going on for a while.

And, I don't have a comment about the ending segment there... ;)

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. Thanks for reading! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 29!

Also, don't forget to review!
Revelations

Chapter Summary

With Naruto and Jiraiya now out of the village, Hiruzen and Tsunade put their plan into action. Kakashi's discovery from before is investigated and is swiftly dealt with. Tsunade's coronation takes place. A message is sent out.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Short but intense - I've been looking forward to this chapter for a while! Hope you all enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 29)-Revelations

Third-Person P.O.V.

“He what?” Tsunade can't believe what she just heard.

“Danzo kidnapped one of my most trusted Jonin, Hayate Gekko, and proceeded to steal donated Kyuubi chakra from the hospital labs and used it on Gekko without his consent. And it started to heal his illness.” Sarutobi explains fully.

Tsunade is very confused. Danzo is still around? Hadn't Hiruzen taken care of that nuisance yet? And what's this about donated Kyuubi chakra? What the hell did that blonde brat get up to?

“Yes, Naruto donated some chakra for medical research after we learned that the Kyuubi was able to destroy Orochimaru's cursed seal.” Jiraiya fills in the missing gaps.

“But that's not all. It turns out that Danzo has expanded ROOT much more than I was aware. Thanks to the infiltration of the ROOT compound and rescue of Hayate Gekko, we have learned that Danzo has been abducting children for years – some clan kids but mostly orphans. And we need to work together to take care of him.” Hiruzen continues to fill Tsunade in.

“So that's why I'm here. Politics. You can't stay Hokage after word of what happens to Danzo gets out to everyone.” Tsunade scoffs, and Hiruzen only shakes his head.

Then what else could it be?

“That is incorrect. After my encounter with Orochimaru at the Chuunin Exams, I have been weakened. I can no longer fulfill my duty to the village as Hokage. I couldn't care less about the political fallout. I'm too old to care.” Hiruzen counters.

“But there's more, Tsunade.” Jiraiya adds.
“Unfortunately, he is correct. Kakashi Hatake came bearing more information. We believe that he is correct with his suspicion that it was in fact Danzo who let Orochimaru into the village. There is evidence that ROOT set up the explosive seals around the village to weaken us. We suspect that he was trying to assassinate me in order to take the Hokage title.” Hiruzen says, and Tsunade is enraged.

“What?! I’LL KILL HIM RIGHT NOW!” Tsunade yells in anger. It turns out the little blonde kid was right – she does care about her team and would regret if she wasn’t there to help them.

“No, not right now. But soon. We need to get Naruto out of the village first.” Sarutobi states, having planned to kill Danzo the moment Kakashi brought Hayate in.

“Naruto? Why?”

“Naruto’s being hunted by a group known as Akatsuki. They are after all the tailed beasts – two of their members attacked Naruto and other genin teams before the Chuunin Exams. Orochimaru revealed to him that he used to be part of Akatsuki, but how much of that is true or not we aren’t sure. But either way, Naruto is a target. Danzo will no doubt use him as a bargaining chip if he had access to him. At the very least, Naruto is a supply of Kyuubi chakra. At the worst, Naruto is bounty.” Jiraiya explains.

“I wouldn’t put it above Danzo to capture Naruto and hand him off if it would get him some kind of power from Akatsuki. We know too little about them still.” Hiruzen adds.

“And just how do you plan on getting the kid out of here?” Tsunade asks, because this whole thing sounds ridiculous.

“Well we need to get him far away, and safe. The only one who could keep him safe from Akatsuki and without rising any suspicion is me. And I still want to train him – I suggest taking him to Whirlpool. I’ve been wanting to take him there for a while, actually. And he could learn so much there.” Jiraiya suggests, and Hiruzen chuckles.

“It would be good for him to go to where his ancestors came from. Lord knows I know nothing about his clan that I could tell him. Alright. Jiraiya and Naruto are to head to Whirpool.” Hiruzen makes official. Then Hiruzen gazes to the window.

“Speaking of Naruto, it looks like a shadow clone is coming to us.”

“Sensei...why THE HELL didn’t you start with this?” Tsunade screams at her sensei.

Because, as it turns out, the Hiruzen Sarutobi she was speaking to in his office was a shadow clone the whole time.

“Because there’s nothing anyone could do. Orochimaru stuck a sword through my spine and paralyzed me. No healer could fix it.” Sarutobi admits.

This is why Sarutobi hasn’t spoken to the village in any official capacity. He can’t let anyone know that he was been weakened to such a state. He has to have a shadow clone take care of his basic needs – eating, bathing, clothing. Sarutobi’s just fortunate enough he can make a shadow clone without any hand seals. That’s how he was able to give the Chuunin their promotions, how he met Naruto and Jiraiya for their mission briefing.
Sarutobi is in his household, being guarded by his son and some guards he knows he could trust. When these people are needed elsewhere, they make a shadow clone – Asuma did that when he meets his team and the other teams.

If Danzo knew he was like this – paralyzed and defenseless - Sarutobi would be dead already. As good as Sarutobi is, there's no way his shadow clone can fight off Danzo and who knows how many ROOT agents. Even his guard can't fight them all off.

“So that's another reason why I'm here. You need me to fight Danzo with your shadow clones, as Jiraiya will be off with the brat distracting him.” Tsunade puts two and two together.

“Precisely.”

“Where the hell's your alcohol? I need a hard drink.” Tsunade groans out.

“So when we infiltrate ROOT's base, what will happen?” Tsunade asks.

“Kakashi pointed out where were several booby traps and protective seals. Be prepared for alarms to go off and for everyone to attack us. Danzo's followers follow him and only him – they were raised and brainwashed and know nothing else. It's imperative that we keep their loss of life to as little as we can. I believe they can be rehabilitated.” Hiruzen explains.

