Fools Rush In

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Fools Rush In

by whazzename

Summary

Rock Lee had only ever wanted three things in his life:

1. To be a truly splendid shinobi.
2. To have somebody love him.
3. To have a family of his own.

Number one he was working towards every day. Number two wasn’t going super well, and unfortunately number three was dependent on number two.

Or at least that's what he'd always thought.

Notes

This is my personal headcannon for how Metal came into Lee's life :)  
This is also the first thing I've written in a long time, and the longest ever...
Lee fidgeted nervously as he waited in the restaurant, eyes glancing back and forth from the door. After a lot of nagging, Tenten had finally set him up with a friend of hers and he was eagerly awaiting his date. He smoothed down his green turtleneck for the millionth time and looked up just in time to see a petite girl with long black hair come in and scan the room.

“Ah, Hanako-san!” Lee called, waving an arm to signal her.

Her brow creased briefly as she noticed him, but she made her way over to Lee’s table.

“Are you Lee?” She asked tentatively.

Lee jumped up and held out a hand.

“Yes, I am Tenten’s friend Lee, it is very nice to meet you!” He shook her hand vigorously and pulled out a chair for her to sit down.

“Y-yes. How nice of her to set this up.”

“Indeed, I’ve been looking forward to it all week!”

Hanako smiled stiffly, as Lee beamed at her from under his bowl cut, practically vibrating in his seat in excitement. There was a moment of awkward silence as he seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

“So Tenten tells me you’re a shinobi like her. That must be interesting work.”

“Oh yes, being a shinobi has been my life’s dream. Even though I can’t use ninjutsu or genjutsu, my goal is to become the best taijutsu user I can be!” Lee emphasized his point with a thumbs up and a rakish smile.

Hanako gave him another strained smile and picked up her menu.

“I hear the food here is excellent!” Lee said, picking up his own. “Oh look, they have curry!”

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An hour later, the two stood outside the restaurant in the growing dusk, a wide smile still plastered over Lee’s face.

“Would you like to get some dessert? There is a very nice place nearby that had the best mochi!”

Hanako avoided Lee’s eyes.

“It was very nice to meet you Lee, but I think we should end things here.”

Lee’s face fell.
“I just don’t think you’re my type,” she continued. “Good luck with your training though and thank you for dinner.”

Lee watched his date walk away, the cool evening breeze ruffling his blunt black bangs. He sighed, his posture deflating as he stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed slowly in the opposite direction towards home.

This wasn’t the first time he’d heard something along those lines, but it still stung. As much as he tried to put on a confident and happy exterior, he knew he wasn’t much to look at. Truthfully, he was getting tired of trying so hard and always coming up short. It was getting embarrassing. At least in taijutsu he knew that if he just put in the hours of training he would become stronger, but in dating so much depended on the other person that he just couldn’t compete.

He thought it would get easier as he got older, but at 25 all his romantic history amounted to was a string of failed first dates. He’d had to watch his friends pair off and get married and start their families while he hadn’t so much as held hands with a girl (except Tenten, but that didn’t count). He was beginning to think that maybe romance just wasn’t in the cards for him, no matter how much he wanted it.

“Oi, Lee!”

Lee looked up from the ground to see a group seated at a table in the nearby dango shop.

“Hello everyone!” He said, slipping on a smile and ducking under the short curtain into the light of the shop.

“How are you Lee-san? I haven’t seen you in a while.” Sakura smiled at him from where she was seated, her arms cradling a small infant with jet-black hair. Her daughter, Sarada, was fast asleep, swaddled in a pale pink blanket.

“You look dressed up, hot date tonight?” Ino teased from beside her. The normally slim girl rested her hands on her swollen belly. Although it may have slowed her movement, pregnancy had done little to curb Ino’s sharp tongue.

“Sort of,” Lee said, ducking his head and blushing.

“Women are more trouble than they’re worth.” Shikamaru leaned against the wall, arms behind his head, but his nonchalance didn’t fool anybody. Everyone knew he was hopelessly devoted to his wife Temari and their son Shikadai, he just wouldn’t admit it.

“What are you talking about? Girls are great! Here, hold this.” Chouji thrust his daughter into Lee’s arms as he stood up. “I’m ordering another.”

Chouchou didn’t seem at all alarmed to be handed to a relative stranger. The one year old squealed and grabbed at Lee’s bangs as he attempted to cradle the baby in what he hoped was a comfortable position.

“So how was it?” Sakura asked.

