I - Autumn's Tiger

by DildoFaggins

Summary

Having just graduated the ninja academy due to a happenstance and placed on Team 7, Naruto is roaring to go. How will his journey be affected if the Shadow Clone Jutsu was not the only thing he learned from the Forbidden Scroll that night?

Starring: Naruto's strange version of Multiple Personality Disorder, screwed-up politics (now in ninja flavor), plotting, puppy-love, literal puppy-love (not in the weird way), rational thought, and the disaster that is a walking chakra-fountain with control rivaling that of the best medic-nin.

Notes

I don't own canon Naruto. What I do own, is the plot, and the several jutsus, techniques, and characters I've created and inserted.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu? But that’s my worst jutsu!” Naruto cried out, dismayed.

He had barely been lucky enough to get away from that damned tower! Thank god for Grandpa being a pervert, otherwise he’d have failed the extra graduation exam for sure! It seemed a bit fishy – after all, Grandpa had said that the room in which the Forbidden Scroll was in was completely off limits whenever he had been at the Fire-Shadow Tower, but he supposed that was the point of the test – infiltration, and search and retrieval. He mentally made a note to practice more of his other skills in the one-week gap between passing and Team Selections… after all, the only reason he could pull this one off was that he pranked a lot… otherwise he’d be kicked off the ninja program for sure!

But he’d get through this one, believe it!

“But why is the first technique a Clone Jutsu? That’s my worst niche! What does the description say?!”

He turned to the scroll and read more closely.

“Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu

Creator – Tobirama Senju

Classification – S Rank

Reason – The Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu is a highly chakra intensive technique. Usage of this technique by anyone under Jounin rank is expressly forbidden due to chance of death, and ninja require a chakra level check before learning.

Requirements – Jounin level Chakra reserves.

Description – The Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu is a non-elemental Clone Jutsu. The technique forms a solid clone which can use chakra and physically affecting the environment. The chakra of the creator is evenly dispersed; unless adequate proficiency is achieved, and the user can distribute chakra mentally. The clones, essentially a living copy of the user, can retain memories, and transfer them to the user on dispelling. Any unused chakra besides the amount used to create the ‘shell’ of the clone will be returned to the user on dispelling.

Warnings – The clone will dispel on one hit. Mass dispelling is discouraged due to chance of brain damage.”

Naruto sat back with a gob smacked look on his face. The Clone Jutsu taught at the academy were basically very low level Genjutsu, essentially a light illusory mirage. But the scroll said that this one was physical and could do as much damage as the user! If he learned this one, that bastard Sasuke would have to bow down to him! Well, he’d be learning a jutsu made by the Second Fire-Shadow, so obviously it had to be kick-ass!
And… transferring memories back to the user…

Naruto’s prankster side went into overdrive. Having to meticulously plan for every situation had given him an out-of-the-box kind of mindset, so it wasn’t unbelievable for him to eventually reach one conclusion – learning this jutsu could save him a lot of time.

Having several clones of himself who could read? Perhaps the entire civilian library at once?! Or! Or! Maybe he’d finally be able to do that damned Leaf Balancing exercise well enough when many of him were practicing it! He had to get this down!

Underneath the jutsu description was an artistic depiction of the hand-sign required, and he grinned when he saw it was only a single, simple one. He made the hand-sign and concentrated hard on the image of another him popping up next to him… maybe in a cloud of smoke?

“Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

The entire clearing, he was in was covered with smoke. He hacked and coughed a bit, not really used to the chakra smoke that gathered around a technique user when using non-elemental techniques. He didn’t remember why the smoke was created, but it had something to do with too much chakra…

He slept that day when Iruka-sensei was lecturing in class… anyway, with this jutsu, he could learn everything he skipped! Then he’d leave that Uchiha bastard in the dust!

When the smoke cleared… his jaw almost fell out of its socket.

A vast sea of orange and blond. Oh, dear god, how many clones did he make?!

“AHHHHHHHHHH! I’m you!”

All of them winced when they all proclaimed as such together. Then they all broke into near identical laughter.

“Hey, hey, hey! This technique was so easy! Why did Mizuki-sensei say that we have two hours to learn one?” one of the clones finally pointed out.

“I don’t know. But maybe if we learn more from the scroll, we’ll get bonus points?” another yelled out from somewhere in the branches.

“Hey, that’s right! The scroll said there were ten techniques in there! Hey, boss, read the other ones!”

“That’s a great idea! Let’s see… there are only five more non-elemental techniques though…” the original Naruto sighed, but then instantly was swept up in a horde of clones gunning for the scroll. “Hey!”

“Boss, if we learn a lot of jutsus, everyone will definitely acknowledge us then!” one of the clones excitedly exclaimed.

“We’d maybe be made Fire-Shadow! Grandpa will have to hand over his hat to us, no questions asked!” Another smugly put in.

The original Naruto immediately felt renewed vigor. “That’s right! Let me read the scroll.”

While nine of the clones gathered around the original to read the scroll, the rest of them were left either perched in the trees in wait or anxiously pacing around the huddle in the middle of the
clearing. Mizuki-sensei had said that they have only two hours… now one hour and fifty-five minutes. Would they be able to do it?

Meanwhile, the ten in the center unfurled the scroll fully and each randomly chose a jutsu to read before quickly going through.

“Grand Clone Explosion Jutsu

Creator – Kentaro Nigashi

Classification – A rank

Reason - The Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu is a highly chakra intensive technique. Usage of this technique by anyone under Genin rank is expressly forbidden due to chance of death, and Chuunin require a chakra level check before learning.

Requirements – Chuunin level Chakra reserves, Chuunin level chakra control.

Description – The Grand Clone Explosion Jutsu is a complementary technique to any clone that has substance – either an elemental clone or the Shadow Clone Jutsu. It relies on largely overpacking the clones with chakra, or (if possible) having a normal clone destabilize their own chakra to such a level, that the construct explodes. This not only requires a keen sense of one’s own chakra, but also a passable level of control to channel chakra.

Warnings – Large blast radius.

Adamantine Strength Nin-Taijutsu Technique

Creator – Hashirama Senju

Classification – S rank

Reason – The Adamantine Strength Nin-Taijutsu Technique requires an extremely high level of chakra control that can only be matched by a medical ninja of extreme skill.

Requirements – Perfect chakra control.

Description – The Adamantine Strength Nin-Taijutsu Technique relies on extreme chakra control to maximize the kinetic force behind attacks. Chakra is rushed to the point of impact and destabilized, which massively increases force, before re-stabilizing and drawing it back, all in the blink of an eye. The difference in mini-seconds between each of these phases is what causes failure in execution of this technique.

Warnings – Attempts by anyone of inadequate skill leads to dismemberment and loss of limbs. Since actual strength is not altered, this Nin-Taijutsu is only of use in battle.

Mental Palace Technique

Creator – Tobirama Senju and Niisha Yamanaka
**Classification** – A rank

**Reason** – The **Mental Palace Technique** requires extreme levels of concentration and creativity in equal measure.

**Requirements** – None

**Description** – The **Mental Palace** technique is one that intrinsically relates to the mind. The user organizes the mind into separate ‘rooms’ that help memory recollection and emotional control. Mastery of this technique allows the user to easily assimilate new information, grants perfect recall, and aids chakra control depending on how meticulously done.

**Warnings** – Failure to complete the technique before emerging from the trance leads to immediate death. Failure to properly form and account for all the user’s memories can lead to insanity. Failure to create a sound mental structure can lead to insanity. Attempting the technique without proper concentration can lead to technique failure but also long term emotional disorders.

**Eight Gates Commandment Technique**

**Creator** – Isshin Neki

**Classification** – Variable.

**Reason** – The **Eight Gates Commandment Technique** causes harm to the user’s body in an inverse relation to the physical condition.

**Requirements** – Calm, collected mind to locate the eight gates in the body. None.

**Description** – The **Eight Gates Commandment Technique** is unique in the sense that it only unlocks the body’s in-built limiters on chakra flow to enhance the strength of the user to unbelievable levels. Strength, speed, and mental procession power is greatly enhanced.

**Warnings** – High training can allow the user to withstand the backlash more, while no training at all can lead to the user’s death on opening the first gate. Standard injuries depending on Taijutsu style. Unlocking all eight gates will lead to the user’s death.

**Element Breakdown Technique**

**Creator** – Takemi Senju

**Classification** – S rank

**Reason** – While minor forms of the **Element Breakdown Technique** are used by ninja to breath while underground or in water at high chakra cost and risk, the element breakdown technique requires massive amounts of chakra to fully convert one element to another on a much larger scale.

**Requirements** – Mastery over the elements to be converted.

**Description** – The **Element Breakdown Technique** allows the user to convert one of the five elements to another of the five. The can be used to provide fuel for elemental techniques, mainly. Over time, the technique can be performed without hand-signs as mastery is gained.
Warnings – Cannot be used against elements fueled by another chakra signature. Ingestion or breathing of malformed elements can lead to death. Incorrect performance can lead to permanent chakra loss.

**Earth Style – True Earth Wading Jutsu**

*Creator – Byakutsuchi Aburame*

*Classification – B rank*

*Reason – The True Earth Wading Jutsu requires a steady output of miniscule amounts of chakra from all the user’s chakra points.*

*Requirements – Perfect chakra control, Jounin level chakra reserves*

*Description – The True Earth Wading Jutsu dispenses Earth-style chakra from the user’s chakra points, allowing for minor control over the element. The user can wade through the ground as if it were air, and not feel the need to breath if the user is underground. While the amount of chakra dispersed is very small, it is as such per second, which means that over time, the technique takes its toll on the user.*

*Warnings – Improper performance of technique can lead to permanent sealing of chakra points, leading to incapability of continuing ninja career.*

**Fire Style – Fire Thrusters Jutsu**

*Creator – Goen Uchiha*

*Classification – A rank*

*Reason – The Fire Thrusters Jutsu cannot be performed without almost perfect chakra control and perfect mastery over Fire-style chakra. Knowledge of chakra points also is vital.*

*Requirements – Perfect chakra control, Fire-style chakra mastery.*

*Description – The Fire Thrusters Jutsu allows the user to gain momentum by blowing fire in the opposite direction of which movement is being performed. Knowing the location of the user’s chakra points can allow the user to accelerate any movement.*

*Warnings – Improper execution can lead to loss of limbs, burning out of chakra network, or death.*

**Five Elements – Great Dragon Combo Jutsu**

*Creator – Hiruzen Sarutobi*

*Classification – A rank*

*Reason – The Great Dragon Combo Jutsu cannot be executed without completing at least the second stage of the elemental flow mastery of all five elements, and then too only barely.*
Additionally, the user requires a massive amount of chakra to be able to form clone with enough chakra to launch the single elemental attacks.

Requirements – High level elemental mastery, Jounin level chakra reserves.

Description – The Great Dragon Combo Jutsu relies on the relationship between elements to execute a barrage of continuous damage towards a single point. Four elemental clones of any four elements (or Shadow Clones) are positioned such that, along with the original, all face the target from five directions at equal distance. Then the Dragon Jutsu of each element is launch with a few mini-second delays to enhance the effects of the previous jutsu, ending in one massive explosion due to the beauty of the chakra in each attack mingling, strengthening, and yet destabilizing each other.

Warnings – None.

Fuuinjutsu Nullification Technique

Creator – Jiraiya

Classification – S rank

Reason – The Fuuinjutsu Nullification Technique will cause the user to vanish if attempted without prior knowledge of the seal involved.

Requirements – Variable knowledge.

Description – The Fuuinjutsu Nullification Technique is a strange jutsu in and of itself. It allows the user to nullify any Fuuinjutsu construct, be it a seal, barrier, or dimensional displacement, if the user it fully aware of everything regarding the construct in question. The technique acts like a conduit for will – if the user can dissolve it with effort, this technique nullifies the time and chakra cost required by simply dissolving the construct.

Warnings – No hand-signs are required. The formula for the technique must be imprinted on the user’s hand (left or right) with chakra ink.

The ten Naruto’s around the scroll stood back from the scroll and looked at each other’s faces with clear hesitation.

“The risks… imagine if we had just barged on with learning the jutsus without reading the warnings… we could be dead.” One said.

“Or worse… we could be alive and have lost our chakra. We’d power through anyhow, since we’d never give up, but… that’s got to be painful…” another shuddered.

“Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I think the only one we can do is the Mental Palace Technique. Not only do we not know how to get chakra control, but if we somehow finish it and then read the scroll, we’ll recall everything in it perfectly and then we can- “

“Practice on our own time!” The original Naruto interjected. “That’s a great idea. Now, bye!”

“Wait what- “
The clearing was suddenly consumed in smoke again as the clones dispersed. Naruto suddenly developed a minor headache. He chalked it up to the clones’ memories transferring in. He didn’t know many words since he never bothered to learn more, so almost half of what was written in the scroll went over his head, but he did know that he couldn’t do the others simply because he didn’t even know what they were talking about.

He looked at the hand-signs required to start the jutsu and was pleased to see that it was again a simple one. Bringing his two hands together so the connected at all the tips, he pointed them down with his thumbs facing straight forward, his hands forming an oval shape. He then closed his eyes and did his best to focus on clearing his mind.

Suddenly, he felt a twisting sensation in his stomach as he was suddenly in… a sewer?

He sweat-dropped. “My mind… is a sewer? Now that’s just insulting.”

“So… my jailor has come to meet me at last…” a growling voice sounded out, coming from the direction in which he was facing.

“Nope! A big N-O. Not going to the big scary voice.” Naruto shook his head rapidly, then sighed, “Hey, hey, hey, the scroll said that I could make ‘rooms’ in my mind, so… Can I change the sewer into something else?”

He closed his eyes and concentrated. He didn’t have much time to finish the basic setting of the jutsu if he wanted to go back and read the scroll again, so he made a basic but thorough layout in his mind. Then, he concentrated on imagining the sewer change into the very same layout.

When he opened his eyes, he was in his apartment. There were shelves on all the walls, filled with scrolls of different colors. He could feel the presence of the voice in his closet, so for now he just closed it shut and locked it, blocking off any connection. Then, he turned around to see the mess of scrolls that were around. He bent down to pick a random one off the floor, and he suddenly experienced having ramen with Iruka-sensei again, when he had asked and not received the Leaf headband.

‘So, these... are memories? Oh well, I’d best get to sorting it all.’

And so, on it went. Naruto almost lost track of time as he sorted the scrolls of his memories. He found out that each color was the emotion most prominent in those memories – bottle green was for envy, lime green for disgust, burned orange for greed, bright red for anger, and so on and so forth. He haphazardly threw each onto a shelf, not even noticing that each scroll shifted to fit in snugly and ordered so that everything looked aesthetically pleasing.

The only pause came when Naruto was finished. He had sorted all his memories as they should be and decided to place all his happy memories in his ‘bedroom’ along with three jutsu scrolls on another shelf – the Transformation Jutsu, Substitution Jutsu, and now the Shadow Clone Jutsu, which also included its larger variant, the Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu. He had only paused to note how small the line of scrolls was, and to promise himself that he’d somehow make more, with more people. Then he made the hand-sign again, and he was back in the real world.

He looked around and noted that not only was the moon in the same position as before, but everything was the same. The chakra smoke from the dispelling of his Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu was still dissipating.

‘Don’t tell me... don’t tell me that all the time in my Mental Palace was just equal to one second of real life time? That’s... that’s awesome! But wait, I still have more than an hour and a half left.’ He
turned to the scroll with a devious cackle that would have surely sent shivers down the spines of anyone in hearing range. “Let’s get wild.”

Even he had his limits though…

Naruto lay exhausted on the grass completely exhausted. Learning to handle even a bit more of chakra control was so difficult…

After reading the scroll again so he could review it whenever in his Mental Palace, he immediately set a few dozen clones on the leaf balancing exercise before rolling up the scroll and setting it aside. He still hadn’t perfected it, which just went to show how difficult chakra control was for him. He decided that he would ask Grandpa for help on chakra control when he passed.

Anyway, he moved on to doing the Grand Clone Explosion Jutsu. While he couldn’t get a handle on chakra control yet, his clones had no problems destabilizing their own chakra. He’d almost gotten caught in an explosion – only his quick reaction time saved his hide. He did turn around to marvel at the explosion radius and force, of course. He’d managed to blow apart fifteen thick trees in one fell swoop! His mind had gone into overdrive with thought. If Shadow Clones resulted in a simple explosion of physical force, what about elemental clones? Were there any Fire-style clone jutsus? Oh god, the ideas!

He immediately retreated into his Mental Palace to pick up the jutsu scroll from the floor and set it in his bedroom shelf next to the others. Now he had four of them.

Since he couldn’t do much more without better chakra control or doing any elemental control exercises… whatever those were… he decided to sweeten his place up a little bit. He walked out of his apartment only to see that there was… nothing. Everywhere he could see, it was just blackness. Well, that just wouldn’t do!

He closed his eyes and concentrated. A big, blue sky with lots of fluffy white clouds and a day and night cycle. The building in which his apartment was in. The buildings around his. The shops, the roads, the bridges, and the trees. He’d explored the entire village in his quest to prank, and he could now recall every single little detail.

He opened his eyes and smiled in satisfaction when he found himself in the hallway of his floor in the building he lived in. He walked out and smiled when he noted that all the details he could remember were there just the same. He looked up towards the Fire-Shadow Monument and sent a silent thank-you up to the Second’s soul, hoping that he was inventing awesome new jutsu wherever he was.

He looked around then and noted that there was… stillness. Everything was ramrod straight and stiff and he didn’t quite like it. He willed a slight breeze into existence and felt a little more at ease when things seemed to have gained some life.

Then he hit a wall.

When he tried to create people, he found out that he just couldn’t will them into existence like he could everything else. He crossed his hands as a thoughtful frown found its way onto his face – this was his Mental Palace, so why could he not make people here just as easy as he could everything else? He decided to ponder it later, deciding to return to the real world.

Since then he was just trying to balance the leaf on his forehead like everyone else. But it turned out that he was still having the same difficulty even though already dispelled one batch of forty-eight clones… although it did get a tiny bit easier…
That brought him to now, after he had dispelled ninety-six more clones and felt a slight chakra drain. The chakra wasn’t the issue, though, it was the mental exhaustion that was getting to him. He couldn’t understand why, though. His Mental Palace should prevent that, right?

He slipped back there only to find… that his room was far fit to bursting with scrolls. He sweat-dropped.

All the scrolls were a uniform grey color and stood out with little differences between them. But they were taking a lot of mental clutter. He could also see that, slowly but surely, all the scrolls were fusing together at the rate of two in maybe two to three minutes. He should have realized that without organizing the mess, his headache would not subside. But he couldn’t always be here, could he? What happens in the middle of a battle, for instance, if he creates many clones to tackle one enemy and they all dispel at once? He surely couldn’t fight out the rest of his enemies with a migraine! And while entering his Mental Palace, spending any amount of time there, and exiting took little more than a few seconds, in a ninja battle that was all the amount of time an enemy needed to finish him off.

What to do….

Oh!

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” he exclaimed, and a single clone popped into existence. The clone was giving him an unimpressed look.

“Really? Yelling out the name of your jutsu? You’re a ninja, not a moron.” It chastised, and Naruto sweat-dropped.

“Hey, hey, hey, it makes me look cooler!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” the clone mocked right back, “it also makes you looks like a moron. Drop that habit right now. I’m not going to have my original be such a moron.”

The original Naruto crossed his arms. “Alright already, stop being such a sourpuss. Why are you yelling at me anyway?”

The clone mirrored his position, adding an arched eyebrow.

The original rolled his eyes. “Anyway, you’re gonna be here for one day. I want you to sort through the memories as they appear here on the ground. I’m not sure if it’s going to work, but if it does, I’m leaving you here full time.”

“Okay, boss.” The clone nodded.

“Good. Now don’t mess anything up! It took us a lot of time… um… lot of time in here, anyway, to get this set up.”

“Why would I mess anything up? I don’t fancy a headache or going crazy!” the clone huffed, but then frowned thoughtfully. “Now that you mention it, though…”

The original arched an eyebrow. “What- oh.”

“Yeah. How did we get this technique down? We have load of creativity, but we can’t concentrate worth jackshit. Or else we’d be first in our class. How did we manage to perform this completely out-of-our-depth we-could-possibly-die technique?” the clone posed, uncrossing his arms to raise them up in frustration. “I wanna know, dammit!”
“Relax. It’s probably because- “

“No, it’s not because we’re awesome. That such a moronic way of thinking.”

“You know, the more you talk, the more I think you’re Sasuke instead of me.” Naruto pointed at his clone accusingly.

Said clone rolled his eyes and mocked gagging. “As if. Anyway, I bet it has to do with that strange voice we heard earlier.”

Naruto looked at his clone questioningly. “How… oh well. I’ll ask Grandpa about it later.” He simply waved it off and vanished.

The clone looked at the place where his original was, then back at himself. He suddenly knew that his original was waking up… very slowly? Oh. Oh no.

The Mental Palace time was faster than his real life. If things were kept at this rate, he’d be here forever while outside it would just be a day! That was going to get so… boring. He simply willed the time to pass faster, as he linked the outer world to a new window on the wall, sitting back on his dining room chair to watch what happened outside.

Meanwhile, in the real world, Naruto had only just risen off the ground, sans headache and other pains, and strapped the Forbidden Scroll on his back when Iruka burst into the clearing. “There you are, Naruto, I finally found you!”

Naruto was going to reply when he stopped short and frowned. ‘Iruka-sensei looks tired, as if he’d run a long way. There’s also confusion now on his face when he’s looking between me and the scroll, while before there was disapproval along with a few tinges of relief clear. Something is very wrong here.’ “Ne, Iruka-sensei. I guess I’m busted.” He sighed, averting his eyes to the floor before immediately perking up. “But Hey, hey, hey! I learned one of the jutsu in the scroll! Now you’ve gotta pass me!” ‘I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m clearly out of the loop here.’

Iruka frowned. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Naruto’s frown returned. “What do you mean? Mizuki-sensei said… oh. Oh, I see how it is. That bastard!” he growled. ‘That fucking trickster played me, and I went along with it! Ugh he’s so going to get- oh shit.’

Naruto, spotting the rapidly incoming Fuma Shuriken, quickly used the Substitution Jutsu to first get away, then replace Iruka so he was completely out of the way. Another usage and the giant shuriken was deeply embedded in a log.

“Damn you, you brat! Come out here and hand over the scroll at once!” Mizuki yelled, frustrated. If the brat substituted out of his shuriken, he surely knew by now that it was him who had thrown it. He should have played the part of a good teacher instead and framed Iruka. Now though… anyway, it’s not like he could even get defeated by the likes of… what is that weight?

“Great Clone Explosion!”

A massive explosion rocked the forest, caused by three Shadow Clones exploding while tackling Mizuki who was deep in thought. Naruto emerged from the trees with an astonished Iruka.

‘If he wasn’t underestimating me… I wouldn’t have been able to take advantage of when he was thinking.’ Naruto realized.
“Naruto! What is going on?! You’ve attacked a member of the Hidden Leaf Village! Do you know what that makes you?!” Iruka yelled, clearly angry that his student had killed his best friend.

The boy in question simply rolled his eyes. “I’ll tell you about it later Iruka-sensei. For now, I need to get back to the old man. *Transform!*

In Naruto’s place now stood a perfectly unharmed Mizuki.

“What... WHAT IN THE WORLD? YOU JUST KILLED MY-“

Whatever Iruka was going to say was cut off as Naruto rammed the pommel of a kunai to the back of his head, knocking his teacher out. He couldn’t chance that Mizuki was not working alone and had others in waiting or on the way nearby, so instead of wasting time trying to calm Iruka down, he chose the quick route. Quickly picking up his teacher, he began to run to the Fire-Shadow Tower.

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“...and that is how I ended up here.”

Naruto was currently standing in front of a very surprised and hurt Iruka, an amused Third Fire-Shadow, and a very... statue-like squad on ANBU... who were settled on the ceiling...

“Don’t worry, Naruto. I have been keeping watch on you ever since today morning, wanting to see if you would need to talk after you failed or passed your exam.” The old man smiled, and Naruto sighed in relief. “Even if you hadn’t told me all this, I already knew about it beforehand.”

Iruka looked at his hand in miscomprehension. “So Mizuki... was a traitor?”

“And a very good one, at that. We’ve never even thought that he could be a sleeper agent. Such a brilliant performance...” The aged man wistfully trailed off. “anyway, a Yamanaka will mind-walk his corpse to find out the rest of the details. Chuunin Iruka, you are dismissed. Get some rest.”

Iruka shakily nodded and stood, he simply patted Naruto on the shoulder and vanished in a *Body Flicker Technique*.

“Aw man, I’ve gotta learn that!” Naruto exclaimed.

Grandpa laughed. “I have no doubt you will, Naruto. But first, a question.” He suddenly turned deathly serious. “Which jutsu did you learn from the scroll?”

Naruto looked confused. Shouldn’t the old man know this...? “The *Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu*, *Mental Palace Technique*, and the *Great Clone Explosion*.”

The old man nodded with a glint in his eyes. His tension then rolled out of his shoulders.

‘Why would he ask me something he already said he knows? Did he want to see if I would lie?’

“Naruto, the rate at which you have learned today is astonishing. It took me fifty-six days straight to perform the *Mental Palace Technique*, and you just managed to do this in a few seconds. Do you have any idea how?”
Naruto frowned thoughtfully. “Not really. We were thinking about it too, but we couldn’t come up with any answers.”

Hiruzen suddenly froze. “‘We’, Naruto?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, my clones and me. We brainstormed about it up here,” here he tapped his temple, “but we couldn’t pin a reason. Although, we did hear a deep voice when he entered our Mental Palace for the first time before we closed it off. Did you know my mind was a sewer? How embarrassing. I don’t even have any dirty thoughts!”

Grandpa seemed to deflate… in… relief? ‘What part about that sentence would cause him to deflate in relief? All I mentioned was me thinking with someone… was he worried that I was talking with someone I shouldn’t be with?’

“Naruto… just… be careful. Those jutsu have high chakra requirements and- “

“Relax, Grandpa, you know I have too much for my own good.” The youngest in the room pointed out, making the Fire-Shadow chuckle. “But I do have some questions.”

Hiruzen made a ‘go on’ motion with his hand.

“I was wondering about chakra control and elemental exercises. I have too much chakra, which means that for me to be able to operate in a team effectively, or even in general, I’ll need to learn proper control… and I don’t know any other exercises other than the Leaf Balancing one. Also, I don’t just wanna sit at home all week, so I was thinking that learning the exercises for my element would help me loads later on.” Naruto pointed out.

Hiruzen seemed to think about something, but then spoke. “Naruto, these are things you learn under your Jounin sensei along with your team. I, in good faith, cannot show favoritism to you by giving you these exercises.” He said, but there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he drew a few sheets of blank paper and began to write. “I am the Fire-Shadow, after all, and it is my duty to ensure that everyone is treated fairly. Not matter how much I care for a ninja or trust them to be careful with any information I give them, I cannot single one out. I’m sorry.” He then pushed the paper over to Naruto’s side of the desk.

Curious, Naruto picked the paper up and his eyes widened when he saw rough notes for some exercises called Tree Climbing, Water Walking, and Air Propulsion. Directly underneath them were five columns of four rows. Each column had one element on top, and the three exercises for them named underneath. He supposed that the old man couldn’t give him his answers on a silver platter after all, no, he’d have to work for it.

And oh boy, he would.

“I completely understand, Grandpa.” Naruto said, crumbling up the paper and tossing it into the trash with a wink at the old man. “I won’t pester you any further.”

Hiruzen just chuckled and handed another paper, this time an official looking one. “Since you only just passed, you won’t have heard the announcements for newly instated Genin. The registration for your Ninja License will be in three days’ time, so be at the Missions Office anytime between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. with a passport photograph and this form. And the Team Selections will be after two weeks, on Sunday. Be at your Academy Class at normal time.”

Naruto nodded as his clone filed away the information. “Alright Grandpa, I’ll be on time, don’t worry.”
Then the older man smiled a warm smile that made Naruto feel very nice. “You have made me proud today, Naruto. Keep excelling and you’ll rise through the ranks in no time.”

Naruto grinned, and gave the Fire-Shadow a peace sign. “Of course, I will! I gotta take the hat from you sometime soon, don’t I?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, let's get into how he learned the jutsu so fast for a second, just to soothe any rattled minds, if it so happens. From what I gathered during that little Sasuke-learns-the-Gokakyuu spiel, it took a week to learn a basic Katon jutsu. But why?
Firstly, and the most basic, character requirement. Sasuke, a five year old (I'm not sure about his age here), probably did not have enough chakra for the technique (even if he missed the requirement by a small margin) and built it up over the week. There is proof of this because when he performs the jutsu, he exhibits signs of exhaustion.
Secondly, it's an elemental technique. We eventually know that Sasuke is lightning aligned. Thus, learning a technique for an element he doesn't have an affinity for would surely take longer.
Third, knowing the finer points of performing the technique. Since Sasuke was inexperienced with jutsu, he didn't know the feelings, motions, and process of going through performing the Gokakyuu. He coughs on his first attempt which shows that even if the fireball had formed, it would be a weak or small one because of his immediate coughing fit.
Now, let's examine Naruto with the Kagebunshin. He has enough chakra, it's not an elemental technique, and he is already familiar with making clones (if dead ones). The only difference in the methodology of performing the Kagebunshin is the increased chakra cost and a handsign. He doesn't need an affinity for it. Thus, it's completely possible that he performed it on his first try even in canon, and simply practiced it a lot in order to not jinx his chance to pass due to his former experience with clones.
Naruto woke up the next morning feeling more refreshed than any night had left him in a long while. He looked out over the village from his window with a smile on his face. ‘Today… I start training as a real ninja. I can even access the Shinobi Archives, now! With the pointers from Grandpa, and the Memory Palace, I can totally be the best ever, believe it!’

For now, though, his stomach rumbled.

Quickly going through his morning notions, and three cups of instant ramen, Naruto found himself staring at his wardrobe.

‘Today is a little hot… I won’t wear my jacket.’

He donned his grey undershirt and briefs, over which he threw on his orange track pants and blue shinobi sandals, with his Leaf Headband proudly displayed on his forehead. His kunai holster went over some bandages tied on his right thigh, and his shuriken holster right next to it. He then checked himself in the mirror.

‘Hmm… something is missing… I guess I really should look into a change of clothes. That jacket gets too stuffy sometimes, and I’m not going to be just sitting around anymore. I’ll be running and training, and I’ll need some clothes that allow my skin to breathe. It’s obviously going to be orange… but maybe something that suits a more active lifestyle won’t be amiss. Maybe I should pay a visit to Higurashi’s?’

Making that a point to do right away before training, he quickly made a single Shadow Clone. The clone then sped off to the nearest empty training ground to make more clones and practicing the Air Propulsion Exercise. Since he had so much chakra, it would only make sense starting big and then going lower and lower to the smallest required chakra exercise. He grabbed his dear Froggie, his wallet and walked out of his apartment, locking it almost thoughtlessly. Walking down the stairs still in thought, he made his way through the Red-Light district and into the Shinobi one while still thinking.

‘I am going to be specializing in ninjutsu, that’s a given, yeah. The Flame Thrusters will probably burn any clothes that get in the way, so I should get something that leaves my elbows free and probably the back of my knees too… and my heels. Then, I’ll need to restock my throwable supply, and… maybe a weapon? Nah, it’s too early for that. I’ll save the money Grandpa gave me yesterday and keep saving to buy a super awesome weapon later on! Then everyone will like me more.’

Thinking all the way even walking as slowly as he did, he finally stopped outside of Higurashi’s Ninja Armaments, a small smile adorning his face. This shop was the only one in the entire village whose owner did not kick him out on sight, and now with his headband, he would finally be able to shop for more than kunai and shuriken. It was why the civilian born ninja aspirants wore such flimsy clothes at the Academy, unless you’re an official ninja, you can’t shop for more than kunai, shuriken, and Fuma shuriken at the shop. Clan members were lucky in that way, they had clan armories and such that they could ‘borrow’ from.

The chime of the bell above the door brought a grin to his face as he made the way to the counter and to the portly man behind it. Kenpachi Higurashi was a man who respected everyone with his
own gruff way, and you had to really know the man to know he wasn’t rude – it was just his manner of acting. With aged-white hair and a short scruffy beard, those glares could sometimes really unnerve Naruto.

“Hey, old man, I’m here for some ninja supplies.” Naruto proudly proclaimed with a wide grin.

The man looked up from a certain orange book and snorted at Naruto. “Finally, a ninja, huh, brat?”

“Speak to the headband.” Naruto haughtily mocked, then broke into a string of laughter that got the old man to smile. “Believe it! And I’m going to be the best ninja ever!”

“Well, you know the store, god knows how many times you’ve stayed over eyeing the shelves.” The man scoffed. “Holler at me if the ‘best ninja ever’ needs a hand.”

“You got it!” Naruto answered, and quickly scurried into the clothing and armor section first.

The old man set his book down and eyed Naruto – the brat was highly amusing when he was shopping. He’d poke and prod around so much, there was no way it could be taken as insulting, it was downright hilarious.

Said blond quickly scurried back, arms full, after only twenty minutes. He laid the pieces group by group on the countertop.

There was a packaged set of three burnt orange V-neck sleeveless muscle-shirts, first. Kenpachi was surprised he even had that on the shelf – no one liked orange around here. Next were three black cargo shorts, with extra pockets. A pair of black steel toed shinobi sandals and black steel-guard fingerless gloves that would reach to his elbows filled the rest of the counterspace, along with two collapsible Fuma Shuriken, and a full set of chakra body weights.

“You know, brat, we have other colors besides orange…”

“Don’t you start, old man.” Naruto rolled his eyes. Kenpachi had been trying to get him to drop the color since ages ‘for his own good’. He didn’t know why, but anyway, it was his favorite color and there was no way he was dropping it. “I’d also like a standard magazine of shuriken and kunai, and a change of headband cloth. Orange.” He said, removing his headband, and dropping it on the counter.

The man sighed. If the brat wanted to write his own death warrant… “Alright, wait here.”

Kenpachi disappeared through the back door of the shop. He knew he could trust Naruto with it, since he was never disappointed when he did. He managed to find a bolt of burned orange cloth that had been sitting in his shop ever since the Nine-tails attack …. Yeah, obvious there why no one liked the color anymore. He went through the process of removing the metal from the ragged blue cloth (what did the brat do in one day, anyway?) and placing and fixing it firmly on the orange one with ease that spoke of experience. He rolled in some excess cloth for personalization and threaded in some weak stitches, so it would hold but it would be easy to adjust, then walked back out to hand over the rest to Naruto. “Alright brat, that will be … thirty-three thousand, three hundred and fifty-two ryo.”

Naruto coughed up the money without complaint. Grandpa had given him fifty thousand, after all, and he would save up enough in time for a weapon later anyway. On his way out, he just walked past the weapons isle to see if anything caught his interest. He did see quite a variety on display, from blades of all kinds to mauls and chains and even a bow, but nothing that called out to him yet. Shrugging, he ran the way home to drop off his purchases under a lose floorboard, just to be extra safe, before putting on the weights. The set had six slots that went on different parts of his body –
one on each limb, one around his chest, and an extra for whichever was his weakest limb to get it up to par. Being ambisextrous, he didn’t have such an issue, so he dropped the last one. He then channeled chakra into them until they were moderately heavy for him, then made his way to the training ground his clone was in.

Almost at the entrance of the training ground, however, he caught a flash of white in the trees. Drawing a kunai, the blonde decided to creep up on whoever it was who tried to spy on him…

Only to find a very laid back Jounin. The man had a shock of white hair tilted at an odd angle, and very little of his face was visible. His headband covered his left eye and a facemask covered the bottom of his face up to his nose, leaving only his right eye visible, which was currently trained on a familiar orange book. He was dressed in the standard Konoha Jounin attire in deep blue, with no personal alterations.

“Yo.” He waved lazily, still not raising his eye.

Naruto did not relax his position. If the man really was a Jounin… ‘The only reason I spotted him is because he wanted to be. The question is…’  “Who are you and why are you here?”

The man didn’t bother to look up or get down from the branch he was on. He did speak, however. “You are Naruto Uzumaki, are you not?”

Naruto clenched the kunai harder. His clones were nearby but making a clone and dispelling it just to get a message to them would mean losing a little less than half of his chakra, which he wasn’t willing to do. He’d need it if the man turned out to be an enemy. “And if I am?”

The man finally did look up from his book, showing that his eyes were now… upside down ‘U’s? Isn’t that too much for a smile? Don’t his eyelids get damaged? “Lord Fire-Shadow told me you were a bit more talkative… but well, I suppose mastering the Mental Palace in a few seconds does that to you.”

Naruto relaxed his guard a little. If Grandpa told him about that, that meant… “Are you here to oversee my training?”

“Maa Maa, nothing so outwardly. After all, I’m a simple Jounin who just happens to be relaxing in the same training ground you are in. If I happen to see something wrong, then it is only my duty to make sure your mistake is corrected, is it not?” the man returned to his reading then.

Naruto smiled a blinding smile. It seemed that even now, Grandpa was helping. He backflipped off the lower branch he was on and landed on the ground, then made the way to his clone. “How’s it going?”

The clone had a barely concealed frown as he stuck three leaves on his head and hands. “Hello, boss. It seems that Grandpa was right, initiating the Mental Palace Technique has granted us better control of our chakra. We can already perform the Air Propulsion exercise perfectly, and Water Walk with a bit of effort, but Tree Climbing and Leaf Balancing are huge no-nos. I can barely remember the number of times we’ve had to- AARGH!” the clone groaned instead, as the leaves fluttered to the ground. “That was five seconds. We thought that having three leaves would increase the amount of chakra needed, but it also requires more control, it seems. We could do the Leaf Balancing for ten seconds, before, with only one.”

Naruto sighed, he expected something like this. Both Water Walking and Air Propulsion required releasing set amounts of chakra, so that was easy. However, Leaf Balancing and its Greater Variant,
Tree Climbing, required the user to maintain a set amount of chakra with a particular flow on either the forehead or the soles of their feet. There was no easy way to do this… what would he do without his Shadow Clones? “Alright, dispel. You’re probably running low on chakra anyway.”

The clone nodded and created another clone before dispelling it. All the clones in the clearing, who were either launching through the air or walking on water, immediately froze. Then, in groups of ten, the hundred clones dispelled. After ten seconds, the main clone dispelled too.

Feeling no headache, Naruto assumed that his Archivist, which he decided he would address the clone sorting all of his memories, handled them appropriately. He then molded his chakra and silently brought two Shadow Clones into existence.

“You know your roles.” He said, grinning. “Let’s get wild.”

“Hell yeah!” the clones yelled, before scattering.

One had completely left the training grounds, going to the Shinobi Archive for a day of Shadow Clone library reading. Having to only glance at a page in passing for the Archivist to learn and catalogue the information helped loads. He guessed that he’d have at least a thousand or so scrolls in his head from that clone alone.

The other, however, moved to the exact center of the training ground, and pumped as much chakra as he safely could into the technique while still having enough to work on his goal. Silently, this time as well, forty-nine clones popped up.

‘It seems even I have my limits. Hundred clones before, and now forty-nine… all with enough chakra to keep working on control… and this is without even the average control an Academy student has… Grandpa was right, with the right amount of control, I can outlast anyone.’

While the clones all drew kunai and charged the trees or the lake nearby, the original walked to a tree with plenty of shade and plopped cross-legged on the ground.

‘While they work on control, I’ll work on my Mental Palace… and gather enough chakra for the next wave of clones.’ He thought, hands forming into a familiar hand-sign.

The sounds of nature and enthusiastic yelling around him faded as he appeared in his Mind Palace, in front of his apartment door. He opened it just as the Archivist finished a ‘short’ nap.

“Hey, boss.” The clone muttered, yawning sleepily. “You know, it’s not fair that you make me do all the hard work. How could you just throw off dealing with killing someone on me like that? It was hell, and then I felt so tired…”

“You’re me.” The original Naruto deadpanned. “If you handle something, I do too. Anyway, I had to focus on seeing everything Grandpa was saying or doing. Did you notice…”

“Yes. The voice.” The Archivist nodded, narrowing his eyes. “It has him concerned. It was obvious the way he spoke – he expected us to either be influenced by it, or to have interacted with it.”

“But what could it be?” Naruto crossed his arms, rubbing his chin to show deep thought.

“You look ridiculous like that.” The Archivist pointed out, then sighed when the original yelped indignantly. “Look, you seem like you want answers, and I do too. Why don’t we try opening the door?”
Naruto eyed the closet with an uncharacteristically intense gaze for a few moments. He recalled the voice and the shiver of apprehension he felt when he heard it, and his hands quivered without conscious thought.

He was broken out of it when the Archivist grasped his shoulder. “A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.” He intoned wisely, a small smile on his face.

Naruto froze and then relaxed. Those were the words Grandpa had spoken when he first joined the Academy. It seemed the moment had passed forever ago, and he wistfully thought that he probably should have treasured his time more – when he didn’t know just how far people hated him – enough to sabotage his education and degrade it to the point it was life-threatening – and when he didn’t figuratively have blood on his hands.

But he was Naruto Uzumaki, and he would have no regrets.

“Alright.” He breathed out. “Alright.” He said again, just to steady himself. Another breath, he took, to steel his nerves. He then walked determinedly to the closet. Flicking the latch, he opened the door, and the two parts of the same person walked determinedly inside just as the first scroll popped up on the floor, the memory of a book titled, ‘The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Ninja’.