“If he's dead, they'll have nobody to follow.” Tsunade follows.

“Yes, but we're not killing him yet. We're capturing and incapacitating him so Inoichi Yamanaka and Ibiki Morino can interrogate and learn everything he knows. If he was working with Orochimaru, and researching the effects of Kyuubi chakra, who knows what else he was working on.” Jiraiya adds.

“That's fine by me. Just let me have some time with him before we do make the kill, right? I want to give him some hell.” Tsunade says, not above torturing. Just because she's a medic doesn't mean she's a doctor.

(Shes knows Nawaki and Dan would be against torture, but Tsunade finds it to be a decent source of catharsis and stress relief, personally.)

“You don't get to have all the fun. Maybe we can do it together?” Jiraiya teases, and for once Tsunade agrees with her old teammate. It might be nice to have some teamwork again...

Their infiltration went smoothly, or as much as could have been hoped.

There were booby traps, but Hiruzen and Tsunade are smart enough that they never even had to slow down because of them. And when they got to Danzo...well, they had more help in the forms of Katsuyu and Enma.

Danzo put up a fight, but against Hiruzen and Tsunade - along with their summons, he never stood a chance. And ROOT wouldn't dare to go against the Hokage in front of him, and that's something Danzo didn't account for.
They swiftly sent him off to interrogation by Hiruzen's most trusted agents of T&I...

...And Hiruzen is glad he kept Tsunade away from the debriefing that Inoichi gave him. And Inoichi and Ibiki are sworn to secrecy about everything until they are given the all-clear. But what he was told?

Hiruzen *can't believe it*...

Danzo...he's the reason there was unrest in the Uchiha Clan. Danzo put in into their mind that there would never be an Uchiha as Hokage.

It was all *Danzo*. He planned it all from the beginning.

He's the reason Itachi was forced to do what he did. He's the reason poor Sasuke's life was put through the grinder. He's the reason Konoha not only lost the police force but many, many good shinobi.

All because he wanted *Sharingan*.

Sharingan. So he could undo a 'fatal error.' Sharingan that go blind while *changing reality*.

*Sickening*.

And Kakashi's initial suspicion was indeed right. Danzo fully intended for Orochimaru to kill Sarutobi so he could be Hokage. And he would have succeeded too, but Hinata Hyuuga was in the right place at the right time to sense Orochimaru's subjects that led to the downfall of the whole entire plan.

And the worst part about that is that Sarutobi's *advisors*...they knew about the plan. They didn't *support* Danzo and his plan to assassinate the Hokage, but they *weren't against it* either.

At best, they were indifferent. At worst, they were *hoping* for Sarutobi to die and be able to stay blameless themselves.

Sarutobi's *shadow clone* was able to take care of them swiftly and dispose of the bodies. They got too complacent in their old age and didn't know what was going on before they were swiftly beheaded.

The blood was more annoying to clean than anything...

Jiraiya and Tsunade can't say they regret them dying either. Those two old bags were in the way long before Tsunade ever left the village.

And then Hiruzen found out even more. It turns out that Danzo used a modified version of Orochimaru's cursed seal to mark all of his ROOT agents with a silencing seal. Luckily, the geniuses that they are in their fields, Jiraiya and Tsunade were able to get rid of those seals from everyone. They were *much* simpler than the snake's Curse Mark – Danzo was *not* a seal master...

Few of the liberated ROOT agents were adults. They pledged their full loyalty to the Hokage now that Danzo was out of power and no longer controlling them – and Tsunade and Hiruzen *believe them*. They are still being put on probation, but they will be valuable assets to the village now.

But too many of them were *children*. Children who were losing their emotions little by little every day. Being liberated, they had such a rush of emotion and uncertainty. They were homeless, with no family.
It was the least Hiruzen could do to set them up in the orphan apartments with a monthly welfare stipend. At least until they can figure out something more to help the poor kids. He also set them up with counselors and therapists that Inoichi recommends to help them recover from their trauma.

Then there's all the other things that Danzo was part of. The disappearance and murder of Shisui Uchiha, the recruitment and brainwashing of Kabuto Yakushi to be Orochimaru's apprentice (Kabuto has now been officially added into Konoha's BINGO book), part of the plot to help kill the Kazakage.

Danzo used Hayate to test the healing powers of Kyuubi chakra to use on himself, to see if they can restore any of his numerous sharingan. And he knew he could eventually sell it or use it in some other way for even more power as well.

But it's now clear to Hiruzen that even after all the years he's lived, after everything he's experienced...he's still so naive. He's made too many mistakes in his life, and he never learned from older mistakes.

Hiruzen Sarutobi admits to himself that he really was too arrogant and trusting...exactly what Danzo told him.

And he knows that after all this is done, he will have to tell Tsunade everything. Because there is too much that he is still hiding from the next Hokage.

“I know that there were trying times in the village lately. We lost many good men and women, but they died protecting everyone in this village and the ideals we uphold. And I must do the same. To be able to protect my village, I must be able to admit when I am no longer capable doing the task, and to entrust the position on someone else.” Hiruzen announces to the crowd that he summoned to the square in front of the Hokage Tower.

(In reality it's a shadow clone. He's still being guarded elsewhere, while his guards have their own shadow clones in the crowd.)

People start whispering and mumbling everywhere.

“And, so I present to you all Tsunade Senju, the Fifth Hokage!” Hiruzen names, and Tsunade walks out in her own Hokage robes.

Hiruzen takes the red hat off his head, and gives it to Tsunade. She puts it on her head, and it's official. The coronation of the Fifth Hokage is complete.

“As your Hokage, I pledge to protect this village! I plan to improve this village – to make life better for everyone here! We will continue to be known as the strongest of the hidden villages, and we will never back down!” Tsunade gives her speech, and everyone cheers.