“What?” Lee asked, with a slight cringe as his hair was pulled away from his scalp.

“Your date, how did it go?”

“Oh, it was fine, not a match though.”
Luckily Sakura’s pitying face was cut short as Sarada stirred in her sleep, and Sakura tried to soothe her. Even though they were good friends now, it was hard for Lee to admit to his childhood crush that his dating life was a wreck, especially when she seemed so happy. After years of persistence, Sakura finally had everything that she had wanted for so long. And that most definitely did not include him.

He passed Chouchou back to Choiji as he returned to the table with a fresh plate of dango, and Lee hastily made his goodbyes, insisting that they would meet up again soon.

Back in the dark of the street, Lee took a deep breath of cool air. Sometimes it was hard to be around his old friends. Everyone just seemed so happy, and it made him all the more aware of what he was missing.

Ever since his was a kid, he’d only wanted three things:
1. To be the best shinobi he could be.
2. To have somebody to love him for who he was.
3. To have a family of his own.

Number one he was working towards every day. Every early morning training session and every mission pushed him to do better than he had the day before. Number two, if the night’s events’ were any evidence, wasn’t going super well, and unfortunately goal number three was dependent on goal number two.

Lee walked up the steps to his small apartment and paused for a moment before unlocking the door.

Or was it?

He thought of how he’d felt as he held Chouchou that evening. Follicular damage aside, there was something about holding the soft, squirmy blob that awoke a sense of longing in him. It didn’t matter what he looked like, Chouchou had felt safe and secure in his arms. Plus that smell. If he’d had ovaries, they would have exploded from that fresh baby smell.

Was it really necessary to wait until he had everything in place to start a family, Lee thought as he brushed his teeth? With his luck, he’d be in his 60’s before that happened.

Lee climbed into bed, his mind racing. Was it even possible? When he’d come up against an obstacle in his training he’d always found a solution, because his goals had always been very clear. How was this any different? If he wanted it bad enough, why couldn’t he do it on his own?

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Lee was already awake when his alarm went off the next morning. He’d barely been able to sleep thinking about all the possibilities and realities if he went through with what he could barely bring himself to imagine. He needed advice. And there was only one place he trusted to get it.

Fifteen minutes later Lee was knocking on a door across town. He cringed at the sound of multiple dogs barking in the quiet of the morning, but despite the early hour the door opened quickly.

“Lee my boy! What brings you here on this beautiful morning?”
“Gai-sensei, I very much need your wise advice!”

“Well come in then and we can talk, I was just whipping up a nourishing protein smoothie!”

Lee entered the apartment and was immediately swarmed by a multitude of dogs in various sizes wagging their tails. He attempted to extract himself from the pack as he made his way into the kitchen but still managed to get dog slobber all over his face.

“Yo, Lee,” Kakashi said, trudging through the doorway in his pajamas. His grey hair was even more tousled than usual and he stifled a yawn from behind his light cotton mask, having obviously just woken up.

“Good morning Kakashi-sensei! I hope I didn’t wake you!” Lee apologised.

Kakashi waved a hand dismissively, he was used to Lee’s frequent visits to by now. He set about dividing dog food into bowls, which thankfully distracted the pack from their intent to lick Lee’s face off.

Lee waited patiently at the table while Gai bustled about the kitchen in his wheelchair, throwing a concoction of fruit, liquid and powder into a blender. Despite his injury, Gai moved with ease and rolled over to the table with two glasses balanced in one hand, putting one in front of Lee. Lee took a small sip of the green-brown sludge and winced, but plastered on a smile. Gai’s concoctions, while insanely healthy, were definitely an acquired taste.

“Now, what did you want to talk to me about?” Gai asked, taking a long gulp of his drink.

Lee was quiet for a moment, thinking how to best word his thoughts. “Senseis, did either of you want children?”

Gai paused mid-sip but Kakashi didn’t seem phased as he joined them with a cup of coffee.

“I prefer dogs over babies.”

Gai looked thoughtful. “I suppose I thought about it when I was younger, but after becoming a sensei I had my precious students to look after. You, Neji, and Tenten feel like my own children!”

Lee smiled at the thought, but even if Gai was closest thing he had to a father, it didn’t fully answer his question.

“You never wanted a family of your own though?”

Gai put his glass down and considered his student.

“What is it that’s bothering you Lee?”

Lee furrowed his brows. “I-I think I want to start a family.”