The Archivist and his original found themselves looking around in the same sewer they had first landed in when they attempted accessing their Mental Palace for the first time. The two turned around quickly and saw that there was a hole the size of a door in the wall that showed the living room they had just been in.

“Alright, so this sewer isn’t just a simple part of the Mental Palace. It’s definitely something else.” The Archivist stated the obvious, getting an eye roll in response.

“So… you have returned, human.” The sinister voice once again ran through the tunnels. “Step closer…”

“‘Human’? Whatever this is, it isn’t meant to be a part of us then.” The Archivist noted. He was sorely regretting the decision of coming here without asking Grandpa first, but an arrow once shot couldn’t be taken back. “Let’s see what it is.”

“I don’t know.” Naruto countered, biting his lip. “Maybe we shouldn’t be here. Maybe we should just seal up the door and never come back here again until we die.”

The Archivist rolled his eyes. “You’re saying that now, but we both know that you’ll come back tonight, if not now. You’re far too much of a determined person to drop an idea for something you don’t even know about.”

The Original eyed his creation skeptically. “Are you sure you’re me? You seem… different, somehow.”

“Of course, I am, moron.” The other responded, grabbing his hand and tugging him over in the other direction. “C’mon. I’ll slow the time back down enough, so we don’t waste much time.”

The two sped down the sewer, unheeding of the red-tinged water that dampened their sandals and pants. The walkway seemed to stretch on forever, until it suddenly opened up into a cavernous room that they couldn’t even see the ceiling or the opposite ends of, which were both shrouded in darkness.

What they could see quickly put them on the alert even more.
Bars. Massive bars, that rose from the water and high up, seemingly stretched on till eternity. The gap between each was more than enough for them to walk through, but something told them it would be a very bad idea. The bar right in the center was double as wide as the rest, and the two could make out a thin line running down the middle.

“A… cage?” the original guessed.

“Boss… why do we have a cage in out Mental Palace?” The Archivist slowly bit out, eyes now wide. “We… we should get back- “

“And to think my jailor would be so rude.” The deep voice spoke, and the two froze. “Of course, considering what humans are capable of, a little rudeness is the best I can hope for.”

“Who are you?” Naruto yelled back, at the same time his Archivist demanded, “What are you?”

“So, demanding for someone so weak…” The voice chuckled. “Come closer, human, and you will see…”

Naruto made move to step forward, but the Archivist stopped him. The latter then walked to the cage, his only fear being the inevitability of dispelling.

He wasn’t disappointed.

A massive orange claw suddenly shot through the gaps and squashed it, sending all his memories back to the original Naruto, who clutched his head at the mild pain before his eyes widened in horror.

Beyond the cage was a monster he recognized well. He suddenly knew why the village hated him, why they scorned him and refused to let him closer. How could he not – the horror of this beast’s rampage was something the Academy Instructors seemed particularly taken with explaining whenever he bothered to attend the History lessons.

The orange was what keyed him in first. Then, as the beast stepped into the invisible light, and Naruto saw the nine orange tails swishing behind the towering vulpine body, he was easily able to make the connection and gasp out the identity of his… prisoner…

“Nine-tails.”

The beast levelled a grin at him, that seemed both frightening and awe-inducing at the same time.

“Human… brat. We meet at last.”

“I don’t understand.” Naruto whispered. “I… the Fourth was supposed to have killed you- “

“Hah!” Nine-tails snorted. “As if that insignificant worm could defeat me. But I would have even accepted it if I wasn’t going to be subjected to this torture!”

“How…”?

“I was sealed in you.” The Nine-tails mocked in a perfect rendition of Naruto’s own tone of voice. “That bastard of a human sealed me in you the moment I came to! At least this time I’m not staked down…”

“Lies!” Naruto yelled out, eyes brimming with tears. “This has to be some sort of Genjutsu in my head, something must have gone wrong with the Mental Palace! Kai! Kai!”
The beast roared in laughter. “Oh, this is just rich! A human in denial! And I thought that the
turtle bastard was hilarious.”

Naruto was beyond calm. “No! Why?! Why did he seal you in me?! What did I do wrong?! I didn’t
even live for a day yet, what could I have possibly done- “

“Oh, you’re even more pathetic than the normal humans I’ve dealt with.” The Nine-tails
scoffed, disgust evident as it laid its head down on two massive paws and adopted a relaxed posture.
“I wonder how he’d react seeing you like this now.”

Naruto took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Alright, so he had a demon fox sealed into his
stomach. He already knew that something was wrong – a whole village didn’t just turn on you
without cause, much less so on a child. At least he finally knew what was wrong! But one thing was
certain, the old man had a lot to answer about.

He breathed in, held for a few seconds, and breathed out, tossing away the last of his hysteria. No,
freaking out wasn’t going to do him any good now. He had to try to see if there was anything else he
could get from the fox.

He brought his hands in a cross sign and in a small plume of smoke, another him emerged.

“Finally, moron. What took you so long, huh?”

Naruto’s eyes quickly snapped from an amused Nine-tails to his left. “Archivist?”

Said clone simply rolled his eyes. “Of course, who else is it going to be?” he said, but then frowned.
“Look, we can puzzle out how I retained my personal memories, emotions, and personality later. For
now…” he then turned towards the beast. “Exactly who would be disappointed of us now?”

“How intriguing.” Nine-tails remarked, seeming genuinely entertained. “Your mind has
fragmented. Your ‘jutsu’ don’t work here unless we both allow it in mutual consent, human.
That is not a normal Shadow Clone.”

The Archivist looked between the Nine-tails and his Original with a confused expression. “I feel just
normal.”

“Minato Namikaze.” The Nine-tails replied instead, his eyes wandering to the original with a
skeptical look on his face.

“The Fourth? Why would he care about our personality? We’re just his legacy…” the Archivist
asked, face drifting into a frown, then suddenly his eyes snapped wide. “Oh. Oh no.”

“That’s impossible.” The original snorted, shaking his head. “If it were true, Grandpa would have
said something. I’ve asked him a million times, he would never hide something like this from me.”

“Think about it, boss.” The Archivist whispered, head bowed. He could easily see is reflection in the
water. “We’ve seen pictures of him several times over in our search to know more about our idol.
We have the same hair, the same base facial structure… the same skin tone and the same build. Only
our eyes are slightly different. Such similarities are far too coincidental to be flukes. We… we could
be related. And, and! The Fourth was described to have an altruistic personality type. If the Nine-tails
had to be sealed into someone, who do you think he would go for first? If he had to die anyway,
he’d go first for his wife or another relative. But we know that he was an orphan and since we don’t
know who his wife was, we can safely assume that he never did get officially married – such a thing
would be impossible to hide. So, assuming that we are a relative… and we were the only one
available close to his dying breath…”

“Grandpa wouldn’t lie to me.” Naruto denied. This was too much. Too much! “He just wouldn’t! He
knows how much I’ve been longing for-

“Ah, but the first lie came from the lips of a human.” The Nine-tails grinned, maw of teeth visible
in his frightening visage. “Are you related to him? Does he have a forceful obligation to tell
you? I’m sealed in you, human, that makes you a weapon for your precious village. You are
nothing more. Nothing less.”

“You’re wrong.” The Archivist said, surprising the Nine-tails. “If the Fourth really was… our
father… then it was right of Grandpa to hide it from us.”

“Archivist?” Naruto whispered, shocked.

“No, boss. Now that we have… changed, we know that it would be dangerous to go spouting off the
fact. But what about when we were younger? Or, hell, even a week ago?” the Archivist pointed out,
light slowly returning to his eyes. “We’d be dead within the week because the Fourth had made a lot
of enemies. We… we’re alive because we didn’t know.”

“So that’s what you are.” The Nine-tails puzzled out, eyes shocked. “How? No human can do
this! This is impossible. How did you get this technique?! Answer me- “ the voice abruptly cut
off at its eyes darted somewhere else.

It was only then that a little bit of the darkness cleared from the cavern. Naruto and the Archivist
were easily able to spot what was concealed in the darkened corners.

Pipes.

Gigantic pipes, that crossed over from the Nine-tail’s cage and towards their Mental Palace…

“NO! That damned Fourth! How dare he! You humans cannot be trusted! It is why I was…. No. No! Begone, human, begone!”

And the two of them felt a tugging sensation from their stomach. After a sudden second-long wave
of nausea, they were back in the living room of their Mental Palace.

The two parts looked at each other and reflexively swallowed. They both already knew that the other
had felt them same –

The Nine-tails was terrifying.

“I… I think I need to go talk to Grandpa.” Naruto whispered after he had suppressed the last of his
shudders. He chuckled when he noticed a second scroll pop on the ground. “And you need to get
started on sorting after resuming normal speed here.”

“Boss…” the Archivist trailed, uncertain.

Naruto managed a weak smile. “I’ll be fine.” He then looked at the closet, and with a wave of his
hand, wooden boards materialized that held it closed shut. A metal chain further materialized, and
somehow threaded through the doors, a padlock holding it in place. Then concrete leaked from the
ceiling, covering the door until it resembled just another part of the wall.

“I’ll be fine.” He repeated and vanished back into the real world under the Archivist’s concerned
His eyes snapped open, and he keeled over, dry heaving a bit. His stomach felt strange, like it was blazing hot for a second, before it faded, and he managed to calm himself into some semblance of normalcy. He took deep breaths, trying to control himself, and was absently grateful that the Jounin in the trees didn’t hop down to fuss over him. No one had before, and he wouldn’t know how to react in such a situation.

He breathed deeply as he stood, forming a *Shadow Clone*, and dispersing it with a silent command for the overseer to dispel a single clone before the lot ran out of chakra so he’d be prepared, and made his way out of the clearing and towards the village proper.

Everything made so much sense now.

He wanted to slap himself. The answer was right there! Demon, they called him. Murderer, pillager – he had done none of these things at the time. Why couldn’t he have been smarter? Why couldn’t he have tried harder?!

He looked around, catching each distrustful or menacing gaze he was sent. Now that he knew what the truth was, he couldn’t possibly hold it against these innocent people how they’d treated him. And really, it wasn’t even that bad! It’s not like anything had gone beyond words – he could still walk through the village without fear of physical assault, he could still use their shops, he could still go to the Academy… the only thing he lacked was their acceptance, or even neutrality.

Loneliness was his only punishment. It could have been much worse, and he was thankful it was not.

What was he going to do now, though?

Talking to Grandpa about this was out of the question, as of now. He needed to think, first. He needed to … he needed to be sure that he would not give in to hysteria, or sadness, or tears. No, he didn’t deserve to.

He could do all that when he had changed things.

He would try. And try. And try again, and even then, keep trying. He would give it his all, do whatever it took, and go the longest. He would get the village to see he wasn’t the Nine-tails in human skin, and he was worthy of their acceptance.

He *would* get them to accept him. That would be his dream from now on-

“Oof!”

Naruto backed off from the person he had bumped into and rubbed his shoulder. Wow, the guy had some really hard bones. He looked up to say as much…

“Shino?”

“Naruto.” The quiet boy greeted without fanfare. “You must watch when you walk on the street. Why? Because bumping into people is impolite.”

Naruto smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, I was just lost in thought.”

The other boy nodded, and then seemed to have noticed his headband. “It seems you have passed. How? We were informed that you had failed yesterday.”
Naruto gulped. If Shino Aburame hated anything, it was being left out of the loop. “Well…”

“Oh hey, Shino! Naruto!”

The two boys turned to spot their other classmate, Choji Akimichi, on his way over, munching happily on a bag of chips with a satisfied smile. One could easily spot Kiba Inazuka on his other side, although he looked a tad sad.

“Hey Shino, Naruto.” Kiba greeted, oddly much quieter than normal.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s wrong, dog breath?” Naruto asked, punching the other boy’s shoulder lightly.

“Akamaru has caught a bad cold. We got ice cream yesterday after I passed, and I shared mine with him.” Kiba explained. “Normally that’s fine, but he had fallen sick with the flu just a few days ago…”

“Oh.” Naruto intelligently said.

“We are sorry that it happened.” Shino added in monotone, turning to look at Naruto with an unreadable look on his face. Although, the blond was able to catch a twitch of the eyebrow which belied irritation. “However, I have news that might change your mood. Why? Because it may cheer you up. Naruto has passed.”

Kiba’s eyes whipped up from the ground to stare at the headband on Naruto’s head, and Choji was already eating much faster and happier when he had spotted it. “Really? That’s great, man! Now none of the gang will be left behind!” the boy happily said, and patted Naruto on the back. “Congratulations!”

“But I thought you failed yesterday, Naruto?” Choji asked, a happy but slightly confused smile on his face.

“Um… well… you see…” Naruto stalled, before an idea crashed into his head. “I kinda convinced Iruka-sensei to keep my passing yesterday quiet, since I wanted to surprise everyone! But… um… it’s kinda moot now, huh?”

“If you wish to surprise someone, do not wear evidence in public. Why? Because it gives it away.” Shino stated quietly, and he didn’t have to point to show he was talking about the headband Naruto wore.

“Sheesh, idiot, I thought you were smarter than that.” Kiba snorted with a fond grin.

“Hey! I was just so excited about it that I forgot, okay?” Naruto defended himself.

“Whatever. Let’s go, Choji! We’ve gotta get back to the compound now. See you later, Shino, Idiot!” Kiba yelled as he ran, Choji following.

“Shut up, dog breath!” Naruto yelled back and received only a barking laugh in return. He stretched out a bit before turning to Shino, who was… blushing?

“Good luck for your shinobi career, Naruto.” He said quietly, before turning away. “Our registration is after one day, and team assignments is after thirteen days. Goodbye.”

Naruto watched the boy hastily retreating with a confused expression. ‘What was wrong with him?’
High above him, on a rooftop, Kakashi sweat-dropped.

Chapter End Notes

Let's consider gathering chakra.

In canon, as far as I know, chakra can be replenished in one of these ways- rest, soldier pills (with a significant drawback), draining it from someone else, or transferring it from another human or bijuu.

Wouldn't this be problematic?

In missions where one must be alert at all times or if it's gone wrong, shinobi would not have the luxury of resting. If they're alone and out on soldier pills, this can be a major issue that can lead to death. Wouldn't ninja devise a way to combat this?

This is when I thought of the chakra gathering game mechanic in the Ultimate Ninja Storm series.

Granted, it's a /game/ mechanic, but it makes sense. The jutsu that people use is essentially chakra converted into the elements or just raw chakra dispersed. When the jutsu is dispelled, where does this chakra go?

My answer? It dispels into the atmosphere.

This means that along with nature chakra, normal chakra is also present in the air. With a little tweaking of canon, it can even make sense - if the chakra organs present in the body of shinobi didn't /create/ chakra, but absorb them through the chakra points present on the body from the air?

Also consider that during the revival of Kaguya, vast amount of chakra was taken in from the ground and air. Can that /all/ really be nature chakra?

Anyway, the chakra gathering mechanic will be considered as canon (or fanon) in this fic.
Naruto shot forward, fire blasting out from his closed fists and bare soles of his feet. Tilting his right foot just so, he performed a 180-degree wide turn that put his on the other side of Kakashi. The fire from his right fist ceased as it began to blow out from his elbow. With a yell of exertion, he slammed his fist onto his temporary teacher, the Shadow Clone popping into smoke as his strike went almost unimpeded and into the ground, causing it to crack and then blow upwards from the force.

Hearing the whistle of wind over metal, he immediately sunk into the earth, wading until he shot up from under the position he had last seen his second teacher, Yamato, at. Barely surprised when he blast through a wooden creation, he instead worked on rapidly transforming the air around him into pebbles of earth, and then infusing them with Wind-style chakra before using the air propulsion exercise to spin around, sending them hurtling at where he hand managed to catch a glimpse on his teacher as his feet touched the ground.

“Lightning Style: Lightning Beast Running Jutsu!”

Naruto rolled his eyes before sending a bit of Fire-style chakra to his feet, blasting into the air using thrusters of fire just as a dog made completely of lightning ran through where he previously stood. With a sudden jerk forward with his hands, he utilized the combined form of Fire Style: Fire Thrusters and the Air Propulsion chakra control exercise to fly to the opposite end of the clearing which he had been aiming for and reach for the lunchbox on one of the tree stumps.

“Wood Style: Restraining Manacles!”

Naruto sighed as he blasted himself back just as three intertwining spires of wood erupted from the ground and raced towards his still airborne form. Dropping the chakra from his thrusters, he instead used the Tree Walking exercise in conjunction with standard feet chakra enhancement to race down to structure and punched through his sensei… only to widen his eyes when he broke away into wood and instead restrained him.

After futilely tugging at his arms and feet, Naruto relented. “Alright, I give in. Come out here already!”

From the bushes emerges two men, one with hair as white as snow and the other a rich brown. The similarities ended at their identical Leaf Jounin uniforms. One’s headband covered his left eye, and a facemask covered the rest of his face. The other wore a more protective helmet-like grey colored facepiece, with the leaf symbol engraved on it.

“And what did we learn today?” the masked one drawled, eyes fixed firmly on an orange book.

The only blond sighed. “Having many techniques under your belt means nothing if you don’t know how to use them.” He parroted back, rolling his eyes.

“Excellent.” The older man eye-smiled, and the youngest felt the restraints break away and fade back into chakra that dissipated in the atmosphere.

“No, Captain Yamato, I didn’t know you could change your Wood Clones into restraints too!” Naruto excitedly said, forgetting all about the bet he had made.

Yamato chuckled weakly. “Naruto, I’m not the one with a short attention span, you know. I still remember the deal.”
Said boy pouted as he crossed his arms. “I don’t get what the big deal is, anyway! I will be in a team in ANBU-“

“Being in an ANBU squad is far different that being in a normal Genin team.” Kakashi pointed out, shaking his head, and snapping his book shut. “I understand why you want to get stronger, Naruto, you were quite vocal about it one week ago…”

Naruto sweat-dropped when he remembered the day he had told Kakashi about why he was putting in so much effort when even his clan-member classmates were taking it easy – after all, he had managed to get his chakra control to a level that a medic-ninja would have in a record breaking time of one week (this was including the fact that he didn’t eat or sleep as much as he normally did, just gathered his chakra while reviewing in his Mental Palace the materials his clones read in the Shinobi Archive under a very catatonic librarian). He wasn’t under any illusions, however. To maintain he level of control, he had to send out fifty clones a day for an hour to perform the Senbon Balancing, Leaf Balancing, and Paper Sharpening exercises… simultaneously.

He smiled as he recalled heatedly informing the man that he wanted to get stronger so that he could protect his village from anything similar to the Nine-tails attack, that he wanted the village to accept him as a part of it. It was the day he first tried the Fire Thrusters and set his clothes on fire. He also remembered feeling distinctly like a wet cat when a water jutsu from nowhere put him out, and then shrieking like a little girl when Yamato revealed himself sheepishly.

“…but to be accepted by the village, you have to at least try to be a part of it.” He then levelled a disapproving gaze on Naruto. “If it was not for Yamato or me, you’d be a starving mess right now. You haven’t set foot in the village at all. I even had to submit your Ninja License picture for you-“

“Hey! I distinctly remember sending a Shadow Clone to do all of those things!” Naruto interrupted. He wasn’t stupid! Unless he ate and rested sufficiently at least once in two days, all the training he’d been doing would be rendered moot!

“After I prodded you.” Kakashi unashamedly nodded. “Thus, the credit goes to me.”

Yamato and Naruto both sweat-dropped this time.

“Anyway, thanks for the morning workout.” He nodded, and seeing him ready to leave, the clones practicing chakra control dispelled. He walked over to the post and picked up his lunchbox, sealing it away in a storage scroll, which he then tucked into his pouch. “I’ll see you after team assignments.”

Kakashi sighed. ‘You’re not supposed to know about that.”

“Are you honestly surprised I poke around in your pouch a bit while you’re so busy reading that smut of yours?” Naruto smirked, but he quickly turned that around when Kakashi looked at him menacingly.

“What else did find when you ‘poked around’?” he asked.

“N-Nothing else! I swear!” Naruto swiftly backpedaled. Hands held up in defeat.

When the copy-ninja eye-smiled and looked away, Naruto turned to face Yamato only to see him giving him a terrorizing look. “Naruto… did you ‘poke around’ in my pouch as well?”

“N-no…” Naruto whispered, comically scared.

The Wood-style user quickly schooled his expression into his usual serene smile. “Good boy. Now, off you trot!”
Naruto ran away so fast he created a crater and a trail of dust.

“He must know that we weren’t unaware of his actions at all, and yet he humored us… he’s grown impossibly in the past two weeks in many ways...” Yamato said, smiling sadly. “isn’t that right, sir?”

“That Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu is really something else.” Kakashi nodded. “He hasn’t made any physical progress, but the things he can do with chakra… if he mastered the third stage of all of the elemental control exercises by next week, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“He already is done so with Wind and Fire.” Yamato reminded him. “So quick too… his affinities must really be strong.”

“Affinities have nothing to do with how strong he has gotten.” Kakashi said, then elaborated on Yamato’s confused look. “When he was… found after the sealing, Naruto’s systems were checked extensively. He only had a normal Wind affinity.”

Yamato’s eyes widened. “Then… how…?”

“Did you think that Lord Third was born with five natural affinities? Or that non-bloodline Jounin spontaneously develop a sudden second affinity?” Kakashi asked, flicking to the next page in his book again. “No. Chakra is like a muscle – the more you work it, the stronger it becomes and evolves. Elemental chakra is nothing different. The more you work with it, the higher your affinity with the particular element will be.”

“But using a jutsu or technique from an element not from one’s main affinity incurs high chakra costs.” Yamato pointed out. “To say nothing if the element is the exact opposite of your main affinity…”

“Have you seen the number of clones that kid can pop out?” Kakashi asked rhetorically. “Even if the elemental control exercises took more chakra, the sheer number he used… and in the systematic way of dispelling one which had made progress, so everyone can use it, with fleshing out new ones every hour after meditating to gather chakra? That goofball is one frightening shinobi.”

“And he will be under you.” Yamato happily pointed out. “If anyone can show him the ropes of a true shinobi lifestyle, it will be you, sir!”

Kakashi the pervert giggled. “My, I didn’t know I was in the blessed company of a fellow pervert, hehehe.”

Yamato stopped short, thinking of what he had said to get such a response. Then he turned on his ‘scary mode’.

“You will not make any sexual advances on your student.” He intoned.

Kakashi shivered. “Hai. It was a joke, a joke!”

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Naruto dashed into his class with few minutes to spare. He had stopped home to freshen up and finally get dressed in his new ninja attire, which he hadn’t yet touched since the day he bought it. Of course, when he saw himself in the mirror, his mind drifted off thinking of what weapon would suit
him best, so he’d have to rely on the techniques from the forbidden scroll only as a last resort (Except his Shadow Clones and the Grand Clone Explosion, of course. And the Mental Palace was as much a part of him as breathing was, he could barely discard it.) So lost he was in his thoughts, that his hour-early pace was completely destroyed.

“Hey, Naruto, over here!”

Said boy smiled as he turned to the source of the voice and, sure enough, there Choji was, munching on a packet of crisps. Kiba and Shino were near him too, and a very familiar face was sitting exactly to his right.

“Oh hey, you guys!” he responded, jogging over to claim the seat next to Shino, the only free one.

“Hey, I was sitting there!” Kiba protested.

“Aw c’mon! I’m still tired from training this morning, have some mercy!” Naruto blurted out, then instantly berated himself. He didn’t want anyone, except maybe those on his team, to find out the techniques he knew…

“Troublesome. My mother woke me up early too.” Shikamaru agreed, which prompted a grumble from Kiba who chose a seat directly in front of them. “Choji told me you wanted to give us a surprise, but then wore your headband around. Troublesome blond.”

“I said I was too excited!” Naruto grinned back. Shikamaru always bailed him out of tough social situations… at the price of knowing the details. Sure enough, Naruto’s smile turned a tiny bit forced when the Nara levelled him a meaningful glance.

“I certainly hope I am on a team with at least one of you. Why? Because the familiarity we have will help team dynamics.” Shino quietly noted, which was his way of saying the little exchange didn’t go unnoticed.

Choji was going to say something, but suddenly the door to the classroom burst open and two girls stumbled in. One was a blonde in a purple dress and the other was a girl with unusually pink hair and a darker pinkish red dress.

“Cha! Take that! I got here first!” the pink one screeched.

“Stuff it, forehead! My foot was a whole centimeter ahead of yours!” the blonde one roared.

“Sakura and Ino are at it again.” Choji noted helpfully, in a whisper.

Shikamaru sighed. “It is going to be troublesome being with her in the same team.”

“You already know which team you’re going to be on?” Kiba asked, a little hurt. Naruto quickly mentally amended that Shino wasn’t the only one who hated being out of the loop.

“Well, we’ve been practicing formations and jutsu together ever since we were kids!” Choji answered. “Our clans abilities complement each other very well, be it for offense, defense, capture, information retrieval, or anything else, really. Our fathers were on the same team, too.”

“An all-rounded team, huh?” Kiba asked, seeing the sense.

“It is the best setup.” Shino approved. “Why, you ask? There is no use for a front-line team who cannot find their opponents, spot traps, or distinguish clone from the original. There is no use for a scouting team who cannot hold up in battle for long, and there is no use for a capture and
interrogation team who can do none of the above.”

“Hey, that was so cool! I never knew you were this smart, Shino!” Naruto beamed.

Shino blushed again. “In- indeed.”

Seeing Naruto’s confused expression, both Shino and Shikamaru sighed. The latter, because he could see plain as day that the boy had Shino wrapped around his fingers, and yet, he didn’t even know. How troublesome.

The group of boys kept talking about random topics (all but one completely unaware of wistful glances from Sasuke and sad ones from Hinata) until their teacher arrived.

Naruto immediately fell silent as Iruka walked to the teacher’s table to the side of the front of the class. The man caught his gaze and sent him a small nod and a warm smile, easing the blonde’s concerns about their relationship being beyond repair – he hadn’t been around the village much in the past two weeks after all.

“Good morning, everyone!” he greeted with a smile, only to gain a tick mark on his forehead when no one except the five of them recognized his presence. “I said, ‘GOOD MORNING, EVERYONE!’” he yelled louder, but no one else paid heed. Finally, his head swelled to massive proportions as he screamed, “SETTLE DOWN, YOU BRATS!”

The classroom suddenly fell to pin-drop silence.

He sighed. “Good. Now, today, the lot of you are leaving the confines of the Academy and finally taking your first step on your journey as true shinobi.” He said, with pride clear in his eyes. “I won’t say much, but I will say this – as long as you believe in yourself, ‘impossible’ is just another word. Your true capability has yet to shine, don’t let your fallacies blot it out.

Now, as for teams, the following are your layouts- “

Naruto blocked most of it out, only pausing to note that a bully from this year had joined in with one of the quietest girls in class. He hoped there wouldn’t be much issues.

“Team 7 will be Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuuga,” “EEP!” “and Sasuke Uchiha. Your sensei will be Kakashi Hatake.”

Naruto turned to spot his teammates, ignoring the screams of outrage from the Uchiha fangirls. He sweat-dropped when he saw Hinata had fainted, but he did catch Sasuke’s gaze, and nodded seriously. The other boy arched an eyebrow but repeated the gesture. The message was clear, ‘I will watch your back if you watch mine.’

“Team 8 will be Kiba Inazuka, Sakura Haruno, and Shino Aburame. Your sensei will be Anko Mitarashi.”

“Oh great, I’m going to get my eardrums busted in an hour.” Kiba grumbled.

Naruto instead turned to look at Shino when he heard the boy’s swarm buzzing agitatedly. “Don’t worry, Shino, I’m sure it won’t be that bad! And we will meet up every week at Yakiniku Q to share our stories!” He beamed a sunny smile, which widened when he heard the boy’s swarm quiet down. “Right guys?”

“Oh of course!” said Choji, who was as big a patron of the restaurant as Naruto was to the Ichiraku’s… aw cap, Ayame was going to murder him! It had been so long since he had been there!
“That doesn’t sound very troublesome.” Shikamaru agreed. He and Choji were as close as real blood brothers, so that was hardly a surprise.

“If Shino’s coming, I’ll come, too!” Kiba said, perking up.

“My g- gratitude.” Shino said, with a blush.

Naruto looked at it a bit confusedly but was stopped from asking any questions when Shikamaru groaned.

“He just announced our team.” He grumbled.

“Told you guys. I wonder who Genma Shiranui is…?” Choji wondered.

They both turned to look at Ino who was currently mute in little but obvious surprise. The young Nara narrowed his eyes.

“Well, that wraps it up. Your sensei’s will now arrive to pick you up. Remember, there is not a single moment on duty when you aren’t being evaluated, either by our superiors, or by life itself.” That said, Iruka took a seat and pulled out what looked like a detective novel to read.

The future teachers then arrived and retrieved their respective teams. It turns out that Genma Shiranui, the man seemed very… relaxed. He wore the standard Jounin uniform, but the leaf headband was worn as a bandana that covered medium-long blond hair, with an easy grin plastered on his visage. His team received him well … actually, only Choji did. Ino seemed quiet and Shikamaru was, perhaps for the first time in his life when not faced with his mother, actually alert. Naruto couldn’t see why – the man seemed as laid back as the Nara heir himself, only rolling a Senbon in his mouth instead of letting out the word ‘troublesome’ all the time… oh well.

As for Anko Mitarashi…

She launched in into the classroom wrapped in a bundle of cloth, which popped open, sending four kunai out to the walls and floor to hold up a gigantic banner that read, ‘The Sexy and Single Teacher – Mitarashi Anko’. The woman certainly seemed… provocative. She wore a very short custard yellow skirt, with a light fishnet upper garment, a trench-coat that barely managed to cover her cleavage and thigh high boots.

Kiba was in love. Sakura… not so much… the same could be said for the other two conscious females in the room. Hinata had fainted with a nosebleed for some reason.

Anyway, before she could usher them out (and sheepishly pull down her banner), Naruto patted Shino on the back supportively which actually relaxed the boy before leaving.

Soon, eight other nondescript ninjas (including a Hyuuga and an Inazuka) arrived in the room and took their charges, leaving only Team 7 in the room. Sasuke gazed outside with an impassive expression, and Hinata was still out cold. Naruto sighed before retreating into his mental palace to read his scrolls.

The apartment he entered was quite the same. He waved to the Archivist as he walked in and headed straight for his first bedroom. He had created a second one for all the books he would read, organized alphabetically. He sent in a gleeful grin when he saw two clones memorizing everything. He moved on to his actual bedroom and smiled when he spotted his ninjutsu shelf.

Besides the original four, there were now many more scrolls adorning it. While the addition of the Grand Clone Explosion, Fire Thrusters, True Earth Wading, Adamantine Strength, Fuuinjutsu
Nullification, and Element Breakdown techniques were his prized techniques, he was no less delighted with the addition of the techniques he’d ‘pried’ off Kakashi with his new jutsu.

On the fourth day of his training, the Archivist had made him find out how many people had mastered the Mental Palace technique. The answer, shockingly enough, was four known alive shinobi besides the entirety of the Yamanaka clan. This led him to believe that their Mind Invasion Techniques were based on accessing another’s subconscious Mental Palace, or whatever their disorganized equivalent was.

Cue experimentation.

Naruto sat Kakashi down and quizzed him on the Yamanaka. Did he ever face on in battle or see one fight? How did they use their techniques? No, not the superficial ones, but the really deep, actually important ones (he got a smack on the head for that). What was the hand-sign they used? How did they outwardly appear while performing the technique? Had he ever tried copying it? (To which he answered in the negative since he couldn’t.)

Now that piques Naruto’s interest. The clan did not have a bloodline limit, so why could the Copy Wheel Eye not copy it?

He then quizzed Kakashi on the Eye Technique itself. Kakashi, intrigued with where he was going with it, answered truthfully (he hoped). Can the Copy Wheel Eye access another Mental Palace? Why not? What could the Copy Wheel Eye see, exactly? So, nothing besides advanced physical perception and chakra?

He then mulled it over in his own Mental Palace, talking it out with the Archivist.

The Yamanaka Clan apparently made it a point to teach their members the Mental Palace as soon as they were Genin. Was there a possible reason they did that? Could their techniques be linked to the Mental Palace?

He went through a few books on the topics of meditation, the subconscious, and, strangely enough, Astral Projection (a supposed myth). He pieced together that the Yamanaka techniques could just be an Astral Projection of the user into the target’s mind somehow, and that the Mental Palace helped with it.

Next came actual attempts.

Asking him to sit down, Naruto placed his hand on Kakashi’s head and formed the half of the Mental Palace hand-sign with his free hand, focusing on his chakra. From his own Mental Palace, he focused on forging a doorway from his mind to Kakashi’s, using his chakra as a medium.

He was both surprised and ecstatic with the success.

Quickly darting in, he was surprised when he saw a perfect copy of his apartment, with no one present, of course. He made his way to look around and noted that the ceiling was higher than his own and that there were far more scrolls than his on the walls.

He darted to ‘his’ first bedroom, and grinned.

There were more than a hundred scrolls on the wall.

Materializing scrolls and pens, he grabbed the nearest fire, water, lightning, and wind ones off the shelf, and formed three Shadow Clones to copy them down and toss them back into his own
apartment as soon as he could.

When the first scroll landed on the floor, he was suddenly completely aware of the jutsu, and was sure he could perform it perfectly. He theorized that every scroll hitting the floor was when a memory took a spot in his mind, so even tossing in written scrolls copied from someone else was like copying a jutsu!

Not one to waste a chance, he copied down all he could from each scroll, which he had to do fast because for some reason the apartment kept getting darker. He only barely made it out with the four scrolls fully done before the door vanished from the wall entirely.

When he awoke in the real world, it was to learn that Kakashi had felt a strange sensation in his head and was afraid something was going wrong and had immediately broken the jutsu. Internally, Naruto further noted that the time dilation effect was present, but that he couldn’t control it when synchronized with someone else. In answer to Kakashi’s inquiry about his attempt, he faked a frown and spun a failure.

Returning to the present, he chuckled as he examined the newer scrolls on the shelf – **Lightning Style Shadow Clone; Fire Style: Grand Fireball Jutsu; Wind Style: Wind Blade Jutsu and Water Style: Water Dragon Jutsu.**

Naruto guessed he’d have to work on his elemental control training before trying the water and lightning jutsus, but the wind and fire ones were fair game. He didn’t actually have a chance to try them out yet because Kakashi and Yamato were on his every step in the past two weeks, and he didn’t want to reveal to anyone that the jutsu was actually successful. Speaking of which, another scroll popped up when he first successfully used the jutsu with a blank label, which he went on to name the **Palace Interpretation Technique.**

Now, though, he just went through the newest jutsu scrolls, running through the hand-signs and ensuring he could use them just as well as his normal ones. He didn’t know whether or not they’d being missions today, but it was best to be prepared for every possibility.

By the time he was satisfied and returned to the normal world, an hour had passed.

He quirked an eyebrow at the empty classroom, save for Sasuke and Hinata, who was now conscious and twiddling her fingers nervously. He sighed and laid back to rest.

It was then that he received a rush of memories. His clone had successfully read the entirety of the Shinobi Archives. That meant a dozen or so jutsus below C-rank (since those are the only ones stored… clans were not foolish enough to leave around strong jutsus or ones their members created and/or analyzed… what happens to new jutsu created by non-clan-affiliated ninja?) to try out! And as each memory flashed through his mind, he also noticed the real bulk of the place - incoming recollections of new analyses of fighting styles, medical jutsu and technique walkthroughs, herb breakdowns, history, and geography, and even some cooking recipes… this Kimchi thing sounds great…

Soon, though, the flashes ended, and he’d have to retreat into his **Mental Palace** to go through them in detail before he could recall them perfectly. He decided to leave that for later, since he’d been spending too much time in it already. Just yesterday, he had waved his hand in the real world and expected a chair to appear. While in normal settings this would be humorous and vaguely embarrassing, in battle it could be fatal. He had to find a way to balance the time he spent in his **Mental Palace** and reality… but how?
“...ru… Na…to? Naruto?!”

Naruto jerked pulled out a kunai, ready to launch it at...

Kakashi?

“Kinky.” He remarked, causing the young Uzumaki to blush.

“Hehe… sorry, Kakashi, sir, I was lost in thought.” Naruto admitted, sheepishly grimacing as he holstered his kunai.

Kakashi eye-smiled. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

This prompted a curious sound from Hinata. “D- do you t-two know each-ch- ch oth- ther?”

Before Kakashi could speak, Naruto hastily replied, “Yes. We’re very good friends.”

Hinata mouthed the phrase ‘very good friends’ repeatedly, and then suddenly developed a spontaneous nosebleed. Naruto sweat-dropped. If one squinted, they’d see a tiny drop on Sasuke’s head as well.

“Um… right…” Kakashi drawled, wondering at how this was the second time today something of this nature had been hinted at. “Anyway, my first impression of you three is… you are interesting. Meet me on the roof in two minutes.” He then vanished in a swirl of leaves.

Sasuke immediately stood and jogged out the door. The graduating classes were on the ground floor, and the Academy had seven… Sasuke would be running for the majority of the two minutes.

Seeing the blond approaching the window in a relaxed manner, Hinata followed. “Um… N-Naruto… shouldn’t w- we…”

Naruto turned to her and gave her an encouraging smile as she stalled. “We’ll be wall-walking. The Hyuuga use control-intensive Nin-Taijutsu, right? So, you’ll have already started this control exercise?”

He chuckled awkwardly when Hinata stuttered out an affirmative.

“Well then, let’s not waste any daylight.” He smiled. He jumped, not bothering to land on the ground as he used the top of the window as a pivot to land sideways on the wall and sprinted up top. He then gripped the railing to cartwheel himself onto the floor with a small grunt of exertion.

“I keep forgetting how nimble you are.” Kakashi remarked.

Naruto squinted. “No. No, absolutely not. You’re not reading Make Out Tactics in front of us on our first team meeting! C’mon, sir!”

“I’m not your teacher yet.” The man pouted, but grudgingly put away the orange book, earning a proud beaming smile from Naruto.

Hinata, meanwhile, had just gotten over the railing. Seeing Naruto smile so widely at Kakashi made her develop a cloud of depression over her head, for reasons.

“Oh, there you are, Hinata!” Naruto turned. “Now, all that’s left is- “

The door to the roof banged open as one Uchiha Sasuke came sprinting through. The boy only stopped in his mad dash as he neared Kakashi, then he worked on calming his only slightly tired...
breaths. He *did*, after all, train everyday…

“How did you two get here?” he asked, not undeservingly, with a stoic expression. “I was out of the door first, and I didn’t hear any footsteps on the stairwell.”

“We scaled the wall.” Naruto commented offhandedly.

Sasuke nodded at him, but looked at Hinata with a calculating gaze, no doubt imagining the timid girl trying to parkour, and failing.

“Well, now that you three are here, have a seat.” He said, gesturing towards the stairs. When his three prospective Genin were seated, he spoke. “Let’s begin by introducing ourselves. I’ll go first. My name is Kakashi Hatake. My likes … hmm… I have very few dislikes. My hobbies… well, you’re too young to know about those. And my dreams for the future…” he let out a perverted giggle at this point.

The three youngsters in front of him sweat-dropped. *’All we learnt was his name…’*

“All right, you go first, White-eyes.”

Hinata both paled and blushed at the same time, which everyone else present noted to be a remarkable feat. “A- Ano… my name i- is Hinata Hyu- Hyuuga. I l- like c- cinnamon rolls and-“ here she suddenly stopped and turned redder than a tomato. “I d- dislike bullies a- and discrimination. My h- hobbies are fl- flower pressing and r- reading a-a-about the Second Fire-Shadow. M- my dr- dream for the fu- future i-is to s-stop the Caged B- Bird Seal in m- my Clan from being used ever again.”

Kakashi nodded, internally his mind was whirling at a past pace. Sasuke showed outwards signs of disgust, while Naruto too looked curious, but only about the last part. *’I read about the Caged Bird Seal in the Shinobi Archives. It said that it’s only applied to the Branch family members… but she’s a part of the Main family. Why does she want it abolished?’* Unfortunately, the Hyuuga, or any shinobi clan, really, jealously guard the intricacies of their clan systems, so Naruto was mostly unaware of the deeper implications of such a thing.

“Next, Mr. Blue, White and Broody.”

Sasuke’s jaw tensed, but he spoke nonetheless. “My name is Sasuke Uchiha. I have a few lies and many more dislikes. My hobbies revolve around training. My dream… no… I’d say it’s a definite future – is to restore my clan… and kill a certain man.”

Kakashi nodded, once again thinking about a lot of things related to the Genin. Hinata seemed to be both sad and wanting to show some sympathy but settled for nervously poking her pointer fingers together while stealing glances at Sasuke. Naruto, meanwhile, narrowed his eyes. *’So that talk… I knew he’d either forgotten about it or cast it aside, but… Don’t worry, Sasuke, I’ll help you get off this path.’*

“And finally, Whiskers.”