All the shinobi and civilians alike cheer for their Lady.

(And spread around, the Chuunin, genin, and sensei of Teams 7, 8, 10, and Gai all realize just what Naruto's secret mission with Jiraiya was about now.)

When the crowd clears, Tsunade and Hiruzen walk back into Tsunade's office with Jiraiya already there waiting.
Putting up privacy seals, Hiruzen speaks.

“As Hokage, there are some things you need to know.” Jiraiya is listening because, as far as both Hiruzen and Tsunade are concerned, he's basically co-Hokage, just without the hat.

“There's more? Goddamn it sensei, you really need to stop keeping things from us!” Tsunade groans, but the news she hears changes everything.

After this meeting, they send out a message.

Out there with a group of mercenaries, a black-haired shinobi – alone in the world – gets a message.

A message to come back.

It's what he's been hoping for for years...but he's also never dreaded something so much.

He immediately burns the message, and feels his hair blowing in the wind for a few calm, hopeful, seconds.

But he follows orders, and gets out of there. But he also begins to go to Iwa on a detour first.

Because if he's going home, then they're both going home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And with its titular chapter, the 'Revelations' arc is complete! Things in the sequel will definitely be different now with everything that happened in this chapter. And we finally got the resolution to Kakashi's chapter from before!

And the next and final arc of this story will be the 'Journey to Whirlpool' arc, so this is most likely the last time we'll see much of Konoha until the sequel.

This chapter was tough to write. I had the ideas planned out, but trying to get a decent chapter-length was very difficult (I still think this chapter is a bit too short). And I'm still not entirely planned out with the sequel yet, so trying to do set-ups for something I'm not sure of is difficult as well. xD

The final section of this chapter is probably obvious as to whom it's referring to, but just in case I won't say anything. Especially because there will be something unexpected later with it. ;)

Thank you all for reading, I hope you enjoyed it! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 30!

Also, don't forget to review!
From Desert to Swirling Sea

Chapter Summary

On their way to Whirlpool, Naruto and Jiraiya take a detour to Suna to fulfill a promise. Naruto has lunch and a discussion with two of the sand siblings, and then gets a lesson on sealing. And getting back on their journey, Naruto is surprised to find out about the test and trial that awaits him.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here's another chapter, and the first one of this arc! Hope you all enjoy!

Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 30)-From Desert to Swirling Sea

Naruto's P.O.V.

Fuck!

I can understand now why they were all mean and pissed off. The desert's so goddamn hot. I'd always be in a bad mood if I had to live out here. It sucks.

“You're lucky I like you kid, because this heat wouldn't be worth coming out here.” Pervy Sage complains to me, and... really?

I may think it sucks beyond all belief out here, but at least I'm not whining about it. And he's a Sandin?!

“Shut it, Old Perv.” I say, because I'm in a bad mood.

“I'm your sensei – you should give me some respect!”

“I'll shove that respect where the sun don't shine if you don't stop complaining!”

And he does shut up.

Good!

I really hope I find some super-duper secret body-cooling seal in Uzushio, because I never want to go through that desert again.
But at least we finally made it to Suna. We're at the village gates, and Pervy Sage is handing a message to the guard there.

“Yes, we were told that someone would be coming to deal with that thing.” The guard says, and I frown.

Gaara, despite everything he has done, is still a person. He's not a 'thing' that needs to be 'dealt' with – I could have been him and I know who I am.

“If you could take us to the boy, I would like to start getting ready. My student and I have somewhere to be and I would like to keep any delays to a minimum.” Pervy Sage says with such diplomacy.

He's never spoken like that in front of me. Though, I've only ever heard him speak to the Old Man, Grandma Tsunade, Kurenai-sensei, and Kakashi-sensei...and he's very rude to all of them!

“Of course. The sooner the better, in my opinion.” The guard says, he calls for one of his comrades to cover his spot as he leads us.

I have to admit, that despite the heat, Suna does look like a very nice village. When we first encountered Gaara and them threatening Konohamaru and his friends, that cemented a mental image of all Suna-people in my mind.

I saw them all mean and dangerous and untrustworthy.

And I know that's not fair. It's just like me being assumed evil because I contain the Kyuubi (who I learned was controlled by an Uchiha when he attacked...).

So, being here and seeing life in Suna – the kids playing, the merchants, the laughter – it really is a culture shock to realize that they are just like us.

This village, and its people, are really just like Konoha is. There are all kinds of people everywhere, but truly seeing it really reminds me that though we are different, we are all truly the same.

And that's why I want peace still. Despite everything I've been through, all the bad people I've encountered, and all the bad thoughts that I've had (some thoughts courtesy to one asshole Sannin), I know what I still want.

My thoughts have been so jumbled. Sometimes it's like I have no idea what I want. Do I want peace – or do I want revenge? Do I really care about why Hidan, Orochimaru, Itachi have gone bad – or do I just want them gone so they never hurt me or my friends again? Am I really telling my team everything, or am I trying to keep things hidden?

I wish this curse mark was gone. I know I'd gladly take it again if that bastard ever tried to hurt my friends, but I hate it. It's ugly, evil, it's affecting my relationship and friendships, and it's still hurting the Kyuubi.

But even though all my thoughts are screwed up right now, I can't even imagine how Gaara's must be. To have your bijuu constantly telling you to kill, to hurt...to never be able to sleep.

If I had to take a guess though, I would say that it's worse than torture.
“Do whatever is necessary. However, a member of our sealing corps will be supervising.” The Acting Kazekage tells us.

Gaara, being accompanied by Kankuro and Temari, just stares at me. He looks...hopeful if I had to pick an emotion from those eyes. His face shows nothing, but his eyes show something.