“That’s wonderful news!” Gai boomed. “That date of yours must have gone well then! I think you may want to wait a little longer before popping the question, but I’m sure in a few-“

“No, sensei. I mean on my own.”

Gai was speechless for once. He shared a glance with his husband who merely shrugged.

“Lee…”
“I know it’s not the traditional route, but I just can’t stop thinking about it,” Lee said, finally looking up at Gai. “Every time I see my friends with their children my heart breaks a little because I’m not even close to having what they do.”

Gai’s expression softened when he saw the tears spring to Lee’s eyes.

“I know you always tell me to be patient, Gai-sensei, but I don’t think I can any more!”

“My boy,” Gai began softly, “I can’t say I know how you must feel, but I do know how much you desire family. As much as I admire your youthful determination, are you sure you’ve thought this through fully?”

Lee nodded and pulled out a notebook from his hip pouch.

“I would take leave for the first year and then apply for a position at the academy. It doesn’t pay as much as A-rank missions but I think it’s more secure and I can be around while the baby is growing up. I know it’s going to be expensive but I’ve been saving since I was ten and I think it will be enough. I’ll probably have to get a bigger apartment at some point but it should be fine for the first year or two—”

Gai felt his eyes prickle as Lee continued down his list. It was no secret that Gai had always had a special bond with his student, but it was moments like these that made his heart swell with pride. No matter what got in his way, Lee’s determination to overcome the hand that life had dealt him always made Gai emotional.

“Lee!”

Lee looked up mid-sentence at Gai, who had his serious face on, eyes closed and brow furrowed.

“This is something that you must devote the rest of your life to. Are you ready to take on that challenge?”

“Yes Gai-sensei!”

“Are you prepared to take on the life of a single parent, no matter how physically or emotionally taxing it may be?”

“Yes Gai-sensei!”

“Will you put your child’s needs before your own, and ensure they want for nothing?”

“Yes Gai-sensei!”

Lee and Gai were both in tears, their volume far too loud for the early hour. Kakashi simply sighed and sipped his coffee.

“If you believe that this is the right path for you then I know that you will be the best father in all of Konoha,” Gai boomed. “And I will do everything in my power to support you!”

Lee sprung from his seat and threw his arms around the older man.

“Thank you Gai-sensei, I won’t let you down!”

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That afternoon, Lee walked through the doors of the Konoha Fertility Clinic and approached the reception desk.

“Hello, my name is Rock Lee and I would like to fill out an intended parent surrogacy application!”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to whoever caught Kakashi quoting Eugene from the Try Guys!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two weeks later, Lee still couldn’t believe he’d gone through with it. After what felt like a hundred forms, Lee was officially on the list to be matched with a surrogate. Even though the agency said it might take a while, Lee couldn’t help but feel impatient. He’d made a huge decision and now all he could do was wait. Other than Gai-sensei and Kakashi, he hadn’t told anyone about his plans yet, in case something didn’t work out, but it was killing him to keep it a secret.

 Thankfully Kakashi had assigned him a mission that would keep him occupied and Lee grinned at the thought as he made his way towards the village gates. The Kazekage would be visiting Konoha over the next two weeks to discuss a joint venture between Suna and Konoha and Lee would be tasked with escorting him for the duration. He’d only seen Gaara a handful of times since the end of the war so he was thrilled that he’d get to spend some time with his old friend.

Despite their explosive battle at the chounin exams and the painful aftermath, Lee knew that Gaara had changed immensely since then. He was now the leader and protector of his village, and had been paramount to the success of the war, joining the villages together and acting as general of the allied forces. Lee couldn’t be prouder of what Gaara had been able to overcome in such a short time.

Lee only had to wait a short time before the Suna party arrived late in the afternoon, the Kazekage’s shock of red hair standing out from the front of the small group.

“Kazekage-sama!” Lee cried, jogging over to meet them and bowing deeply. “Welcome to Konoha!”

“Hello Lee.” A hint of a smile ghosted over Gaara’s normally expressionless face at the green-clad ninja’s enthusiasm.

“I am sure you are tired from your journey! Please come with me!”

Gaara nodded and fell into step beside Lee, his white robe billowing behind him while his bodyguards headed towards the Jounin barracks. The sand nin’s small frame was swamped by the attire of his station, making him seem even younger than his 24 years.

“I hope the journey to Konoha wasn’t too arduous!”