Naruto scowled at the dig at his whiskers, but then smiled and went with it anyway, “My name is Naruto Uzumaki! I like ramen, the color orange, Gramps, Grandpa Teuchi and Ayame, and my teachers! I dislike waiting, and perverts, believe it.” Here, he levelled a mildly annoyed glare at Kakashi, who eye-smiled in return making the boy sigh. “Well, I like pranking, training, and meditating. And my dream for the future is to be the best Fire-Shadow ever, believe it!” he grinned wide, pumping his fist in the air as he abruptly stood in what he probably thought was a heroic pose.
Kakashi, well attuned to Naruto’s behavior by now and tempered into such a state by Might Guy, didn’t even find it out of place, nodding as he did to the other two. Hinata’s eyes were full of admiration for her long-time cr-ahem!-teammate, while Sasuke looked vaguely amused.

“Well, now that we’re done with that, there’s nothing much for us to do today. You’re free to leave.” Kakashi waved them away. “Meet me tomorrow at Training Ground 7 at 6 a.m. in the morning for a survival exercise.”

“We have performed plenty of those at the Academy.” Sasuke stated, looking at the Jounin with a disappointed gaze.

In response, Kakashi chuckled disturbingly.

“Hey, hey, hey! You better not be thinking perverted thoughts about us, sensei!” Naruto admonished, crossing his arms. Sasuke looked vaguely constipated at the thought, while Hinata suddenly sat ramrod straight, a nosebleed beginning.

“Ah, nothing of the sort.” Kakashi chuckled with a sweatdrop, wondering what was wrong with everyone today. He then visibly grew serious. “The three of you are not Genin officially. At least, not yet. Tomorrow will be your real Genin test; which, let me tell you, will have a sixty-six percent failure rate.”

Hinata, still bleeding from her nose, smiled weakly and asked, “A-Ano... then the Academy Graduation was...”

“Oh that?” Kakashi rolled his single visible eye. “That was simply a way to sort the truly hopeless from the rest of you cannon fodder.”

Silence.

“Well, I’ll see you three tomorrow, bright and early.” The Jounin said, rising. “Oh, and don’t eat any breakfast...” he cautioned, turning away, and smirking underneath his mask. “you might end up puking it all over the place.”

He then vanished in a swirl of leaves.

Naruto stared at the spot Kakashi was seconds ago, before abruptly yelling to the heavens, “We’ll just see who beats whom tomorrow, sir!”, scaring poor Hinata and making Sasuke closing his eyes in irritation, before turning and sprinting away while throwing a “See you tomorrow, you guys!” at the remaining two members of Team 7.

Running across the rooftops to the Training Ground in question, Naruto frowned in thought. ‘A real Genin exam...? Way to crush the hopes of those who finally thought they made it, and then to fail... but it’s better to have them fail now and retake the Academy to learn better than it is to see them injured... or worse... out in the field. But a sixty-six percent failure rate? Twenty-seven graduates, this time, so that would mean only nine would pass. Why would they put us all in teams and then rework the entire thing if one or two in a slot fail...? No, the entire team passes together, or fails together, it’s the only way that makes sense. Given that nine is a multiple of three, and that the Hidden Leaf emphasizes teamwork so much... that’s the only likely possibility. So, the test tomorrow will probably focus on how we interact as a team...’

Naruto reached Training Ground 7 just as the sun was directly overhead. Internally grumbling about the waste of time waiting for Kakashi, he looked around himself with a keen eye. ‘A clearing, a forest, a wide river, and a rocky hill... this accounts for almost all the terrain in the Land of Fire. It’s
a shame we can’t have something awesome like a snow room or something to simulate the weather of the Land of Lightning…

He jumped to the ground and walked sluggishly to the center of the clearing. ‘If the test tomorrow will want to gauge us as a team, the obvious way will be through something practical. Perhaps we will be asked to find something or fight something or someone, or something like that. I wonder if we’ll have to fight Kakashi-sensei? Nah, that’d be overkill, yeah.’

He brought his hands in a cross seal and two clones formed around him. The first stopped where he was and created ten other clones to scatter and memorize the layout of the area, while the clone itself walked to the shade of a nearby tree, sitting down and working on meditating to replenish its reserves. The second clone walked ahead of Naruto, and formed a hundred clones, each immediately breaking off to their own training. The blonde himself continued past the center (where the second main clone was now yelling out at his underlings to work harder) and onto a secluded area of the training ground to work on physical training.

In the past two weeks, Naruto hadn’t bothered with physical training at all, working only on meditating to restore his chakra reserves to make an increasing number of clones once his were depleted. The weights didn’t have much effect since he limited his actual body in such a manner, and since Shadow Clones didn’t transfer physical growth over… well…

For today, he decided, he wouldn’t do much beyond a few moves to get used to the weights more. After all, it wouldn’t do to tire himself out completely when tomorrow was so important, so he began.

He was soon surprised.

Even though his weights were on, it felt like there wasn’t anything hampering him. Sure, they were miniscule in quantity, but he should have felt something, right? He tried jumping without chakra and realized that he even reached the same height he always did – it was as if his body had already adjusted to the weights completely!

He only removed the weights while bathing, but still, it was ridiculous. He didn’t do any physical exercises at all!

‘This doesn’t make any sense.’ He thought, stopping his motions, and adopting a thinking pose. ‘It’s almost like my body has healed past the … strain … oh. Oh my.’

Naruto had always healed fast. Even when he was younger and only just getting into parkour, any damage from falls or even twisted ankles and bruises muscles always went away the next day. He just used to think he was awesome that way, but now that he thought about it, even the most physically fit people took at least a day or two to heal up from bruises, much less broken feet.

‘So, I have an advanced healing factor.’ He decided, eyeing his weights. ‘But how does that apply to these? Am I somehow… healing my body so that my muscles can cope with the weight?’

He stopped in place and removed his shirt to remove his weights on his chest, then went for the ones on his limbs – hidden by longer than normal gloves and his boots respectively. He then tested his movements.

‘Slightly faster…. Almost insignificantly so. Yet, I still feel the same… this calls for some experimentation.’ He grinned. He’d have to go by Higurashi’s to get the exact idea of how heavy his weights were, but for now, he put them on and channeled more chakra into them, so they went from non-existent to moderately heavy once more.
‘If my hypothesis is true… I’ll get very fast very soon.’ He grinned, and began to practice physically with more vigor, determined to test his theory out.
Yawnning, he groggily made his way to the kitchenette in order to fry a couple of eggs before he went through his morning motions. Yamato was responsible for his change in diet – the man was appalled when they were talking, and Naruto casually mentioned that he ate little else besides ramen. The man went off on a tangent, citing this habit for Naruto’s stunted height and lack of musculature, but Naruto just ignore him for a few minutes. Ramen was the food of the gods, for one, he wasn’t going to abandon it so easily. And besides, even if he wanted something, he couldn’t just waltz into a grocery store and buy some – he’d be massively overpriced and sold either spoilt or expired products.

But when Yamato pulled a scary face, there is no way one wouldn’t be cowed into fear. Also, apparently the other two men had found it funny that Naruto forgot he could simply Transform himself into someone else for quality service, since seals that usually blocked such jutsu from being used in an establishment wouldn’t be present in a civilian store.

Still, he had to admit he felt much better, already being able to see much better and feel much more active than before… which was saying a lot. He only then realized what his stubborn nature and stupidity had done to his body as he had looked into the mirror the next morning and already noticed he looked much healthier simply at a glance.

Anyway, he devoured his breakfast after it cooled enough as he dressed and downed an entire glass of milk before grabbing his throwable pouches. Just when he was about to leap out, however, he paused. Thinking for only a minute, he quickly doubled back in and grabbed the two collapsible Fuma shuriken, fashioning a rudimentary hold out of ninja wire and wore them so that the ring at the center of each were positioned where his shoulder blades were, and the tips of the blades reached the opposite hip. Deeming himself sufficiently ready to encounter anything for today, he made his way back out, then locked his door and jumped out a window onto a rooftop to speed on from there.

The sun was barely out, and some stars still stubbornly twinkled in the lightening sky. Clouds were sparse today, but that was normal for Konoha.

The sun was on his right when he finally landed in the middle of Training Ground 7, morning rays finally making an appearance. He walked over to a tree and sat cross-legged, forming a seal, and retreating into his Mental Palace.

He materialized just inside his apartment door and walked straight to his ‘Shinobi Archive’ shelf. He dug out the latest edition of the Bingo book and sat down on his couch before flipping to Kakashi’s page.

“Your Lightning sphere suddenly grew much brighter yesterday.”

Naruto looked up when the Archivist came up to him and leaned against the doorframe.

“It was probably because it was the first time you actually used a Lightning Style jutsu, but it’s good
to know.” The mental projection shrugged. “The black sphere still hasn’t changed, however.

Naruto arched an eyebrow and peeked into the kitchen. From where he was seated, he could easily see the spheres, and indeed, his Lightning one much brighter.

The first time he’d attempted an elemental jutsu, the wall in his kitchen that had cabinets got a subconscious makeover. The single window relocated to the center, and the cabinets were replaced my six spheres embedded into the wall all around it. Five, he deduced, were representations of the elements. The second largest was a near transparent sphere in which he could spot a grey vortex swirling, directly below the rectangular window – he guessed it was his Wind affinity. The next largest were two identically sized spheres on either side of the window, in one a single fireball blazed brightly, and the other was simply filled with rocks and mud – his Fire and Earth affinities respectively. The smallest were two spheres on the outer sides of the previous two, one filled with water and the other with a medium-sized lightning bolt bouncing around at fast speed – his Water and Lightning affinities. The Archivist theorized that the sizes were larger than what one would expect since he was doing the elemental control exercises for all of the elements, and the sizes could and would still change based on his continued efforts and usage.

No, what mystified them both was the sphere directly above the window. It seemed to practically radiate a darkness that they both felt was strange – it was as if something was meant to be there but wasn’t, yet.

“Well, we’ll find out in time what’s meant to be there.” Naruto shrugged, returning to gaze at the Bingo Book. “A thousand jutsu? Are there even a thousand jutsu?!”

“You ask that question all the time.” The Archivist rolled his eyes. “Probably not in the sense they meant it, but if one accounts for all the variations of all the jutsu out there? Doubtful, but likely.”

“And I get him as my sensei!” Naruto beamed, stars in his eyes. “I’m going to be so strong!”

“If we pass this test.” The Archivist muttered, crossing his arms. “I still think it’s a stupid notion for us to be put through it. Grandpa already knows what we are capable of.”

Naruto rolled his eyes. “He doesn’t know how we would work in a team, and remember – ‘the Village hidden in the Leaves’

“-prides itself on Teamwork. Their shear compatibility with each individual greatly increases their combat efficiency, and enables squads to take down much stronger enemy forces.” The Archivist parroted, looking bored. “We’ve read the same books, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah; you’re just pissed because I didn’t come in before I fell asleep last night.” Naruto stuck his tongue out.

The Archivist huffed. “Well, I’m the only human thing in this place – there aren’t even any other things to do besides watching you, and I get bored!”

Naruto thought for a minute. He certainly wouldn’t want to be stuck in the Archivists place. How could he…

Hm….

“Okay, then.” He brought his hands in a seal, and another clone popped into existence. “Here, another one.

“Aww! Little Aru-chan wants some company!” the newest clone cooed, jumping and latching onto
the newly dubbed ‘Aru’ with enthusiasm.

“And what is he supposed to be?” Aru grunted, trying to pry off the newest clone.

“He will be… the clone that categorizes the new memories.” Naruto decided, nodding. “You will just categorize the books I read when they come in and watch what’s happening outside to help me when I come in here if I have a problem.” He paused then, looking at the excited clone. “He seems to like you.”

“Aww! Is sweet little Naruto-chan feeling left out?” the new clone cooed, extricating himself from a grumbling Archie and leaping for Naruto-


“I think we can call him the Immature.” Naruto deadpanned. Even when he was younger, he didn’t act that way.

“Ah, so Naruto-chan is a Tsundere.” The Immature noted, a strange glint in his eyes.

“I am not Tsundere!” Naruto growled, then threw his hands up in the air. “Whatever. I’m out of here. Take care of him.” Naruto muttered, and vanished.

The Archivist looked at the spot where he was in muted horror, while the Immature grinned in a childish manner. “So now I’m all alone with older brother Archie!”

Meanwhile, Naruto opened his eyes and yawned wide, and looked around. Sasuke and Hinata were already there – Sasuke too rested his back and a leg against a tree, arms crossed, and eyes closed. Hinata was poking her forefingers together and looking around uncertainly.

“Oh, good morning Hinata! Good morning Sasuke!” Naruto excitedly greeted, smiling.

“G- Good morning…”

“Hn.”

Naruto sweat-dropped. “Wow, the two of you have enthusiasm in spades.”

“I- I am just a l- l- little bit nervous a- about this t- test.” Hinata mumbled, shifting uncomfortably.

“You should be.” Sasuke stoically said. “With how much you’re fidgeting, I’m surprised you passed as the Kunoichi of the year.”

“Sasuke…” Naruto began, with a warning tilt in his tone.

“Shut up, Uzumaki.” Sasuke opened his eyes, face adopting a scowl. “You’re not much better – your fancy notions of peace and love and **bonds**” he scoffed the word out with as much disgust he could muster, the other two were certain, “ring hollow and mean **nothing** if you can’t enforce them. How are you going to do so when you’re not strong enough?”

Hinata was going to say something, Naruto thought, but to save her another word lashing, Naruto spoke first. “If I fail I will try again.” He simply said.

“And if you fail again?”

“I will try again.”
Sasuke paused, then snorted and shook his head. “Instead of battering yourself like an idiot—"

“Is it being an idiot to never give up?” Naruto growled, crossing his arms. He thought that he had gotten through to the last Uchiha, but it seems it’s much more difficult to reach a traumatized person through their demons than he assumed. “If you cannot stick to your convictions, it’s better to abandon them altogether. Power doesn’t matter if you don’t have the strength of will to ensure your dream is fulfilled at all.”

Sasuke and Hinata both stared at his resolute pose, one with an expression of confused rage, and another with undisguised admiration. The former opened his mouth to speak, the seemed to think better of it as he turned away with a scoff. “Just try not to slow me down, dead-last.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, bastard.” Naruto sweetly replied, turning away from him as well.

Unknown to the two of them, Hinata floundered for a while, looking between the two of them, then sat by herself under a cloud of depression.

This scene is what Kakashi walked to. His eyes roved over the three of them, considering. He had been here exactly when he said he would, of course. But he never said, he’d appear in front of them.

He had watched from the shadows of a nearby tree when Naruto and Sasuke argued. Having overseen the blonde’s training, he knew that something of this nature would occur when put with the traditional Uchiha personality.

“Yo.” He waved in greeting.

The three stood up, but their responses were lackluster.

“Hn.”

“Heh.”

“A- ano…”

Kakashi sighed, and wordlessly removed an alarm clock. Making a show of setting it to ring at noon, then withdrew two bells from one of his pockets before speaking. “To pass the test, you simply have to take one bell from me before noon.”

“Ano… K- Kakashi-sen- sensei… th- th- there are only t- two bells…” Hinata stammered, looking confused.

Kakashi eye-smiled. “Well, that just means that one of you would have to go back to the Academy, right?”

While Hinata adopted a horrorstruck expression, and Sasuke a determined one, Naruto narrowed his eyes.

“Alright, ready? Begin!”

Naruto quickly withdrew a smoke bomb from his pouch, and slammed it onto the ground. Using it as cover, the three vanished. The young Uzumaki quickly seeped underground using the True Earth Wading Jutsu and waded until he crossed out into the river and watched Kakashi carefully from there.

‘Only two bells? One has to go back to the Academy? Unless they’d bring in a Genin on reserve,
which is highly unlikely, this is probably the tactic Kakashi-sensei is using to test out teamwork. While he will be able to judge our ability, he will also see whether we can hold together through adversity. A clever ruse.

Naruto looked towards the trees. ‘Clever, but inappropriate. Sasuke lacks any motivation to work with others. He sees himself bearing the weight of his entire clan, with them crying in the background for vengeance. He’s got the idea stuck in his head that he’s got to bear all this by himself. Hinata … I don’t know much about, but she seems far too nice or shy to point out anyone their mistakes, or even take the first step forward in an interaction. Based on past incidences, Sasuke would brush me off unless he tastes defeat, and only desperation not to go back to the Academy can force Hinata to work with us at her full capacity – which means starting at the earliest an hour before the end. I have time for a rumble… after Sasuke bites the dust once.’ Naruto smirked, and remained where he was.

Kakashi gave nothing away in expression, but Naruto was sure he knew where he was and was amused with it.

After a few minutes of waiting, Kakashi finally spoke out loud. “A ninja must know how to hide in any situation… you three have got that down, at least.” He nodded, and walked to a tree to sit under its shadow and read.

The moment he sat himself down, four shuriken embedded themselves in his body. Naruto was not surprised when he abruptly vanished and there was a log in his place.

‘Kakashi is not a ninja to underestimate the use of a Substitution Jutsu.’ Naruto smirked. ‘Where most view it as a menial one only worthy of Genin to use, he recognizes the fact that basics can save your life – he’s a master at it.’

He dived deeper, so as to hide his actions better, and created a Shadow Clone. It sped off in search of Hinata.

‘Sasuke is not the type to sneakily attack sensei. At this point, it’s just not his style. He’ll probably challenge him directly, even knowing he’ll fail.’ Naruto mentally sighed. ‘Well, I guess it’s time for that rumble I wanted-‘

He suddenly felt an explosion above ground. Visibly starting, he only found out what happened when the Shadow Clone he previously created had created and dispelled another.

‘Idiot… now you’re stuck in a Headhunter Jutsu. Hmm… I should really learn that one.’

Naruto created another clone, which used to Air Propulsion exercise to burst out of the water, signing for the Water Dragon Jutsu.

‘That should give my other clone a chance to find Hinata without incurring Kakashi’s attention.’ Naruto thought. He mentally groaned when he received his memories of his clone dissipating when Kakashi threw a single Lightning-style charged kunai through the construct itself. ‘No matter how many jutsu you know, it matters little if you’ve mastered the use of none of them.’ He reminded himself, then launched out of the water himself. He used the Fire Thrusters and Air Propulsion combination to fly over the short distance between them, and then abruptly cut it, dropping down with a chakra charged punch that cracked and then collapsed the whole training grounds floor.

“Don’t count me out yet!” he grinned, making Kakashi sweat-drop from his perch on a tree in the undamaged portion of land… quite a ways away.
The disruption had the added advantage of loosening Sasuke’s trap, but he was too stunned to take advantage of this. Already calculating for such an eventuality, Naruto dropped a smoke-bomb and grabbed the dazed boy, running out of there.

“H- what… Dead-last! Set me down this instant!” he yelled, when he was lucid enough.

“Shut up, Bastard!” Naruto whisper-yelled back. “Kakashi will find us, otherwise!”

Sasuke seemed to be struggling with himself a bit, before relenting. “I still insist you set me down.”

He whispered back, equally intense.

This was a surprise to Naruto. ‘Being beaten so soundly must have been a major hit to his pride.’

Thought Naruto, and then, seeing as he was not about to run off getting into fights he shouldn’t be in, set him down but made way to run again. “’Mon, Hinata is this way?”

Sasuke frowned but followed him. “The timid Hyuuga? Why are we going towards her? We can both … work… together… to get the bells.”

Naruto was mentally cheering. That line alone, insult to Hinata aside, was something the bitchy Sasuke would never had said. “Sasuke, think about it.” He urged, taking to the tees with the other male Genin hot on his heels. “Sensei said yesterday that only thirty-three percent students pass, which means nine this time around – that could mean three teams. Every Genin team in Konoha had one Jounin and three Genin, no more and no less. Ever. Reshuffling us all after making a team, does that seem like something a ninja village would condone?”

He let Sasuke stew about it for a moment, before the other’s voice spoke in a strange tone.

“Teamwork. We either pass as a team or fail altogether. But the bells… a divisionary tactic? That scarecrow!”

Naruto snickered despite the situation. “I know. It’s clever. But not clever enough to get by us.”

Naruto smirked. “Kakashi-sensei thinks we won’t pass this test – he’s underestimating us. It’s time we show him we aren’t as weak as he thinks we are.”

Silence for a few moments. “What happened to you? You seem very different from who you were two weeks ago.”

Naruto actually looked at him for a moment, taking in the constipated look on his face. It was a sign of confusion – he was trying to puzzle something out without having all the cards, and he knew it. “I’ll tell you if we pass the test. Is that good enough for now? It’s a long story.” He finally said, turning to look just in time to duck below a low hanging branch which Sasuke leapt over one step behind him.

“Hn.” He grunted, and Naruto took that as an agreement.

They finally came to Hinata, who was looking in their direction expectantly, All-Seeing White Eye active. The clone by her side dispelled as soon as they landed on the branch.

Naruto took this as an opportunity. If he played this right, the team would have a much easier time later on. “Sasuke, would you please explain the concept behind the test to Hinata? I’m going to form a plan of attack.”

The boy stared at him for a moment, face stoic. After a stare-down which neither of them broke, he grunted and turned to Hinata, making a good job of it by laying it out as a puzzle for her rather than simply telling her the crux.
Meanwhile Naruto thought.

‘What good be a good enough show of teamwork that Kakashi will accept us? The bells are obviously not the endpoint – he definitely wants to see us worth together first and foremost. So that means that if we do get the bells… hehehe. Okay, so Hinata has the All-Seeing White Eye, Sasuke has Fire-style jutsu, and I have… a lot more. From what I’ve read, the Hyuuga have disabling techniques so…’

“Hinata, do you … er… why are the two of you staring at me like that?” he asked, confused.

The other two kids quickly averted their eyes and either looked stoic or twiddled their fingers.

“Anyway, Hinata, do you know any Gentle Fist move besides the standard Nin-Taijutsu routines yet?” he asked, observing her closely.

“Ano… I kn- know the A-Air Palm.” He stuttered out, turning red. “That i-is-“

“It’s okay, Hinata, I know what that is.” Naruto assured her, surprising the girl. “But you’re next in line to be Clan Head, right, shouldn’t you know a lot more? No offense, but it just seems like the smart thing to do, especially with what happened twelve years ago.”

Hinata turned red, but it was Sasuke who spoke, “Twelve years ago?”

Naruto nodded. “Twelve years ago, a delegation from the Hidden Cloud came to the Hidden Leaf under pretext of forging an alliance. In reality, the real mission was acquiring the All-Seeing White Eye.”

Sasuke’s eyes widened minutely, barely a twitch in difference, but it as equal to a gobsmacked expression.

“The Hidden Cloud doesn’t have many Bloodlines under its belt.” Naruto explained. “While Hidden Mist has… sorry, had the most number of them, Hidden Leaf the most powerful ones, and even Hidden Rock and Hidden Sand have quite a few, the Hidden Cloud have barely more than five… and those are sparse enough that it doesn’t really make a difference. Two of them were lost – the Gravity Style and the Hail Style. The Black Lightning isn’t an actual bloodline, just a more intensive form of the Lightning Style – however it is considered as such because of the rarity of shinobi who can use it. The Gale Style is almost a learnable one, given how easy its techniques are – but few ninja there have a water affinity so it’s still limited. Anyway, we’re getting of track, yo! The point is, they wanted a strong Bloodline for the village – which is something I really don’t understand – and so they selected the All-Seeing White Eye. After all it is a very powerful Eye Technique. Their target was Hinata, here.”

The girl flinched, while Sasuke’s eye twitched. “Twelve years ago… she was four years old.”

Naruto solemnly nodded. “Yes. The result was that the Hidden Cloud demanded the body of the Hyuuga who committed the murder as recompense. Now, there is something else you need to know to understand the story. Do you know that the Hyuuga are divided into two branches?”

“The Main Family and the Branch Family.” Sasuke nodded.

“Do you know the difference between them?” Naruto prodded.

The boy shook his head. “I assumed that the Main Branch was the… ‘purest’” he spat the word “line of Hyuuga.”
“Well, you’re half right.” Naruto said, turning to look at the ground. “The Main Family is just that – one family. Currently, it is comprised of Hinata’s father, Hinata’s sister, and herself. The Branch family is comprised of sixteen families of Hyuuga not limited to having one child. The other part, however, is the bad one, even if it fulfills the purpose. The Branch Family have a Seal placed on their forehead, called the Caged Bird Seal. Now, the primary function of the seal is to completely erase the All-Seeing White Eye from the person’s system after their death. The secondary function is to make them undeservingly loyal to the Main Branch.”

Sasuke’s eyes snapped to his.

“That’s right. With a simple hand-sign, a Main Branch family member can send out chakra fluctuations from the seal and into the brains of any Branch Family member they focus on. The Branch Family are little more than cattle to them.” Naruto spoke, tone flat. He was furious when he found out, furious enough to almost go to the Fire-Shadow demanding him to tell them to stop… but he still couldn’t face him. “Now, the kicker is that the killer was Hinata’s father, having delivered the blow himself after chasing her captor halfway to the border of the Land of Fire. He was even ready to be given, but the Council of Elders of the Hyuuga Clan – oh, and they don’t get the Caged Bird Seal on them either, by the way – refused to hand over an unsealed All-Seeing White Eye, and also refused to brand Hiashi then and there with a Caged Bird Seal for… reasons unknown. Anyway, on his own behest, his twin was offered instead, leaving a boy in the year above us fatherless.”

Hinata was staring at him with shock and confusion written all over her face, and her eyes watering.

“The incident actually has a romanticized novel version out, named ‘the Sacrifice of the Caged Bird’. And the Shinobi Archive has a basic summary of every clan that was ever part of the Hidden Leaf.” Naruto quietly answered the unasked question. “Anyway, I assumed that, to prevent such incidents from happening again, the Elders would insist on you learning more advanced techniques, since they don’t have another twin to sacrifice again.”

Hinata twitched at that, but remained silent.

“Hinata…?” Naruto prodded, almost going to nudge the girl, but caught himself in time to prevent the action.

“I d- don’t like c-causing p- p- p- pain.” Hinata finally stuttered out. “I s- see the Eld- Elders and my r- respected father cause s- so much pain ev- everyday to th- the Branch Family. They ins- insist that I can only l- l- learn the te- techniques if I d- do them on Branch Family mem- members.” She regressed into whispers at this point. “I d- don’t want to c- cause them m-more pain. I ev- even hold b- back when sp- sparing against m- my own sister – wh- who thinks me wea- weak because o- of it…”

Naruto was stunned into silence. Just how kind was this girl? She was willing to put her own career into jeopardy simply because she didn’t want to hurt anyone? He had the sudden urge to pummel certain Elders…

“They are unworthy.” Sasuke said bluntly, making Hinata raise her head in surprise. “If your sister treats your kindness as weakness, she is unworthy of it. If your father treats your love as a weakness, he is unworthy of it. If your ‘Elders’ treat your compassion as a weakness, they are unworthy of your attention.” He was angry, Naruto knew, but was holding onto himself pretty well, all things considered. “My own father regretted turning my-… his first son into a prodigy because he detached himself from everyone around him. It is good that you are not one.”

Hinata and Naruto both stared at Sasuke like he had grown a second head – Hinata, because she had never heard a kind word out of his mouth… ever; Naruto, because the boy was, albeit with difficulty,
but still, talking about something he considered taboo.

“Sasuke is right, Hinata.” Naruto agreed. Sasuke visibly twitched in surprise, which was the normal equivalent of someone falling down in shock. “If they can’t see the pain they’re causing, and what they have become, how to they deserve your love and affection?”

**Change barrels in unseen, sometimes.**

- “I have never really looked at it from Sasuke’s point of view, before, but I understand now.”

**It could be an action you wouldn’t do otherwise. It could be either simple, or big enough to be disastrous.**

Grandpa’s face passed in front of his thoughts, and he scoffed. “If they can’t accept you for who you are, can’t reveal their intentions to you truly, can’t be on the same wavelength as you, do they deserve your love?”

**Or it could be a whisper, a mere word or two, that turns your world upside down.**

- Sasuke looked at Naruto with respect in his eyes. Hinata looked devastated, but determination was slowly seeping into her, Naruto could see. He really wished he could read her thoughts, but he couldn’t so he had settled for her face.

**Or it could come, with thunder crashing in the skies and heavens weeping, with a simple fundamental variation in our own thoughts, by something you seen, heard, smelt, or tasted...**

He could only see determination now. “Alright, Naruto. Let’s keep that aside for now. What’s your plan?”

**Or felt.**

Chapter End Notes

Important tidbit; in this story the Academy graduates at age sixteen. There’s a Pre-
Academy that exists to teach the basics (such as language and math) that ends at age 10, from where the Academy itself picks up after a year of granted leave, generally to give applicants a chance to be sure they want to be a ninja.

So?
Pre-Academy - Five to ten - Basics such as language (including the basic sealing dialect), sciences, and math.
Academy - Tactics, Geography, History, Chakra Control, 3 Basic Jutsu, Social Science, and.... ???
I mean, I don't understand why even in canon the Academy only limited to what I think is upto grade 7 irl academics??? Since there is no way science was as advanced there as it is here...
Hmm...
How about I refine exactly what they study and get back to you? For now, though, there is definitely something called a Pre-Academy and the real Academy, going on for generally the above specified years.

So basically, add four years to everything, since canon academy let's out at 12 (?) but this one let's out at 16.
Naruto created a *Shadow Clone* with the minimum required chakra and then popped it, sending a message to the *Shadow Clones* with Sasuke and Hinata that he was in place, and ready.

Kakashi was in front of them, and the timer read only twenty or so minutes more. How long did that forced heart-to-heart take, anyway?

Sasuke barreled in from the trees, chakra enhanced speed surprising Kakashi for a moment before shaking his head, knowing that such quick technique came from Naruto’s instruction. He shut his *Make Out Paradise* book and met Sasuke head on.

Instead of beginning a combo, Sasuke vaulted overhead and ran straight on. Kakashi stayed in one place, perceptively gazing about the field, but hiding it under a mask of confusion.

Hands popped up from the ground, trying to make a grab for Kakashi. He sidestepped it. After exactly 8 seconds, another pair of hands popped up, and Kakashi sidestepped again. Then, suddenly, the whole field seemed to erupt in hands trying to grab him. Kakashi jumped straight up to avoid them.

Sasuke stopped and ran back forming the hand-signs while he ran. With nary a shout, he released a much smaller *Great Fireball* than before straight at the point Kakashi would be when it reached. The Jounin, surprised that they would collaborate at all, was a little late in his *Substitution*, but he pulled it off.

That was his first mistake.

When he landed on a spot in the trees, Hinata jumped right at him, All-Seeing White Eye activated and filled with determination. She struck forward, sending a blast of amplified chakra straight at him with the *Eight Trigrams Air Palm*.

That alone wouldn’t be so bad, if Sasuke didn’t suddenly appear behind her and use a *Grand Fireball* that was much closer to the size of the original one he had used. The two jutsu combined and blazed even brighter and larger than the second *Grand Fireball*, making it impossible for him to do anything else except use another *Substitution*. He landed a ways away and out of sight.

That was his second mistake.

After exactly eight seconds, ten different copies of Naruto seemed to leap at him. He prepared to simply spin one around and throw them all off. But this idea was halted in its tracks as they all exploded without waning in a large radius of Lightning-style chakra.

Kakashi, now singed, got out of his barely-in-time substitution, finally deciding to get serious.

That was his third and last mistake.

A gigantic barrage of kunai suddenly made it’s way towards him, he turned and ran directly up the tree narrowly missing each one, and backflipped when the barrage ended, intending to appear right at the point of origin of their trajectory. Getting the general direction, he appeared there, and found Naruto cackling madly, hands full of kunai.

“I’ll definitely get him this time. Hehe.” Naruto laughed, looking around for where his sensei went.
Kakashi sweat-dropped, but snuck up behind the boy, intent on putting him in a low level Genjutsu.

Before the ‘boy’ suddenly sparked with Lightning-style chakra. He stopped his hand-signs and activated a **Substitution**…

Got you.

Only to black out after a flash of white light.

When he came to, he was tied to the middle post in the center of the training ground. His eyes widened when he saw all three of his Genin student in front of him, with Sasuke and Hinata holding a bell each with a smile (AN ACTUAL SMILE ON SASUKE’S FACE??) and Naruto in the middle of them both, giggling at him.

“Oh, Kakashi-sensei, taken down by three mere Genin… how shameful.” Naruto cooed.

“How did you get me?” Kakashi asked, a curious look on the… visible part of his face… which wasn’t much. But he did have a glint of pride in his eye.

“Well, you demonstrated the **Substitution** three times for us, in quicker and quicker succession.” Naruto beamed. “It was all a ploy to see how you moved. The **Substitution** and the **Body Flicker** jutsus have one thing in common – high speed movement. While the **Body Flicker** is done by channeling and coating the body with chakra and simply running, the **Substitution** is performed only by coating the body with chakra to lighten the load on muscles and thus increase movement speed. However, this means that the **Substitution** can only be done for a short distance. Experienced shinobi can increase the distance, but not by much. Most shinobi have a certain direction they prefer to move in by using a **Substitution**, we just had to figure out yours, and get Hinata there to perform a Gentle Fist strike!” Naruto then stopped and sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “We were going for the middle of your spine, to temporarily paralyze you, but I overbalanced, and she ended up striking the base of the back of your neck instead.”

“But I thought Hinata was back with Sasuke… and that Sasuke was in the clearing… oh wait.” Kakashi paused.

“That’s right! **Shadow Clones** under a **Transformation**!” Naruto beamed.

“But then how did your clone use an **Air Palm**?” Kakashi asked, now actually curious rather than the pretense he was putting up before.

“It wasn’t an **Eight Trigrams Air Palm**, but a **Wind Style: Gale Palm**, a C-rank jutsu that is similar to it and is available in the Shinobi Archives.” Naruto corrected.

“Ah.” Kakashi sighed, probably feeling a little dumb. “Anyway, you have the bells, you two.” He said, turning to look at Sasuke and Hinata. “Which one of you will give theirs to Naruto?”

Sasuke smirked and Hinata managed a small smile, sans any hint of nervousness. “We will either all pass together, or none at all.” She said firmly, which made Kakashi look at her with the tiniest bit of shock, then his gaze flickered to Naruto.

He shook his head. “Very well, you three all pass. You are officially Team 7.”

Naruto cheered and leapt into the air. Hinata gave Kakashi a wider smile, and Sasuke smirked wider.

“Now.” Kakashi eye-smiled. “Which one of my cute little Genin will release their poor old teacher?
A cloud of depression formed over his head when he saw that the three of them had already turned and were walking away with nary a thought about him.

“My cute little Genin don’t love me!” he wailed, with chibi tears leaking from his eyes.

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“…and then I was released from the Fire-Shadow office.” Naruto finished, eyes cast over the village from where he was seated on the roof of his apartment building. “I knew that the villagers treated me with scorn and hated the idea of my existence because of the Nine-tails, already, and it hurt so much… But I forgave them. They simply don’t know any better. How can you resent a child for fearing the dark?”

Sasuke was deep in thought. About what, Naruto could only guess. Hopefully he was not thinking about enslaving him or something.

Hinata, on the other hand, had an inappropriate look of understanding on her face. “Whenever I activated my All-Seeing White Eye around you, I always saw a strange red spiral shape enclosed in a circle where your belly button should be.” She spoke softly. Even though her stutter was gone with her uncertainty, her voice was still as soft as bell-chimes. “Is that where…”

“Yes.” Naruto nodded. “The seal holding the Nine-tails, I’ve found, is a Trigram Seal. It had eight anchor points, and one matrix. It was listed as one of he strongest seals ever created… by my father, the Fourth.” He said, sighing. “I have forgiven him too – don’t look at me like that, Sasuke. If you were in his place, and the beast was attacking the Uchiha clan, how would you react if you had no other choice that could be worked in the limited amount of time you had?”

Sasuke, who looked shocked for a moment, averted his gaze. “Hn.”

Naruto looked between the two of them… who seemed lost in their own thoughts. Probably about how crazy the day was, today. “So… are we okay?”

“No.” Sasuke said, gaze turning steely. “No, we are not okay, yet.”

Hinata’s had snapped towards him. “Sasuke…?”

“The night of the massacre…” he started; but paused to take a deep breath and calm his shaking hand, before continuing. “The night of the massacre, I was on my way from a late training session on the Academy grounds. Remember that Sword Technique demonstration?” he asked rhetorically. “I was … am … interested in swordplay. I had opted to watch the demonstration, and then went to the training ground and had fun the full evening pretending some random stick was a sword.” He smiled a sad smile for only a moment. “When I reached the compound, the lights were off, but it was a full moon, so I could see well enough. At first, I thought there was a clan meeting – there were too many of those at the time, and only the other two kids in the Academy and I didn’t go. So, I continued on my way… but I stumbled across Aunt Rushi… I rushed back home and… there he was. My father and mother were telling him that they were proud of him, and then he ran the sword straight through their bodies. Then he…” a confused expression suddenly overtook Sasuke’s stoic one. “Then he… cried? He cried over their corpses, before he realized I was in the room. He took off at a very slow speed, perhaps so that I would follow, and left me outside. Standing in front of the moon, he told me
to... to run, to live a pitiful existence. He told me to hate him, to gather enough hate in myself till I have the same eyes he did. Only then could I go to kill him... Then he... wept? Yes, he wept a single tear, before another of blood joined it and then... I relived him killing my parents for seventy-two hours."

Hinata seemed shocked beyond words. Naruto, on the other hand, had his eyes narrowed.

“When I woke up I was informed that my brother decided to kill my entire clan to test his prowess. And that he’d left me out of pity.” Sasuke said, voice back to monotone. He looked at his hands. “I felt so unbelievably angry... at myself. I was weak enough to be pitied... by a monster. I felt so angry at myself for not being there earlier, for wasting my time that evening playing around like some child...”

Hinata laid a hand on his shoulder, and he didn’t shrug it off.

“That’s the night my childhood died.” He finished quietly, eyes closed.

Naruto himself was deep in thought. ‘Why would Itachi’s parents be proud of him for killing the entire clan? Why was he so sad while ‘testing his prowess’? If he killed two other children, who were probably younger than Sasuke why spare him? Something is not right here.’

“Now... we’re okay.” Sasuke said, clenching his fists.

“Yes.” Hinata smiled a soft, sad smile. “Look at us, the dregs of shinobi, called failures, demons, and trash. Yet... here we are. We are Genin now. And we can only go up from here.”

Naruto and Sasuke both looked at her, then at each other. Hinata stopped gazing at the moon and looked at the two of them too.

“We’re team 7.” Naruto nodded, grinning.

“And we're going to get stronger.” Sasuke smirked.

“Strong enough to never be walked over again.” Hinata smiled softly.

Hidden in the trees nearby, Kakashi nodded to himself, eye on his book, but his heart out with his three new students. He was once called the son of a failure, and he understood them perfectly. He wouldn’t hold back, he wouldn’t make them wear baby shoes. Their teamwork was already beyond amazing... It was time to turn them into real shinobi.

And that was how change continued.

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Naruto woke up the next morning exhausted. He was fine physically, but he just felt so heavy... emotionally. It was as if, instead of his baggage getting lighter, it only got heavier.

‘I have to find a way to help Hinata help the Hyuuga clan.’ Naruto decided, staring up at his ceiling, looking at a small lizard scurry away. ‘And I have to find out whether Itachi was really a monster or not.’
With that in his mind, he woke up fully from the bed and went about his business.

An hour later, he was at Training Ground 7 with much heavier weights on. His hypothesis was almost proven correct – once he slept and woke, all his injuries and ailments vanished. He could use this to cheat his way faster into weight training.

Having already finished the Shinobi Archive, today he made six clones that immediately took off towards any empty and unassigned training ground. He already had a clone set working on Chakra Control. Five of these would work on Elemental Control, while the other would govern clones who would try out all the C-rank and below jutsu he read of from the Archive. In a few days, he should be able to complete the third stage of all the Elements and focus on the fourth and final one… after finding out what they were.

While affinity training up to three levels was recommended for the primary affinity of all ninja, the fourth stage was a jealously guarded secret. He only learned of them from Yamato, who refused to say anything else. Apparently, it was something you either came up with on your own or got a master to tell you. He did not want to approach Grandpa just yet, so he held off on finding out for now. He was sure he could butter that man up if he had to.

When he arrived, he was shocked.

Apparently, so were Sasuke and Hinata.

All three were staring slack-jawed at a sweat-dropping Kakashi.

“Y- you’re here...” Naruto trailed off, stumbling towards his teammates.

“On... time...” Hinata trailed, like the world had just said Cinnamon rolls were all they would eat, forever.

“H- hn...” Sasuke stuttered, but the fact that he stuttered at all was a great indication of how he was feeling.

Kakashi’s sweat drop grew in size. “I didn’t make that bad of a first impression... did I?”

“You did.”

“Actually...”

“Absolutely.”

“Never mind.” He sighed, then adopted a serious expression. “I’m giving the three of you a choice.”

The three Genin in front of him straightened, sensing the gravity of the situation.

“I was once an ANBU commander.” He stated, ignoring the disbelief on their faces with only a minor scowl (which was hidden anyway) to show for it. “I am well aware of how to achieve each of your best potentials within the shortest time possible. You can choose that route, which will be so tiring you may want to drop dead. Or,” here he relaxed his posture a bit, “we can keep the kiddie gloves on, and go on the same snail’s pace the other Genin teams probably are adopting. Your call.”

The three of them eerily smirked at the same time. “There is no question.” Sasuke spoke for them. “And we believe you know exactly what we’ll choose.”