“As is expected. The preparation will take a few hours, would it be okay if my student took a tour around the village? He hasn't been exposed to other people and cultures that much, and I think this would be a great opportunity for him to get some life experience.” Pervy Sage says.

The hell?

This is the first time I'm hearing of this!

I mean, I took Gaara down when this village attacked my own. Not that I don't think I can handle myself, but I'm not dumb enough to not know that there may be some people here who may not be a fan of me...

“Of course. Kankuro, Temari! You will escort this young man around the village!” The Acting Kazakage says. I did not miss his glare, though...

...and I'm already on edge.

“Yes Baki-sensei!” They say in unison, and before sparing one more look at Gaara, they turn to me. “Naruto...we'd like to talk to you first, if that's okay?” Kankuro asks me, and I'm surprised.

But I accept their offer, and Pervy Sage just nods at me as he begins to draw some seals on chakra paper.

“And you have any preferences for food?” Temari asks as we walk out.

“Got any ramen places?”

“THIS STUFF IS AWESOME!” I yell as savor the broth of this ramen.

It's not better than Ichiraku – but it is very different. It's really difficult to even compare them, really, because of how different they are.

“The spices native to this region are different than those in the Land of Fire. I was just as stunned when I first ate in Konoha, too.” Kankuro explains, and I nod as I gulp down more of this delicious ramen broth.

It's funny – they're acting civil to me. Almost like trying to be my friends.

After another couple of minutes, I finish the bowl of ramen and we start to talk.

“I first wanted to thank you.” Temari says, and I'm not really surprised; after all, my offer does two things: helps someone suffer less, and also offers their village more protection from it getting free.

But which reason – or both? - are they thanking me for?

“Gaara wasn't like this as a kid. He was nice, compassionate, and just like any other kid. But then our father...our father put the Shukaku in him as a gambit for power. But he didn't realize how bad his seal was, and it made Gaara act for the worse. Gaara was isolated, because the Shukaku attacked anyone who came close. People became afraid of him, and he grew to hate.” Kankuro explains.
That's...terrible.

Just like me, Gaara's father sealed it in him. But mine did it to protect the village and did it with knowing how it would affect me, and tried his best to make life decent for me.

But Gaara's father did it for power. And then it backfired and instead made the village weaker.

Gaara...

“We love our brother, we really do. As much as he has hurt and scared us, we know it isn't him. It's what was done to him. When you told him about your sensei...he was so hopeful. It was the first time we saw the old Gaara in a very long time. He cried with us and apologized, and has been looking forward to hearing from you ever since.” Temari continues.

Now I regret waiting so long to ask Pervy Sage, or anyone. I'm sure I could have asked the Old Man to send a message or something sooner.

“We came as soon as we could. We had missions that—” I'm cut off.

“No, we understand. I don't know if I should be telling you this, but Orochimaru killed our father and impersonated him at the Chuunin Exams. We didn't know it wasn't the Kazekage. We were just following orders.” Kankuro interrupts.

Wait...the Kazekage was their father???

The Kazekage sealed a Tailed Beast into his own son for power.

Un-fucking-believable.

“I understand that. You all seem like decent people here. What surprises me the most is that the Kazekage had his own son made a jinchuuriki.” I say.

“Then he tried to have Gaara killed because he was too dangerous. We never trusted father again after that – he tried to have our brother murdered for something he caused!” Temari adds.

I have no idea how to even respond to that. The whole situation is disgusting and I feel so sorry for these three.

“I'm sorry...” I say, because there really is nothing else for me to say in response to that.

“Just thank you for doing this. You showed us mercy after the fight. You're giving our brother his life back. Naruto Uzumaki, we are in your debt.” Temari says, and I shake my head.

“No, no debt. I made the offer because it's the right thing to do. I don't want people to face unnecessary pain. And I could have very easily been in your brother's position. I would have been if my seal wasn't as good. Please, this wasn't a favor. It was just me trying to help someone who was hurting.”

“Well, we'll never forget. As far as we're concerned – and our sensei who's acting Kazekage – Konoha has done a great service for us.” Kankuro states matter-of-factly, and I can't argue with that.

“Alright then. And to thank me, how about another bowl of ramen?” I joke, and Kaankuro and Temari happily eat another bowl with me.

And after we eat for another few minutes, a shinobi drops down behind us, with a porcelain mask but with beige-colored uniforms. A Suna ANBU.
“You three have been summoned to return.” The shinobi says to us, and I finish my ramen with an audible, delicious slurp.

“Lead the way!”

“Now, Naruto, so far our lessons have only been about seal creation, and not seal modification. So there's one basic rule with seal modification: you cannot start from scratch. Whatever you want to do, you have to figure out how to do it with that's already there. Why do you think that is?” Pervy Sage asks me, immediately delving into a lesson on seal theory.

Let's think, Naruto – because things that are already sealed or affected have already had their basic structures changed. You can't just undo it to restore their basic structures – they have been integrated into something else and have somewhat become something new in its own right. Modifications can be undone, but initial seals cannot be.

I know this. But I have to have more confidence in myself – I'm a Chuunin now.

“Because the basic structure has already been merged with the initial seal and there's no way to separate them.” I say, confident in myself.

“Correct. Look at the seals I have drawn up. Most of them are still far out of your league, but I think you would benefit from seeing them yourself.” Pervy Sage instructs, and I look.

There are many seals and symbols which I recognize – strengthening seals, stabilizers, shaping seals, balance seals. There are so many things here that I learned at the very beginning – the basics. Though they are all connected to things I don't understand, the entire things is built upon these basics.

“You're trying to get me to see that the basics we covered are the foundation for this seal? Seals are built upon other seals, and these basics are necessary for anything and everything.” I conclude.

Pervy Sage really is a fan of self-learning – he just guides me to the next step and wants me to figure it all out for myself.

“Exactly. The realization always has more of an impact if you see it yourself in action rather than just being told it.” He lectures.

I gotta admit, it is a little off-putting to be given a lesson while Gaara is just lying here covered in seals, while his siblings and the acting-Kazekage watch us...

“They teach these lessons for a reason. Now, watch.” Pervy Sage instructs, and I know he's ready to activate the seal. “Gaara, I'm not sure how this will feel as it happens. But it will be drawing from your chakra and from the Ichibi – but with the way your seal currently is you may feel any number of symptoms.” Pervy Sage warns Gaara.

“Just do whatever you need to do. Please...” Gaara pleads, and it just makes me relieved that we are here now to help him. He is desperate.
“Alright. Here goes...” Pervy Sage says and he presses his palm to the center of Gaara's chest, and the seal starts moving into his chest.

All Gaara does is continuously moan as it happens – either form pain or relief I have no idea.

When the seal is almost done going in – for at least a full twenty seconds – there is a bright light and when it finishes Gaara gasps.

“It is done.” Pervy Sage says, tilting a cup of water to Gaara's lips, who drinks it down in one gulp.

“Gaara!” Both Kankuro and Temari shout and run over to their brother. Their sensei/acting-Kazekage comes over too.

“How do you feel?” My sensei asks to my fellow jinchuuriki.

“I don't hear it...I don't hear it!” Gaara says, actually smiling. Not one of those murderous smirks, but a real, legitimate, happy smile!


“No, not at all! I feel...amazing. I've never felt like this before. Thank you!” Gaara tells us, first looking to sensei and then to me.

“You're very welcome. Well, my work here is done. We'll stay for a couple days to make sure there are no adverse side-effects, but then we need to get on our way.” Pervy Sage says.

We're leaving so soon? I know we came here just for a detour – and we're headed to Whirlpool – but I thought that now that Gaara's seal is fixed, I'd be able to talk to him. Actually truly talk to him – he's a jinchuuriki like me – and now he has his life back.

But I understand. I'm supposed to be learning and training, and there's only so much I can do here.

“Of course, Master Jiraiya. Thank you for helping my student and the village.” Baki says to sensei.

Well...at least I still have two days to try and get to know Gaara. Maybe even to become friends...

“Again, I cannot thank you two enough for what you have done for me. And I'm so sorry for what I did to your friends. I'm relived they are doing well.” Gaara tells us.

And he's smiling. And this is not the first time seeing it!

Last night, after the sealing was completed, all six of us (me, Pervy Sage, Gaara, his two siblings, and their sensei Baki) went out for dinner.

And...it was very awkward. According to all four members of their team, it was Gaara's first time in a group meal. And...he said he liked the experience! It was fun having a real conversation, where there were moments of silence and he could express his own thoughts.

It...it just all seems so cruel and horrible to me. I cannot possible imagine the life Gaara lived up until this point. But I am so glad I was able to help make him feel better.

“That wasn't you, Gaara. I know it wasn't. Please...try to forgive yourself.” I say.
I probably wouldn't be feeling this way if he had permanently hurt - or killed - any of my friends. But he hadn't. And because of that, I'm able to separate my feelings enough to let me think about Gaara fairly.

I know that even though he is beyond relieved, happy, and excited for his new beginning – he is racked with guilt.

“Total forgiveness may not be possible. But I will try to better myself to not let it define my life.” Gaara says.

I suppose that's the best any of us can hope for, really.

Pervy Sage and I say our goodbyes to them, and with a bow from all of us, we leave the Suna gates and head back into the desert, back on our trek to Whirpool.

And of course, not even a half-hour later...

“Naruto, can you use some of that Water-Style jutsu on me? The heat is killer!” He complains.

So, instead, I use some Wind-Style jutsu on him and make his heat even worse.

“STOP COMPLAINING! AREN'T I SUPPOSED TO BE THE KID HERE?” I yell, because he's so annoying!

...But he's also a really good person and sensei...

I can't believe how the environment and climate changes before my very eyes.

Somehow, the desert first shifted into a dry tundra. Then a sort-of oasis appeared, and soon enough we were traveling through a bayou, and then it morphed into a wetland.

The wetland turned into a swamp. The swamp itself was windy, and it was almost flooded. And then the swamp drained and led into a sea.

It only got more and more windy and treacherous to travel through – Pervy Sage had to set up seals on our tents to prevent them and us from getting blown away from the wind as we slept.

So after three more days traveling, we go to a point where we needed to start water-walking completely to continue onward.

“Can't we summon Boss Gama to carry us?” I ask Pervy Sage.

“Of course we could. But you could always use more chakra control training, right?” He teases, and I groan as we begin.

It's weird – to keep constantly water-walking for hours and hours. There's concentration and muscle-memory, but the more you do it the weaker your chakra is, so it's always a new constant battle for balance.

(But, luckily, I never thought I would fall in. I'd bombard this ocean with Shadow Clones if I felt I was close to falling in.)

And after a couple more hours of walking – for the most part in silence but this old perv kept
mumbling to himself about ideas for his next *manuscript* – We reach a single stone in the sea for us to stand on...

...And in front of us is what appears to be an island, but it is *surrounded by whirlpools* through my entire field of vision.

The island is at least several kilometers away. And there seem to be whirlpools the entire distance there...

“Well, kid, here's our first challenge. You're the Uzumaki. Figure out how to get us into the village.” Pervy Sage suddenly says.

*The fuck?*

I have to figure this out?!?!

“So you're telling me that we went all this way just for *me* to have to figure out how to get through this?” I ask, and Pervy Sage just shrugs.