Kakashi nodded. “I knew, but I had to offer a choice so that whoever didn’t want to would back
down.” He pulled out four pieces of paper. “Okay, then. We will start as soon as we’re done with
these. These are chakra papers. Normally they are used for seals, but they can also tell a person’s
elemental affinity when they channel their chakra through it. For example,” here he picked one up,
and held it until it crinkled in on itself so badly it turned into a ball. A very… stiff ball, “I have a
strong lightning affinity. With a lightning affinity, the paper crinkles. With fire, it burns. With water,
it gets wet. With wind, it gets cut in half. With earth, it turns to dust.” He held them out. “Now you
three try.”

Sasuke took his first and channeled chakra into it. His paper crinkled up almost as bad as Kakashi’s,
and it caught fire after that.

“A very strong lightning, and a medium fire affinity.” Kakashi hummed. “At what age did you
master the Grand Fireball?”

“I was ten years old.” Sasuke supplied.

Kakashi muttered something like “That ought to do it.” Before handing Hinata the second one.
The girl seemed to tense. “Sir, Hyuuga aren’t supposed to learn elemental jutsus.”

“You’re under my jurisdiction now, not your clan’s.” he assured her. “I can legally teach you
whatever I wish.”

Hinata nodded, and channeled her chakra into the paper. First it split into half. Then those two again
split into halves. Before the top two could so much as start to fall, the entire paper was cut into
several tiny squares.

“Well, what do you know.” Kakashi said, his tone belying a little bit of surprise. “A Hyuuga with an
astoundingly strong wind affinity.”

“Ummm…?”

“Well,” here he adopted a teaching pose. “Hyuuga clansmen and women generally, or rather,
always, have a water affinity. That’s where you get the inspiration for your style from. The gentle fist
is as fluid as the waves but can carry the force of a tsunami.”

“Yes, that’s right!” Naruto exclaimed, causing the two Genin to jump at the volume and Kakashi to
sigh. “Many ‘experts’” here he scoffed “believe that the Gentle Fist is based on an earth affinity. That
is beyond absurd. The style has rigid stances, sure, but the whole point of it is dexterity. Any
 technique beyond the normal Nin-Taijutsu requires a high amount of speed! That itself rules out earth
and fire. Then, no techniques have any slicing motions, ruling out wind. The presence of deflection
ones narrow it down to a water affinity!”

“That’s right.” Kakashi drawled. “Due to the fluid nature of both Wind and Water style chakra, yet
the subtle and glaring differences, the style might not feel right to you, but you can make it work at
its basest level. Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yes.” Hinata nodded rapidly, face red. No one knew whether it was embarrassment due to her
situation, or anger at the fact that no one ever tried to help her. “While I can go through the motions,
the exact feelings and sensations described to me by my tutor were absent. I could never relate to the
style as they said I should.”

Kakashi nodded. “That’s why they should really start checking the affinities on their members. It’s a
one a million chance but… well, what can we do?” he shrugged, and handed the last paper to
Naruto.
He grinned and channeled chakra into the paper. It split into four strips. One strip got damp faster than the eye could see. Another crinkled till it curled on his hand. The other two, however, both burned to ash and the other turned to dust at the same time.

“All five affinities. Very strong.” Kakashi quietly noted. “Naruto, how many control exercise have you finished?”

“Well, you know I’ve finished the third ones for Fire and Wind, the laterms of which comes easiest to me..” Naruto spoke, eyes narrowed. "Lightning is the hardest, due to the inverse nature it has with Wind, my primary affinity."

Kakashi nodded absently. "Hmm... yes, yes." He murmured, then turned to regard his Genin as a whole. “The Village Hidden in the Leaves values teamwork because it allows to have a theoretically all-rounded cell. What one member may not know will be learned by the other.” He looked at them with a piercing gaze. “As such, I want you three to decide which path you would like to travel.”

“I can do anything these two won’t, believe it.” Naruto said, gesturing towards his two teammates. “I mean, with my Shadow Clones and the Mental Palace, I can learn anything as long as I put a mind to it, anyway.”

“While I dislike the notion of using my future Bloodline as a crutch,” Sasuke spoke, “I will be along the same lines. Apart from mastering what I observe, I will need to limit myself in no way.”

“I honestly don’t know which arts I would like to pick up.” Hinata said, wringing her hands. She had these tics for her whole life – even if her stuttering stopped, her behavior wasn’t magically going to change. “I will look into it and research on my own and have an answer by next week.”

Kakashi nodded, then turned to the other two. “Even if you can master everything, it helps to have your fingers dipped in a single art for most of the time – it grounds your mind and makes you more dangerous. Being a jack of all trades and a master of none will help, but it can also be your downfall.”

“Hey, hey, hey; I was thinking more along the lines of ‘Master of all Trades.’” Naruto smirked. “But I believe mine will be Nin-Taijutsu and Ninjutsu. Anything else as my main makes little sense.”

“Playing to your strengths, that’s good.” Kakashi nodded. “In the next month alongside physical training with the rest, I will be drilling you on one jutsu every three days, which I want you to spend fifty clones mastering. If you don’t get it down, you don’t get a new one.”

“Hai, sensei.” Naruto nodded, grinning.

“I think, once I awaken my Copy Wheel Eye, that Genjutsu should be my forte, along with Kenjutsu.” Sasuke added. “I’ve always been attracted to swords— "

“Kinky.”

“And I believe,” Sasuke grit his teeth glaring at a grinning Naruto, “that it will be most fruitful. Genjutsu is often an underestimated art that, when coupled with my Copy Wheel Eye, could leave me with a lot of options, which I like.”

“That is a good combination.” Kakashi nodded. “I believe there should be plenty scrolls in the Uchiha Archive. I want you to choose a basic one tomorrow evening, and start with it the next day. Even if you haven’t awoken your eyes to cast from them, you can still perform them normally. I’ll also teach you one Genjutsu in a week until you have mastered it. You’ll be too tired tonight.” He ignored Sasuke’s confused frown and turned to his other two students to speak.
“Ano… until I decide, can I try everything else, a little by little?” Hinata asked softly. “They know themselves inside out, but I’ve never… had the opportunity.” She finished quietly.

“Of course.” Kakashi smiled, and this time it was frightening. “I will also accompany you tonight on your way back to your compound and have a word with your father.”

“Ah! You learned it from Yamato!” Naruto screamed, which the other two couldn’t even hear because they were too busy being either scared… or awed.

“Can you teach me?” Hinata quietly asked, which made Naruto and Sasuke faceplant.

“Of course.” Kakashi eye-smiled. “Now, I have the perfect training for you three today. Naruto, I’m giving you one minute to create any clones or anything for the day apart from this. I’ll let you meditate periodically.”

“That’s fine… I already have clones working, believe it.” Naruto sheepishly smiled, rubbing the back of his head.

Kakashi cuffed him on the head. “I requested this training ground for a reason, Naruto. It’s the biggest in the Leaf, and is the only one with privacy seals. Call them here.”

Naruto sighed, and created and popped another Shadow Clone. “Done.”

“Good.” Kakashi beamed. “Now, Sasuke, I want you to stay here,” he continued, ignoring the sounds Naruto’s incoming clones were making. “Naruto go stand over there, and Hinata, go there.” He pointed, and backpedaled himself a bit. “Alright, that’s it. Now, I want you to keep throwing projectiles at Sasuke. If you run out, get in close and personal. The idea here is to simulate a near-death scenario.” He instructed, as his Genin paled. “Now, let’s start.”
Naruto could barely walk on Saturday, but he made his way to Yakiniku Q anyway. He had been waiting for this part of the week, and he’ll be damned if he would be kept away from it by something as stupid as exhaustion. Kakashi made good on his word. The ex-ANBU commander ran them through like roadkill every day, until the other two passed out and even he was running on fumes, which said a lot.

His weights were up to 200kg each now, something which he was told was no small feat. When Kakashi was in a serious mode and spoke that way, it meant that it was the most spectacular thing in the world. He had gotten down two jutsu in the past five days, although they were both for Water style – Great Water Shockwave, and the Water Vortex. Along with that, he had managed to keep his control, and finish the third level of all the Elemental Control exercises. He was told that it was no easy feat to enhance the opposite to the user's natural affinity – Water for Fire and Lightning for Wind – to the same level, which he responded to by proceeding to do just that. He was currently beyond ninety-eight percent of the shinobi population of the world in pure Elemental Control. That made him feel more than just proud, even though he could barely work any chakra after training so long and hard all day. Kakashi was really taking advantage of his ‘magic night’s sleep’, as he put it, and really put Naruto through his paces. He didn’t really get a chance to test himself – Kakashi had said they’d all do it at the end of the one month.

Speaking of the others, they really were worse off than Naruto – at least he could delegate his work to more than an army’s worth of people (namely, his Shadow Clones), but Sasuke only had his Copy Wheel Eye. It had three beads in each eye, now, thanks to Kakashi’s insane training. The ‘attack Sasuke’ game was one that Naruto enjoyed very much, but the young Uchiha probably was cursing him to within an inch of his life. He was at the Hospital every night for four days, being healed up enough for training the next day to maximize the potential of his Copy Wheel Eye. Once he had that down, it had taken Sasuke the remaining day to completely master the False Surroundings Illusionary Art. That surprised Kakashi since he had thought that Sasuke wouldn’t have the control for it. However, it turns out that the boy had been heavily using the Uchiha Clan Archive ever since the massacre and had been practicing Chakra Control even before that. For all these years, his control was good enough for most Genjutsu. His sword training was something they had combined with both – during the Copy Wheel Eye phase, he was to use only his sword, no chakra and no dodging, to block the projectiles or jutsu; and during the Genjutsu phase he had to find a way to work in attacks along with casting the art. Picking up on the Iaido style, Sasuke actually enjoyed himself on the last day, since he had to use his creativity more than just ‘how do I block six kunai coming from three directions at once’. He also picked up some of the jutsu being thrown round, but heavily declined using Naruto’s Taijutsu style since it was too erratic while he preferred a flow he could get familiar with.

Hinata seemed to be the only one of the three enjoying ‘Hell Month’, as they’d dubbed it. Every day, she’d try out a new niche – Bukijutsu, Ninjutsu, Taijutsu, Genjutsu, and Kenjutsu were attempted this week. She’d felt most at peace with Taijutsu and Ninjutsu and decided that those would be her main concern. Deciding to spend an hour the next week trying out other things, she said she simply ‘preferred getting in close’ than staying at a distance or trying sensory manipulation. Naruto predicted she’d pick up a Nin-Taijutsu or even create one. Regardless, she had at least a basic level of skill in everything she’d attempted. She’d also managed to fight her reservations on sparring with her sister and defeated the brat, moving on to defeat some other low-level Hyuuga, who her father had deemed ‘weak enough not to accidentally kill her’. In reward, she was given clan technique scrolls, and worked hard to master them in the evening phase – that’s what knocked her out so much; chakra use.
While she had amazing control and sizeable reserves, holding back so much had done a number on her Chakra coils, which had been just a hair’s breadth shy of being atrophied. She simply said that ‘the burn felt good’ and could never stop herself from training. In spite of the serious demeanor Kakashi had adopted over his goofy one he’d displayed when Yamato and he watched over Naruto, he cried chibi tears to see his student so hard-working.

The team was coming along very well, if he’d say so himself. Judging them against what several books described as the skill level of standard Genin, he would not be arrogant or prideful to state that they were way beyond, already. Their teamwork was also something Kakashi commended – especially given his rule of ‘those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse then trash’. On closer investigation, however, there was no way this wouldn’t have occurred.

The only thing that’s better for teamwork than sharing your darkest fears and insecurities was almost dying together. Team 7 (even their sensei, unknown to the three young shinobi) had formed strong bonds the night of their Genin test. Perhaps the most surprising of the lot was Sasuke – Naruto never had anyone other than Iruka and the Fire-Shadow to open up to, and Hinata had no one period. Sasuke, while having his family snatched away from him at a young age, had also something in spades that inhibited his social skills; a heavy burden of pride, keyed into a mixed superiority and inferiority complex. When Naruto sat down to actually think about it with the new added information from Sasuke’s input, it made sense. The Uchiha clan had instilled a great bit of superiority in all their clan people from a very young age, given their utter mastery of anything they put their mind to thanks to the Copy Wheel Eye. Even though his brother slaughtered the clan, he did so in less than an hour, proving his power. On the other hand, Itachi was much stronger than him, and the only emotions that linked him to the man since that fateful night were fear and anger. It was almost given that he’d act the way he did. What was uncharacteristic was him opening up and his subsequent better attitude. When Naruto once again tried to think about it, he pinned down the answer to be Pride.

Hinata persevered through much, even he saw that. In Sasuke’s mind, perhaps, when he weighed Hinata in front of any girl their age, there was almost no comparison. The girl had been suffering verbal and psychological abuse ever since she could remember, with absolutely no support from the clan – the Main Family ignored her because she was weak, and the Branch Family were forced not to acknowledge her until she gained necessary proficiency in the Gentle Fist, and idea propagated by the Elders. Outside of the clan, she had not a single soul to encourage her either – Naruto remembered that most in the Academy had reasons (excuses) for not approaching her – either they found her too clingy, too timid, too creepy, or (as in the case of a certain spiky haired individual) were simply too lazy to take the first step. Sasuke was ashamed that he was in the second category, and Naruto castigated himself for falling in the third.

Aside from the talk they’d had at the pier long ago, what drew Sasuke to Naruto was his resolve. Even during the Academy days, the young Uchiha drew his spirit to train from Naruto, who he had seen either practicing his time away or managing to run away and hide from ANBU. During the test itself, many of his preconceptions of a loud-mouth, overly conspicuous, tactically-impaired loser fell away when the blond exhibited knowledge and intelligence even he couldn’t match and a keen mind for planning that he couldn’t make heads or tails of until it was all over. On some level, Naruto also guessed it was his way of not directly giving the Uchiha the answers on a silver platter (which he had grown sick and tired of from the rest of the village), and have him work out the answer himself, recognizing his talent in a far better way – Naruto guessed this could also be tracked back to the boy’s pride.

He shook his head of his thoughts (barely holding down a wince when his neck hurt) when he saw the eatery they had chosen for their weekly hangout. He could already see Kiba, Shikamaru, Choji,
and Shino occupying a table outdoors, but he also spotted two familiar unusual hair colors… of pink and blond.

He staggered up to them and nearly fell into the chair Shino had vacated when he spotted his friend approach. “Yo.” He waved weakly.

“Damn, Naruto.” Kiba whistled. “Your sensei is really putting you through the ringer, huh?”

“Troublesome.” Shikamaru added, eyeing Naruto up and down. “This means that once our teachers catch wind of it, we’ll end up like this, too.”

“Naruto!” Ino seemed surprised. “If you were tired, shouldn’t you be resting?”

“No way.” Naruto vehemently said. “I missed Shino and my friends far too much to let this opportunity slip by.” He sighed and winced when something moved in his chest. “Ow.”

“This is illogical and self-destructive. Why? Because the human body needs rest to recuperate from training – you more than us due to its intensity we can clearly see.” Shino chastised him, and Naruto spotted his left eyebrow twitch minutely, which conveyed irritation. “I have informed you on various occasions that-“

“Guys, give him a break.” Choji interrupted, biting on a chip. “He’s clearly gotten here to spend time with us – let’s not chew him out for it, okay?”

“Troublesome.” Shikamaru sighed.

“So what is your teacher like?” Choji asked, opting to be the one to break the ice. “Genma told us he was an elite Jonin and a war veteran.”

“Kakashi is evil.” Naruto muttered, reaching for a glass of water. “I mean, he’s a good person and all, and fun to be around, but at the moment, he’s pure evil to me.”

Sakura, having been quiet all this time not knowing the dynamics of having the dead-last of the Academy in a group of clan heirs, suddenly spoke up. “And how are your teammates taking their training? Hinata and Sasuke?”

Naruto eyed her for a moment. “I can’t give you details, but let’s say that I have an advantage they don’t. They’re probably exhausted on their beds, right now.”

“Cha! What advantage could you have over Sasuke?” Sakura rather… loudly asked.

Ino eyed the others at the table. The only reason she was okay with Naruto at the table was that her own teammates had said that he was a much different person than the rumors made him out to be. So far, she could certainly agree to that. The only thing evil about him was the stench currently wafting from the blond, but the smell was oddly… wet… like he had been wading in stagnant water. Anyway, there wasn’t anything really bad about him now that she actually took the time to sit with him – he just seemed… normal. However, even she had long noticed that he had an unusual amount of stamina, seeing him bounce around all the time even after the exercises at the Academy, so for him to be this sluggish…

She mentally shrugged, thinking that the only one who knew the team could be a person who was actually on the team, so she elbowed Sakura and hissed a reprimand, “Forehead, can’t you see he’s exhausted? Leave him be.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes at Ino and made to say something, before she turned to look at Naruto…
really look at him. The boy was staring at her with an unreadable expression, but she could spot several sliced spots on his clothing, she could notice that his posture was slumped far more than how it normally was, that his limbs hung almost uselessly from his frame, and that he seemed to be slightly thinner than before. She bit her lip and looked away.

“Anyway,” Kiba broke the silence, feeling uncomfortable, “Anko is awesome! She’s totally crazy, but she’s awesome! She works at the T&I department, but she’s amazing at tracking stuff! My sister told me she beat her once in a game of tracking, and she’s one of the best my clan has to offer!”

“Miss Mitarashi also does not dismiss my bugs as useless.” Shino input quietly. “It is a refreshing change from being ostracized for it.”

Uncomfortable silence once again descended on the table. Naruto looked sideways at Shino with a small smile. He knew that once the Aburame realized that he made people uncomfortable with his mere presence, he’d taken to it as a game. Either he went unnoticed, or he made everyone around him feel so guilty or unwelcome that they’d stay away out of their own conflicted feelings.

Under the table, his foot carefully nudged Shino’s and he offered him a gentle smile. The Aburame’s visible part of the face turned a very light pink.

Ino’s eyes widened. “Oh my.”

Naruto turned to look at her, confused. “Oh my …?”

“Oh my… our teacher is better!” Choji quickly interjected after he was poked in the ribs by Shikamaru. “Genma told us he’s a normal village Jonin, but that he took missions with two friends of his, and that he once guarded the Fourth!”

Naruto froze. “What?”

“Oh yeah!” Ino spoke, getting nudged unnoticeably by Shikamaru. “He’s so awesome! And cute.” She said, hearts visible in her eyes.

Naruto shook his head. He cursed himself for overlooking such a simple detail – the two ‘friends’ of their sensei but have been Raido Namiashi and Iwashi Tatami, the other two members of the Fire-Shadow Guard Platoon instated into duty by the Third for the Fourth. This was a problem. If they were closer to the Fourth than the books let on, that could mean they were either unaware or very aware of his existence… he had to keep his distance from them.

“That’s nothing! Anko can summon snakes!” Kiba gloated.

“Genma can summon Leopards!” Ino rebutted.

“Anko can use Earth style and Fire style.”

“Genma can use Earth style and Lightning style.”

“Anko-“

“Mister Inazuka.” Shino interrupted. “It would be better if you conceded your argument. Why? Because you are beginning to delve into information that could be used to surprise the others later.”

Kiba laughed sheepishly while Shikamaru pegged Ino with a “Troublesome.”

The food finally arrived, but Naruto, having come late, hadn’t been able to order anything, and none
of the boys were surprised when the waiter pointedly ignored the young Uzumaki. Shino ended up sharing his food with a near unnoticeable blush, stating that he could get more food for himself at home later on, but he very much doubted Naruto would have the energy or the drive to walk to another restaurant and then walk home.

This time, Ino giggled, much to Naruto’s confusion, and Sakura muttered a shocked, “Oh.” Regardless, Naruto enjoyed the evening and went home with more energy in his body than any other night.

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“Yo.”

Teams 8 and 10 turned to the greeting and seemed pleasantly surprised when Naruto wasn’t alone this time. Hinata stood on Naruto’s right, smiling serenely.

“Naruto! And Hinata too, this time.” Kiba greeted, getting up to drag another chair over. “C’mon sit down!”

“Well, you look better than last time, at least.” Ino noted, seemingly uninterested, but Naruto caught an underlying tone of curiosity.

“You guys don’t look very good though.” Naruto noted, and the others almost seemed to collectively sigh.

“I told you it would be troublesome.” Shikamaru groaned from where his head was slumped on the table. “Our teachers learned that your team was going through something they called ‘Kakashi’s Hell Month’, so they started putting us through our paces too.”

Naruto and Hinata traded a glance. The blond had shared his concerns with the other two Genin members of his team – he decided he wanted to risk a test of this other sensei. If he was close to the Fourth and knew of his existence, he had kept it quiet so far and didn’t seem inclined to tell the world about it. If he wasn’t and he made the connection, his next actions would say a lot about his character and the Fire-Shadow could run damage control.

Speaking of which, he had been putting off the meeting with the man as much as possible, which wasn’t very hard given how exhausted he was every day. But now that his rate of recovery seemed even better and Kakashi had firmly denied upping the rate of his training until they were sure it was a permanent thing, Naruto had a little free time on his hands now, which would undoubtedly be noticed by the Fire-Shadow.

Naruto only hoped his even faster recovery was not a temporary deal, and that he could up his training even further, since he was really liking the results. His weighs were now at 500kg each, and his Taijutsu was much quicker even with them on. This week, he’d learned a couple of Earth style jutsu in the span of the six-and-a-half days – the Earth-style Shadow Clone, and the Underground Overhead Sensing Jutsu and Technique. The latter made his True Earth Wading Jutsu much niftier, since he relied on his acute sense of hearing before to pinpoint things above ground, before. Now he could easily sense what was above ground for just as far as his normal sight. Another group of clones were now delegated to learning the ins and outs of all weapons except swords – Naruto
wanted to give Sasuke his own thing (besides the unique Copy Wheel Eye, of course, but that wasn’t something Sasuke had showed interest in since he was very young). Whether it was throwables, blunt, or bladed weapons, Naruto had already utilized the knowledge of the Shinobi Archives to memorise information on everything. This week, he focused on using a bo-staff, something that his Gramps was famous for. While he was slowly rising from ‘pathetic fool idiotically swinging sticks around’ to ‘barely acceptable’ (his own words) he still hadn’t found that he felt right with it... he was afraid he would never find anything of the sort.

Along with all of this, however, Kakashi also told him in passing conversation what was proving to be an intimidating task – the fourth and final step for the mastery of Lighting style chakra.

What was lightning, essentially, at its most basic level? It was energy. Highly volatile ionic energy. The only way to understand something like that, to truly understand, is to become one with it. He’d have to let himself get struck by a natural lightning strike while overloading his body with Lightning style chakra.

It wasn’t that easy, however.

First off, overloading your body with any type of elemental affinity was general considered Bad, with a capital ‘B’. Even though the Fourth Lightning Shadow did not let any details about his Lightning Armor Jutsu slip, Naruto was certain the man was either charging his muscles and his chakra network, or only his muscles with the element in question. If a shinobi channels a single elemental affinity throughout every bit of his body, he runs a risk of dissipating into the very element – in short, death. The chakra costs and control requirements weren’t an issue for Naruto, who had plenty of the former and perfection in the latter. He just didn’t know how to either stop himself from turning into a lightning bolt permanently or getting burned inside out. The risk was very real, since even Kakashi refused to perform it. In fact, he was told that the number of people who ever performed the fourth step could be counted on the digits of his two hands with fingers still left over, only half of which were alive. He then questioned why such supremely powerful exercises weren’t performed by everyone and their mother, and why information about them was not so easily available, but Kakashi had no response to that.

Secondly, natural lightning was extremely hard to come by in the Land of Fire. The only place where the possibility had a remote chance of coming to pass was Mount Enraiten, and it was designated as a chakra-corrupted zone like the Leaf’s Forest of Death ten years before the villages were even founded. Short of travelling to the presently non-allied Land of Lightning, there was no way for him to reach the stage at the level he was currently at. The aberrations in the mountain fueled the nightmares of seasoned shinobi till today, even though no one has braved it for at least fifty years.

And finally, one’s conscious mind had to be filled with one emotion – reverence. Naruto had only felt it fleetingly, if ever. The concept of God when you were a shinobi held little promise. Th civilians held such beliefs, of course, and far be it for Naruto to begrudge them that, but the emotion had never manifested to even a normal potency in his being. How was he to master the element if he couldn’t even feel the emotion associated with it?

A nudge in his side shook him from his thoughts. Hinata had just prodded him, he realized, and then sheepishly smiled at all the curious looks he was receiving. “Sorry, guys, I had a lot on my mind.”

Kiba snorted. “Understatement of the year, man!”

“You looked sad.” Shino quietly noted, and Naruto’s eyes attempted to drill through the sunglasses the other kid wore. What color were Shino’s eyes? He’d never seen them before, ever. He wasn’t sure anyone had seen his eyes – the visual sensitivity of the Aburame was far more than any living thing on the planet, and so they required extreme levels of protection. If a normal person were to
wear their shades, they would be able to see an extremely muted glow even if they looked directly at the sun.

“It’s just… I’ve hit a problem with my training, nothing major, believe it.” Naruto waved his hand nonchalantly. “Anyway, we’re not going to talk about training again, are we? We’ll all get to see it after two weeks anyway!”

And indeed, that was what would happen. There was going to be a three-way competition between the rookie teams of this year after a month. It was probably why the other two teams’ teachers had stepped up their training. Perhaps they had a competitive streak?

The teams this time were carefully balanced out for any sort of situation. The word among those most privy to such things, Kakashi had said, was that several teams had either failed or died altogether due to overspecialization – the deadliest error a ninja or a team could make. This was why the assignments this time were intentionally out of the norm. They were a test-run, in other words. If it worked, it would be applied to future teams as well. If not, then the teams would be put through rigorous training to meet a specific methodology.

Naruto’s own team was well balanced. Where Sasuke brought in the interrogation, Kenjutsu, Lightning and Fire Ninjutsu, and Genjutsu, Hinata brought in the tracking, Nin-Taijutsu and Wind Ninjutsu, and Naruto… well… he had a finger in everything.

Hinata’s training was… strange. The girl, having finally decided on her path, devoted her evenings to the Hyuuga Clan techniques still. Her morning was spent experimenting. Wind was the most versatile element. It cold slice- bludgeon, attract and repulse using vacuum, or all of the above at once. It was why the exercises were so varied compared to the other elements which followed either one or two types of attack or defense. She spent the mornings either attempting the Wind Element control exercise, or trying to incorporate the element into her clan techniques and had hit a snag. It wasn’t like Naruto’s Adamantine Chains, where he let instinct guide him, no. He suspected Hinata was trying to change her Clan’s style entirely to incorporate the Wind element. She also learned a Wind Style jutsu that Naruto exhibited which he used to fool Kakashi, the Gale Palm.

Sasuke, on the other hand, proved to have a latent talent with Genjutsu. Much like Hinata, instead of adhering to strict recipes and jutsu created before, he experimented to form his own in the mornings more than that. However, he did learn the Hell Viewing and Tree Binding Death Illusory Arts. Alongside that, he trained his Kenjutsu katas and the first level of his Lightning Element control exercise in the evenings.

Towards the end of their day, when the three of them were exhausted (although not as much as before), Kakashi wrung them through team formations and tactics for an hour. This was the true ace of the ANBU – while the members held notable talents themselves, the sheer intricacy of their teamwork far surpassed what normal Genin teams showed. Each ANBU squadron trained day in and out to fill in the gaps left by the other members in the group and worked like a well-oiled machine. While their sensei told them head-on that he didn’t expect them to work that way easily, Team 7 already had a healthy camaraderie to offset battle-field experience.

This, alongside the fact that even the other two Genin started wearing weights (at a far more manageable measure of five kilograms for each individual weight) catapulted their effectiveness beyond any Genin team in the Leaf.

“It’s just… we keep getting the feeling that the three of you are going above and beyond, and it frustrates us.” Ino decided to speak. “We all were in the same year of the Academy, with varied grades and different personalities and the whole deal. But…”
“You feel left behind.” Hinata softly spoke, with a knowing glint in her eye.

Naruto sighed. “You shouldn’t. We chose this path for ourselves. We decided to be the best there is, for our own selves, believe it.” Naruto smiled wide. “Don’t think of us as overachievers. Think of us as the mark you all should be on.”

“But why?” Shikamaru asked, and for once, his lazy expression was absent. Naruto, internally startled, realized that the Nara had never once, in all his life, ever left the lazy expression off his face. What Naruto perceived – narrowing his eyes, or that he was suspicious or disbelieving – was all interpretation of minor giveaways that most wouldn’t grasp.

The question made him sigh. He couldn’t tell them that Sasuke wanted to confront his brother on equal footing, or that Hinata wanted to change her clan. He couldn’t tell them that… he was still trying to find his dream. The Fire-Shadow dream… was something he was not sure about since Training Ground 7… when he, for the first time in his life, listened to Sasuke.

“Our reasons…” Hinata trailed, drawing surprised looks from everyone present, as they hadn’t seen her so steadfast… so strong. “are our own. The question is, can you find yours?”

The other Genin fell into a pensive silence. Even Kiba and Sakura appeared to be thinking. Sighing, Naruto gazed up at the moon, not noticing the glances Shino gave him, or the ones Hinata gave Shino.

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“Hey, we’re early, for once!”

Team 10, who were the only ones seated on the table, turned to Naruto and Hinata to welcome them, only to stop and stare.

Naruto knew how he looked. His entire gear was riddled with slices, and one of his pant legs was burnt off. Hinata had slices all over her gear too, and her headband/necklace was tucked into her pocket, a new thin scar lined her neck vertically from just below her eye – major damage only halted by the fact that Naruto had delved into Iryojutsu.

It was the simplest decision really. Both Sasuke and Hinata had no way of mastering so many things in so short a while (as Sasuke refused to use his Copy Wheel Eye to learn trivial things, something that made Kakashi proud; and Hinata didn’t have the reserves for more than one Shadow Clone with enough left-over chakra to practice) that Naruto did. So, while a group of clones went through Chakra control motions and the other through weapon katas, another delved into healing. It was an obvious choice – he had enough control for it, and enough chakra to heal while he battled. So, he did, and was surprised when it came to him as naturally as breathing. He supposed it was to be expected – the First’s Adamantine Strength Nin-Taïjutsu Technique relied on extremely high control, and the First was also a medic. The man was quickly becoming Naruto’s inspiration.

Hinata didn’t seem too bothered by the mark. He then remembered that her idol, the Second, had quite a few in his own right. She dreamed of reaching the level of proficiency with her Wind Style that he did with the Water Style. Her scar was the effect of her concentration going awry when she tried to wrap wind blades around her hands during Gentle Fist katas and techniques. It was going well too, after a full week of experimentation, but when her concentration slipped…
Sasuke was the best off of them three, though. The Uchiha had borne no injuries while learning the *Chakra Flow Technique* to enhance his Kenjutsu with Lightning and Fire style chakra, although he had a preference for the former. He also learned a new Fire Style jutsus named the *Smoldering Touch*. Otherwise, he kept bettering himself with the way of the sword, now comfortable with being only left with his sword in combat.

This last week, Kakashi had left them to their own devices, no restrictions besides the basic strength and speed routine they did every mom. While his clones did their do, Naruto the Original worked on tactics and strategy. If Kakashi himself wasn't training, he was playing mind-stimulating games with Naruto. It would only help, since having all the jutsu in the world would be for naught if he did not have the mind to use it.

At the end of every day, however, Kakashi made two of them fight the other, and Kakashi always joined in when Naruto was singled out and told him to go all out. It helped that, on the last day, Naruto was asked to drop his weights in order to get a feel for moving without being encumbered. Kakashi was forced to use his implanted Copy Wheel Eye to keep track of him... something that cause a minor bit of unrest when Sasuke asked for an explanation and Kakashi gave him one.

“Why is it that you two never come to us unscathed?” Choji asked, worriedly munching on chips.

“'It's not training if it doesn’t exhaust you completely’. Kakashi’s words.” Naruto parroted, occupying a seat. On his left, Hinata did the same.

“Our own teacher seems to have similar definitions of training.” Growled Ino, with a twitching eyebrow. “He’s driving us insane!”

“You should be overjoyed to have Genma as your instructor.” Said Naruto, confused. “He was a member of a three-man squad that relied on exceptional teamwork and amazing skills – he’s the perfect person to teach this generation’s Ino-Shika-Cho trio.”

“Um, Ino,” Hinata carefully ventured, “what exactly is he making you three do?”

“It’s troublesome.” Shikamaru sighed. “We meet up at nine every morning, and spend the entire morning training. At Afternoon, we have an hour-long break to catch our breaths, and perform a D-rank mission in the afternoon. Then, we are ordered to go back to our clan compounds and train till 6, that’s when we are dismissed.”

Naruto and Hinata blinked at them, then blinked at each other. “And what training do you individually do?”

“In the morning, Shika works on tactics and strategy, along with chakra control and some reserve-strengthening exercises. Ino works on chakra control and some Taijutsu, while I work on strength-building and chakra control.” Choji said, munching away. “In the evening session, I work on the *Body Expansion* technique with my dad and learn clan politics. Shika plays Shogi with his and plays timed puzzles to increase his processing speed. And Ino…”

“I work on the *Mind Body Switch Jutsu*.” She beamed.

Silence. The birds there were crows cawing in the distance. They could be clearly heard.

It started with a twitch of Hinata’s eyebrow. Naruto’s lips twitched next. Hinata’s face was clearly fighting a frown, while Naruto’s was fighting… a smile?

Suddenly Naruto broke into boisterous laughter while Hinata adopted a scary visage.
“I change my mind.” Naruto managed to blurt out between laughs. “Genma is an amazing teacher.”

“He is jeopardizing his students’ lives.” Intoned Hinata. “I will end him.”

Team 10 was visibly disturbed.

Team 8 arrived at this exact moment. “Oh you guys are here, already! That’s—“

“I will end him.” Hinata said, still in her Yamato-scary-face (trademark pending) mode, turning towards Kiba.

Massive sweat-drops developed on everyone else present, save Naruto, who was currently laughing his heart out.

“Err….” Sakura intelligently commented.

“Their teacher—" Naruto finally spoke when he calmed down, pointing at a now disgruntled Team 10 “is the laziest person I’ve ever heard of.”

“What are you on about?” Kiba asked, taking a seat. Shino claimed the one on Naruto’s right, and Hinata smiled.

“Let’s compare. What do you guys do for training?” Naruto asked, pointing a breadstick at Kiba.

“Are we not supposed to keep that information from each other till the end of next week?” Shino asked.

Hinata stopped her expression and smiled sweetly. “Please humor us. We promise to reveal our schedule, as well.”

“Well, Anko is a real taskmaster.” Sakura spoke, and everyone turned to look at her. “We meet at 8 in the mornings and begin with a ‘warm up’ in Training Ground 24, which is a smaller version of the Forest of Death. There are no creatures within, however. We practice chakra control, Taijutsu – especially so for me and Shino – and then move on to teamwork exercises till 1 or 2 noon. We have our lunch, usually at a dango bar, and then perform one D-rank mission every day. After the mission Kiba and Shino leave to practice their clan techniques, while I get trained under someone called Kurenai Yuuhi for Genjutsu use till 7 in the evening.”

Silence once again reigned.

This time, it was broken with a sigh from Naruto. “I heard that Anko is very… excitable. Is she really okay with that sort of training?”

“It was a stipulation by the Fire-Shadow.” Shino spoke. “Sensei was a Special Jounin until recently under probation due to special circumstances. While she has not yet divulged the reason she was promoted, she was kept in check by only one rule – maintain a normal amount of effort.”

The shadowed expression on Hinata’s face was back. “I will end her.”

“Everything leads back to him.” Naruto muttered under his breath, which went unheard by most present save for Shino and Hinata, due to their proximity, and Kiba due to his hearing. “Hey, I just noticed to don’t bring Akamaru to these meetings. Where is he?”

The boy with canine features smirked. “Now now, Naruto, don’t expect to distract us so easily. You’re going to spill the beans.”
Hinata’s expression changed back to normal and she smiled serenely. “Are you sure? We wouldn’t want to hurt your ego.”

Naruto tried his best not to snicker.

“What do you take us for, chopped liver?” Sakura growled. “Out with it, already.”

Hinata sighed. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She glanced at Naruto, conveying ‘I’ll start first’ with her eyes, to which Naruto gestured ‘Go on’. “Alright. I will begin since my schedule is the lightest. After our morning warm-ups on our own time, we meet at 4:30 am. The team spends an hour doing various exercises, dexterity enhancing ones, mostly, before we break for individual training. I practice Wind Element control and integrating it with my Gentle Fist. This scar,” here she pointed at the new ghostly white line, as if it had healed and faded a long while ago “was the result of my concentration and control slipping for a second. As it is, I’m lucky that I didn’t slice up my eye.” She added as an afterthought. “We stop for a five-minute lunch break – ration pills, to get us used to them – and we converge after twenty minutes stretching to lessen the fatigue. This second ‘session’, I use to perfect my clan techniques and perform them in less and less time – the finer details of which I cannot divulge. Finally, at around 10pm, we stop individually training and begin team training – either teamwork or set scenarios… although, as of now, we’ve only covered direct combat with each other… Regardless, after that, we stop at 11. I’m usually fast asleep in twenty minutes.”

“Now that you mention it,” Naruto spoke, thoughtfully (and doing his best not to laugh at his friends’ expressions and the gallon-sized sweat-drops they now sported), “we should probably get Kakashi to run us through more different scenarios than combat ones, since we’re going for a well-rounded team.”


Naruto snapped his fingers. “You just had to lay that mine there, didn’t you?”

“I can’t let you have all the fun.” Hinata playfully giggled.

Naruto smiled at the sound. It took a lot for Hinata to leave the fragile-voice and adopt a more stronger tone. Even if it was still soft, it spoke of an underlying strength that few possessed.

“That… was the easiest schedule out of the three of you?” Choji asked for clarification.


Team 10 remained silent, but team 8 spoke up.

“Earth.” Shino said, quietly.

“Water.” Sakura admitted.


“That’s quite a diverse collection, there.” Naruto smiled, amused. “If your teacher has another element, it would mean that you have only one element you can’t counter.”

“Er…. What?” Kiba intelligently asked.
However, it was Sakura who answered his unasked plea to explain, to no one’s surprise. “Honestly, Kiba… each element has one another that it’s stronger and weaker than, each. Fire is strong against Wind, but weak against Water. Water is weak against Earth. Earth is weak against Lightning, Lightning is weak against Wind, and Wind is weak against Fire – it’s a circle of reactions. What the idiot is trying to say,” Naruto bristled a little, but a nudge from Shino kept him quiet with a touch to his thigh, “is that if we have four elements in our team, there’s only one that we really have to watch out for.”

“Hey, that’s right!” grinned Kiba, looking smug. “Our team is awesome!”

And with that, the tense atmosphere vanished about the table, and small conversations started up again, matter is training forgotten. Naruto though Shikamaru looked a little cranky, but the boy must have been the only one there who realized that he hadn’t given away much, or that Hinata held a lot back. Shino, too, looked oddly contemplative, but he couldn’t, for the life of him, figure out why.

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“Welcome, youthful Genin!”

Everyone present looked at the green-clad bowl-cut man a little oddly, save for Kakashi (due to familiarity), Shino (because he couldn’t be outwardly disturbed), and Shikamaru (because it would be wasted effort).

“Gai.” Kakashi sighed.

“Oh, zip it, you freak.” Anko growled, which caused a slight cloud of depression to hover over the Jounin. “Alright, listen up, maggots! You’ve noticed that all the fresh meat of this year is here,” she gestured towards the rookie nine, “and the only weaklings to pass last year, too.” She gestured towards a team that stood a little apart from the others, but not by much. On hearing this, the boy who was glaring daggers at Hinata started alternatively glaring at Anko and Hinata. He looked like a Hyuuga. On his left, a girl dressed in a sleeveless pink shirt, green leggings, and a storage scroll strapped to her left hip stood with a resigned expression. On her left… was a mini-clone of the man who first spoke who was looking decidedly forlorn while gazing at his sensei. Anko continued with a strange grin – “We’ve decided that, since in a few days-“

“Two.” Genma helpful added, smirking at the scowl that turned on the only female sensei’s face.

“-in two days,” growled Anko, “it will be once month and three weeks since the previous graduation, that you all will kill each other for our amusement.”

“It’s a competition to see how well you’ve grown.” Kakashi spoke instead, turning a page of his book.

“Kakashi.” Smiled Anko, sweetly. “Last time, what did I say would happen to you if you read that book in front of me?” her tone was sickly sweet. Hinata suddenly seemed very interested in her.

“Er… you’d leave me alone?” he asked, then vanished.

“Get back here!” the crazy woman screamed at his retreating figure, and vanished too.

Silence.
“Anyway,” Genma flawlessly took over when it looked like the other two weren’t coming back. “the
competition will start in a few minutes.” He then produced a bowl out of nowhere. “Pick a card.”

Wordlessly, Neji, Kiba, Hinata, and Ino emerged from their groups, picked a card one by one, and
read out its contents.

“Kakashi Hatake.” Said Neji.

“Genma Shiranui.” Said Kiba.


“Anko Mitarashi.” Said Ino.

“On each of those papers are one of our names.” Genma continued. “You will have to find us before
sunset. You all know who is who so don’t bother using that excuse.” He said with a wry smile,
glancing over at Shikamaru who was about to open his mouth. “Ready? Go!”