“Yup. So, you better get started. I'll be writing.” He says, sitting down on the stone – and taking up most of the space – and just leaving me here to almost-literally *sink or swim on my own*.

“You're an asshole, Pervy Sage...” I mumble.

He only laughs at me. *Goddamn it!*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, that's the first chapter of this final arc! Are you all excited? I certainly am!

This arc is just going to be about me being creative and trying to do some interesting original storytelling. I have several ideas and I think it's going to be pretty fun!

I know my chapters have been shorter lately. It's just the way things are turning out; what I have been planning just doesn't need a lot of words to express the ideas.

But, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I know it's very different than what the story's been, and it'll continue to be different until it's over and the sequel begins. But I think it'll be worth the ride.

Anyway, thank you all for reading! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 31!

Also, don't forget to review!
Trials and Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Naruto tries for days to solve the puzzle to enter Whirlpool, until he finally manages a bit of luck. Naruto and Jiraiya explore the remains of what once was a lively village. Naruto and Jiraiya get taken underground.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And here we go with another chapter! Hope you all enjoy!
Also, please review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Be a Ninja (Chapter 31)-Trials and Discoveries

Naruto's P.O.V.

What a bunch of fucking shit.

Like, this is bullshit. Total, reeking pure bullshit.

“Can you hurry up already? I wanna stretch my legs on land.” Pervy Sage says.

“WELL IF YOU WOULD HELP ME WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO ACTUALLY GET ON YOUR GODDAMN PRECIOUS FUCKING LAND!” I scream at him, and he only laughs.

Oh, fuck you...

I've been trying to figure this out for two days now. Two full days of just sitting on this fucking stone surrounded by this whirlpool sea.

There was barely enough room for our tents. And luckily I have food packed in my storage seals, because I would be starving right now.

I have tried everything I can think of to get into the village. My shadow clones hate me – I have put them through so much!

The first thing I tried, which I know was stupid but it was worth a shot, was trying to create enough shadow clones to somehow carry me/let me use them as a stepping stone to get all the way to the island, like a really long version of how I use them for my Uzumaki Barrage attack.

That...failed spectacularly.

First, none of the shadow clones can find any footing at all on the water. And that's not because they can't water-walk – because they are able to do that – but it's because these whirlpools are weird.
I don't know if there is some special chakra running through them because I don't have Hinata's awesome abilities – though I do suspect the Uzumaki have something to do with this... - but my shadow clones can't find footing.

And I just can't create them fast enough one-after-another. I tried jumping off of one from the stone, and then creating another in the air to jump off of after, and it just isn't physically possible for me to do it fast enough before I'd fall.

So that plan is out.

So then I tried using water-style jutsu to see if I could somehow part the water; like either move the whirlpools or crate a dam of sorts to reveal calm water for walking or maybe another stone.

That didn't work either. I don't even know if it's possible – but when I tried I just got a few slashes and waves, but there was no substantial movement of any body of water or the whirlpools.

Then I had another idea.

'Hey, asshole, if you're not gonna help me can I at least use you for your jutsu?' I asked him.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, make yourself useful and create some Earth walls to help us get across.' I demanded of my jerk of a sensei. Pretty much the same thing I tried to do, but with an element strong against water that I am incapable of doing, and so are my summons.

'I'll try. But I was on a roll – I better not lose my train of thought because of you!' He whined – and I am so happy that he did lose his train of thought, because serves him right! - and did what I asked.

And nothing.

Only a few individual rocks – more like pebbles – came up from the water.

'Hmm, that's odd. I really did try, by the way, so don't go all accusing me of sabotaging you. You're doing great, by the way...' He teased me.

'Shit up.'

So, it really does seem to me that there's something going on. Whether it's a natural thing, or something done by Uzumaki – or others? - to prevent unwanted entry into the village, it's going to require something else.

"Is this just some test for me to say, 'I give up' and then you make some point? Or do you really not know how to get in?" I ask him, frustrated – and I wouldn't put it past him to waste my time for some lesson I wouldn't be able to even 'get' without some boring speech.

"I really don't know. I definitely have some theories about it – at least one of which you have actually tried already – but I don't know for sure. This is your show, Naruto. You want to learn about your people? Work for it." He tells me, going back to his writing, but not before patting my head once.

Maybe some ramen will help me think better.
Okay, I just had some ramen and I'm ready to get back to trying to figure this shit out. First, I need to review what I've already done. This was one of the things Pervy Sage first instructed me on with seals – when you get stuck, review what you have and go from there.

So far, I've tried to physically bypass the whirlpools and the sea: first by trying to jump over it, then by trying to move the whirlpools, then trying to create a physical dam barrier using both water and earth.

These didn't work – I can't create clones fast enough, and there seems to be something blocking the use of our chakra, as even Pervy Sage only could bring up pebbles from the sea floor.

So, I've tried everything I can think of to avoid the whirlpools and the water. But maybe...

...Maybe the answer lies within the whirlpools.

Maybe, there's some sort of pattern to the way they move? Maybe the speed at which they spin, or the direction they spin, anything like that?

I didn't notice anything before, but my shadow clones were never specifically paying attention to those. But now, if I'm looking for it, we may be able to spot something.

To be able to do this and process all the information, I'm going to have to take this systematically. A few whirlpools and shadow clones at a time.

Well, might as well start now.

“Shadow-Clone Jutsu!”

Okay, I really wish Shikamaru was here right now.

Because I'm at a loss. I can't figure this out. I spent yet another day just analyzing as many whirlpools as I could. All of them spin the same way – all of them spin at the same speed, they all look the same, they all smell the same.

I need my genius best friend here because I'm about to lose my fucking mind!

And thinking of Shikamaru...makes me think of Hinata. I miss her so much. I miss Shika too, but Hinata and I barely got to do any relationship stuff before all these missions.

I should be able to control myself. This is important! This is about my training, my safety, and my clan!

Yet I can't stop thinking about just hugging her, kissing her, seeing her smile, smelling her hair, hearing her voice reassure me that everything's going to be okay.

I feel so lonely out here. Pervy Sage is definitely looking out for me, and I know he cares about me and everything, but even after everything I don't share a bond with him yet like I do with Kurenai-sensei or anyone from Teams 7, 10, or Gai.

I just miss Shika and Hinata.

And being out here on this stupid fucking stone for days, increasingly failing at solving this puzzle, makes me feel dumb.
I'm starting to feel how I did back in the Academy. Before I really had made friends with Shika or Hinata. Back before Iruka-sensei liked me. Back when before and after Heba was at the orphanage with me. Before I had my friends from the other teams.

And being constantly reminded that I'm failing at this – via the entire ocean in front of me – really just makes me feel like shit.

Time to waste more chakra on shadow clones in some vain attempt at entry...

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*Holy shit!*

“PERVY SAGE! I THINK I GOT IT!” I yell out, getting the memories of one of my shadow clones.

“Yeah? Then, spill. I'm dying to get off of this thing.” He says, and I don't comment on that...

“My shadow clone...when it jumped into this whirlpool wayyyyy back there, it got dizzy and suddenly it was on dry land! I think the whirlpool's a teleporter of some sort! Maybe a transportation seal? Or maybe something like Dad's Hiraishin?” I ask, excited because maybe Dad's jutsu is already helping me this soon!

“Really? Fascinating. Make another clone and show me.” He asks, and I do just that.

However, I have to make a few shadow clones so they are able to stand on each other's heads and when they jump, the top one launches off the next so it is able to get enough distance to make it to the correct whirlpool.

And when it enters, my clone doesn't dispel instantly. I get no memories from it until a few seconds later when I clearly see more dry land.

“I got it's memories! It's definitely it!” I shout, because I'm ready to see Whirlpool Village with *my own* eyes!

“Give me a moment to check it out.” Pervy Sage says, and he makes his own shadow clone which is able to jump all the way to the whirlpool on its own and it enters.

After a minute of silence – *jeez*, he said he wanted to hurry! - Pervy Sage just smiles at me.

“Congratulations, Naruto. You got it! Let's go in!”

YES!

I'M AWESOME!

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To get into the village, I had to jump off of more shadow clones, and Pervy Sage – the show-off asshole – was able to jump there on his own.

And as my shadow clones dispelled when they got here, I never really got a good look at the land until now.
And...it's kinda depressing.

There’s so many broken buildings. I see remnants of peoples’ homes – beds, cupboards books.

But the area is beautiful. The trees are unlike those that are in Konoha or Suna. Their leaves are colored so differently, their trunks a different design. There are flowers everywhere – so the village still has some life in it.

I walk for a few seconds, just looking around but still be careful of any hidden seals, when something very unexpected happens.

“Pervy Sage!” I call out to him, holding out my arm with the glowing bracelet. “There must still be Uzumaki here!”

“Looks like it. Well, stand with me and lead the way. We don't know if they have any booby traps.” He tells me, and he walks over to me and we start following my bracelet's lead like we did when we were searching for Grandma Tsunade.

After a few minutes of walking through the desolate village, my bracelet does something it didn't do before – it just stops glowing.

“Huh?” I ask aloud, and I turn to Pervy Sage who appears to be just as confused.

“I don't know, Naruto. I don't know how Minato made that bracelet, so I couldn't tell you exactly how it works in a place like this.” He tells me.

“HELLO? IS ANYONE THERE?” I scream out, having an idea.

“Quiet! What are you doing?” He scolds me, lightly hitting my shoulder.

“Well, I was thinking, with Tsunade she was the only Uzumaki. What if there are several here? The bracelet might not be able to handle that and just...give up?” I ask.

And...saying it aloud sounds a lot dumber than it did in my head.

“Hmm...that's not a bad hypothesis. Still, you can warn me before you do something like that!” He lectures, and I suppose he does have a point.

“I'm sorry. Maybe I should be doing those reality checks...I should have checked with you. This seal is really messing with me...” I tell him, and I just feel like shit.

Once again, I don't think about telling my sensei. I had a thought and just went with it because I knew what I was doing, but I didn't even think to tell my comrade.

“I understand. And it's my fault for telling you to not do them. We'll get through this, I promise you.” He reassures me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “And if anyone is listening, we come in peace. We're from Konoha. I'm Jiraiya of the Sannin, and this is my student Naruto Uzumaki.” He speaks loudly, and at least I felt better that he thinks my idea was actually a good one.

Suddenly, an older bald man appears right in front of us only a few meters away, seemingly shifting out of thin air.

Pervy Sage and I immediately get in our battle stances, ready for anything.
“From Konoha, you say? And with a child Uzumaki? If so, then let me officially welcome you to Uzushiogakure. I am Sikona Uzumaki, the leader of the village.” The man says, smiling at us.

Okay...I never expected Shikamaru's idea that other Uzumaki to be here to really be true.

But it is true.

My clan.

That is insane.

The Uzumaki that are here...they live underground!

“All after the attack on the village, very few of us escaped. I was the only one to come back – this is my home, and I didn't want to just abandon it. I knew trying to rebuild the village was not only futile but also dangerous. So, I decided that I would make an underground city. I moved the essence of our clan and our lives down there.” Sikona explains to us.

He hasn't taken us underground yet. He's explaining what happened after the massacre of our clan.

“How many of you are there?” Pervy Sage asks.