With that, he popped into a cloud of smoke – ‘The Shadow Clone Jutsu…’ and Guy gave a thumbs
up with his very shiny teeth on display before blurring.

Disregarding everyone else, Naruto and Sasuke turned to Hinata as one. Her All-Seeing White Eye
was already active. “He’s fast…” she quietly noted, “… but I have him.” She then blurred away,
followed by Sasuke and Naruto. Those left behind either had wide-eyed expressions, a frustrated
frown, or an overeager grin that was capable of blinding people.

This was going to be an interesting day…

The male Genin of Team 7 followed Hinata through a variety of places. Her All-Seeing White Eye
had only gotten stronger with the rejuvenation of her chakra network and the inclusion of Wind
Style. Naruto understood that she somehow incorporated the idea of wind being ever-present into the
All-Seeing White Eye, but he had read that the potency of those eyes relied on a mixture of skill and
genes. He had made it a personal goal to find out how, since the girl was being teasingly tight-lipped
about it.

Anyway, they sped through the training grounds sector, the merchants’ guild, the Nara Clan
compound (where they had momentarily paused because Hinata found the deer absolutely adorable)
and the Fire-Shadow Tower, speeding right past an unamused Fire-Shadow (Naruto’s and his eyes
connected for a second, and he knew there was no way out of a meeting now that Hell Month was
over), and finally over the Fire-Shadow Monument and into an extremely wide clearing beyond.

There they found… all the teachers.

“Oh, my youthful rival, you were indeed correct! Your youthful team is the first one here!” Gai
proclaimed, and a sudden fire burst into his eyes. “When Lee hears of this, no doubt he will aim to
better himself! And if he cannot, he will do five hundred lap races on the border walls! If he cannot
do—“

Genma’s very loud sigh interrupted his tirade. “Kakashi, Hell Month? On freshly graduated Genin?
If I would have found you earlier in the week, I’d have asked—“

“You’re just jealous you lost.” Kakashi spoke, eye-smiling. “I look forward to the Collector’s Edition
of Make Out University.”

“If only that Old Man did not forbid me from breaking them a little…” Anko sighed. “But whatevs.
A deal is a deal.”

“You lot bet over us?!” Naruto demanded incredulous.

“When you make a Jounin,” – ‘Not ‘if’.’ Naruto noted – “you’ll understand that there’s very little to do when you’re not on a mission except gossiping, training, and betting.” Genma spoke in a sage-like tone. “You will remember today and thank us for our premature advice.”

The three Genin sweat-dropped. ‘Not likely…’

“Yosh! The evidence of your youthful training is clear for all to see!” Guy interjected, pointing at their gear.

And… well, it was. Even counting identical change of gear that they all had at their homes, Hinata, Naruto, and Sasuke were currently wearing their most okay gear… which looked like they’d been fighting a heard of angry bulls while blindfolded and with hands tied behind their back… on roller skates.

“We thought we’d purchase new gear after we collect some money from D-rank missions.” Hinata softly explained. Sasuke was already eyeing a few trees, probably to slice up in order to keep from boredom. “It is through our own effort that we wish to live from now on.”

“Such youthful spirit!” Gai crowed. Naruto could swear his regeneration was working overdrive on his eardrums. “Kakashi! How did you perform such a youthful feat?!” he demanded, turning around to point at their sensei.

“Hm? Did you say something, Gai?” Kakashi lazily questioned, not even looking up from his book. “Damn you and your hip attitude!” Gai snarled, anime tears pouring from his eyes.

The three Genin of Team 7 sweat-dropped further.

“If you think you’re going to be doing D-rank missions, you’re wrong.” Genma snorted. “You just went through the very intensity of training that individual ANBU members go through after physicals and before their personalized routine. I’ll eat my own senbon if that happens.”

“Really, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto asked, excited. “Does it really mean we can skip over D-ranks?!”

“Hm? Did you say something, Naruto?” he asked, in the exact same manner he treated Gai to.

A small cloud of depression formed over Naruto while Hinata patted his back. “There, there.”

Eventually, Team 7 fell into discussion with Anko about summoning. Hinata had heard once from someone called Kurenai that she was one of the only two female summoners currently a part of the active ninja roster in the Leaf. It wasn’t very enlightening beyond what Naruto already knew – that one had to sign a contract with the summons’ family in order to even try performing it, and that contracts were hard to come by. She was extremely tight lipped about where she got the snake contract, but she did explain that she used an advanced form of Fuuinjutsu – *she was also tightlipped about where she learned it, since she knew nothing else in the subject* – to route her summons through her sleeves. While Hinata and Sasuke didn’t find a Snake Contract very appealing, Naruto was enamored. He was simply seeing a resemblance with them and his Adamantine Chains, and began absently wondering on how the two would mix…

Just about the time it would be noon, team 9 burst into the clearing.
“Ah, my youthful students have arrived!” Gai cheered, using pure physical speed to appear next to them. “Alas, my eternal rival’s team is filled with slightly more youth – for they arrived earlier than you!”

“Team 7 should, perhaps, safeguard their spirit?” the male Hyuuga mocked, crossing his arms. “They wouldn’t want to… run out.”

“Who is this moron?” Sasuke asked Hinata in a low voice, gripping tightly the sheath of his sword, but otherwise showing no other reaction. “He holds a grudge against one of us.”

“He is my cousin.” Hinata said, softly. “He was bitter to the main family before, but his anger has increased since I beat him in our family spars. If we are to fight today, I am not sure I will be able to hold back against his arrogance.” Hinata added under her breath.

“If we have to fight, I’ll take him.” Naruto assured her. “We wouldn’t want you to get frustrated enough as try to cut his balls off.”

Hinata colored brilliantly, while Sasuke turned away to hide an embarrassed blush. “I- I only used that threat one time!” Hinata protested, which did the opposite of helping Naruto keep his laughter down.

It was just then that Team 8 entered the clearing as well.

“Cha! Good job, Kiba!” Sakura excitedly yelled. “You really do have a good nose!”

Akamaru happily barked.

“Yes, Kiba, good job.” Another feminine voice was heard, and Team 10 entered shortly after them.

“Wha- Ino-pig! Don’t tell me you followed us here!” Sakura gasped, offended.

“This is all so troublesome.” Shikamaru sighed from where Choji and he were being dragged in my Ino. Choji just nodded.

“Yosh! Now that the lot of you are here, you must all take part in a youthful four-way team clash!” Gai proclaimed, with fire blazing in his eyes… again. “The winning team of this bout will be youthfully stricken off from D-rank missions permanently! The losing teams will valiantly bear that burden in their stead!”

Hinata smiled, Naruto grinned, and Sasuke smirked.

Kiba snickered. “Looks like that was the last time we had to shovel manure, Akamaru! We’re going to hit the jackpot today!” said dog barked back cheerfully.

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that.” The girl with her hair done in two buns scowled, whipping out a scroll from nowhere and unfurling it. Kunai exploded forth and flew at team 8, who could barely dodge in time to the opposite end of the field.

“No more D-ranks?! Hell yeah! You two, let’s go!” Ino proclaimed and began to drag them into the clearing from where they were still in the entrance.

Suddenly, the earth rumbled, and two perfect cracks formed in the ground, separating the three teams. They all looked towards the source… a grinning Naruto.

“Since I get the feeling that D-ranks suck donkey balls, we’re going to fight with a little bit of extra
might.” He said, and then team 7 blurred.

Hinata landed in front of Team 10, Sasuke landed in front of Team 8, and Naruto landed in front of team 9.

“Now… let’s get wild.” All three of them whispered to the wind, and charged forward.

Naruto forced flame out from his body from the soles of his ninja sandals (which had two chakra-conductive metal circles) managing to rocket forward akin to surfboarding. He slammed a punch into the girl, who didn’t even realize he was there, knocking her out instantly.

Seeing this, the boy who had to be Lee seemed to gain a determined glint to his eye as he bent down to untuck his orange (‘Maybe the guy isn’t that bad, after all.’) leg warmers, but Naruto wasn’t going to wait to give him the chance! He propelled to his position and, seeing that he was a lot more solid than the girl, knocked him out with Medical Chakra.

Two Shadow Clones popped into existence around him without even making a seal, and they all raced towards the lone member standing. One punched forward to launch a Grand Fireball… from his fist? The other launched a Gale Palm with a one-palm shove straight into the previous jutsu, causing a now-larger ball of nearly white-hot flames to fly at Neji. The boy only smirked, before he spun on his heal, and kept spinning, a dome of chakra raising itself with sheer centrifugal force from his body.

“The Eight Trigrams Palm Rotation.” Naruto Identified it, and began mentally calculating whether he should just charge in and knock the boy out, or humiliate him a bit? A defense was useless if it couldn’t be raised in time.

“You should give up now. Fate has decreed me to be today’s winner. My defenses are impenetrable.” Neji said, smirking.

A tic mark formed on Naruto’s forehead. Yes, he’s going to humiliate him.

Drawing back the chakra in his weights, Naruto vanished. He didn’t even stop to kick Neji, he did it while moving. After kicking Neji around a lot in the air, he finally gave him a kick straight in the stomach to send him crashing down to the ground with a resounding ‘boom’.

When Naruto landed, his teammates were already there. “That’s a bit excessive.” Hinata noted.

“He needed to have his ego brought down. If he acted that way against an enemy ninja who was downplaying his skills…. At least now he will live another day.” Naruto noted, but then turned around and grinned widely at the teachers. “Does that mean we don’t have to do D-ranks, anymore?”

Genma’s eyes, which were as wide as saucers, abruptly narrowed as he turned towards Kakashi. “This was a setup.”

The white-haired man didn’t even bother to shrug in apology.
“- and that’s final!”

The roar of the Fire-Shadow Naruto saw as a grandfather rocked the entire hallway in front of the double doors. He paused where he was about to kick them down, and then did so with greater haste before speeding in front of the Old Man’s desk and pointing hands coated in *Chakra Scalpels* straight at…

A… cripple?

“Ah! I just threatened a cripple!” Naruto yelled, very self-consciously. He completely missed the tic mark on the cripple in question, the sweat-drop on his sensei’s head, or the chuckle disguised as a cough from the Lord Third. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Cripple!”

The Third was coughing very loudly now. “That’s quite alright, young Naruto, I’m sure that ‘Mr. Cripple’,” here, the one eyed-cripple actually frowned, “is quite alright. He was just leaving anyway.” He waved the youngest off, before turning an all-too-sweet smile on the cripple. “Isn’t that right, Danzo?”

The now-named Danzo nodded calmly, and stood, hobbling his way over to the door. “I’d ask you reconsider, but I can see why you wouldn’t.” the man sighed, and finally left the room.

“Damn, old man. If I didn’t know any better than believing you’d let someone get away with threats towards you, I’d take that as one.” Naruto frowned, before hopping off the desk and cutting off chakra to his hands, opting to raise them to the back of his head instead. “I’m really proud of your lungs, by the way.”

Hiruzen laughed. “I’m sure.” He then smiled wistfully. “You haven’t come by in a while.”

Naruto caught the sounds of Kakashi turning over a page in his book. So… this wasn’t going to be a private conversation, then. “I didn’t know how to react.”

“The young Uzumaki sighed. He’d just have to be forward, then. “Grandpa, ‘m going to say some sensitive stuff. If you’ve got anyone here you don’t absolutely trust,” he paused flicking his eyes at Kakashi and then in four particular spots of the room where he could smell chocolate, blade-oil, Yamato, and, oddly enough, wasabi, “I’d ask them to leave.”

Hiruzen contemplated him for a second, before smiling. “I’m sure that everyone here in this room can be trusted, Naruto. Please feel free in sharing your concerns.”

“All right then.” Naruto arched an eyebrow but said nothing to further convince the aged leader. “Your funeral. Why didn’t you tell me that the Lord Fourth was my father?”

“Where did you hear that from?” Hiruzen asked, voice completely hard and serious. The blond caught a shift of his hand under the table, and then felt a brief tingle over his skin. The walls of the room shined for the smallest mini-second before returning to normal.
‘Anti-jutsu and privacy seals… he’s good with them,’ Naruto sighed, getting all the confirmation he needed. “So, it’s true then… and before you get all paranoid on me, the nine-tails is sealed behind the strongest protections in my Mental Palace, so don’t be worried – I’m sure you know the significance of barring a door in there…”

Hiruzen sighed, as if a huge weight were being lifted off his shoulders. “So that’s how you got it down…” He briefly pondered something, seeing his foster grandson’s confused expression, before explaining, “Normally, it takes quite the while to get a hang of meditation before you can even think about attempting to initiate a Mental Palace. You have to ensure your chakra doesn’t fluctuate, that your mind is clear, and there is nothing on your person that can interfere, such as a chakra suppression seal, or something of the nature. Most people take a while to learn to meditate and clear their minds… quite a while, in fact.” He shook his head. “But as you put it, you simply made the hand-sign and found yourself there. This had already given me doubts at the time, but now I’m certain – the seal has some point that intimately links with your mental health… perhaps a ground for communication that Minato included for… God knows what reason.” The Fire-Shadow sighed.

“The Archivist – the clone that manages my Mental Palace – had similar concerns.” Naruto agreed. “He postulated that, since we found ourselves in the seal first, that the Lord Fourth had forged something of the sort. The only question we had was why.” Naruto mused. “We suspect that he wanted me to build good relations with the Nine-tails.”

“Naruto, the Nine-tails is a cunning, manipulative, and ruthless creature.” Hiruzen sighed. “It is not to be trusted.”

“He.”

“I… what?”

“’He’. Not ‘it’.” Naruto emphasized. “I’m all too familiar with how it feels to be referred to as an ‘it’. And I’m pretty sure the Nine-tails is a ‘he’, considering the tone of his voice.”

“… Right.” Hiruzen allowed. “’He’. Naruto-“

“I’ll be cautious, Old Man, don’t worry.” Naruto waved him off. “Fuck, all month I’ve been wondering how I’d face you but now that I’m in this office and actually talking to you, it feels so trivial.” Here, he sheepishly rubs the back of his head. “I mean, before Graduation, if I even had the slightest inkling I was the son of the Fourth, I’d be yelling it from the rooftops. I still feel like doing it, actually.” He mused. “But my father had a lot of enemies. It’s a weak argument when it comes to my person now, but back then…“

Hiruzen said nothing, just choosing to look at Naruto, but the young boy could spot a glimmer of sadness and relief in his eyes. ‘So, he’s happy that I understand.’

Hiruzen sighed, but then turned around to walk back to his desk. “No more D-ranks for Team 7, then?”

“Was there ever any doubt, my lord?” Kakashi asked, a little affronted.

“That’s good. At the level you are, Naruto, you will probably be taking my hat in no time.” Hiruzen smiled a soft smile.

“Um… Gramps… I don’t want to be the Fire Shadow anymore.” Naruto said, with a tone of finality. Hiruzen drew back in surprise. “What?”
“Well, yeah.” Naruto sighed. “Face reality, gramps. The only reason I wanted to be Fire Shadow was because I was just so… deprived, I guess. Deprived of good attention, of affection … of anything really. And I’m not saying it’s yours or dad’s fault!” he was quick to add when Hiruzen made a strangled sound. “Because it’s not. The two of you just made do with the best you could. It’s just… Sasuke said something that really struck me, a month ago. We were bonding over Hinata’s problems, and he asked her if her clan deserved her unwavering affection even after they’ve never helped her. It got me thinking… why do I care about how the village sees me? I’ve got my own family now – Team 7, the Ichiraku family… and you.” He said, firmly. “And I don’t think I need anything else. I’m… okay. For the first time a long while…” he whispered. “I’m okay.”

“Naruto…” trailed the aged man in the chair, shocked and oddly… grieving.

“Don’t you dare try to blame yourself for my life, old man.” Naruto growled. “It wasn’t you who never looked at me without contempt, it wasn’t you who refused to acknowledge my existence, it wasn’t you who… refused to treat me as a human being.” He ended softly. “It wasn’t you, or the ANBU who used to guard me, or anyone else’s fault. Sure, everyone in the village acted… horribly… but I don’t expect them to act any other way. A gigantic monster destroys their homes, takes away their loved ones… and they have to watch a reminder of it every day? Who wouldn’t act that way?” he laughed bitterly. “I may not be able to see myself in the mirror anymore, but I forgave them. They deserve a chance, at least.”

“Now who is going to rescue me from all this paperwork?” The old man bemoaned, trying in vain to hide his watery eyes – ‘Eyes full of guilt, sadness, loathing.’ – and smiling weirdly. “My hands will cease all function at this rate.”

“That’s easy, Old Man. Shadow Clones.” Naruto shrugged, and vanished in a Body Flicker.

The Fire Shadow stared at the spot he was, filing that clone bit for later use (seriously, is he an idiot or what?) and looked at Kakashi with a blank expression, lowering the seals. He noted that Naruto’s jutsu worked even when the seals were active; but then again, with enough chakra, seals were buffeting winds at best. “Did I fail him, Kakashi?”

“We all did.” The man answered, voce just a little bit choked up. “We all did.” He repeated, before vanishing.

Not wanting to watch anymore, Naruto let go of the chakra on his feet anchoring him to the wall and fell, phasing into a Body Flicker on the way down and bursting forth in a startling display of speed. He was on top of the Fire-Shadow Monument in the next second, looking over the village.

“I’ve forgiven you.” He whispered to the wind. “I’ve found my answer. I’ll forgive you and keep doing so as long as I know your hurt is genuine. But god help you… god help you if it turns out to be something else.”

And with those words, he vanished back to his apartment in a trail of leaves.

After an evening and night of peaceful rest, Naruto woke to birds chirping. Quickly going through the motions (and an eggy breakfast), he stared at his ruined clothes with a forlorn expression. ‘I guess I’ll have to go shopping again. Dammit, I was hoping to save the Old Man’s stipend! Oh well. I was planning to ditch the orange anyway. Maybe blue…?’

When he went to grab his wallet, he was pleasantly surprised to find a manila envelope next to the Froggie… filled with ryo notes. He counted out a hundred thousand worth.

‘Oh, there’s a note. ‘To replace what was lost, even though it will never be enough – a Well-wisher.’
Not stalker-ish at all… I’ve gotta check out some ninja level security or move into the Shinobi district. This could have been a Paper Bomb for all I knew…’

Pocketing the money anyway, because he had learned a long while ago not to say no to free stuff, he donned his ragged gear and used a **Body Flicker** to make his way to Higurashi’s.

“Hey, Old Man!” he yelled out, all but bursting in. ‘**Hmm… I have to work on exiting better…’**

“Did… you just enter in a swirl of leaves? You know what? I don’t want to know… What the hell kinda monster did you get eaten by?” Kenpachi asked, looking over his ragged gear.

Naruto snorted. “It’s called a ‘Kakashi’. Watch out for it alongside porn shops.” He shot over his shoulder, disappearing into the clothing racks.

Kenpachi shrugged and rolled his eyes, muttering something under his breath, before returning to his book, a thriller this time. In no time at all, Naruto was back, already changed. He was garbed in a nearly exact ensemble – the same type of combat boots, gloves and shorts, but he now wore a sleeveless hoodie with a lot of pockets now, in a shade of blue that matched his eyes. Tossing another three sets of the clothing on the countertop, he counted out an estimate and forked it over after his goods were rung up without much fanfare.

“Say brat, now you gotta do those chores your lot calls missions, right? Mind repainting the signboard outside?” Kenpachi asked, a glint of amusement in his eye while he packaged Naruto’s purchases.

“Not gonna do those, you geezer. I won a bet so that I’ll never have to do those again.” Naruto beamed. “Oh, and I need my headband redone in black.”

“Glad you’re finally ditching the orange, but don’t turn goth on me.” Kenpachi teased but took the headband anyway.

“Oh please, this just blends better.” Naruto shot back. And it did! He was even careful to not pick out a pitch-black color, but something slightly lighter. As he spoke, he walked over to the weapon’s aisle, checking if there was anything new in.

He wasn’t disappointed.

It wasn’t exactly a weapon that caught his eye, it was a throwable. Two Fuma shuriken the likes of which he’s never seen were now on the shelf for an outrageous price. Ignoring the numbers, he grabbed them off the shelf and examined them more closely. They both were identical down to a fault. The center of it was a hollow circle, but it had a handle that crossed it laterally and felt comfortable in Naruto’s grip. Each had eight points, sticking out in sharp, short pikes from the intricate artwork. While the edges were uncolored metal, the center was a pitch black. The Metal curved and twisted so intricately, he wondered how long they took to forge – no wonder the price was that high. He grabbed them both just in time to return when Kenpachi emerged.

“Here you are brat. And I see you finally found something you like off that aisle.” Kenpachi remarked, handing him the headband, which he wrapped around his right bicep. “That’s quite expensive, though – part of the reason no one’s bought it even though it’s been up since a month. You sure you have enough dough?

Naruto snorted as he tallied up the total and found he hand only a few thousand ryo left over. Ouch. “Yeah, yeah, here you go. We done?”

“Yeah. Oh, and if you’re going to end up here every month buying new clothes, you might want to
research some on Fuuinjutsu.” Kenpachi said as he handed over the parcel, reaching around the counter for two black Fuuma Shuriken holsters which were complementary with the ones he bought. “Dead useful when it comes to item preservation.”

“They don’t have anything about it a lot in the Shinobi Archive, but I’ll check it out. Thanks, Old man.” Naruto replied, pausing in his outwards walk to don the holsters so that they crossed over his torso diagonally, then slid the two of them in place behind his back. Thank god their clasps were on the edges rather than the side.

That done, he briefly returned to his apartment before speeding to Training Ground 7. He had to admit that using the **Body Flicker** was liberating. Very. It was as if he was a caged bird his whole life, and only now he could spread his wings. Running had nothing on it in terms of speed, he was sure. The only drawback he could think of was swirl of leaves on entry and exit of the technique. Oh, how could he eliminate that?

The ‘village’ of the Leaf wasn’t exactly small. He’d read that the village, when it was founded, was actually less than a fifth of what it was now. The Earth-style users must have got a kick out of expanding the village walls, no question.

In a few seconds, he blurred into Training Ground 7. Only Hinata was present, and he took the time to see her new gear.

Some of it was the same – dark purple baggy pants (although it bunched together just past her knees now), kunai holster on her right thigh atop bandages (Naruto didn’t need kunai or shuriken… he had a barrage of jutsu instead), and her headband (although now it was now a purple cloth) hung around her neck like a necklace. That’s where the similarities ended.

Her previous delicate hairstyle was replaced with a boyish cut – hair too small to grab, he realized, Kakashi had done that once or twice in the last week of training, which consisted of pure all out combat alongside conditioning exercises (the thought made him brush back his own hair, getting slightly shaggier, and decided he’d cut it later that evening). A simple black crop top emphasized her bust, which was far more developed than it should be at her age, over which she’d worn a shorts-sleeved dark purple jacket that barely reached her navel, unzipped – much more breathable and easier to move in. her hands were free of gloves, but on her right hand sat a simple yet aesthetically pleasing purple bead and rope armlet. But that wasn’t very shocking.

Her lips held a cigarette.

“Hinata? Smoking, really?” Naruto chuckled, walking over.

The girl turned around and smiled, inhaling and grasping the cigarette. “I met a Jonin yesterday in the evening who smoked. We talked, and he had a… major impact on me, I guess. You would know… if you bothered to turn up at Yakiniku Q yesterday.” Her voice was soft, but it also held a teasing tone.

“Alright, I rested.” Naruto pouted. “You try-“

“Calm, Naruto, I was just teasing.” She smiled, bringing up the cancer stick for another drag. When she exhaled, she saw the look he was giving her. “Our chakra network is much more of use than a civilian’s. It flushes our body every week, so don’t worry, I won’t be dying of cancer anytime soon.”

“Oh. That’s different, then.” Naruto blinked, then smacked one palm with a fist in realization. “Oh! That’s how so many ninjas who drink more than their bodyweight in a week don’t die!”
Hinata merely gave him an amused look.

“You’re realizing that just now?”

Both of them turned to look towards the familiar voice and were not disappointed.

Sasuke emerged from the tree. He was dressed in…

“Do you have a business deal to get to, later?” Naruto asked, because he looked decked out.

Sasuke wore a simple purple dress shirt, a black cravat, formal black pants, black formal shoes, and a black matching waistcoat. The left sleeve was only visible till his elbow, where it was then tucked into a black leather glove. The right arm was covered in a leather arm glove of some sort that ended at his knuckles, leaving his fingers free. In his left hand was his beloved sword – a beautiful silver hilted o-katana that was nearly as tall as him.

Sasuke gave him a blank look. “I simply deemed this outfit functional and yet fashionable. I’ve modified it personally to allow for freedom of movement and durability. Does it not satisfy?”

Naruto shrugged. “I feel woefully underdressed standing next to you. I’m gonna be across Hinata so that you don’t overshadow me in that regard.”

“Moron.”

“Bastard.”

Hinata sighed out a plume of smoke, then put the flickering cigarette out. “Please keep the bickering to your household. You’ll announce your marriage to the world this way.”

“Hi- Hinata!” Naruto exclaimed, blushing. “I- It’s not-”

“She’s only teasing.” Sasuke waved it off. Naruto shot a betrayed look at a giggling Hinata.

“Besides, I believe I prefer the company of the fairer sex.”

“I’m not that picky.” Hinata interjected, strangling any response Naruto would have shot right in his throat. “Does it really matter? We’re going to be taking lives on a daily basis. Morally…”

Naruto lapsed into thought at that. In his life in the Leaf, he’d heard one saying being repeated everywhere, but mostly near the shinobi bars – ‘Old enough to kill, old enough to drink, old enough to fuck’. He’s almost a hundred percent positive that no Genin has their hands free of blood past the six month mark. So…

“Well.” He sighed, rubbing the back of his head. “In that case, let’s swing by a bar before we get out of here on whatever mission. I’ll pick up a bottle of sake.”

“Ah, my cute little Genin have found the perversions of life, at last.” Kakashi’s voice is heard as he walks into the clearing, Make Out School-time in hand, which he quickly puts away after spotting Hinata. Naruto shudders thinking of what the girl will slice off if she catches it in his hand…

“Hardly.” Sasuke scoffed, turning to face his instructor. “It would be more politically correct to say, ‘Have discovered means of stress relief’.”

“God knows I have one.” Kakashi sighed, looking towards his pouch where is book was stored, but shook his head and eye-smiled instead. “Well, today is your first day as operational Genin of the Leaf and will be taking your first mission. Are you not feeling excited?”
A random breeze blows through the clearing, showing the terribly unexcited faces of his Genin.

“Okay then! To the Mission-monger!” Kakashi called out and turned to Body Flicker away. Sasuke scoffs and copies him, followed by a sighing Hinata.

Naruto takes a moment to smile, before bursting into leaves himself.

He appears on the Missions Office to see… a theatrically moaning Kiba.

“No, please! You have to promise us you’ll never give us Tora again! I’ll give you my first born! Just, no more!” He moans, and Akamaru is doing a very good impression of the puppy-eyed look… you know, considering he’s a puppy and all.

“You agreed to the terms of the melee and must now uphold them for your honor.” Shino chastised him. “Do not act in such an unsightly manner. Why? Because you are making us look like jesters.”

“But-“

“Team 7 reporting for a C-rank mission, my Lord.” Kakashi interrupts, walking up to the mission desk.

A thoroughly bored Fire-Shadow is sitting there, Naruto notices with surprise. Perhaps this is one of those random days he arrives in surprise to inspect the goings-on? “Ah, yes. Iruka, hand me one.”

“But, my Lord!” His old teacher protests, “Not only have they not even attempted a single D-rank mission, they have also only been out from the Academy for a month!”

“That’s alright.” Hiruzen waves him off. “Now let’s see…”

“Please, Naruto!” Kiba turned on him instead, grabbing him by his shoulders. “You have to take back the D-rank diversion thing!”

“Hey, Dog-brat, I didn’t know you were into begging so much.” Anko said, draping her arms over his shoulders and licking his cheek. “Now I know what to do when I take your virginity.”

Kiba shudders and Akamaru whimpered.

“Now, now, I'm sure it’s not all that bad-“

‘MEOWWW!’ “Oh Tora, come back to mommy!”

“AHHHHH! It’s happening again!” Kiba screams, almost dislocating a surprised Anko.

“Oh, here is a good one. A relaxed escort mission to the Land of Waves. You will be escorting a bridge builder named Tazuna Tatsumaki. No ninja encounters expected, just a chance of bandits.” Hiruzen speaks, as if a stage-worthy drama was not happening in front of his eyes. “Have someone send him in please.”

In fifteen minutes, during which a hysterical Kiba is dragged out by Anko along with his extremely reluctant team, a beer-bellied clearly-drunk hat-wearing old man is escorted in.

“This is the super protection I’m paying for? A businessman-wannabe, a smokestack, and a brat?” he jeers, eyeing the two critically.

He instantly found his bottle of sake, held up in one hand, in the grasp of said ‘brat’, who took an experimental sip.
“It tastes like water.” He noted, at which the entire room sweat-dropped.

“Ano, Mr. Tazuna, I assure you that we’re more than enough for your protection.” Hinata spoke. “Considering that we’ll only be encountering bandits, why would you need any more?”

Every ninja worth his salt noticed Tazuna twitch at that, and many narrowed their eyes.

The sudden silence broke when Naruto set a now-empty bottle down on the table, frowning. “It’s just water.”

The Fire-Shadow grasped the bottle and brought it to his nose, sniffing experimentally, then recoiling. “Naruto, this is one of the strongest alcohols I’ve ever smelled! Are you sure you are okay?”

Naruto frowned further. “Yeah, I’m fine. I feel like it was just water, believe it.” Then his eyes widened. “Don’t… don’t tell me…”

Hiruzen nodded gravely. “I believe so.”

“NOOOOOO! WHY, GOD? WHY?!”

“Ano… sir, what is wrong with Naruto?” asked a concerned Hinata, gazing at Naruto in surprise, and with even more astonishment at the Fire-Shadow, who was currently patting Naruto on the back with clear pity.

“Naruto’s… condition … greatly accelerates his healing and metabolism.” Kakashi explains with a sweat-drop growing on his head. “He’s just realized what it means.”

The proceedings were interrupted when Anko doubled back in with a stern expression on her face. “Alright, you geezer, seeing the amount of D-ranks my team has been doing, I daresay that we’ve gotten enough for a C-rank! If the brats get one now, they’ll be more motivated in the future.”

“Then you can take this one.” Kakashi sighs, waving his hands towards Tazuna. “My lord, do you have any missions dealing with… ‘trash disposal’?”

Hiruzen arches a brow, asking, “Are you sure, Kakashi? This is their first mission, after all.”

“Positive.” Kakashi nods. “And it will better prepare them for the next mission we have in mind.”

Both Sasuke and Hinata narrow their eyes, sans a blonde who is still wailing anime tears, who currently has Tazuna patting his back in sympathy.

“Alright… hand Anko the mission scroll. You can have…” here, he digs around the C-rank rack. “This one. A simple mission which entails dealing with a group of bandits on the edges of the Fire Country and Tea Country borders.”

“Brilliant!” Anko beams, then frowns in Naruto’s direction. “By the way, what’s got the brat all cranky?”

“I can’t get drunk!” Naruto wails, which draws more sympathetic looks from the other ninja (even the ANBU hidden in the shadows). “I’ll never be able to get drunk! Oh, what a world!”

Sasuke gains a tic mark on his forehead when even Hinata looks at his other teammate in pity.
I have completely removed any bloodline from Naruto from a reason. Watch out for it in the last sentence of this fic when it's done.
“Maybe you need a break.” Iwashi sagely advises. “A long break. I sure know that it helps.”

Iruka scoffs and downs the heavyweight shot and slams the glass on the counter of the shinobi bar he’s currently at, and levels a forlorn look at his friend. “I don’t know… I’ve been to the standard therapy sessions with the Yamanakas; I don’t think a break will help.”

“It will do wonders for you, trust me.” Raido smiles from the other side. “I’m sure Genma would say the same. Hell, he’d probably buy you passes all the way to the Hidden Rock if it helped you.”

“Fuck yeah, lover boy”! A cheerful voice screams from the door.

“Oh. Gods save me.” Iruka bemoans his fate, much to Genma’s amusement and Raido’s resigned acceptance.

“Iruka?” another voice sounds out, and the Chuunin doesn’t feel like killing himself at hearing it.

“Aoba?” the scarred Academy teacher asks, and whirls on his stool to gaze upon the newly entering pair.

“When Anko told me I’d find you here,” Aoba begins, scanning his comrade from hair tips to toes, “I didn’t believe it.”

Sad woman scoffs, disregarding the stools available and instead perching on the counter right between Iruka and Raido. “I’m always right, glasses.” She then, rather rudely, too, downs a shot that Iruka had paid for. “Look, lover boy- “

“Anko, I’m not in the mood.” Iruka interrupts and tries not to cringe when he sees almost everyone present startle visibly. Anko was like his unofficial little sister, and he always had time for her antics.

“It’s that bad, huh?” Aoba whispers – or tries to – to Raido, who nods solemnly.

“Im sorry, bro.” Anko quietly says. “Look, you’ve got to break out of… whatever this is.” She waves her hand around for emphasis, while also signaling the bartender for a refill. “I get losing precious people, I really do, but this is ridiculous.”

“He hasn’t eaten a full meal in two weeks.” Iwashi adds helpfully, but wilts under Iruka’s harsh glare.

“What, I’ve got you guys as nannies, now?” he scathingly bites out. “Wonderful. Let me check my things for poison and senbon before I approve, though.”

“This is what I’m talking about.” Raido quietly says, with an expression of disapproval. “You’re pushing all of us away. Kotetsu stopped trying after that comment about his sister- “

“Woah, what?” Aoba interrupts, and everyone can see his eyes widen behind his glasses. “Iruka, you know that’s a sore subject for him!”

“Izumo was furious.” Raido continues. “He almost wanted to pummel you to the ground when he found out.”
“Why all this funk, anyway?” asks Anko, pointing out the proverbial pink elephant in the room. “I know you two were close, but- “

“He proposed, alright?!” Iruka almost shouts, and the bartender – safely wiping away his glasses nervously on the other side of the counter – almost drops the things in his grasp at the volume. The man sighs before continuing. “He proposed to me a week before his… the graduation exam. I was going to tell you all about it the next day.”

There is silence for a few moments for quite a while.

“Is this about Naruto?” Aoba asks, eyeing the next shot his friend took with pity. “Iruka, you know the boy had not choice- “

“Of course, it’s not about Naruto.” Iruka sighs. “I may be ‘in a funk’ here, Anko snorts at the hand gestures he makes to emphasize the quotation marks, “but I am not crazy. It’s not his fault at all!”

“Then what is it?” Aoba perseveres. “If you don’t blame Naruto, do you blame yourself? That’s not very healthy, Iruka, and it’s not even valid.”

“I don’t blame myself.” Iruka replies, sounding more like a petulant child than a mature Chuunin. “It’s just… things were going fine. We picked out an apartment to share in the Shinobi district. We were going to look into adoption. He said he wanted to pass something of himself on.” The man swallows another shot. “It all went so pear shaped so suddenly…” Iruka harshly wipes a tear. “But he didn’t just do something he would get a slap on the wrist for, no. He wanted to hurt Naruto… he knew how I felt about him, he knew! How… how could he…”

The others shared loaded glances. This was serious business.

With a sad sigh, Aoba seats himself too, determined to help his friend out of his low.

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“Cha! Let’s get going on this mission already!” Sakura exclaims, eyes glowing with an inner fire. “I will perform so well on this mission, that you’ll finally have to let me sign the Snake Contract, Anko-ma’am!”

The Jonin in question snickers. “Right, pinkie. And my dumplings are not alcohol laced.”

“Ma’am, you should refrain from using references that people do not understand. Why? Because then the meaning of it is lost.” Shino notes, glasses glinting in the bright morning light. He was irritated, of course. He hadn’t slept well the previous night, and a strong feeling of foreboding was still clouding his mind. He was not one for superstitions, but he had made… arrangements, as was required of all ninja who left the village proper. Ninja life was perilous, after all, and all shinobi on the roster were basically required to hand in instructions on what must be carried out in case of unfavorable circumstances. Still, his father was quite amused about the fact that he believed something of the nature could happen on a C-rank mission that was technically just dropping a child off next door – the Land of Waves was their neighbor, after all.

“Let’s go!” Kiba whines. “We’re wasting time just standing here!” His little furry companion barks in agreement… before leaping off his head in an abrupt move and landing in the arms of another.
“Oh hey, Akamaru! You seem quite excited today.” A familiar voice sounds, and Shino attempts to appear nonchalant as he spots a mop of blonde hair. “But why are you guys still here?”

“Our client has not yet arrived.” Shino responds, eyes focusing directly on the object of his affections. Oblivious, dense, immature, unmindful object, but he digresses.

“Hey, how come Akamaru always jumps on your head? He never does that for anyone else but me!” Kiba whines… again. Perhaps there was a mistake at birth, and Akamaru was the actual Inazuka clan member while Kiba was his ninja-dog. It would make sense…

“He just knows I give the best ear-scratches!” Naruto beams, reaching up to run his fingers through Akamaru’s fur. “Isn’t that right, boy?”

Akamaru barks in agreement.

“Traitor!” Kiba cries, pointing at his partner in exaggerated dismay. “You wound my heart!”

“Why am I the only sane person I know?” Sasuke mutters from some distance behind Naruto, and Shino is quick to note that the entirety of Team 7 is present… including Hinata… who was currently giving him the look. He absently wonders if all girls have perfected the look since birth, because even Sakura and Ino have begun shooting him the same whenever they spot him. The look that is practically demanding why he has not told Naruto of his feelings yet.

He firmly decides that he will not think of such things just before his first C-rank mission.

“-hino! Shino! What’s wrong?” a voice breaks him out of his thoughts, and he is not surprised that it is, in fact, Naruto.

“I am mentally accounting for several scenarios we may face in this mission.” Shino lies, and ignores that the look that he was receiving from both Sakura and Hinata had doubled in intensity. “Why? Because a ninja must always be prepared.”

Naruto smiles wide, and Shino has to exercise tight control over his parasitic insects to prevent them from buzzing along with his increased heart-rate.

Yes, he was practically doomed to forever be fighting his own thoughts on the matter, but at least he would not have to chance that beaming smile becoming awkward if things went wrong.

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Hiruzen Sarutobi gazes at his crystal ball, watching his pseudo-grandchild along with his team. He shakes his head and chuckles when said blond finally snaps, gathers his chakra and takes to the trees at a speed that quickly allows him to overtake Team 8, followed by a sweat-dropping team 7. He never did have the patience, and considering that the border is days away…

He deactivates the Crystal Gazing jutsu and leans back on his chair, absently noting that his Shadow Clones had almost finished processing his paperwork. He takes a slow, pleasing drag from his pipe and exhales the smoke with practiced ease, sighing in contentment.

It is not to last.
The door opens and a lone figure walks in, stopping in front of his desk to gaze at him with piercing eyes, before taking a chair without so much as a ‘by your leave’. Hiruzen isn’t surprised, the woman in front of him rarely ever deferred to him with respect, something that both agitated him and yet provided a semblance of normality in his hectic life as a leader of a military village.

“Why was I not informed when he was made Genin?”

Hiruzen lowers his eyes from the ceiling to gaze at the only other occupant of the room, while almost absently brushing his hands against the trigger for his privacy and anti-jutsu seals. The figure in front of him ripples, and the Transformation falls away, not surprising her in the least.

Long, brown hair. That is what would catch anyone’s attention first. It’s done in braids, and the braids are also looped and coiled as such so that it doesn’t hinder movement or vision. Heterochrome eyes, one green and one blue, almond shaped and surrounded in black eyeliner. One brow arched in question on the aristocratic visage, with a seal matrix displayed on the left side of her forehead prominently, above the green eye. Full lips are squeezed between teeth in a show of agitation. This angel in front of him is garbed in a simple brown battle-kimono, with a dull green cloth wrapped around her hips and left shoulder that covers her lower body.

“I hope you were not followed.” Hiruzen replies instead, eyes going slowly back to the ceiling. There were only a few people Hiruzen trusted more than himself. Along with Shikaku Nara, Jiraiya, Naruto Uzumaki, and, once upon a time, Tsunade Senju and Orochimaru, the woman in front of him, who in no way looked her age, also counted within them.

“I’m not here to play games, Hiruzen.” She growls, and Hiruzen notices that her agitation must only have worsened with his apparent lack of interest. “I had you promise that you would notify me immediately when he did. If that boy had grandfather’s skills, he should be trained in them to lessen the danger he may pose to himself or to others.”

“He is your grandchild.” Hiruzen notes. “Why do you always refer to him as ‘that boy’?”

“I am the last of a decimated clan, Hiruzen.” The woman in front of him says in a tone that belies incredulity. “To say nothing of my age – I can pass at any moment now. Getting close to him would only be detrimental to us both as my final days approach.”

“I’ll never understand you, Byakuri.” Hiruzen sighs and lowers his gaze to meet his elder’s. “He has no one. If you were to- “

“My methods are my own, Hiruzen.” Byakuri interrupts. “Since you know nothing of my motivations, I would rather you zip your childish mouth.”

Hiruzen bristles but says nothing.

The woman gazes at him with a calculating gleam. “You care for him, even though he does not belong to your line or your clan… why?”

“His current circumstances are a direct result of actions on my part.” Hiruzen points out, taking another drag from his pipe. On noticing that the tobacco within has been consumed, he fills it again and lights it up with a snap of his fingers. “I would be a poor human being if I wasn’t even the least bit concerned.”

“Considering the fact that most human beings are pitiful, selfish, and mostly horrible caricatures of their ancestors, nowadays, I’d dare say you are already an exemplary human.” Byakuri scoffs. “Bravo.”
“What are you really here for, Lady Senju?” Hiruzen asks, eyes narrowed. “I have been ensuring that he gets the best. His teacher had been specifically assigned due to his relations with his father, other obvious reasons none withstanding. He has been flourishing under his tutelage. In fact, he, along with his team, have been through an introductory course designed for ANBU this past month, and I can safely assume that he is already beyond most Chuunin. So… why have you deigned this a moment to grace me with our presence? Has Danzo not been treating you well?”

“Oh, your petty political games intrigue me so.” Byakuri scoffs, then shy offers him a smirk. “But I do have to admit, placing me under his care publicly so that he is directly liable for any hardships I incur was a brilliant move. Dearest Danzo has been trying to find a way to capture me for my blood for quite the while, and it is beyond amusing to see how he copes with my caustic wit.”

“Why thank you. Knowing your mannerisms, that’s practically you gushing in praise.”

“Don’t let it get to your head. Regardless, I am here because I wish to test the boy for the Wood Release.” Byakuri states, with the subtlety of a war-hammer.

“Two Bloodline Limits rarely manifest one alongside the other, Byakuri.” Hiruzen sighs. “Even if he has Senju blood in his veins, the chances are- “

“As long as there are chances, disregarding the prospect would be a fool’s notion.” Byakuri Senju interrupts, tone icy. “Have you forgotten the prophecy, little monkey? If he is the subject, he could very well be the only one to save us all. I have devoted my life to studying what the Great Dragon Sage once dictated to my great-uncle, and I can safely say that the subject is from this latest generation of ninjas. If it is him… remains to be seen. However, if it is so? Then what? Should he not be given every advantage he could possibly need?”

“I have already been giving him every advantage!” Hiruzen snarls. “Not confiscating his scrolls is one major thing – considering that his ‘clan’ is no longer active and the Council was on my case about obtaining such a variety. The Uchiha were known masters in every field, thanks to the Sharingan – those scrolls could very well be what catapults our village higher up in terms of quality of our ninja force, but I still refrained. I’ve made no moves to abate the near-devotion my citizens exhibit towards him, nor the favoritism. He’s been getting quality education- “

“While you fan the flames of his ego. Bravo.” Byakuri snorts. “Having the sharpest kunai means nothing if it’s liable to break.”

Slamming his fist on his desk, Hiruzen speaks in a deadly soft voice. “Do not take that tone with me. I am still your leader.”

Byakuri too lays her hands on the table. “And I’m still stronger than you, Hiruzen. That little pet ANBU of yours is not the only Wood Style user alive. Now, if we’re done with this routine, when can I test the boy?”

Hiruzen levels a final glare at the smirking woman in front of him, sighing. It was always like this with Byakuri… she could always get under his skin the easiest. “He is scheduled to return in a week. I’ve sent him on an A-rank disguised as a low C-rank, to test his capabilities. The bandit group he is supposed to be ‘eliminating’ is led by a missing ninja of low caliber.” He steeples his hands as he closes his eyes in thought. “I will warn you not to get your hopes up. His affinities were tested, and the only ones displayed were a primary Lightning with a secondary Fire… it’s not possible.”

Byakuri stills, shocked. “Did… did you say Lightning and Fire? In that order? Are you sure?”

Limit that could emerge?"

The woman seated opposite him grants him a calculating gaze. “The First’s great-great-grandfather. He held the same affinities… A primary Lightning and a secondary Fire… and later in his life, after being the first to develop the third stages of the elemental control exercises for these elements, exhibited a strange element. It was like raw energy given form, if I had to describe it. He never could identify what it was, but his memoirs explain it as the ‘easiest methods of vaporization of even the toughest material’.”

“I have never heard of this in my studies of notable Bloodlines,” Hiruzen admitted. “But that’s not a surprise – records of the Warring Clans Era are sparse at best.”

“Hiruzen… if he has this one… I will be most certain that he is indeed the child of the prophecy.” Byakuri said, biting her lip in an uncharacteristic show of uncertainty. “Have you had any luck identifying the subject of the Toads’ prophecy, yet?”

“I believe it is Uzumaki Naruto.” The Sarutobi clan head nods. “It helps that Minato was certain of this too… I believe it was partially why he sealed half of the Nine-tails into Naruto, or else he could have simply taken the beast in its entirety with him into the Death God’s belly.”

“Hardly.” Byakuri scoffs. “That brat was many things, but he was not an idiot. He wouldn’t perform such an action on a vague hunch such as that alone. Not to sound juvenile, but, ‘obviously’.”

Hiruzen offers her a dubious glance.

She simply smirks. “If he took the entire beast with him, the Leaf would be left without a tailed beast in its possession, which would be unacceptable. While other major countries have at least one, or even two, in their possession, doing so would be tantamount to an invitation to invade us.” Pausing, she next continues with a little steel in her voice. “You know, for a country that desperately needs their Human Sacrifice,” Byakuri points out, sneering, “your citizens certainly treat their own like a pariah. If they are indeed so scared of the Nine-tails, would they not want to get in his good graces, above all? That would be the sensible thing to do, after all.”

“There is one thing you should know about the general populace.” Hiruzen says, a bitter smile on his face. “People are often quick to come to conclusions, but slow to correct their mistakes. At least they haven’t done something idiotic like refuse him service in shops entirely, or rally into mobs to ‘finish what the Fourth started’, or even sabotage his education in the Academy. That would just be… stupid.”

“Ridiculously so.” Byakuri nods. “Refusing him service wouldn’t work, anyway, since you keep a close watch on him. Trying to kill him would release the beast – granted, after a set number of years, but it would be released, and the people are not stupid enough to do that. Nor is the council idiotic enough to allow that to happen, they want their Human Sacrifice in fighting condition, after all – that would also negate the last thing you said.”

“Well, at least we can be content in the fact that our citizenry is not comprised of complete imbeciles.” Sarutobi beams, much to Byakuri’s fond exasperation. “Nevertheless, it is odd for you to show such… curiosity in one not related to your direct personal interests.” He then notes aloud, a shrewd glint in his eyes. “What are you planning, Byakuri? He may be a Human Sacrifice, but you never showed such interest in Kushina.”

Byakuri simply offers him a wry smile as she stands. “I will return in a week’s time.” She then begins to make her way out of the office.
“Byakuri.”

She stills.

“Harm a hair on his head, and you will know exactly why I’m known as the God of the Elements.” Hiruzen says, and in his tone, there is no room for kindness. This is the man who was forged in the fires of war and led his village for a long time into prosperity.

Byakuri turns and levels him a sideways look. “Do you honestly hold so low an opinion of me to believe I would harm him?”

Silence is her answer.

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Far underneath the village, a complex exists, wreathed in hundreds of seals and concealing Ninjutsu that ward it away even from the most talented of sensors and astute of mind. It is a vast one, stretching almost to the entirety of the village underground, with multiple winding entrances scattered throughout the community above. It is designed like a maze, this complex, and is not clearly segregated in any way. There are four hubs, however, each almost identical to the other in each of the cardinal directions, that meet in one single circular room that reaches deep into the earth.

It is in the center of this room that a lone chair is occupied by what appears to be a crippled man at first glance. His right eye is covered in bandages, and his right arm is tucked into his dark blue wrap-around cloak. A cross-like scar is on the chin, and his face is wrinkled with age.

“Report.” He barks out, and although his voice is not loud, or tinged with any emotion whatsoever, it is hard to deny the authority laced within.

“He has departed on a C-rank mission, Lord Danzo.” An operative complies, kneeling in front of the aged man. Every part of the kneeling human is obscured, either by the black hooded cloak he or she is garbed in, or the shadows crated by it. “The estimated time of completion is a week, however, as our past records indicate, his impatience will lead to an earlier end.”

The man now identified as Danzo nods, single visible eye almost closed in thought. “And your mission?”

“Successful.” The operative affirms in her monotone voice. “The boy is ignorant of the fact that some scrolls shouldn’t be where they are in the Archive. We have successfully been able to provide him with advanced scrolls on several supplementary subjects and some low ranked Wind Style jutsu. It is curious, however, to note that he did not pay as much attention to them as I would have thought.”

“Unimportant. He has mastered the Mental Palace technique. Paying attention is not necessary when one can easily review anything perceived by their senses repeatedly, without pause, and without care for time consumption.” Danzo waved her off. “What of his training, this week? Was he able to perform to our expectations?”

“Yes, Lord Danzo. He has far surpassed them, even with the adjustments to our forecasts that were made after observing him for the first two weeks.” She said. “His growth rate is astounding. He has reached the stage of progress which we had predicted would take three more months. Should I
“No. I want you to delay that.” Danzo snaps, and a barely concealed tone of frustration colors his tone when he speaks next. “We are not the only one with an interest in him. Uzumaki has been closely watched by many factions in the village, and none the worse than the Fire-Shadow himself. Extending him an invitation now would not only be met with vehement refusal, but also be catalogued and act as a cause for exposure. I will not risk that. Currently, the only people who know of the existence of Root are my old teammates and Shikaku Nara. Having the scrutiny of others would be… unfavorable.” He opens his eye to gaze impassively at the agent before him. “Tail him on his mission. I wish to know of every single detail. Hiding from the All-Seeing White Eyes should not be an issue for you. Do not be detected; and under any circumstances, do not interfere.”

“As you command, Lord Danzo.” The operative bows her head further, before blurring away, leaving the man dubbed as the ‘Old War Hawk’ contemplating his plans.

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“It… is startling. She is a completely different person.” Hiashi Hyuuga admits, sipping his tea with a stoic visage, although Inoichi easily notes the well-concealed surprise underneath. “I was unaware that associating with the Uzumaki boy would be a cause for such an improvement.”

“He has surpassed our expectations.” The lone Yamanaka in the room agrees. “We’ll have to rework everything. I had tried my best to convince the old geezer to wipe out my clan’s technique from the scroll, but he never did budge. ‘The decoy scroll had to have something of worth, after all.’ Damned imbecile.”

“Peace, Inoichi.” Hiashi sighs. “There is no use of anger, now. It is far too late.” He tilts his head. “But I am unsure I heard right. The ‘Decoy Scroll’?”

Inoichi eyes his cup of tea, anger brimming against the surface. “The real Forbidden Scroll doesn’t exist.” He explained. “Having a scroll filled to the brim with all notable techniques? That would be foolish. No, instead, the Decoy Scroll is compiled with ten techniques that have the most risk in execution. It is a bait, of sorts, to lure in the few foolish individuals who hunger for our techniques. It is one of the few things the Five Great Shadows actually agreed upon – any persons of interest captured could be traded, rogue factions could be identified, and scattered rogue ninja eliminated, all at a reduced risk.”

“It seems foolhardy, to enter any jutsu in the scroll at all.” Hiashi notes. “Would the same purpose not be fulfilled if there were no jutsu within at all?”

“There have to be some jutsu of worth within the scroll, or else it would be discarded entirely.” Inoichi points out. “Time in needed for the tracking seal built into the text of the scroll to be located. For that to happen, the scroll must be interesting enough for the appropriator to hold on to. Low level jutsu would garner nearly as much suspicion as no jutsu at all would, and clan jutsu are out of the question.” Here, he scoffs bitterly. “Or at the very least, most are. Mine are apparently fair game.”

“We have both been wronged, my friend, and in many instances.” Hiashi says quietly, agreeing wholeheartedly with the sentiment displayed by his fellow sufferer. “That is the whole reason for the plan, is it not?”
Inoichi does not respond, taking a sip of his tea and opting for a bout of silence instead. He gazes out the window of the Hyuuga clan-head’s office and looks at the village yonder. The village that had taken so much from his clan… the village that was the cause of so much suffering… “Has the Hidden Sand agreed to our terms?”

“Yes. Our demands were accepted without question. Apparently, they already had similar plans in the works – our part is just the icing on the cake.” Hiashi supplies, head slightly bowed. “My friend… are you sure this is the best course of action? The village has wronged us in many ways, but… this feels a bit extreme.”

Inoichi turns from the window to gaze at his Hyuuga compatriot. “Hiashi, do you know which clan has the highest rate of suicide in the village?”

The man in question opts to say nothing.

“Our Mind Invasion technique is a wonderful thing, after we have formed our Mental Palaces. We can read memories, learn of things the target knew, such as jutsu or knowledge, with no added chakra cost. However, there is one thing about the technique that only my clan and all the Fire-Shadows ever knew about.”

Hiashi remained silent.

“We feel their emotions.” Inoichi confides. “Their convictions, their hopes, their dreams, fears, loves, their entire life… is like an open book we are forced to read between the lines of. It is not ‘reading’ their memories but living them. Truly believing you have existed as they did and acted as they had. This has disastrous consequences on one’s psyche. And for us Yamanaka, the psyche is more important than even breathing is. Uncaring for our plight, we are forced to use our talents for the benefit of the village… but at what cost?”

“I did not know.” Hiashi quietly admits.

“It is a secret we are forbidden to revealing on the pain of death.” Inoichi laughs bitterly. “After all, our clan must retain its usefulness in the eyes of others, and not be declared as a glass cannon. The village would lose face. It is not as if they care for our suffering, either way.”

Hiashi ponders this distressing revelation as he sips his tea. This is, indeed, something he would have to bring to the Clan Elders. But that is for later. “The Chuunin exams will occur after six months since the one in the Hidden Cloud has just ended last week. It will be in the Leaf, this time. The Sand plans to strike then.”

Inoichi stills, then smiles.

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He wipes his hands on the towel next to the sink, uncaring of the red mess that is the rest of the room and smiles in satisfaction. Red eyes with three black beads in each almost glow in the darkness of the dissection chamber as he switches off the lights and departs. Footsteps echoing in the stone hallways, he makes his way to the throne room with nary an interruption and takes his seat in front of the gigantic statue of a snake with a sigh of contentment.

“Lord Orochimaru, I have news.”
Orochimaru opens his eyes and gazes upon his aide, a small smirk playing on his lips. “Have you found out what I asked you to, Kabuto?” he asks, his hissing tone relaxed and unhurried.

“Yes, my lord. The cache is in the dead center of the islands, far under the recommended diving depth for normal ninjas.” He reads from a scroll. “The entrance is barred by a blood seal, the likes of which we weren’t able to disassemble. We will need the blood of a true member of the clan to open it.”

“And how many members to we know of?” the Snake Sage asks, curious.

“Just four, my lord.” Kabuto admits, sounding vaguely apologetic. “Two are deceased, the late wife of the Fourth Wind-Shadow and mother of three, and a male in the Hidden Mist who fathered a single daughter. One is alive and well in the Hidden Grass, a female by the name of Karin. She has not been identified as being a part of the clan yet. And another in the Hidden Leaf, a male, named—”

“Naruto Uzumaki.” Orochimaru completes, smiling. “Ah yes, the son of that idiot Minato. Hmm… do we know much about them?”

“The female in the Hidden Mist goes by Mei Terumi, after her mother.” Kabuto recites from another scroll. “She has inherited two Bloodlines, the Lava Style and the Corrosion Style, from her mother’s side. She bears the trademark gigantic reserves usually associated with Uzumaki blood and has been seen healing from severe wounds. However, she is in a position of prominence there, and will be noticed missing. She has also been noted to have an iron resolve.”

“What has she chosen to do in that forsaken place?” Orochimaru asks, arching an eyebrow. Even he knew of the Bloodline purges occurring there under the tyrannical rule of the Fourth Water-Shadow – after all, he did acquire one of his most prominent followers as a direct result of the massacres.

“She is the leader of the rebellion, my lord.” The bespectacled teen replies, adjusting his glasses. “Under her guidance, the Loyalist forces are being slowly but surely pushed back.”

“Ah.” Orochimaru tilted his head. “The famed Uzumaki stubbornness… moving on?”

“Out of the three children of the Wind-Shadow, only one has inherited strong Uzumaki genes.” Kabuto says, squinting a bit. “His name is Gaara, and he is the youngest of the children. However, due to his strong chakra, he was chosen as the Human Sacrifice for the One-tailed Raccoon-Dog.”

“How disappointing.” Notes Orochimaru. “Having two other spares might have made the Wind-Shadow inclined to forgive the missing of one of his children. What a waste… How about this Karin?”

“She has only recently joined the ninja force in the Hidden Grass and is already popular for being a very skilled healer.” Kabuto states. “Her raw control coupled with her gigantic reserves have enabled her to work miracles with healing techniques. She is almost never let out of the village.”

“She would have proved valuable… were she no so closely watched.” Orochimaru sighs. “How troublesome. What about the Namikaze brat… he is a Human Sacrifice too, is he not?”

“Yes, my lord. He houses the Nine-tailed Fox.” Kabuto nods. “Until a month or so ago, he was reported to be a below average ninja-aspirant, with a penchant for pranks and boisterous behavior. However, this changed when he mastered a technique called… the Mental Palace…?”

Orochimaru stilled. “He… mastered it, you say?”
“Our spies have told us he managed to do it in less than a minute.” Kabuto frowned. “That can’t be right, not technique can be mastered in so short a time.”

“This technique can.” Orochimaru disagreed and arched an eyebrow. “Let me guess, he now shows exemplary performance in memorization and control, has mastered several jutsu, and has grown in strength exponentially?”

“Y- yes… my lord…”

“Before Danzo gave me the body of a barely living Uchiha as payment for the Senju arm prosthesis he now wears, I had attempted to learn that technique. Having it under my belt would have made me unbeatable, and the need for the Copy Wheel Eye unimportant.” Orochimaru mused. “But I could not. It requires certain… strengths that I cannot fully accommodate. To know that someone outside the Yamanaka clan managed to… and at such a young age… he sounds promising. If I still had to switch bodies every three years, I would have considered him as a vessel.”

“My lord, pardon me, but would the Nine-tails not have been a detriment that way?”

Orochimaru waved him off. “The Uzumaki vitality allowed his mother to live past the very same beast being ripped out of her by force. I would have convinced him that this was the best thing to do, and as a willing participant, he would have been in a far better shape for the extraction of the tailed beast. It could have been directly transferred into a clone we could have grown from his bone marrow. Ah. Well.” He steeples his fingers. “So, we have no easy targets to capture… the most viable seems to be this Karin. Have Kimimaro sent in.”

Kabuto hesitated before speaking. “My lord, if I may be so bold...?”

“Go ahead, my loyal servant.” Orochimaru allowed, with a sick parody of a smile lighting up his features in amusement.

“The Chuunin Exams will be held in the Hidden Leaf in a few months’ time.” Kabuto began. “If we were to manipulate events such that Karin was also sent in, we could seize three of them at once, since the invasion we have planned with the Sand would need Gaara in the village as well. Considering the fact that the One-tail can be sealed into even an object without repercussions, and we do have a shinobi in our forces that know the special technique we acquired from the Hidden Sand, would that not be the more viable option?”

Orochimaru mused over the idea. His aide and apprentice did have some merit. He would have his revenge and procure the tools he required to crack open the last vault of techniques that has been kept away from him, all at once.

His laughter rang out in the caverns of the Hidden Sound moments later.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it.

This chapter was necessary to set the stage. The Yamanaka clan will be the big baddies of the first arc. Besides the reasons mentioned, there will also me more that will be unveiled at a later date.
Orochimaru obtaining the Sharingan is just common sense. When he fashioned the Hashirama prosthetic for Danzo with a dozen of his eyes, is it not only prudent he asks for a set as payment? There is nothing else that I can think of that Danzo would offer him in repayment, tbh. His lack of body transference will also be explained later.

One more thing, in canon, there were 3 people who were referred to as 'God of Shinobi' that I'm aware of - Hagoromo, Hashirama, and Hiruzen. In this fic, however, for simplicity's sake, Hagoromo will be the only one known as the God of Shinobi. Hashirama will be known as the 'God of Nature', and Hiruzen will be known as the 'God of the Elements'.

The stage has also been set for what will be the finale of the first arc. Let's wait and see where it leads. Stay tuned!
“Okay, then, team! Let’s camp here for the night.” Kakashi eye-smiled, beaming at his Genin.

Sasuke scoffs. “But why, sir? We still have three or four hours to midnight, we can easily make it to the Tea Country border and camp nearby.”

Naruto isn’t saying no to that. They’d been travelling for a week now, at the highest speed they could while also having stamina left over to jump into action, if need be. The air grew steadily colder as they eased their way towards tea country, not by much, but enough to make the air around them quite pleasant. It made sense, since growing tea required temperate climate.

“I’m sure the bandits won’t be going anywhere if we rest for one night, Sasuke.” Kakashi smiled.

Well, considering how fast they’d been moving all day, maybe a night’s rest before they had to actually do something was worth it? Naruto mentally shrugged, deciding on a course of action and weaving the hand-signs for a jutsu, before slamming his hands onto the ground and activating the Earth Style: Earth Wall, carefully controlling his chakra so that only a medium sized slanted shelter appeared when the land shifted in front of them under a tree.

Sasuke gave Naruto a look.

“I don’t know about the three of you,” Naruto said, yawning. “but I sure can go for a good night’s rest.”

Not undeservingly, he thought. These past few days he’d been routinely leaving a team of cones to learn and master some jutsu, namely the Earth Wall, and the Vacuum Bullets. He reached his limit in free-source jutsu - especially those of his natural affinity because there weren’t many wind users in the Hidden Leaf, and as such even having that one was a miracle from the Shinobi Archive. The rest of the clones worked on adding the techniques and information they had learnt to their arsenal and finding new and creative ways of using them, along with a group to practice chakra control, can’t forget that. The slip of even a single day, and his control would be shot to hell.

“Me too.” Hinata admitted, stretching her hands up high above her head.

Kakashi smiled. “See?”

Sasuke pouted – um, made a face and looked the other way. “If that is what you think is best.” He relented and pulled out the scroll in which he had sealed away his camping supplies. His expression changed when he finally caught the words Kakashi had been subtly signing behind his book – ‘We are being followed.’ He shot a glance at Hinata who had her All-Seeing White Eyes active. He himself discreetly activated his Copy-Wheel Eyes and scanned the trees as subtly as he could, which was to say Naruto himself wouldn’t be able to spot it if they hadn’t trained alongside each other for so long.

“Who’s got hunting duty?” Naruto asked feeling brave enough to attempt taking their pursuer.

Kakashi hummed. “Hinata, do you mind? Naruto, you go gather some wood for the fire, while Sasuke and I will set up camp.”
This was Kakashi assigning them roles, since they had already sealed away enough raw meat and wood in Stasis Storage Scrolls to last them a long while. It meant that Hinata would go in one direction, he himself in the other, and Kakashi and Sasuke would stay and take on whoever was fool enough to attack them. Did this mean there was more than one pursuer?

“Of course, sir.” Hinata smiled. “My last record was thirteen minutes for a deer. This time, I shall try to beat it.”

Thirteen pursuers? Perhaps this was their bandit group, then? But how …

Naruto said nothing and turned away, humming obnoxiously loud. He had spotted the signs a couple hours back, but he wasn’t the best at keeping abreast of the goings on in his environment. The signs were small – a rustle of leaves too loud for a treetop animal to make, sudden flight of flocks of birds where they were previously content, and he was also pretty certain he heard an almost-muffled curse once.

He theatrically eyed an almost barren shrub. That was a rookie mistake. If their pursuer did want to Transform into something, it shouldn’t have been something so out of place. Presenting an image of what the prey exactly desires can be mighty suspicious, especially since the shrubbery around it was lush and green.

“Oh hey, this one looks nice!” he beamed, then pretended to scratch his head. “But… will this be enough? That bastard Sasuke always berates me… but no matter, my sweet Hinata will always complement my daring efforts!” he proclaimed, raising his fist in the air. “Alright! Now, to cut this poor little tree off with a kunai!”

Naruto was pretty sure he could see a sweat-drop forming on the leafless shrub, and he held back the tic mark from forming on his head with pure force of will alone.

“Aw man! I knew that forgetting my pouch back in the village was going to come bite me in the ass!” he groaned, and studiously ignored the sweat-drop growing bigger. “Well, then, I’ll yank it out! Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

Carefully controlling the chakra output allowed Naruto to overload the ambient release amount, releasing more smoke than strictly necessary. Using the opportunity, he quickly sunk into the ground using the True Earth Wading jutsu and used the Underground Overhead Sensing technique to get a general idea of his playground while one of the six clones acted as the original. ‘Two chakra signatures, one civilian level… but the other…’ his eyes widened, ‘it’s almost as much as Kakashi! This is no simple bandit group.’

Feeling a plan forming, he quickly created and dispelled a Shadow Clone which already had the True Earth Wading jutsu activated in order not to displace any soil too much but also get a message to his clones. Then, he slowly and quietly waded across the distance between him and the lowest level chakra signature, and then through the trunk of the tree the man was perched upon. Naruto’s head peeked out from some distance above the man to observe while his clones began blaming each other for the excessive smoke. He seemed almost generic in appearance – beige pants, bare torso, lower face covered with a cloth and what looked like a crude imitation of shinobi sandals.

‘Shinobi sandals are specially designed to allow chakra passage from the soles of the feet to the external environment.’ He thought, quickly receding into the trunk again after taking a quiet breath of air. ‘The man should have no use for such specialized gear… unless he was being coached in the shinobi arts by someone. Maybe the large chakra I sensed earlier?’

Allowing himself to lower a little, Naruto mentally prepared himself before his hands shot out,
grasping thee lower jaw of the man, and twisting, snapping his neck with ease, and then pulling the body into the trunk with him.

‘Dammit… I never wanted to kill, but if it’s me or them, I sure know who I’m rooting for.’ He internally grumbled, wading downwards and leaving the bandit’s body far below the ground. ‘Now… for the Jonin… well, there really is no way to surprise him, I guess.’

Deciding that now was as good a time as any, Naruto created and dispelled another Shadow Clone, and waited patiently until he heard a loud explosion. A set of memories rushed to his head, but he still waited, and sure enough, another quickly followed.

Disbelieving, he quickly waded upwards and soon his torso burst through the ground, eyes incredulous.

He’d just taken out a Jonin with nine clones using the Great Clone Explosion. Either he’d sold his act as a fool a little too well to the get man overconfident, or he was just plain weak, regardless of the size of his reserves. Was surprise really that good of a deterrent?

Skeptical, Naruto fully got out of the earth and fought to hold down the contents of his stomach as he examined the scene. There was… a lot of blood. Pushing the nausea aside, he took a deep breath of air – ‘Air tinged with the smell of blood’ – and focused. The man seemed to be well-tanned and had brown hair. Combined with the squint-like eye shape and gear he wore, he was clearly from the Hidden Sand. He had no headband on him to prove it, but the puppet that he was apparently inside solidified his hypothesis.

‘What is a puppet-user missing-ninja from the Hidden Sand doing all the way out here?’ he wondered, confused. As far as he knew, the only thing of note in the area was the border post of Tea Country.

Mentally shrugging, he crouched to retrieve the personal effects pouch that he could see was mostly intact. He found several storage scrolls, and what looked like… a photo album.

He swallowed hard as he looked through the four-page book. The man had a wife and a daughter, somewhere. Did he just do the right thing? Mizuki was a different case – not only was the man endangering the entire village by disclosing state secrets to… whoever he was going to give the scroll to, but he also had no one to call kin. What… what should he have done?

Shelving the thought process for later, Naruto stuffed the album and scrolls back in the pouch and fastened it to his right hip. ‘I can have time to think about this later – my team needs me.’

As if that thought were a cue of some sort, shouts and explosions began to ring through the forest. ‘The noise of my clones exploding must have hastened their plans.’ He thought; and used a Body Flicker to appear in the clearing.

Which was covered in either corpses or unconscious men and women. Hinata was currently sitting on the chest of one of her own gender, lighting a cigarette with a… was that a teddy bear lighter?!

Never mind. Sasuke was wiping down his blade with a cloth, sitting opposite her, while Kakashi was flipping through a Bingo book at a sedate pace.

He sweat-dropped. “Um… it must have taken me less than a second from when the explosions started…”

“Well, we’re nothing if not fast.” Kakashi eye-smiled, then turned serious… or as serious a silly him could get, anyway. “I want you to use your Mind Body Scan technique to- “
“It’s the Palace Interpretation Technique, sir.” Naruto grumpily corrected.

“Yes. That.” is teacher sighed. “Use that on one of the unconscious ninja we managed to capture and get us some answers. He was a-

“Puppet user from the Sand?” Naruto completed, and seeing his team’s questioning gaze, vanished in a swirl of leaves, and reappeared holding a head. “This guy was one too.”

None of his teammates looked disturbed at his casual handling of a decapitated head, but Hinata did blow out her puff of smoke a little shakily.

Kakashi hummed, backtracking through the pages until he paused at one. “Ichi Murasakino. Missing ninja from the hidden sand specializing in puppetry. Part of a five-man group known as the … Five String-weavers of the Sands…”

“Cheesy.” Hinata giggled, puffing away happily on her cigarette. “Are they supposed to be like the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist?”

“Supposedly.” Kakashi hummed. “Each of them wields an immensely complicated puppet crafted by the most famous – or rather infamous – puppeteer, Sasori of the Red Sands. Missing ninja business aside, he’s celebrated as one of the most crafty and intelligent ninja to raise puppetry to new heights… although, he hasn’t been spotted in quite a while.”

“And you believe that he has been teaching his… puppetry,” Sasuke scoffed, “to these no-good vermin from behind the scenes?”

“Not quite.” Their teacher shook his head. “While distance means little for a ninja given enough time, the last place he was spotted was somewhere in the deserts itself. Many speculate that he has a hideout there, under the cover of hundreds of seals. It’s a bit farfetched, but it’s plausible. Additionally, my opponent was the egotistical boasting type, and he never mentioned him at all.”

“That… doesn’t really mean much though.” Naruto pointed out. “He could have been purposely spouting off those comments in order to have you judge him incorrectly.”

Kakashi sported a hurt look, single eye brimming with tears. “So little faith!”

Naruto rolled his eyes, kneeling on the ground and setting the head down as well, forming the half-hand-sign needed for the Palace Invasion Technique. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.”

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was in his apartment… if it had been sapped of all color. Everything was in the monochrome spectrum.

‘Hmm… is this because he is dead?’

Naruto, not one to waste an opportunity and pleased to note that the time dilation effect was still operational, strode with purpose towards the bedroom. His heart fell when he noticed there were less than ten scrolls on the wall, four of which were the three academy ones they learnt and the Shunshin, another of which was the Earth Style sensing technique he already knew, and a much easier variant of the True Earth Wading jutsu called the Underground Projection Fish jutsu. That left just five others.

The first one that Naruto immediately thought of copying was the Chakra Threads technique. Even if he never got into puppetry, the technique was nifty as it would allow him to nominally control anything from a distance, like environmental objects or such and such. Additionally, it doubled as a
control exercise that used little chakra, which meant that he could reduce the number of clones he sent into controlling chakra every day and use them for… something else…

Shaking his head, he tossed the scroll through the door to his own Mental Palace. Given that this person was dead, he didn’t really have to bother much about consequences.

He examined the remaining four scrolls. They were colored a dull grey that seemed slightly off compared to the monochrome scheme the dead ninja had. Maybe they were different, somehow?

He was right, of course.

The four scrolls were named Puppet Creation, Puppet Maintenance, Sealing Techniques, and Poison Crafting. On opening them, he realized that they weren’t jutsu, but theory.

‘But then shouldn’t they be in one of the shelves in the living room?’ he wondered, but gathered them up in his hands as he walked back out anyway. Tossing them through the door, he turned back to the single shelf of memories that was so tall, that the roof of the apartment had to be extremely high to accommodate it.

‘Oh well… the most recent memory should be… here!’

Naruto flipped open the scroll and began to read it through… only for his eyes to widen as he continued…

‘This… this can’t be! Not another secret! Damn you, grandpa!’

He quickly tossed the scroll back through the door and began to skim previous memories. ‘If I can only find the conversation the actually had with him… aha!’

Grabbing the scroll and tossing it into his own Mental Palace, he quickly backed out and emerged into the realm of the conscious.

“Well?” Kakashi prodded when it was clear he was not going to speak soon.

“They…” Naruto swallowed. “They were sent here by Orochimaru of the Three Legendary Ninja. He offered them refuge in his village named the Hidden Sound after they wiped out a squad of his ninja. Their first mission was here, to … to scope out the Sealing defenses of a bunker in the middle of Kanashii Ocean… belonging to the Hidden Whirlpool village.” He finally looked up to stare at his teacher’s face. “I… is that my village, sir?”

Kakashi stiffened and looked away from the young Uzumaki. “I …”

“I know who my father is, already.” He pointed out. “I also clearly haven’t gotten the name ‘Uzumaki’ just for kicks. Tell me who my mother is.”

Hinata perked up at this, while Sasuke shifted uneasily. Mothers, probably, were the only topic that made shinobi uncomfortable.

“Very well.” Kakashi sighed. “Her name was Kushina Uzumaki, the next in line to be the Storm-Shadow. The Hidden Whirlpool village, like many other, was comprised of many clans, but the Uzumaki was to it what the Senju clan is to the Hidden Leaf – founders, and a symbol, of sorts. It also helped that their name matched a lot of things… anyway. Lady Kushina was a short-tempered woman, who was so terrifying when she got mad, that people dubbed her the ‘Red Hot Habanero’. She was a true master in wielding a sword, although she preferred a village-specific style. She also hated being a damsel in distress and did not quit being an active shinobi until she realized her family
of two was going to be a family of three.”

Naruto sniffed, but no tears fell. “Do… you have a picture of her?”

“I have one. It was the only evidence of her I was allowed.” Kakashi eye-smiled, ruffling his hair.

“Can we… can we please go see this bunker?” Naruto pleaded, eyes wet. “Please?”

Kakashi sighed and was about to say that he needed the Fire-Shadow’s permission to change the mission parameters, but then Naruto’s pleading gaze was suddenly joined by Hinata’s puppy-dog eyes, and Sasuke’s steely glare which was tempered with a light blush. He sighed again instead. “Oh, very well… but only after we’re done with the last member of this Ninja Swordsmen rip-off.”

“Believe it!” Naruto screamed, hopping in joy. “And I know just where their camp is, too! I’ll be done with him in five minutes, believe it!”

He then vanished in a swirl of leaves.

“I’ll go make sure the dead-last doesn’t destroy the forest.” Sasuke sighed, but vanished in a swirl of leaves as well.

“Well, we’d best get going too.” Kakashi said, eye-smiling.

Hinata stopped him short by bowing in front of him. “Thank you, sir.” She said, before vanishing in a swirl of leaves.

Kakashi, left alone in the clearing, smiled, before deciding to clean up after his students.

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“This… this is the worst thing she could have done!”

Hiruzen was angry. Scratch that, no, he was furious. He had trusted her. He had made her promise to put her team ahead of other priorities, to always think of them before her flawed perception of the world!

But she hadn’t. Her foolhardy mannerisms had today cost him a member of his ninja force. How was he going to face the Council now? Especially considering…

He sighed, putting his head in his hands. He wasn’t worried about losing political clout, no. He was ashamed that, in spite of numerous warnings from the council about Anko’s mental state, he gave her a responsibility of a Genin team anyway. And now…

He absently reached for the intercom, pressing the button and speaking wearily. “Send a hawk to Team 7. Ask them to drop their current mission and travel to Wave Country immediately. They are to assist Team 8 on their mission and ensure the lives of the remaining two Genin. Along with the letter, send in a specialized corpse stasis scroll … for the body of a Genin.”

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 Meanwhile, things were not going very well for Team 8.

Sakura bites her lip as she looks into the mist worriedly and with tear-clouded eyes, which she angrily wipes away in order to focus. Shino is already gone but Kiba… he is still alive… she needs to focus.

Zabuza had killed … one of them already, and it will be cold day in hell when she allows his accomplice to kill her other one too.

Whatever it takes…

‘I never ask anything of you.’ She begs, more tears brimming over her eyes. ‘But please… give me strength to protect them.’

‘It never was my prerogative not to.’ Inner Sakura mentally responds. ‘You’ve never even allowed me access to your chakra. I don’t know how or why I was created… but I will always help you first. We won’t become like Yakumo and… whatever it is the other her has become. We will achieve true synchronicity. All you had to do was ask.’

‘Then let’s do it.’ Sakura breathes, and she forms the hand-signs for a jutsu she’s only just learnt, intent on doing something. “Illusory Art: Great Cherry Blossom!”

The ground shakes as a spectral version of her own self emerges from nothingness. The projection looks exactly like her, not a hair out of place, except for the monochromatic color scheme and an intricate sealing matrix on her forehead.

“Let’s go!” Sakura roars, and her gigantic copy is already in the air, fist poised back for a punch as she descends from her lunge onto a dome of ice mirrors. The objects in question have little chance against such raw strength and are abruptly shattered.

For as long as she remembered, Inner Sakura had always been there for her. It was she who she spoke the most to, who she went to for advice. It was also she who consoled her when she found out she was adopted. Was it not strange, to know that a single decision – based on her hair color, to boot – had changed her life so? It was only a week later that she had met her… her cousin and learned of her true heritage.

It was like the universe was intent on showering her with bombshells.

While Inner Sakura was dishing out some very external damage, Sakura herself broke into a run towards what was moments ago the center of the dome, towards two prone bodies.

“Kiba!” she calls out, frantic in her worry. She kneels down next to the needle ridden body of her last remaining teammate and goes shock still.

There is a thick ice needle buried deep in his eye-socket.

Chapter End Notes

Let me begin with a question. How did Team 7 survive the Wave arc?
Answer: Kakashi and Naruto.

Without the Kyuubi's chakra, Narita would have quickly followed Sasuke into unconsciousness. And without Kakashi's Sharingan, defeating Zabuza would be a pain. The guy is a master of 'Silent Killing'. He became a member of the Shinobigatana Shinchinin Shu for a reason. In my opinion, it was his bad luck that led him to be defeated so soundly.

Let's examine the team on this mission. Sakura, besides the Kurama Clan Kekkei Genkai (which will be explained later), has no notable abilities. Shino only has his Kikaichu and one or two clan jutsu which would be able to point out Zabuza, but he's a Genin while his opponent is a Jonin. And Kiba is loud and brash like canon Naruto, but isn't shown to be as tactful - he's a leap in and attack kind of shinobi.

Coupled with Anko, they're all bound to fail.
“This… is the place?”

Naruto arched his eyebrow, bemused. Smack dab in the center of Kanashii Lake was a small isle, barely enough for a hundred people to stand uncomfortably. Just sand, and… nothing else of note.

“There must be something hidden around here.” Kakashi mused, Copy-Wheel Eye uncovered and staring every which way. “The denizens of the Hidden Whirlpool village specialized in sealing the way we specialize in teamwork. Couple that with their almost innate ingenuity, and you have a scary monster of a village on your hands.”

“But this isn’t the site of their former village.” Sasuke pointed out. “For all we know, those missing-ninjas had wrong information.”

“There!” came the triumphant cry of Hinata, and all eyes fell on her as she jogged to a cluster of rocks on the North side of the island. She bent and picked the one that was northernmost and turned it over. Sure enough, there was a sealing matrix on the flat underside. “There are three other clusters. Pick the westernmost of the western, and so on. They all have matrixes underneath.”

Naruto quickly made two clones and they used the **Body Flicker** to accomplish just that, returning almost in the same second due to their enthusiasm. “Here!”

Kakashi examined them with a critical eye. “These look nothing like I’ve ever seen… except these parts.” He said, finger hovering over a section of the matrix that looked like the spiral every Leaf ninja wore on their clothing. “This is a **Recognition Matrix**. In complex seals, chakra is not enough to initiate the reaction between all the different elements; blood is usually required since it carries a bit of a chakra organ’s latent energy. This particular matrix ensures that unless the blood of the person who activates it carries the genetic marker the creator emphasized, the seal won’t work.”

“That’s… so awesome.” Naruto proclaimed, stars in his eyes. “My ancestors were awesome, believe it!”

“What about the other part you recognize, sir?” Hinata asked, bringing Naruto back down to earth.

Their teacher’s eye narrowed slightly as his finger moved to hover over a square like mish mash of symbols above the spiral. “The second one is a **Sequential Activator**. When one seal is separated into parts, there is **always** a specific order to activate them. Unless these four are activated in the correct order, the seal will collapse onto itself and render the sequence unusable.”

Naruto’s eyes dulled a bit. “But… we don’t know the correct order…”

“Wrong.” Sasuke spoke, much to the surprise of the other three. “We do know. Think, you idiot. If the Hidden Whirlpool village were to make a secret password of sorts of anything that their future descendants would have to grasp, what would they use?”

“It would have to be something they had easy access to, for one.” Hinata mused. “Their descendants, in this case Naruto, would have to know of it and relate it enough to the Hidden Whirlpool to actually form the mental connection between the two, and use it.”
“Then, if their descendant weren’t smart enough, they would still wish their knowledge shared. Thus, it would have to be simple enough to grasp.” Kakashi pointed out.

Naruto’s eyes narrowed at his teammates, but then they widened. “But... that’s too obvious! They would never make it so easy... would they?”

“Only one way to find out.” Kakashi sighed.