“There are twenty-six of us Uzumaki living down there. Many of them children or teens like you, Naruto. Some non-Uzumaki parents live there too with their spouse and child.” Sikona tells me, and I can't believe it!

It's not like when I found out Tsunade was (distantly) related to me. She's technically an Uzumaki, but she doesn't care. Perhaps it's because she carries the Senju name, but the fact of her being an Uzumaki hasn't come up in a single conversation since my bracelet tracked us to her.

These people pride themselves on being Uzumaki. My parents died for me and the village and gifted me Mom's maiden name in her honor. From what Kakashi-sensei, Pervy Sage, and the Old Man told me, she was proud to be an Uzumaki and my Dad was proud to have married one.

And he created this bracelet for her too, so he was proud for her as well.

Just being here, talking to another Uzumaki, and learning something that others don't know about my clan...it makes me feel closer to my parents. Both of them – not just Mom. Dad supported Mom in her want to learn more, and it feels to me that I have his support too.

Thank you, Mom and Dad.

“So why have you two come to the village?” Sikona asks us.

“Well, Naruto is my student. I am Konoha's sealing expert, and I wanted to teach Naruto fuuinjutsu. And I thought he could learn and appreciate it more if he came to where his people are from.” Pervy Sage answers.

“I see. You definitely could learn a lot here, boy. We may have lost a lot of good men and women, but we never lost our skills or knowledge. But Naruto, do you have a goal for coming here as well?” Sikona asks me directly.

“Well...I just wanted to learn more about my clan. You see, I was an orphan growing up. And I
never even knew there was an Uzumaki clan until just a little while ago, and then I learned that my mother was an Uzumaki. And this bracelet, you see, it can detect nearby Uzumaki. My Dad made it and left it to me before he died…” I tell him.

“I understand. I’d be happy to tell you everything you want to know about our clan. Well, if you are who you say you are.” Sikona tells me, and I am immediately skeptical and on alert now.

Pervy Sage is the same.

“What do you mean?” Jiraiya asks, getting serious.

“Calm down, now. I just need to do a harmless blood test. I wont hurt you. It's just to confirm that Naruto really does carry Uzumaki blood. Because even though you carry Konoha headbands, I cannot just take your word that you really are friends.” Sikona explains, holding his hands up in defense.

Pervy Sage and I look to each other, and he gives me a nod before relaxing.

“I understand. Naruto, is this alright with you?” My sensei asks me.

That's one thing I really do appreciate about training with Pervy Sage. As annoying, pervy, and irritating as he can be...he really does look out for me. He talks to me. He asks my opinion on things. And I know I give him a hard time, but he knows I really appreciate everything he's done for me as well.

“Yes. I will submit to the test.” I say, and Sikona nods before taking something out of his clothes.

“Very good. This is a standard sealing scroll locked to everyone except those with Uzumaki blood. If you would?” Sikona asks before placing the scroll on the floor.

“And I don't mean to accuse you of anything, Sikona, but would you mind if I quickly examined the scroll myself first? To make sure my student is safe?” Pervy Sage asks.

Hey, it's only fair, I guess.

“Of course.” He responds, and Pervy Sage walks to it and holds it for a few seconds before placing it back on the ground.

“I believe it is safe. You may proceed if you still wish to, Naruto.” And that's good enough for me!

I step up to the scroll and bite my thumb like I'm used to, and squeeze out a drop until it falls on the scroll.

And just like with before with Dad's own scroll, there's a bright light before some basic weapons, food, and medical supplies comes out of the scroll.

So...this confirms what I already knew?!

“Perfect! Now that you have proven that you really are an Uzumaki, would you two like to come and see the village proper? There's so much we can show you!” Sikona exclaims, much more excited than he has been so far.

I probably would be too – finding another member of our incredibly small clan!

“Sure, let's go!” I say, and Pervy Sage just laughs before we follow Sikona.
“So, tell me. How did you figure out the seal in the whirlpools? It was designed for an expert Uzumaki seal master to be able to decipher.” Sikona asks as we sit down after teleporting.

Just like with the whirlpools when we entered the island, we teleported again underground.

“Umm...my sensei said it was a trial that only I could solve. And I kinda got lucky. A shadow clone finally found the answer and got onto the island.” I answer, and Sikona looks surprised.

“So you just happened to pick the right one?!” Sikona asks, obviously shocked at what I just said.

“Not exactly. I had checked every single one until that one. It was a pain in the ass.” I say, pissed about all the time and chakra I spent while my asshole sensei didn't bother to help at all.

“So you managed to make over a thousand shadow clones? How long were you guys out there?!” Sikona just keeps getting more and more shocked!

“Umm...just three or so days. I can make a lot of shadow clones.” I answer, and Sikona just laughs.

“My, my, you're really special! You're an Uzumaki and you didn't figure out the seals and clues. I'm amazed, really!” He just laughs.

Does he...know about Kyuubi now? I mean, he is the reason I am able to make so many shadow clones.

And if he doesn't, I really hope being a jinchuuriki doesn't change things here for us...

...Because I already like it here. And I don't want us to get kicked out or anything just for something I was practically born with.

“Well, how about we set up a tour around the village?” Sikona asks.

That sounds good to me!

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, this chapter was pretty fun to write! I just got to be creative with a trial to enter the village, and just used my imagination to make the village how I wanted it to be.

Like I said before, this arc is just going to be original stuff and trying to have some fun with being creative. I hope you guys are enjoying it so far!

Exactly how much of this arc I want to have a lasting effect in the main plot, I'm unsure about. But I think this arc is more about just enjoying the ride than trying to make it key to the plot.

But whatever the case, I don't have many other notes for this chapter. It was just me trying to be a bit creative!

Thank you all for reading! Stay tuned next week for Chapter 32!

Also, don't forget to review!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!