Naruto pursed his lips but nodded. Creating another clone, which accepted the one from Hinata, the clones and original made their way to the approximate center of the isle. They all then turned their backs to their respective implied cardinal directions. Naruto bit his thumb and activated them: South, West, North, and East, then each one of them channeled some chakra.

The results were instantaneous. The four flat rocks began to hum with energy, then lifted off their hands and hovered around each other in the air. The seal work on them glowed, before lifting from the stones in front of their very eyes. The rocks dived uselessly into the sand below as the four different seals began to rework themselves mid-air.

“It’s... beautiful...” Hinata murmured, staring at the event with her All-Seeing White Eyes still activated.

“So, the answer really was the Uzumaki Spiral.” Kakashi noted. “Good work, you three.”

The seal stopped flowing by the time he finished his last word and began to twist. Before their very eyes, a black vortex appeared mid-air, the diameter of, approximately, seven feet or so. It stabilized and began to hum.

“I think we’re supposed to walk through.” Naruto said, eyes wide. “I sure know what I’m going to study next...”

“Well... let’s not delay the inevitable.” Kakashi ventured, and gently nudged Naruto. “I think it’s best we hold hands. I’ve never seen anything like this, but I think that if anyone were to try and step in without being in contact with you... bad things may happen.”

Naruto gulped, but took his teacher’s and Hinata’s hands, the latter of whose cheeks dusted with pink at the contact. When Sasuke took her other hand, her blush deepened.

And as one, they walked through the portal, which collapsed upon itself as soon as they were through. The four now-seal-less stones exploded in a shower of dust.

The members of Team 7 walk into a simple room. Naruto looks around, and is surprised to see a room full of shelves, stocked to the brim with... nothing.

The shelves are empty.

“Well, it looks like I wasn’t the first Uzumaki here, believe it.” Naruto points out, sighing dejectedly. “I should have known. I couldn’t possibly have been the only Uzumaki to survive. There must have been others, perhaps even someone who knew about this place.”

“It doesn’t add up.” Sasuke pointed out, activating his Copy-Wheel Eyes to check for illusions. “If someone did pillage this vault, why were the ‘keys’, the stones we found, back in what looks like a logical puzzle at all? Would they not be broken apart or whatever? Why would someone go through the effort of placing them back in the puzzle if there’s nothing to protect?”

“To mislead us?” Naruto asked dubiously. “This could be a trap... you know, maybe this wasn’t
such a smart idea after all.”

“There’s another seal under the center tile.” Hinata speaks up, and then frowns. “And the rest of these tiles are hiding a lot of spikes. Metal spikes with an ejection mechanism.”

“A trap, indeed.” Kakashi notes. “But is it for everyone indiscriminately, or only for those who aren’t of Uzumaki blood?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Naruto teases, but walks to the center square tile. It is not unique or distinguishable in any way other than a small chip on its top-right corner and the absence of grouting around it. Naruto gingerly picks it up and turns it around – sure enough, there is a similar seal on this one, however, it looks more complete. He sighs before he bites his thumb hard enough to draw blood and quickly smears it on the ceramic before it can heal.

For a second or two, nothing happens to the tense four shinobi. Then, there is a soft shimmering sound, before a plinth rises from the ground in front of Naruto with a completely different seal engraved on it.

“This… is surprising.” Kakashi observes, and edges closer. “I’m not entirely sure what this one is supposed to do.”

“It’s alright to not know something once in a while, sensei.” Hinata quietly notes.

“No, it’s just that… the fourth learned all he knew about seals from his wife – a member of the royal family from the Hidden Whirlpool. Indirectly, I learned from one of the best sources for sealing knowledge that remained in the world.” Kakashi mutters, his other hand involuntarily reaching up and exposing his implanted Copy-Wheel Eye. “I should know what this does. I can’t recognize a single part of it.”

“Aren’t there different sealing languages?” Naruto points out, leaning closer. “Maybe it’s a different dialect from the same village…”

The four shinobi stare at the seal.

“Just activate it already.” Sasuke grouses, clearly struggling with anticipation. Hinata giggles at the not-pout the Uchiha has painstakingly practiced and perfected in order not to appear his age.

“Well… here goes nothing.” Naruto mutters, and bites his thumb, pressing it to the seal before channeling some chakra.

A hum began to sound in the room as the bookcases began to move, sinking into the floor to reveal strange devices attached to their tops. The seal shimmers before the stone disperses into a mist-like state.

“If you are watching this, then you have proven yourself to be of Uzumaki blood.”

The four shinobi will vehemently deny starting and hurling kunai into the mist to anyone who would ask them. As if the disturbance is a signal, an image begins to materialize therein, clearly being projected from the devices. It is that of a map of the planet, with a white circle being depicted somewhere approximately in the middle of Kaijuu Ocean.

“Hear and heed our warning. A great threat approaches the shinobi way of life. Our attempts at unravelling this mystery have led several of our key researchers to insanity. The marker will lead you to our base. This is all we can do, because the corruption… has led us to make some poor choices. The subterfuge mission into the Hidden Stone and the assault on the Hidden Cloud outpost … both
are not even the tip of the iceberg. Several of our operations after coming into contact with Object Six-Paths has led to... subverted mental functions. A few of us have been able to free ourselves from this influence, and have decided to bring down all of the barriers surrounding our village so that the invasion staged against us can be effective. Unfortunately we have been unable to prevent one of our own from sending a message to the Hidden Leaf, although we must express gratitude up to whichever higher power watches over us that the message was sent through a summons and not a human – denizens of the summoning realm have shown extreme levels of resistance to whatever is trying to take over us.”

Team 7 remained in shocked silence while the image changed to show a... strange object. It was predominantly purple and was apparently an overturned cone with smoothed over edges levitating above a sphere. Both had glowing white lines running all over the surface.

“Object Six-Paths is named as such because it exhibits a strange phenomenon. It seems to convert chakra into a strange form of energy that greatly revitalizes any shinobi that attempt to draw it in via meditation, although they lose their chakra capacity over long periods of time. On examining the cavern that we extracted it from, we have noted signs of strange mechanical marvels, perhaps from far in the past. This leads us to believe that this planet, before even the arrival of the mythical Sage of Six Paths, was inhabited by sentient, intelligent life. The technology is far too damaged with age to directly use, although we have attempted to reverse engineer or study certain pieces that do not seem to be a part of something larger. All our techniques and advancements, even our secondary sealing dialect, come from this very object. It has been under our scopes for as long as our village has stood, almost, give or take a year. At one point, we believe that we had begun to realize that the controlling phenomenon, which we’ve termed ‘indoctrination’, had been asserting its control, but were physically and mentally incapable of stopping. No chakra-user was free from its thrall, although civilians show a token resistance. We caution any who attempt to study this artifact and would warn them that the influence can spread from person to person if an infected person’s chakra is dispersed in close proximity to another via techniques or cleansing meditation.”

A humming sound began to make itself known after the last word, and the image began to destabilize.

“It’s going to blow!” Hinata shouts, All-Seeing White Eyes active. “There is an unstable chakra buildup directly above us!”

“Hold on to me.” Kakashi commands, hands flying through hand-signs as he speaks. His three Genin quickly latch on to his as the wordless jutsu activates and they sink into the ground. Kakashi wades a few feet away before channeling chakra to his feet and shooting upwards from the ground just as a massive tremor shakes the ground around them.

Naruto quickly holds onto his team with Chakra Strings as he uses the Fire Thruster Technique to slow their fall back onto the surface. They seem to be on water, and each member of the team manages to use the Water Walking Technique to stay afloat in spite of their current feelings on what just transpired.

“That... was unreal.” Naruto breathes. “What was that?”

“We need to report this to the Fire-Shadow.” Kakashi pants. “The reason behind the Hidden Whirlpool’s actions has been long sought after by all the nations, even the ones they have wronged. If that projection is to be believed, they were not operating with free will. This, alone, changes a lot of conclusions we had previously drawn. If we can get a Yamanaka to extract the memory and project it with their Memory Actualization Jutsu, we could help ease many still hot tempers and finally get a working treaty with the Cloud and Stone villages!”
“I think that will have to wait.” Hinata whispers, then points to a rapidly approaching dot in the sky. “We have a messenger bird heading for us.”

The poor bird alights on Sasuke’s shoulder with exhausted movements. Clearly, the avian has been tracking their signature for a long while and was perhaps confused due to them being seemingly underground in the middle of a lake.

“It’s a Mission Request.” Kakashi notes. “This isn’t the right time- … oh.”

“What is it, sir?” Naruto asks. The emotions flickering in his teacher’s eyes were far more than he was used to. Perhaps it was because he had finally found out exactly what happened to an important person in his life. And it isn’t to say the revealed circumstances were normal at all…

“It’s Team 8.” Their teacher says, quickly pulling out a pen form his pocket and scribbling something on it, then rolling it up quickly and handing it back to the bird, which took off tiredly. “They’ve encountered problems on their mission due to misinformation from the client.” He finally raises his eyes and looks at Naruto. “They have faced some injuries as well. We have to hurry.”

“Right.” Naruto replies, immediately breaking into action. History be damned – his friends were living here and now. He quickly creates two Shadow Clones who latch onto a determined looking Hinata and Sasuke, while he himself jumps onto his teacher’s back. Naruto pays no heed to the exceedingly and uncharacteristically stiff posture of the man underneath and sends a flare of fire natured chakra to his feet and through the conductive soles of his sandals that erupt in thrusters, and along with his clones, he shoots into the air. Compressed pulses of negligible amounts of chakra add in the Air Propulsion Technique in the mix, which causes the entirety of Team 7 to rocket forwards at speeds that nearly break the sound barrier.

After hitting land and ascertaining their position, they swerve to the left and head straight for the land of waves. While chakra intensive, the speeds Naruto carries them at ensures that they will be there quickly. As for he himself, a simple Soldier Pill will replenish his reserves enough that he and take part in a skirmish or two before collapsing. As they found out through experimentation after their ANBU grade poison-resistance injections.

Soon enough, Kakashi spots the bridge he was informed about through the Mission Scroll and gestures Naruto to descend. Eager to do so, the all the blondes pivot and slowly reduce the chakra usage by their active techniques, also applying the Air Propulsion Technique with increasing force in the direction they’re falling to slow down. They touch down without a sound and observe the battlefield they find themselves in.

Naruto’s eyes first search for Shino. Instead of him, however, he spots Team 8’s captain, Anko, kneeling by the body of – as identified by Archie – Zabuza Momochi, a member of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist. The woman isn’t looking so great, however, as it seems she was bandaging the stump of what was once her left shoulder.

Forgetting everything else, his eyes widen, and then his visual search turns frantic. He spots Sakura and runs towards her. She’s kneeling next to the prone form of Kiba, surrounded by puddles of water. In front of her is another body, which looks unrecognizable as it is crushed to a pulp.

“Sakura!” Naruto yells, running with all the strength he can muster. He’s next to her in less than a second. He notices she is crying, and attributes it to the bloodshed right in front of her. Amongst the graduates this year, it is no secret that maybe she was the weakest – when it comes to physical or mental strength. The only thing that had allowed her to pass was her exemplary knowledge. The rest was barely acceptable. He reaches out and touches her shoulder, but the girl does not stop sobbing. “Saku... ra”
The word is whispered out, for he notes that Kiba isn’t breathing.

The leftover energy from Naruto’s knees give out. Kiba and he weren’t the best of friends, but they were pretty darn close to be. They had skipped classes together, they’d eaten together, played with Aka-

“Sakura.” He speaks, voice subdued. “Where’s Akamaru?”

Th girl gasps, finally registering outside stimuli, and looks around desperately. Both their gazes land on a white mass a few meters away, but both of them cannot find the strength in their bodies to stand. 

Naruto doesn’t react when Hinata reaches down to lift Akamaru in her arms. She brings him to them, and Naruto uses the **Mystical Palm Jutsu** to heal the cuts and scrapes he can see, along with any possible internal injuries. “He’ll be okay.” Naruto says, but his voice lacks energy. He doesn’t flinch when a hand lands on his shoulder, recognizing Sasuke’s hand.

“Sakura.” Hinata whispers, her tearful eyes catching the other girl’s. “Where is Shino?”

The other girl doesn’t respond.

On the opposite end of the bridge, Kakashi is eyeing Anko bandaging her injury with an expressionless visage. The other Jonin, even though she registers his presence, doesn’t react. She stands shakily on her bleeding legs and begins to limp towards her Genin.

Kakashi suddenly appears in her path.

“Move aside, Kakashi.” She grunts and waits.

The man doesn’t move.

“Dammit, Kakashi, move aside!” she demands, much louder this time. “I need to check up on Sakura and Kiba!”

“Kiba is dead, Anko.” Kakashi says, and his voice holds no tone. While he personally held no relations with the dead Genin, the loss of life from his village – the loss of a life of a ninja barely **two months** in service, bites him hard.

The woman stills. “No…”

“Yes.” Kakashi disagrees. “And do you know whose fault it is?”

She is the silent one this time.

“I read the details from the Fire-Shadow.” The man extrapolates. “You should have turned back when you faced the demon brothers. You could have still turned back when the Aburame heir passed on. You could have-”

“Fuck you, Kakashi!” Anko screams, watery eyes filled with rage. “You don’t know what exactly happened! You don’t know them, or their dreams, or their drive!”

“Their dreams are dead, Anko!” Kakashi snarls, losing all stoicism. “The sparks of their drive did not even catch fire! Don’t stand there and speak as if you are blameless for this!”

“I’m not guiltless, you bastard!” Anko screams, and Kakashi notes that the curse seal is unravelling the tiniest bit, showing her fight against it even now. “I am the one who should have taken them back regardless of their feelings about it. But you don’t get to stand there and lecture me when I’m-“
“Do I get to, then?”

The quiet voice takes the two Jonin by surprise, and they both turn their gazes to see the Genin assembled a few steps away. Sakura is still sobbing, her frame shaking almost dangerously with every hiccup. Hinata, crying quietly, has her hand wrapped around her shoulder. Sasuke is carrying Kiba in a fireman’s carry over his right shoulder, and Naruto, on the female ninja’s other side, is cradling Akamaru with his hands.

“Wh- what?” Anko gasps out.

Naruto eyes her with emotionless eyes, and hands Akamaru over to Sakura, who cradles the canine as if her life depends on it, before advancing on Anko. “Sakura, Kiba and… and Shino were under your command. Your command. They haven’t even been in the field for two months. They don’t know what’s best for themselves. It’s your duty to ensure they stay within the realm of safety while braving the fine line that lies between the two zones.”

Anko stopped short. “You-”

“Shinobi die on missions – this is true.” Naruto says. “But they die for a reason. A valid reason. The only reason I see for Kiba’s and Shino’s deaths… is the two of you.”

He hears Hinata gasp and Sakura abruptly stop sobbing, but doesn’t pause. “The two of you didn’t deserve them on your team. They had hopes, dreams, talent, drive… and best of all, they had kind hearts. You.” he turns, and points to Sakura, who is staring at him with wide eyes. “You never made the effort to be a good ninja. I’ll cut my heart out if the opposite is true. You and your foolish delusions about shinobi life-“

“Naruto!” Hinata cautions, but her teammate doesn’t stop.

“-your worthless dreams of molesting Sasuke along with that bitch friend of yours-“

“Naruto, that’s enough.” Kakashi says, but his student still doesn’t stop.

“-never, ever, took being a ninja seriously. If you had, then today…” he pauses, and breathes shakily. Then, he takes another breath, to steel his resolve. “You were useless. You are useless. You will always be use-“

He abruptly stops. Aware of a stinging sensation on his cheeks, he shakily reaches up with a palm to touch the spot, then turns finds himself gazing into the eyes of his female teammate.

“Hinata…”

“Don’t.” she says, and her voice is shaky. “Don’t bury your emotions behind your Mental Palace, Naruto.” Her hands grip his shoulders. “Let them out.”

“I- I can’t-“

“I know you know, Naruto.” Hinata whispers. But in the silent mist that surround them, she knows well and good that her voice carries to all the ears. “I know you played blind to him for a reason. I know you know, and I know it must hurt.”

“But-“

“She’s right.” Another voice speaks, and Naruto turns the slightest bit to look at Sasuke. His eyes are not emotionless, this time. They are full of uncharacteristic compassion. “I didn’t have a fancy
technique to do it, but I tried to dam everything in. And you know what that made me. The only reason I’m better is… because of you.” He grips Naruto’s upper arms firmly. “Don’t follow the path you told me not to take.”

Naruto’s eyes shift from one to another, before he shakily nods and closes his eyes.

A second later, it’s like a switch is flipped, and his tears begin to flow. He collapses onto the unforgiving ground, taking his teammates into a group hug with him.

The cloudy sky finally breaks, and heaven weeps for its children.

Chapter End Notes

Here we see two major plot points to this story - the finding of a Reaper artifact and Shino's death.

If you readers are familiar with the Object Rho mission in Mass Effect 2, they will know the significance of the first. I won’t say much else.

The second was necessary to mold Naruto into the Shinobi I wish to portray him as. How will this effect him? Continue reading to find out.
Comatose

Team 7 approaches the Hidden Leaf with a solemn air. The weather, seemingly reflecting their mood, is heavily cloudy and slightly windy. Behind them, a one-armed Anko is carrying an exhausted Sakura over her shoulder.

“Oh hey, sir … um… where is the… oh.” Izumo stammers.

Beside him, Kotetsu nudges him angrily and shoots the group a sympathetic look. “Um… your mission scroll, please.”

Kakashi pulls two scrolls from a pouch, one for his own team and one for Anko’s, and hands it over. “Teams 7 and… 8 … reporting in from a C-rank and a B-rank mission.” He states, while his single exposed eye scans the orange book held in his other hand.

“Alright. The… uh… the Fire-Shadow has ordered your presence at the earliest.” The Chuunin nods, and hands the scrolls over. “I suggest you lot make your way over promptly so that Anko can go ahead and get medical attention later.”

Kakashi barely nods and turns in the direction of the shinobi following him. “Alright, then. Body Flicker to the Fire-Shadow’s office in thirty seconds.” He says, and proceeds to immediately do the same.

“He’s probably gone ahead to ensure we’re alone.” Sasuke needlessly points out. While the boy had never been particularly attached to anyone in this year’s graduates save for, dubiously, Naruto, his one-month training and the subsequent bonding has given him a new appreciation for human life. His brother did after all, extinguish so many lives that fateful night, and he had sworn not to be like him.

“There’s no need to try to fill the silence,” Naruto mutters while running his free hand through his hair. He’s done that a lot on the way back, he mentally notes. “You never were one quite up for it.”

“Neither were you for being silent.” Hinata, quiet but bold, points out.

Naruto doesn’t reply but looks at Akamaru instead, who pawed his way out of Sakura’s shaky grasp and into Naruto’s firm one long before they left for the Leaf. The canine is fast asleep, and Naruto can still feel the wet spots the dog’s tears made on his clothing. Before this, he was not even aware dogs could cry.

Five seconds more. Would Shibi and Kiba’s mom be in the room? It was standard procedure when a ninja is lost on a mission and the remaining team members report back in-

His world blurs and he knew he was being Body Flickered somewhere. How rude.

When the world regained some semblance of substance, his stomach lurches funnily when his eyes land on the clearly resigned but distraught forms of Shibi and … whatever Kiba’s mom’s name was. The Inazuka were more expressive, and thus he was clearly able to see her expression. Her form did not waver, remarkably, and she did show much more control on her emotions that he would have expected from a mother having lost her son. But then he remembers that she is a clan head, in front of the Fire-Shadow and another clan head. The time for true grieving would come later, much as the Aburame seemed to be feeling. Naruto was very familiar with Shibi, who was much more of a tentative uncle figure in his life than a simple parent-of-a-friend. If Aburame funerals were not so
private as he was previously informed of, he would have begged to attend.

“Team 8.” The Fire-Shadow speaks, tone heavy with… something. It isn’t quite obvious. Either that or Naruto’s mind still is not on track. “Since you have already sent in a report, a full debriefing is not necessary. However, I will ask you to hand over the bodies of Shino Aburame and Kiba Inazuka to their rightful holders, and then recount of their passing.”

Anko swallows heavily but reluctantly loosens her hold on the last surviving member of her team. Sakura, even in her sleep, seems to have a tight hold on her neck, which makes Naruto think Anko might be being lightly choked.

Good.

She reaches her only hand into her jacket and pulls out two scrolls, and hands each to the two parents in the room. Kiba’s mom pulls at it harshly, and levels a heated glare at Anko. A small part of Naruto feels vindication at the action, especially when Anko refuses to meet her gaze. Come to think of it, the matriarch also seems to be glaring at the Fire-Shadow in equal measure. Shibi accepts it with apparent calm. In spite of the fact that he now seems to be the only remaining member of his family, he does not reveal any emotions. Naruto’s heart reached out for the man, and he wishes he could stand next to him. Aburame were not much for show, and yet the young boy knew that the older man would find some much-needed comfort in the gesture.

“Qui- … Shino died by being sliced up into many pieces with a long chain made of throwing-stars that the Demon Brothers Gozu and Meizu wield in unison. He was the target of an ambush.” Anko speaks, throwing the fact around with the tact of a wrecking ball. Naruto feels his fist clenching but relaxes it when Akamaru stiffens in his other arm. The dog yawns and wakes, then whines and licks Naruto’s face. Kiba’s mom sees this, but makes no move to approach them, something that confuses the victim of dog-licks.

“I see.” Shibi speaks, then tilts his head towards Naruto. “I wish to speak with you.”

Naruto smiles sadly. “I’ll be there.”

Shibi nods after a long gaze and vanishes in a swirl of leaves.

Anko turns to Kiba’s mother, and makes to speak, only to be halted by a raised hand. “Save it. I’ve heard it all from Kakashi’s report.” She levels a frosty glare, only further enhanced by tearful eyes, on the woman in front of her. “When Hana told me that you were going to be a team captain, I was the first to protest. While I did not doubt your combat skills, I doubted your mentality and your teaching ability. My concerns… were correct.” She takes a deep breath before continuing. “Hana wants to speak to you.”

Anko doesn’t respond.

“And you, brat.” She barks, her eyes moving to Naruto’s form. “I’ll be taking Akamaru.”

The dog in question whines pitifully and snuggles closer to Naruto. The woman in front of him raises an eyebrow.

Naruto feels the ninja-dog shivering against his side. “He will not be going anywhere.”

Kiba’s mother raises another eyebrow. “Akamaru is a member of the Inazuka clan. As the clan head—“

“Akamaru is capable of self-determination.” Naruto cuts her off, and levels a look at her. “He will be
where he wants to be.”

“You’re overstepping your rights, brat.” She growls. “As a Jonin of the Leaf, I’m ordering you to hand over my clan member.”

“Tsume.” Hiruzen interrupts, and when the woman swiftly turns to him, his face is impassive. “I may have made a wrong decision regarding your family, but I am still your leader. Go home.”

The now-named Inazuka clanswoman glares at everyone in the room before vanishing in a swirl of leaves.

The oldest in the room exhales a deep sigh. He looks up after a long pause. “Jonin Mitarashi. You are hereby suspended from your post in favor of a probationary status as Tokubetsu Jonin. You will submit yourself for psychological evaluation after one week. If you are found capable of continuing your career, you will be restricted to C-rank missions and below for the duration of your probation. Dismissed.”

Anko simply vanishes in a swirl of leaves after the last word leaves the Fire-Shadow’s lips, taking Sakura’s still unconscious form with her. Naruto stares at the spot feeling… vacant; the earlier feeling of righteous anger having fled the near instant he felt it. He just barely suppresses the urge to gnash his teeth when he recalls that the Archivist refused to bear this burden of sadness as well.

‘If I keep dealing with your emotions, a day will come when I do not exist, and you will be left with the most crippling of emotional pains when you must do it on your own.’ He had said. ‘You cannot depend on me to do so much. Being reliant on a figment of your imagination, in essence, is actually a sign of several mental disorders. And how do you feel, being reliant on someone else to do what you should be doing in the first place? Categorizing your mind is different… and dealing with emotions is too vital a part of growth.’

“Team 7.” The Fire-Shadow continues then, tone much lighter. “I recognize that you have dealt with much today, but I will ask you to convey in what Captain Kakashi has described in his written report.”

The Genin exchange a glance, and Naruto sighs when it is obvious ho they want to speak for them. “Our mission was to eradicate a group of bandits situated near the Land of Tea.” He began, eyes focused on the floor. “It went without a hitch, even though our opponents were led by five individuals known as the ‘Five String-weavers of the Sands’, a group comprised of five Jonin-level male shinobi from the Village hidden in the Sands. No, the irregularity presented itself when I used my Palace Invasion Technique to scan their minds for the reason why they had allied with civilian bandits and seemed to be teaching them the basics of Shinobi life.”

Naruto breaks off a bit to cough, but it is simply a front to analyze the expression of his leader. As one would expect of a leader harshly reminded of the reality of his post, Hiruzen’s face is completely closed off, save for the obvious, near-palpable, aura of tiredness that surrounds him. Well, bombshell is a go.

“After dealing with them, I used my Palace Invasion Technique to analyze their recent memories. I discovered several things of import.” He continues, and raises his fingers to tick them off. “They were hired by Orochimaru of the Three Legendary Losers. They were hired for the purpose of scouting the area for a mythical trove of Uzumaki knowledge, which we ended up uncovering. And finally, and perhaps the more immediately pertinent, is that he is the leader of the up-and coming Village Hidden in the Sound.”

There is a short pause before Hiruzen speaks next, and his shoulders look a little more and a little less
“Hanzo the Salamander ‘awarded’ them the title when they managed to outlast his initial combat barrage by displaying exemplary teamwork, thus getting his notice. I do not see how that makes them anything other than losers. He spared their lives because they amused him.” Is Naruto’s obvious reply.

“Quite.” Hiruzen remarks, the smallest of smirks on his lips. “And your Palace Invasion Technique?”

“I can’t claim to be an expert, sir,” Kakashi interrupts, “but I believe it to be a technique similar to the Yamanaka Clan’s own. From what Naruto has told me, it is something quite similar.”

“Hmm… continue, Genin Uzumaki.”

“After we gathered the approximate location, I personally requested Captain Kakashi to investigate. We had to solve a simple sealing array to gain entrance, but we learned that the actions that led to the war on the Hidden Whirlpool were, in fact, involuntary. They were primarily decided by an object with a capability to somewhat control the minds of chakra-users. I also have the location of said object, complete with the warning not to approach. One notable fact, however is that members of the Summoning Realm are immune to its thrall.”

Hiruzen seemingly closes his eyes in thought. “Before we mount a mission on this … Object Six-Paths, was it? … yes, before that, I will work together with our intelligence division to break down this mystery best we can. When we are ready, we will assign Team 7 on this mission, along with a few additions. Are there any objections?”

“No sir.” All four ninja speak at once.

Hiruzen allows a small smile to grace his features. “Very well. Due to the complications that have arisen on this mission, I hereby grant Team 7 a one-week paid leave. Collect your checks from the receptionist. Dismissed.”

Team 7 bows as one and the Genin began to shuffle out.

“Would you like us to join you for dinner, Naruto?” Hinata asks, slightly hesitant. Sasuke makes no outward motion but his eyes do gaze at his male teammate from the corner of his eyes.

“Maybe later.” Naruto shrugs. “I think I’ll just head home and sleep now.”

“Remember, Naruto, don’t hold it all in.” Hinata advises to Naruto’s back as he leaps on a nearby windowsill. “It will only harm you, in time.”

Naruto looks back at her, nods, and Body Flickers away.

“Do you think he will be okay?” Hinata asks Sasuke, gazing the way Naruto went and biting her lip. Sasuke sighs. “I don’t know.”

***
Anko blurs into visibility at her destination. She contemplates whether or not to wake up her charge, and then simply sighs and knocks on the door.

“Coming!” chirps a rather high-pitched voice, and Anko arches an eyebrow. That isn’t the voice of Mebuki Haruno at all.

The door opens and standing on the other side is a very familiar blonde. After all, her team did butt heads with Team 10 several times over their short tenure…

Ino Yamanaka’s eyes widen when they take in the state of the two of them. “Miss Anko! Oh dear, come in!” she yells.

Anko hesitates but ends up going in anyway. There is just something about Yamanaka eyes… one just can’t say no to them. “Thanks girlie, I’m just here to drop off Sakura and then I’ll be on my-“

“Sakura!”

Oh great; the real Mebuki. That was a conversation Anko was hoping to avoid…

“What in blazes happened?” thundered the voice of Kizashi Haruno. “You swore you would do your best to protect her!”

Anko says nothing at the moment, opting to lay her Genin on the couch before speaking.

“What in blazes happened?” Ino tries again, and Anko cannot stop herself from flinching. Oh well, it doesn’t look like she can continue on-field duty for any longer…

She gently sets Sakura down, and barely draws her hand back before the girl’s mother is on her, hands checking for temperature first, and eyes roving every which way to ensure her daughter was unharmed.

“She’s fine.” Anko says bluntly. “It’s just a simple case of chakra exhaustion.”

The father opens his mouth, but Ino speaks before he does. “She means she’s used too much energy and needs to rest to regain it. She’ll be weak for a few days but otherwise totally fine.”

Ah, so the civvies didn’t know much. That’s… stupid, frankly. If Sakura would have been her daughter…

Anko cannot stop herself from scoffing. If Sakura were her daughter, it would just have meant an even earlier grave.

“Please tell us what happened!” Mebuki requests, but it sounds more like a demand, and Anko sighs as she eyes a chair. This would take a long, long time, and the faster she finished it the faster she could get to the bar.

***

Sasuke enters his house with a call of “I’m home!” Before, just after… that night, every time he involuntarily called out these words, it would send pangs of red hot pain through where he thought his heart is. Trying to break the habit had not turned out to be possible either.
He sighs as he sets his sword down. So many things had changed since the formation of Team 7. The academy seemed like a whole other life, an idyllic one. Sometimes he finds himself wishing-

“Well, come on in then, boy! You’re wasting my time!”

Sasuke’s eyes widen, and his hands blur into hand-signs for the **Grand Fireball Technique**. He primes his chakra and exhales a huge fireball right there in the middle of his house.

Activating his Copy-Wheel Eye, Sasuke leaps onto the ceiling, grabbing his sword’s sheath on the way and holding it firmly in his left hand. Who could have possibly gotten in his house? There normally is a constant Anbu guard around his compound to protect the clan library, and the while the Uchiha were not as good with seals as Naruto’s clan supposedly was, they were no slouches either. The seal work throughout the compound is very high level, and would only let in direct blood-relatives!

When the smoke dissipates, he almost drops his sword.

There is a dome of wood somehow sprouting from his floor. A perfect hemisphere.

“Honestly, the gall! Attacking your elderly is not very nice, boy!”

The dome slowly segments itself away to reveal an aged woman. Her garb doesn’t attract her attention, nor do her hands, which are clasped in a Snake hand-sign. What does get his notice is her face, which he instantly recognizes.

“… Grandma…?”

***

“The sky is crying.”

Hinata does not even look away from the light drizzle that seems to fall from the sky. It really did look like the heavens were crying. She absently traced the contours of the darker clouds with her eyes as she wondered if they were crying for the friends she lost or someone else, somewhere far away. “I am glad to see you are losing your pomp, sister.” She says, and smiles a sad smile. “You did not knock.”

There is no answer for a few seconds, but she is not truly focused there. Instead, her attention is only attracted when there is a rustling of fabric next to her due to Hanabi’s approach. “Are you well?” she asks instead, and that seems to open the floodgates.

Hinata turns to her and weeps. After joining Team 7, she never let herself show such weakness even to herself in private.

Hanabi is visibly disturbed at this turn of events. After her sister’s current winning streak amongst the clan, she had been building up a certain image – one that did not include a vulnerable, crying mess. “What is wrong, sister?”

“Everything.” Hinata sobs, quiet but heart wrenching. The younger sister sheds a few tears of her own at the pained sounds. “What use is all my power if I can’t even protect those I love?!”
Hanabi had no answer to that. She simply didn’t know the pain of losing someone to comment, and it was clear one of her sister’s friends have met the Death God. Finding it was not her place to any anything, she simply settled in for a night of offering silent comfort.

In another room of the compound, Hiashi deactivates his Eye-Technique and sighs, putting his head in his hands. He spent a long few minutes debating internally with himself, before standing up and dusting imaginary dust off his robes.

He was a father. It was high-time he started acting like one.

***

The heavy downpour barely masks the cacophony coming from Training Ground 7.

Naruto whirls, water whips growing larger the more water they collect through the falling rain, and trees fall like dominoes in his wake. A jump and a quick thrust of fire chakra see him boosted up high into the sky, and he comes crashing down with a yell. A few dozen meters worth of trees around him quiver and begin to fall.

Another wordless sound of rage sees him picking up a tree and tossing it with barely any effort into the air. A blast of fire from his hands sets it aflame as it comes back into the embrace of gravity and impact the forest floor with a loud noise.

Kakashi, who is crouching on a nearby branch, is absently awed with the fact that not a single inkling of the Nine-Tailed Fox’s chakra has filtered through, and internally marvels at the sheer ability of the Mental Palace Technique. Such a gem would be a weapon of mass destruction… thankfully not everyone could perform it. He himself had attempted it once, but even after trying for the longest time, he found only failure. Till date, he couldn’t find out why that was.

His eyes absently flick to Naruto, who is panting with effort but still continuing on with his destruction of their training grounds…. Hmm. It seems that Tenzo will not be getting much sleep tonight.

Then he catches the raw anguish on Naruto’s face and amends that statement. There were two people he knew who wouldn’t find much sleep that night. And maybe… sticking with one of them would make him feel better.

Another scream rends the air and the ground quakes.

Maybe after this, though.
When Naruto does find himself in a fitful sleep that night, he finds himself in his Mental Palace instead. As his eyes dart around and work on comprehending its state, he finds himself thinking that, somehow, it’s only right for his ‘apartment’ to be in a disarray. In spite of the fact that his furniture is strewn about as if someone tossed it in anguish, his thoughts immediately direct his eyes to a barred non-descript door. \ 

True enough, the boards are visibly loose, and a daunting red mist is emerging from the gap between it and the floor.

Frowning, he set about manually righting the furniture. Thankfully, the bedroom was unaffected, so he didn’t pay it much mind. The wall with his chakra affinities was quite alright too, so he dusted his hands when he was finished and smiled a small smiled at his work.

Wait… where was Archie and… the clone that showed his feelings? (He really needed to come up with a name for that one.)

A single cross-seal and two puffs of smoke later, there were two other occupants of his Mental Palace.

“Took you long enough.” Archie sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I thought you’d be so occupied by moping that you wouldn’t think of coming in here.”

“Shino is dead, Archie.” The emotion clone whispered, bottom lip quivering. “I think Naruto deserved some time off.”

Naruto himself just shrugged. “Something like that. How did the two of you disperse, anyway?”

Archie pointed at the door to the Nine-tail’s cell. “That chakra leakage tipped us off the edge. When are you going to fix that, anyway?”

“In a moment. I actually need to talk to the fox myself.” Naruto waved him off.

“Why?” the emotion clone asked, eyes wide. “He’s so scary.”

“About that…” the original drawled, shuffling his feet. “You know how I… destroyed Training Ground 7? What if…”

“I don’t think so.” Archie shook his head. “It’s a chakra construct. What would it feel loss about? Can someone steal its chakra?”

“It’s a veritable mass of chakra… which means it’s got more chakra than the entire village combined, right?” the original patiently explained. “What if someone-”

Archie’s eyes grew wide. “Do you know what you’re suggesting?” he hissed, waving his arms wildly. It was the most he’d come to ever emulating Naruto’s behavior himself. “Who in the world would be so powerful to trap it in an illusion? Unless it was the result of a godly technique, there’s little to no chance!”
Naruto just offered him an irritated look. “If you know what I’m going to say before I say it, the least you could do is wait for me to finish.”

The emotion clone wasn’t focused on them, though. His eyes were trained on the loose boards against the door. “Do you think that’s why he’s angry then, Naruto? Maybe he just lost all motivation after he was freed from the illusion?”

A spell of silence reigned over the room, during which all three aspects of the same boy exchanged loaded glances.

“It’s worth a shot trying to talk to it.” Archie relented, sighing. “If nothing else, we can at least confirm our hypotheses from its behavior.”

“If it’s true, we should report it to Gramps.” Naruto firmly said. “Someone strong enough to control the Nine-tails…” he shivered. “…damn it, I have to get stronger!”

“There is little that’s freely available that you haven’t learned yet.” Archie snorted. “If you want to learn any more you’d have to…” he trailed off.

Naruto’s face was suddenly graced with a shit-eating grin. “Yes.”

“No!” Archie vehemently shook his head. “If you’re caught, you’ll be punished much more than you ever have! I’m not going to die just because you have a fetish for learning new things!”

“Gramps won’t kill me.” Naruto waved him off. “The Hyuuga clan will be the only challenge… I can request uncle Shibi to allow me access… I’m sure Shikamaru could help me convince his dad…”

“You’re insane.” Archie said flatly. “Losing Shino had knocked the few screws you gained lose.”

“Excuse me?” Naruto snarled, ignoring a strange sound from behind them. “I’m trying to make sure that we aren’t killed by whoever was powerful enough to control the strongest tailed beast! What makes you think he won’t come back?”

“If someone wanted the Nine-tails, they would have attacked long ago.” Archie glared. “You’re talking about learning can jutsu, Naruto. That’s not something anyone would allow! You’d ruin whatever balance the clans have left with that idea! First off, you won’t even get to that point because no head would willingly give away their secrets this way! Second, they will consider all angles, including you someday using the knowledge of their techniques against them! Don’t be daft-”

“I’m this close to dispelling you myself.” Naruto grit out. “Weren’t you the one who just said you didn’t want to die?”

“I will die the moment you completely and irreparably exhaust your chakra.” Archie drily said. “If you’re deemed a threat and they seal off your chakra-”

“It won’t come to that!” Naruto shouted, patience snapping. “What is your problem, anyway? Don’t you want to be able to defeat the guy – or girl – when they do come after us?”

“I only want to continue existing.” Archie bit out, equally peeved. “You trying this… this… this foolish endeavor will see us hanged, or worse, captured and kept alive only because they don’t want the Nine-Tails returning from the dead somehow and rampaging across Fire Country!”

“Why don’t you-”
Their argument was cut off when a roar of rage shook the apartment. Their eyes widened and darted
to the door that kept the Nine-Tails away…

It was wide open.

And the emotional clone was nowhere to be found.

Cursing their luck, both original and clone broke into a run, barely flinching when the hardwood
floor of their apartment gave way to the water-covered concrete of the sewer like prison where their
tenant resided. The two tore through the straight path, launching themselves at breakneck speeds
only to come to a stoppinghalt just before the gigantic caged.

The Nine-tailed Fox stood on its haunches, tails swishing agitatedly as itglared at the emotional
clone, who stood with wide arms inside its cell.

Wait a minute… inside its cell?

“Come here and give me a hug, nine-o!” the emotional clone… cried… and tried to launch itself at
the powerful being.

They both sweat-dropped when the all-powerful Nine-tails dodged to clone projectile as if it were the
plague. “Stay away from me, you abomination! I will not suffer your presenceany longer! Keep your… hands… away from me!”

“That wasn’t very nice.” The emotional clone mumbled, standing and shaking some of the water off.
“C’mon! We know you’re suffering now! Why are you being so Tsundere?”

“I need none of your pity!” Nine-tails snarled. Then its eyes found themselves fixed on the original
Naruto. “You! You, miserable cretin! You created this monstrosity! Take it away from me!”

“Oh my, is the great Nine-tails scared of a hug?” Archie drawled, smirking. “I wonder, was the
village to initiate a collective group hug, would you have ceased your pointless attack sixteen years
ago?”

The beast looked terrified of the very thought. It froze in fear and let Emote grab onto its fur.

“This isn’t what we’re here for.” Naruto grumbled. “Emote, please release the Nine-tails and come
here.”

“But he’s so warm!” Emote whispered in an absolutely crushed voice. “Why do I have to leave him?
You leave him!”

Archie and Naruto sweat-dropped. “Um… okay…”

The Nine-tails seemed to have had enough of the positive contact and whacked one of his ails
against his side, popping the clone. “Why have you deemed it fit to intrude on my domain?”

“You’re sealed in me.” Naruto deadpanned. “Technically, all of this is my domain.”

“I do not belong to any human!” the Nine-tails growled, tensing as if to pounce. “Least of all a
child!”

“I am not saying you do!” Naruto growled. “You know what? I’m honestly not in the mood for
this.”
Archie looked at the retreating form of his original, then turned to regard the beast speculatively. “You know… being in a sewer is not exactly what I’d call helping my mood. How are you still sane in this place?”

The beast kept quiet, but his eyes did not venture an inch past his form.

Archie sighed, but closed his eyes and concentrated. Naruto had done this in their Mental Palace, and this place was connected to there, so…

With a slight tremor, the water began to recede into the ground. The entire area seemed to get a lot brighter, allowing one to freely view the rather sparsely set-apart walls and ceiling. Archie lifted his hand and pushed out, enlarging the chamber in which the Nine-tails himself was. With a snap of his fingers, a screen seemed to materialize out of nothing on one of the walls, which only then blinked on to show the roof of Naruto’s apartment.

He then left without a single word thrown over his shoulder.

***

“Stupid all-powerful amalgamation of chakra. Ridiculous egos. Ugh!”

Akamaru whined from the counter.

“Oh c’mon, he was a jerk!” Naruto said, waving a ladle about in the air. “Where does he get off being so self-righteous? All I want to do is talk!”

The dog yipped a few times.

“I don’t care if he doesn’t want to be there. The least he could do is listen.” Naruto resisted. “If you were sealed into a prison by a bunch of cats, you’d listen to what they had to say, wouldn’t you?”

Akamaru growled.

“Oh, you big baby.” Naruto shook his head, pulling out a dog-biscuit from the box he kept and holding it out for Akamaru. “Here, chow on this till the soup is ready. We’re going to be having chicken and vegetable soup!”

The dog mimed gagging.

“I’ll give you all the chicken bits.” Naruto assured him.

He pulled out a few vegetables and got to dicing. The motion was almost absent-minded as his thoughts drifted, and he allowed himself to get lost in the motions.

Until there was a knock on the door.

“Ow! Son of a-” he swore, sucking on his finger as he stomped his way to the door, and yanked it open. “What the hell is your- Oh. What are you guys doing here?”

Out of the door yonder stood Shikamaru and Choji, the first looking incredibly bored and the latter looking distinctly uncomfortable.
“Oh, hey, Naruto. Mind if we come in?” Shikamaru waved.

“Um… sure.” Naruto hesitated, casting a quick glance over his shoulder. “It’s in a bit of a disarray…”

“That’s fine.” Choji smiled an awkward smile that lasted until he stepped in and took in the smells. “Oh, that smells delicious! What are you making?”

Naruto’s eyes widened. “My soup!” he crowed, abandoning them and running into the kitchenette. “Aw dammit! Make yourself comfortable, guys, I’ll be out in a sec.”

The two friends exchanged a glance and a pair of shrugs before kicking off their sandals and making their way into the living room.

“Disarray, he says.” Shikamaru mumbled. “If my room were like this every day, my maybe my mother wouldn’t be on my case so much.”

“Naruto was always a neat-freak.” Choji shook his head. He absently unsealed a packet of crisps, tearing it open and chomping down. “Do you remember his reaction when we went to Kiba’s— oh.”

Shikamaru sighed. “Choji…”

“Alright guys, sorry about that.” Naruto sighed, hands busy holding and petting Akamaru. “I almost missed the best time-window when I had to put the leeks in… ah well, all’s well that end well.” He beamed, taking a seat in front of them. “If you’ll wait for some time, would you like to have breakfast?”

BARK!

“Akamaru is with you?” Choji asked, surprised. “I thought he’d be over at the Inazuka compound.”

Naruto shrugged. “Tsume was being a bitch about ‘handing Akamaru over’. She of all people should know how smart ninja-dogs are and that if he wanted to be with me, he should be able to.”

Naruto set Akamaru on the couch next to him as he sat, and the canine immediately nuzzled into his lap instead to sleep. The boy smiled fondly and stroked the dog’s fur.

Silence hung in the air for a few moments, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“Since when do you cook?” Shikamaru broke the silence softly, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, over the week between graduation and assignments, one of my… friends… told me what I was missing out on by obsessively eating ramen.” Naruto admitted, scratching the back of his head sheepishly. “I can still indulge, but he said I’m only harming myself by having practically nothing besides ramen and milk.”

“We’ve tried to get you to eat something else for ages!” Choji protested. “I mean, you eat a lot of stuff when you’re over at my place, but…”

“You mom makes the best food.” Naruto pointed out. “I’m obviously going to leave nothing of that piece of heaven.”

Shikamaru nodded in assent. “That’s true. So… who is he?”

“Um…” He just helped me out during the week.” Naruto tried. “You guys know how horrible I was
during the Academy… I requested Gramps to get me someone to bring me up to speed so that I don’t bring down team performance.”

The Nara studied him. “Sure.” He allowed. Why that line sparked a bit of worry in Naruto’s mind was a sound question. “So… how are you holding up?”

The room almost seemed to physically darken with the amount of gloom that now practically permeated it. “I’d appreciate it if we don’t talk about this.”

“Naruto…” Choji tried, then just cleared his throat instead.

“Troublesome.” Shikamaru groaned. “Look, we just came from Sakura’s. She’s been crying.”

“Are you honestly going to advocate for her when you now how her being… her… could have been the reason this all happened in the first place?” Naruto asked, growling. “Shikamaru, we’ve known each other for years. Years. Are you willing to risk our friendship for this? Because let me tell you up front, I am not going to apologize for a single word I said.”

“We know how you feel about it.” Choji quickly interceded, giving Shikamaru a warning glance. Good. For all his tact and strategy, Shikamaru had always been thrown off when it came to Naruto. “Practically the entire village knows you’ve done nothing this passed week besides wreck Training Ground 7. But… this isn’t like you, Naruto. Hurting someone like that with words… we haven’t even seen Ino all week because she’s apparently camped out at Sakura’s house trying to console her.”

“She deserves it. Sakura, I mean.” Naruto insisted. “Ino could do better than her.”

Akamaru decided to join the conversation and whine.

“Oh, please! Aren’t you sa–… never mind. Come here.” He sighed, wriggling his fingers.

Akamaru leaped into his lap and surrendered to his finger’s ministrations in reply.

“You’re just saying that because you’re too nice, Akamaru.” The blonde spoke, a sad smile on his face. “I wonder what Shino would have said…”

“He would have called your behavior illogical.” Shikamaru pointed out. “He would say that it was practically guaranteed we’d die out in the field someday.”

“Someday, Shikamaru.” Naruto pointed out, fingers still carding through Akamaru’s fur. “Not on the very first C-rank! Anko should have trained them more before…”

“You’re grieving. We get that.” Choji softly spoke, standing to come by Naruto’s side and lay a hand on his shoulder. “But lashing out at someone who was powerless to stop what happened is not the answer, Naruto!”

Naruto opted to remain silent.

“Look, we didn’t come by to try and talk you into forgiving Sakura straight out.” Shikamaru sighed. “We just wanted to see if you wanted company for the day.”

KNOCK KNOCK!

Naruto arched an eyebrow as he gently sat a drowsy Akamaru on the couch and moved to the door. “And who else did you manage to rope into keeping little old miserable me company?”
He opened the door and froze. “Lady Tsume?”

Said lady shifted uncomfortably, then sighed, crossing her arms. “Hello, brat.” She greeted, walking in without so much as a by-your-leave. “I’m here to talk to you about your bond with Akamaru.”

***

“I don’t understand.” Sasuke shook his head. “You’re saying I am… part Senju?”

“A quarter, to be exact. I am your mother’s mother after all.” Byakuri nodded, sipping her chamomile tea. “And since I have the Wood Style blood-line-”

“Oh, yes.” Sasuke threw his hands in the air. “I almost forgot. You hold one of the most powerful and coveted bloodlines in the history of the Elemental Nations and no-one has so much as heard a peep about it!”

A whip of a plant of some sort seemed to grow out of the flooring and smacked Sasuke upside his head. “Do not interrupt your elders when they are speaking, boy!” she chastised, stern. “You are the heir to both the Uchiha and Senju bloodlines, now! Show some decorum.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I just didn’t have any family around in my formative years to teach me tact.” Sasuke icily retorted. “You do not get to come in here after your spectacle the week before and demand my respect, grandma, because you weren’t here when I needed you!”

“Oh, how pitiful.” the old woman sneered. “The world does not revolve around you, boy! Open your eyes and look at the bigger picture! Our clans were sworn enemies; my marriage to Ira Uchiha was kept a secret even from our clan heads – they thought your mother was a bastard. How would the populace react if a Senju showed up to care for the last loyal Uchiha?”

“Probably worship the ground you walk on.” Sasuke countered. “Your clan was known for loving peace. If you took me under your grace, no one would bat an eyelash.”

“You are a greater fool than I took you for.” Byakuri shook her head. “I do not owe you an explanation, but I will tell you what you fail to see just so you may know how ridiculous you sound. Have you heard tell of any true Senju since you were old enough to?”

Sasuke was about to answer but frowned instead when he realized that officially, the Senju clan was recorded as extinct.

She smirked. “Our clan was wiped in the Third World War – it is the reason why the Fourth Fire-Shadow slaughtered nearly a thousand Hidden Stone troops. While the Hidden Cloud distracted the strongest of our number – which I am ashamed to say included even me – the Hidden Stone sent in a specialized force to wipe out our clan from the rear. Why, you may ask? It is because, excepting the Uzumaki clan, of course, we have the strongest life-force and far denser chakra than any other clan to walk the Earth… mostly; there are always exceptions. The Hidden Stone houses a clan called the Richu, who are famous for only one ability-”

“Absorbing the life-force of any individual they come in direct contact with.” Sasuke completed, eyes widening. “But they are extinct!”

“That is because the more they absorb, the more days they shave off their life.” Byakuri continued
smoothly. “Given the fact that they were unable to officially sire any more children as a whole, the clan passed on.”

“Alright, fine, so clearly there is a reason you were kept out of the public eye.” Sasuke allowed. “Although, if you were a participant in the war, how—”

“Faking one’s death is child’s play for an ex-ANBU operative.” She waved him off. “You were an innocent child who knew nothing of deception and even a slip on my part on what would objectively be a long-term infiltration mission would lead to several carefully built lies crumbling down, if I chose to use a disguise to get close to you. No, I stayed away for both our benefit. Hiruzen transferred me under Danzo’s care in front of all those who are in the know about it, so he couldn’t find any way to use me for his own means. Seals take care of any blood spilt or the sort, so the Senju blood was relatively safe.”

Sasuke frowned, finally reaching for the tea service and pouring himself a cup. “Why would anyone want Senju blood… or DNA?”

Byakuri took a minute to sip her tea and swirl it about in the cup. “What do you know of my father, the First Fire-Shadow?”

For a moment, the young boy’s eyes widened when he made the connection that he was, in fact, related to two of the former Fire-Shadows, but didn’t let the excitement distract him from what was quickly shaping up to be a conversation that gave him a lot of answers. He took a sip of comforting tea before answering. “I know that, besides the Wood Style, Lord Hashirama was lauded for being a medic of great talent. He had massive chakra reserves, and this, coupled with the fine control he had over his chakra led him to be known as the God of the Forest since he could utilize jutsu for more effectively than anyone alive during that time.”

Byakuri smiled a small smile and gestured with her cup for him to continue.

“He also is said to have created the forests surrounding the Hidden Leaf with his own jutsu.” The younger added absentmindedly. “It is a testament to his power – we share borders with the Hidden Sand, which is essentially a desert, and the lands on the other end slowly drift into prairies and grasslands as we move on, which means he picked a middle-ground between a desert and a countryside and chose to erect a massive forest there-in.” For a moment, Sasuke let himself be in awe of such strong power and pure will, before he tried to think of more. “He’s also said to have powerful regeneration capabilities… even in the most strenuous of situations, a single night’s sleep was said to cure him of even the worst wounds, and in battle he could last longer than most.”

He paused when a smirk graced his grandmother’s features. Hm, so Hashirama’s regeneration…

“Danzo wishes to utilize Senju blood to try and access Lord Hashirama’s healing abilities?” he asked, a little green.

“Quite.” Byakuri nodded. “The answer to his regeneration lied in a power he never spoke of. But even then, it was heavily implied that this power changed him several times over its usage. It’s actually a well-guarded secret that he was quite pitiful when he was younger but grew in massive leaps and bounds once he accessed it… regardless, that’s not the point. Whatever that power was, it changed him to accommodate for regeneration. Which means…”

“The key to allowing any humans to regenerate at the rate he did, the answer, would lie in his blood.” Sasuke muttered.

“It’s why his remains were burned rather than buried, as was the custom that time.” She sighed. “I
shudder to think what some people might have done with his DNA…”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes. Byakuri was far lost in her memories, while Sasuke was thinking about the circumstances his life was now mired in. Truly, some deity must have had a massive grudge against the Uchiha clan for him to have landed in such a situation…

“The past is the past.” He finally said, setting his tea down. “I would… I would like to apologize for the way I conducted myself earlier – for a moment… for a moment the possibility that things could have been different had taken over my mind. My teammate often tells me that if one were to lose themselves in the past, they would never be able to see the beautiful things that lie in front of them.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, pushing them back. “I guess… I guess I should just be thankful that you are here now, rather than get angry over why you weren’t here in the past. Some things… some things should just be left behind.”

Byakuri studied him for a moment. “I may not have visited you in the past, but I did watch over you from time to time. I saw you try and fail, then try again and succeed at several of your endeavors. It was clear as day that you were fueled by a drive for revenge. What has changed so drastically, so suddenly, that you are capable of being so mature now?”

Sasuke mulled over that question for a moment. “I think... that I haven’t just suddenly started changing now. My teammate, Naruto Uzumaki, he had tried several times over the Academy years to get me to let go of my then-current mindset. Some of that must have stuck with me through the years, and then… and then we shared our hearts that night after the Bell-test. Honestly, I am just so tired… tired of living up to people’s expectations with no true substance in return, tired of being seeing as something of a hero for simply surviving at my… at that man’s mercy… tired of just… everything. If changing the way that I think can make me feel content, then why not?”

Inwardly, a chibi Byakuri was cheering for the direction her grandson was thinking in. Outwardly, she only smirked. “Alright then, boy. Now that you are aware of my existence, it makes little sense for us to live apart. I know your team’s forced vacation is ending tomorrow, so after you return from your next mission, I will start training you to master your affinities. Just sitting her next to you, I know that you are incapable of utilizing Wood Style, but… Hiruzen told me you have a primary Lightning affinity and a secondary Fire. Is this true?”

Sasuke nodded. “Yes. Kakashi-sir has told me of the way our chakra reacts to affinities, so I’m nearly positive my Fire affinity was developed because I utilized a lot of Fire-style chakra over the years my chakra-network solidified.”

Byakuri hummed. “Have you begun any Elemental Control exercises?”

“I have started on my Lightning affinity’s first stage and have almost completed it.” Sasuke stated confidently. “Once I complete it, I will move on to the first stage of my Fire affinity.”

“In one month? Impressive.” She smirked. “Of course, with your determination, I expected as much.”

Sasuke remained impassive externally but felt a warm tingling in his heart at this true praise from his… from his grandmother. Wow. That would take some getting used to. “I pale in comparison to my teammate. He has already mastered all three stages of all five affinities.”

Byakuri clucked. “Now, now, if we compare ourselves to those who perform better, we will always find ourselves lacking.” She then wagged a finger. “However, if we compare ourselves to those who are weaker, we will find ourselves complacent. Remember this, Sasuke: always move at your own pace. Never try to do more than you can, for you will exhaust yourself. But on the other hand, never
settle for performing less than you absolutely know you can, that will just hinder your progress. Balance is key to one’s progression when it comes to strength, be it physical or mental.”

Sasuke drank in this advice with rapt attention. His father was one who always pushed him to do more, but his… that man… always advised him to take things at his own pace.

Now, who had been the stronger of the two?

“Now then.” Byakuri smiled widely, setting her cup down and standing up. “I do believe I have furniture to move. I don’t need to place a mission request when I have a perfectly capable young man here now, do I?”

Sasuke sighed.

***

“Wind Style: Wind Blades!”

Hinata pated, but there was a slight smirk on her face when she saw her thrown wind blades slice right through the wooden post out in the Hyuuga Compound’s training grounds. The slice was clean, and the top of the log fell to the ground with a muted thud that just satisfied her. Before… before she knew what the problem was, she felt so helpless and insecure – she kept blaming herself for holding back but also was unwilling to move forward because of her little sister… that was until Naruto asked her a simple question.

“If you get stronger, you’ll be the Clan head someday, right?” he asked, fingers poised on his chin as if it took a lot from him to think this much. She knew better – Naruto was growing to be a better tactician than even most Nara were supposed to be. “So if you train hard and take the seat from your father before your sister reaches the age when she is to be branded, you can just abolish the seal before that! The only Hyuuga who can be Clan head are the Main Family, and if you prove in front of the others that you are stronger than your father, they themselves will dethrone him and put you in his place! Then, before the seal is applied, dissolve the Hyuuga Elder’s Council and abolish the seal!”

Now, every day that she did not train, she considered a waste. Every moment that she spent bettering herself, she would be this much closer to changing the clan.

She could save her sister.

“So… it is true. You have a Wind affinity.”

Hinata slowly relaxed from her stance and stretched a bit, turning to look at her father, who stood at the door from her house into the grounds, hands folded. She wasn’t very sure, but there was a flash of guilt that existed for only the barest of moments in his eyes before it was gone again.

“Yes. Kakashi-sir told me that it is a very rare possibility since the Water affinity in Hyuuga blood is too strong from the All-Seeing White Eye to circumvent, but at times it happens.” She nodded, sighing. “He suggested that Hyuuga members should do a customary affinity test before they truly begin to learn the intricacies of our style to minimize wasted effort.”

Hiashi hummed noncommittally, before he made his way to her, and studied her form with
unreadable eyes. “I have never… I never did speak about your mother with you.”

Hinata would have jerked in surprise were she not stunned into silence. Her mother had always been a sore topic in the household. Every picture that had her in it had been removed and kept someplace… else. She secretly thought that they had been burned. Her father never mentioned her and turned cold if someone else did. The one and only time she had asked him about her, he refused to even glance in her direction for weeks.

“Hitomi was… like a breath of fresh air.” He spoke, and Hinata hung onto his every word. This was something about her mother… she needed to know. “She hailed from the Hidden Sand. It was when a treaty was only just being debated that we met. A prominent clan that holds the same status there as we do here, the Fuurendan Clan, proposed a marriage between us to more deeply tie or villages.”

“Mother was from a clan?” Hinata whispered, wrapping her hands around herself.

Hiashi, it seemed, almost didn’t hear her, but he did smile slightly. “Oh, yes. The Fuurendan Clan were known for their unrivalled control over wind. It was a combination of a bloodline and some secret they possessed, a secret they guard jealously till this day, that they rose to be one of the most fearsome clans even before the Hidden Villages were established by the first Shadows. The things she could do…” he trailed off, lost in memories. “But it was not her power that eventually saw us fall in love in what we both initially thought to be a burden of a marriage. No, it was her… being. She often insulted our set ways and tried to bring more freedom into our traditions, but she was the one who you would find the first at the scene when a member of our clan was injured, be it the lowest Branch Family member or even an Elder. She did not know any medical techniques – her control was too erratic for that. But she did read many scrolls, and so she knew of many remedies that one could use and apply to gain relief.”

“She sounds… wonderful.” Hinata breathed, eyes wet.

Hiashi looked at her then, and smiled faintly. “She truly was. I forever regret the day…”

“Father…” Hinata began slowly, not wanting to disrupt this little blessing, “you never did tell me how she died.”

She noticed the change almost immediately. Where Hiashi was almost lax even in his rigid posture, it seemed now that he entire body locked itself in place. His jaw clenched. His eyes hardened. How had she not noticed this before? He was… forcing himself not to act on an impulse. What was it?

“Did you know that she had the most vibrant purple hair?” he continued, but his voice was… off. “My mother had actually laid a wager that our first child, you, would have her purple hair. But it seems that our genes intermingled, and you have some shade in between.”

Hinata couldn’t focus on the little nugget of information. While externally she did her best to act attentive, internally, she was slowly being filled with dread and fear.

*How did her mother die?*

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Naruto stood in front of Shino’s grave, a sad smile gracing his face. He almost knelt down to touch the ground… but he refrained.
“Ah, you are here.” A voice spoke, but Naruto didn’t turn to see who it was. After spending his childhood almost living in the Aburame compound, he would recognize that voice anywhere.

“Uncle Shibi.” Naruto greeted, but still did not turn. “How are you today?”

“I am doing adequately.” The man responded, coming to stand right next to his son’s… best friend. That’s all they would ever be, now. “I expected you later this day, considering how you spent your past week. Why? Because you should be feeling extensive chakra exhaustion after you rendered Training Ground 7 essentially desolate.”

“I’m sure Captain Yamato would have it down to rights soon enough.” He waved him off weakly. “And I left a clone back home before I came here, so I’m sure he can handle whatever comes his way.”

“Ah, the Shadow Clone jutsu. Quite useful.” Shibi noted, then shuffled with something inside his jacket and pulled out what looked like a vial. “Shino willed his queen to you.” He offered, unceremoniously handing it over.

Naruto, who had moved to take the vial, froze. In his Mental Palace, he was certain that Emote and Archie were feeling a similar shock. “He willed his queen away? To me?”

“Our queen is the leader of our hives.” Shibi spoke, voice monotone but distinctly softer than otherwise. “She gives birth to the drones we use in combat and processes our chakra to convert it to that which can be consumed by our insects. Without that buffer, our Parasitic Destruction Insects would harm us – it’s why they deal pain as well as drain chakra when they attack our enemies; the buffer our queen forms is non-existent with them.” He turned to look at Naruto. “Shino had… had feelings for you. It’s why he willed his queen to you. Why, you ask? Because such an act is usually done with a clan member’s significant other.”

Naruto was riveted even further. “Shino… liked me? Like, liked liked me? But…”

“Us Aburame do not tie ourselves romantically as easily as others do.” Shibi spoke, after a few minutes of silence. “We only choose those who we know will always be at our side. Something within you must have shown Shino this. Afterall, you two did did each other for years.”

Naruto tried his best to process this as he looked at Shino’s grave.

“Make of her as you wish but be warned.” Shibi said, tone growing serious for a moment. “While we will respect his wishes, I will not see our clan’s secrets delivered to the enemy-”

“You know me better than that.” Naruto interrupted, eyes wet and tone watery. He sniffed. “C’mon, Uncle Shibi, you definitely know that I would never-”

“It had to be said.” Shibi said, and Naruto was sure that if he knew it was appropriate, he would have shrugged. “I will… leave you for a few minutes. Please… take care and be in good health.”

Naruto nodded stiffly and waited. When he was absolutely sure Shibi had left, he couldn’t stop himself from falling to his knees and screaming out loud.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, please don’t hate me.

I know this was essentially a huge info-dump with little plot, but trust me when I say every single notable fact mentioned here is important. Byakuri is going to be a major character and Hinata's mother? Hm... ideas, ideas! Let’s make it a great story, hm?

Akamaru... is going to stay with Naruto. Sorry if that disappoints anyone.

Also, did anyone not something extremely vital here? Something that gives a hint as to what Naruto’s bloodline will be? *wink wink*
Naruto absently patted Akamaru’s fur as they read the hastily thrown together Inazuka jutsu scroll while waiting at the bottom of the Fire-Shadow tower. After the bonding ritual, the bubbly canine had grown much larger, coming up to his shoulder in height, and the dog would only grow larger. His fur took more of a russet tone rather than his previous pure white, now bringing him closer to that which his name implied. He developed a black discoloration around the eyes itself, looking as if he were wearing diamond shaped goggles over them. However, one could easily see this was not the case when they caught a glimpse of his bright blue eyes, similar in color to Naruto’s own.

The ritual in itself was very binding. It involved a total merging of Naruto’s blood and chakra with Akamaru’s own. This, of course, officiated the meager bond that they had already developed subconsciously. The most drastic effects, however, were limited to Akamaru’s body and chakra. The dog’s reserves had grown massively, coming up to almost half of Naruto’s own, which by itself were comparable to several Jonin combined.

Most notably, however, because of the large chakra capacity the canine possessed, Naruto was able to use the Mental Palace Invasion technique to access Akamaru’s instinctual formation to insert several scrolls…

“Big-bro Naruto, why can’t we try the Fang-over-Fang at least once before we take our mission?” the dog whined.

Ah, yes. Playing around with Akamaru’s Mental Palace allowed him to note down a few more intricacies of the technique. He almost hit himself in the head when he realized that the little fact had actually slipped his notice before. Kakashi had never learned or performed the Mental Palace Technique successfully, so what exactly had he invaded when he performed his technique on the man? Or even on the Five String-Weavers of the Hidden Sand?

His answer? Everyone had subconsciously developed a rudimentary version of the technique at its basest level – that of storing information. The technique he learned, on the other hand, allowed him to use every aspect of it, from organizing, to viewing and diluting real time, to chakra control, and even defending his mind.

So, when he ‘invaded’ Akamaru’s Mental Palace, he actually reached this very basic version. Thinking quickly, he made copies of the Mental Palace Technique scroll from his own and slid it into Akamaru’s. The dog then utilized the information from the scroll to build his own and was now reaping the benefits Naruto himself did.

They hadn’t checked the natural affinity of Akamaru’s chakra yet, but he had enough chakra and control to use some of Naruto’s techniques, including the Fire Thrusters Technique and the Grand Fireball Jutsu. The other few that Naruto thought would be useful for the dog to know were soundly rebuffed by him, but the boy did internally decide to win the dog over as time went on.

“Hello, Naruto.” A soft voice spoke, and he looked up and at a smiling Hinata, who currently crouched a bit so she could look down on him. “I didn’t know you decided to bond with a ninja dog.”
“Big-sis Hinata!” Akamaru yelped, jarringly dislodging Naruto to get up and run around them in a circle. “I missed you!”

“… who talks, apparently.” Hinata spoke, eye wide. “I knew the more advanced dogs talked but… wait… ‘Big-sis’…?”

“Dammit, Akamaru, you almost ripped the scroll!” Naruto whined, quickly rolling it back up. “Then Tsume would yell at us again.”

“Wait… that’s Akamaru!?” Hinata gasped, turning to eye the dog almost incredulously. “What happened?”

“Well, that’s a bit of a story.” Naruto smiled sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. “When ninja dogs of the Inazuka clan pick a partner, they use an intricate Seal to bind the human and canine together. It involves exchanging blood and chakra and this huge-”

“Big-bro Naruto, you’re not supposed to tell that to anyone.” Akamaru pointed out, bumping his nose on the blonde’s head.

“Yeah, yeah.” Naruto waved him off. “Anyway, usually when a member of the bond dies, the other soon follows suit.” Here his voice turned a little flat. “It was a great mystery to Tsume as to exactly why Akamaru was still alive, and the grief of losing her son didn’t exactly do wonders for her composure when we got back. Apparently, Hana, Kiba’s sister, had a long conversation about it with her and somehow, against all odds, I already developed a fledgling bond with him.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t exactly be the first time my luck has been ridiculous, lately.”

Hinata hummed, running her finger’s through Akamaru’s shaggy fur. “So now the two of you are, essentially, an Inazuka pair? Wouldn’t that fall inside clan jurisdiction?”

“Nah, Tsume’s cool like that.” Naruto smiled a wistful smile. “It’s just… Kiba is dead, you know? She was in a fury about it, especially since she swore to do her best not to lose family after her husband died in the Third World War…”

“That… doesn’t explain why she wouldn’t induct you in the clan.” She lilted, confused. “Considering what you are… oh.”

“For being a Hyuuga, one may say you are oddly unobservant.” A familiar voice spoke, and the three turned to acknowledge it. Sasuke, hands n his pocket, made his way towards them… a woman at his side? “Everyone, this is my grandmother. Grandmother, this is-”

“Naruto Uzumaki and Hinata Hyuuga.” The woman nodded. Naruto felt confused for only the barest of moments. She didn’t look old enough to fit the tag, but in a world where people could spit out fire, you learn to accept things out of the norm fast. “I am Byakuri Senju. I hope my grandson is not too much trouble.”

Sasuke shifted uncomfortably.

“Of course not, old hag!” Naruto beamed cheerily. “Any annoyance he may pose quickly subsides when we get to assault him in training!”

“I wouldn’t say ‘assault’.” Hinata giggled. “It’s more of a… training exercise.”

“So it would seem.” Byakuri smirked, then turned a mock scowl on Naruto. “And who are you calling ‘old hag’, half-pint? I could run circles around you even as old as I am!”
“No one disses the height.” Naruto growled contemptuously.

“You must respect your elders, big-bro.” Akamaru whined. He then offered a bow to Byakuri.

“It seems like your companion has more courtesy than you do.” The oldest present noted. “I wonder how that would fare in general dynamics…”

“Oh, that’s it, you-”

“Please don’t insult a Leader of a founding clan, Naruto.” Kakashi admonished, appearing amongst their number in a swirl of leaves. He then turned and greeted said heir without actually looking away from his… literature. “Lady Byakuri.”

“Hatake.” The woman shortly spoke, then turned to address her grandson. “I expect you back in one piece. If you travel to the Hidden Grass, by any chance, do bring along some of their chamomile tea.”

“Yes, grandmother.” Sasuke agreed, then hesitated. “Would you… um… like anything else?”

Meanwhile, the remaining three members of team seven plus a dog stood off to the side. “I can’t believe it. Sasuke is being… nice to someone…” Naruto trailed, looking like his eyes were going to pop out of their sockets.

As Byakuri listed off things she would like to have from different villages, Hinata poked Naruto in the shoulder. “She is his grandmother.”

“But still… it’s Sasuke.”

“Big-bro Sasuke is so kind!” Akamaru barked. “I always thought he was rude…”

“As you will, Grandmother.” Sasuke tilted his head. Only after he watched the woman turn around the corner of a building, he turned to see an expectant team. “What?”

“Let’s just get our mission and get going.” Kakashi sighed, turning sharply on his heel and walking sedately into the tower.

As they made their way into the mission’s office, Naruto thought on exactly what the occurrence entailed. Sasuke’s grandmother… shouldn’t she have been killed in the massacre? And, she was a Senju, something that Kakashi affirmed (her cold attitude towards him aside), which meant that members of two clans that were all but sworn enemies had married, or just laid together. Sasuke’s father or mother, his brother, and he himself carried both Uchiha and Senju genes. Something about that statement gave him a sinking feeling in his stomach, but since he couldn’t find a reason to fault it, he just ignored the sensation for the moment. Perhaps the reason why his ninja sixth sense was going off would reveal itself later on.

He was snapped back into reality when they did not take the turn for the Mission-monger, and instead took the stairs that led up to the Fire-Shadow’s office. Odd, that.

Kakashi knocked on the door and opened it to let himself and his team in. However, the office already held other occupants aside from the leader of the village.

Naruto let his gaze trail across the faces present. Aside from Hiruzen, there were three other elderly faces. One of them Naruto recognized as the bandaged cripple who was called Danzo, seated directly in front of the Fire-Shadow. On his left was an old lady dressed in simple garments and a blue haori. Across from her, on Danzo’s other side, a bespectacled old man sat.
In the free space in front of the desk was what looked to be another team – Chunins, as was obvious from the fact that they all wore flak jackets, and were dressed in the normal ninja attire of a blue body glove. Two of them were female – a blonde and a brunette, both of whom had two short-swords strapped to their right upper back. The other two males did not have any visible weapon, but one sickly looking one wore his forehead-protector as a bandana.

“Ah, Team 7.” Hiruzen warmly smiled at the incoming team. “Please, do come in. We have been expecting you.

Naruto exchanged a glance with Hinata and Sasuke as they followed their teacher to stand beside the other team.

“So, this is the team that defeated the Five String-weavers of the Sands and submitted the broken puppets from the battle to Research and Development?” the old woman asked, narrowing her eyes. “Deceptively weak looking.”

Naruto bristled, but Akamaru’s nudge to his shoulder reminded him to take a deep breath.

“Are you sure about this, Hiruzen?” the only unidentified old man asked, eyeing the team with a critical glance. “This is a Genin team. A Genin team. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Need I remind you that we are running understaffed as it is?” Hiruzen chastised, inhaling deeply from his pipe. “Most of the other teams have already been running themselves dry from all the extra mission-load in preparation for the Chunin Exams, and the ones that are off-duty are too exhausted to take another step. Even Team Hayate here,” he gestured to the other ninja team present, “just returned from Hoen after negotiating with the Daimyo about the exact dates we should hold it on. And, regardless,” here, he levied the team a playful smirk, “Team 7 is on par with most Chunin teams within the village.”

Kakashi chuckled lightly, seemingly unfazed with the tired and tensed atmosphere in the room. “Of course, my Lord. Did you expect any less?”

The woman nodded. “You seem to have put your tenure as Captain-Commander of the ANBU to good use in training your team. I have no qualms about this mission. Homura, you should have more faith in our men and women.”

“I hope you’re right, Koharu.” The now-named Homura sighed.

A few seconds of tense silence passed before Hiruzen spoke again. “Team 7, you have been selected for an A-rank mission in conjunction with Team Hayate.”

All Genin present stood a little straighter at that. An A-rank mission, within the first two months of being an active ninja? Unheard of.

“The Hidden Sand has requested any available teams in order to deal with a threat.” He said. “The village has recently discovered the area in which Sasori of the Red Sands has established a base, of sorts. You will travel to the village, rendezvous with your temporary assigned commanding officer, and help them to deal with him. Your expected mission duration is one month.” He then gestured to a sealing scroll in front of him. “Additionally, Akiko Yamanaka of Team Hayate will negotiate for information on your recent adversaries and return their puppets as a gesture of goodwill. Are there any questions?”

“No, sir.” The ninja collectively responded.

“Good. You are to depart in an hour, so you lot are dismissed. Team 7, please stay behind.”
Team Hayate bowed low and quickly (yet somehow in a lagging manner) left the chambers proper.

“Kakashi.” Hiruzen addressed the Jonin directly. “Your team, however, has an additional objective.”

“I guessed as much.” The man admitted. “What is it, my Lord?”

“Given the intel that Naruto was able to gather, we decided it prudent to sweep the village for plants from Orochimaru.” The man began. “We thought it odd that none of our informants thought to report in on foreign shinobi within our borders. Our endeavor did not go unrewarded – we found a single mole hidden in our ranks. A Genin by the name of Kabuto Yakushi. On interrogating him, the Yamanaka Clan delivered several disturbing news. The first, and most relevant, is that my old student is after Naruto Uzumaki, here.”

Naruto started in obvious surprise. “Me? Why…? Oh. The Five String-Weavers were searching for a vault of Uzumaki knowledge that took my blood and chakra signature to open. He probably wants me to access other such troves of knowledge.”

Hiruzen nodded sadly. “Yes. When he was young, Orochimaru had only two ambitions – to master all the ninjutsu in the world and understand chakra intimately. In this pursuit, he has committed numerous monstrous deeds, mostly in an attempt to understand and collect bloodline limits.” Here, his eyes darted to Danzo. “Both within, and outside our jurisdiction.” Then he sighed, removing his pipe from his lips and rubbing the bridge of his nose. “It is important that you know, for all intents and purposes, that the man is functionally immortal.”

Silence.

“How is that possible?” Hinata breathed, surprised beyond belief.

“Apparently, in his travels, Orochimaru came across an individual from the Cult of Jashin from the Hidden Hot Water. This individual, once known as Hidan, had submitted himself to various experiments conducted in name of their god to created a vessel for him to step into our world.” The aged leader explained. “Having managed to capture the man, Orochimaru was able to implant various abilities in the man’s body before using a special technique to… take over his body.”

“What kind of techniques?” Kakashi asked, snapping his book closed and tucking it away. Naruto recognized this as his game-face, one used when his teacher was deadly serious.

“This unfortunate event when Orochimaru was part of an organization of extremely powerful individuals.” Danzo spoke, finally drawing attention to himself. “We cannot reveal to you its name or the identity of its ringleaders. However, the brat now has the Explosion Release, the Wood Release, the Copy Wheel Eye, and a unique Eye Technique we have been unable to identify as of yet.”

Once more, Team 7 was left in stunned silence.

“Wait… the Copy Wheel Eye? Itachi is in this organization?!” Sasuke demanded, eyes focused on Danzo.

“Hold your tongue, Genin! You are in front of the Council of Elders!” Koharu snapped.

Hiruzen cleared his throat. “While I can understand your emotional involvement here, young Sasuke, that is completely irrelevant to the matter at hand.”

Naruto eyed Sasuke, who looked to be visibly trying to reign in his temper. “My… apologies, honored Lords and Lady.”
“At least Lady Byakuri has managed to instill in you some manners.” The old hag sniffed.

“Kindly focus, everyone.” Hiruzen sighed, then refocused on Team 7. “We do not expect you to battle Orochimaru or anything of the sort. In fact, we already have confirmation that he is currently in an entirely different area altogether, or else we would not risk sending this envoy no matter how grave the matter at hand might be. However, my old student has often been known to employ tactics of more of a savagely deviant nature, and saw it fit to warn you.”

“Then what is our side-mission, my Lord?” Kakashi asked, eyes falling to his ‘inattentive lazy’ state.

“We have also gathered that the Hidden Sand wished to launch an invasion against our own village during the upcoming Chunin exams.” Hiruzen spoke, then turned to look at Naruto. “I want you to analyze the village, catalog various ways to mitigate this threat, and render them a harmless.”

“You want us to sabotage them?!” Naruto gasped, then clenched his fists and narrowed his eyes. “But-”

“I did not explicitly say so.” Hiruzen spoke, then averted his eyes. “However, if you find no other way…”

Naruto glared at him before bowing his head. “As you wish, my Lord.”

“Think of it as pranking them, Naruto.” Hinata offered, looking unsure as her eyes wandered between her two male teammates, both of whom looked upset. “It’s our way of pranking them for thinking of invading us.”

Naruto turned to look at her incredulously but ended up simply taking in her nervous posture and sighing. “Right.”

“Then you are dismissed,” Hiruzen spoke quietly. “Remember, as your side mission is an S-rank, no details can be revealed to anyone except the people in this room, an offense that can be punished by interrogation and then immediate execution by your Commanding Officer.”

“Yes, Lord Fire-Shadow.” Team 7 saluted as one, even though two members did so disgruntledly, then made their way out of the office.

After they had to be well out of earshot, and knowing that the office’s seals had already been active all this while, Homura turned to offer a skeptical look to his colleagues. “I still do not understand why such a sensitive mission is being given to a Genin team with less than half a year’s experience.” He admitted. “And one with such… impetuous members.”

“Naruto has… a way with people.” Hiruzen noted. “The sense of what to say just right has only improved since he initiated his Mental Palace, from what I observed during his true Genin Exam. I… I know he is the right one for this mission. It also doesn’t hurt that he and his comrades form the most talented team we have on hand.”

“He is also a vessel of a tailed beast,” Danzo said simply, “and remember that should the Hidden Sand decide to detain or attack them, Team 7 is the only one capable of even a remote chance at escape from all our currently available teams. And they will be shadowed – the great tree never does let its saplings travel far away from its roots.”

The other three occupants of the room turned to look at him with a deadpan stare. “We know you will have a squad of Root following them – why must you be so cryptic about it?” Koharu asked bluntly, drawing out a sigh from Homura.
Danzo simply shrugged.

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“This meeting is now called into order!”

Far into the ruins of a once-great village, a single complex of rooms that looked none-the-worse for wear was now lit with overhead lights, illuminating polished metal walls and floors. A single large screen on the wall showed the progress gauge with the restarting of all technological processes that were meant to activate once the occupants of the nine Stasis Pods were released.

“How far along is it?”

“We’re only half-way done? Has this thing gotten slow, or am I just impatient?”

“You’ve always been impatient.”

“Why you-”

“Enough!” the first voice spoke. “We have not gathered here to fight. I imagine all of you are feeling just as disturbed as I am that our leader would do this to us, but fighting amongst ourselves is not the answer!”

“We need to return to the surface and see what has changed.” A female voice spoke. “I do trust none of us are going to Kaijuu Ocean anytime soon?”

“I only just feel free of that damn thing’s control. Please do not bring it up again.”

“I agree with him… and also with her. We need to see what has happened to the world while we were asleep. It is obvious our village is destroyed – we must now see what to do with the future we have been given.”

“I’d rather have died with them back then than live this life! Our people are dead, you hear me? Dead!”

“Let’s take a couple of months to survey the topside. We can all split in different directions, and see how the world has changed for ourselves.”

“I do not think you will find much different.” The first voice spoke, yet again. “Look at the date on the screen.”

Silence.

“Was there a mistake in programming? How can it be only twenty years?”

“We need answers, this much is true. We can still get them from the surface while remaining under the radar. And, for Itzamna’s sake, no destroying any villages!”

“That was one time!”

“Why do I get the feeling we are going to be here for a while?”
PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR NOT UPDATING but I had like, a bunch of relatives over for the longest while and I just couldn't find the free time. *offers cookies* On another note, though, this chapter is probably the shortest one I have written for this story. I just needed to get the ball rolling and figure out a way to start the arc.

OH, and who found Orochimaru absolutely stupid in canon? *waves hands wildly while jumping up and down* The guy knows how to create Uchiha clones, apparently. So he's got to be pretty smart. If he figured out a way to implant Juugo's clan bloodline to practically everyone he wants to take the bod over of, why couldn't he just implant all the bloodlines he wanted into Hidan and just go from there? After transferring Shin's implant-accepting bloodline or whatever into him, Kabuto's regeneration first would mean that the body wouldn't break down anymore so he could stay forever in it. Hidan's body would mean it would never die, no matter what happened (except malnutrition... I think? or the dust style, probably), and then he could load up on whatever he wanted from there. Like... wut, bruh?

Anyway, what do you think? Orochimaru won't play a major role in this part of the fic, or even the next one in the series, but I wanted to have him at least present for a couple of things in the future to explain more things later on.

Speaking of which, this is the next arc - Naruto in Suna (Hi, Gaara!) !!!! Also, you must have got that Sasori hasn't joined the Akatsuki, so who could be the person who takes his place? And who are the group of people who talk near the end? Stay on (with much more longer chapters in the future) to find out!

End Notes

Please leave kudos and reviews! They're like chocolate and cake to my attention-starved self.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!