“It was uneventful.” Gaara, never one to waste words, kept his gaze ahead as they made their way down the main road. Gaara would be staying with Temari for the duration of his trip, glad to be able to spend some time with her now that she lived in Konoha full time. Unfortunately Kankurou was away on a mission so he had been unable to come along.

“That is excellent! I understand that you and Hokage-sama have an exciting new project to work on while you are here!”

“It will require a lot of conversation, but yes, it will be a benefit for both of our villages.”

“Well if you require anything during your stay, please do not hesitate to ask!” Lee said with a thumbs up as they approached the Nara residence.
Gaara paused at the gate to the grounds.

“Actually, there is something I hoped to ask of you,” He said slowly, meeting Lee’s eyes.

“Anything Kazekage-sama!”

“I know it has been a long time since we—” Gaara paused, furrowing his brow slightly before continuing. “I would like to improve my hand-to-hand combat skills. Would you be willing to train with me while I am here?”

Lee’s eyes widened at the request.

“Of course!”

Gaara seemed slightly surprised at Lee’s sudden response.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

Lee chuckled, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Continuing to challenge oneself is the most important thing in life! I would be honoured to help! We can start tomorrow morning!”

Gaara seemed to relax slightly.

“Thank you.”

Lee’s mind started racing with the possibilities as they made their way towards the house.

“We can start with the fundamental sixteen fist strikes and then move on to kicks! Or perhaps we should start with blocking first—but maybe evasion is better since it’s a great way to learn footwork… How many pushups do you do daily?”

The Nara residence was in the middle of town, but still felt remote, a low stone wall enclosing the traditional single storey house. A well manicured rock garden dotted with small trees and meandering pathways surrounded it, the soft trickling of water from a bamboo fountain only adding to the tranquility of the space.

The front door opened as Lee and Gaara stepped onto the wooden engawa and Temari appeared in a lilac coloured robe with a black-haired infant perched on her hip. Shikadai was three months old and a mirror image of his father, although he had Temari’s deep green eyes.

“Look it’s uncle Gaara!” She said, enveloping her younger brother in a one-armed hug.

“Hello, Temari,” Gaara greeted softly.

“Thanks for dropping him off Lee.”

“It is my pleasure Temari-san!” Lee exclaimed, saluting. “I will leave you to enjoy the rest of the evening and will see you bright and early for training tomorrow Kazekage-sama!”

With that Lee bounded away, Shikadai staring with wide eyes at the strange green man.
Lee was still mulling over training schedules when he got home from his evening workout, flattered that Gaara had requested his assistance. After a round of deep stretching, Lee showered and changed into sweatpants and a soft t-shirt. He was in the midst of trying to decide what to make for dinner when he noticed the light on his phone, indicating a message. He punched in his pass code and cradled the phone with one shoulder as he began chopping some bok choy for a stir fry.

“Hello this message is for Rock Lee. This is Dr. Morita from the Konoha Fertility Clinic, we’ve been able to match you with a suitable surrogate and would like the two of you to meet to get to know each other and discuss a possible contract. Please be at the home of Mai Hidetsu, 23 Senju Street, at 5:00pm tomorrow with any questions you may have and I’ll be in touch to follow up.”

Lee had frozen mid-chop, and it wasn’t until he felt a sharp sting of pain that he came back to reality. In his shock he’s sliced through the soft flesh between his thumb and forefinger and bright red blood was now staining the vegetables. He dropped the phone, sucking a breath in between his teeth and shaking his injured hand. As this only proceeded to spray drops of blood over the counter, Lee quickly clamped his other hand over the wound and went to the bathroom for his first aid kit.

He ran his hand under the tap and watched as the blood swirled with the water, trying to comprehend what he’d just heard.

He’d been matched.

Somewhere in the village was a woman who was willing to carry a child for him.

And he was meeting her tomorrow.

Although the clinic had warned him that it could take months to match him with a surrogate, it had only been a few weeks since he’d submitted his application. He hadn’t even begun to think of what to ask someone in this situation. The sound of a loud knock and his front door open noisily snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Lee, I need to vent! Neji is being very Neji today and it’s driving me crazy! I brought yakisoba and-HOLY SHIT WHAT HAPPENED!”

“I’m in here!” Lee called, turning off the tap and rummaging in his first-aid kit.

Tenten appeared in the doorframe holding a plastic bag, her eyes wide with alarm.

“It looks like a horror movie in there, what did you do?!”

Lee smiled sheepishly as he wrapped his hand tightly in gauze.

“The knife slipped.”

“See, this is why I don’t cook.” She shook the bag of take out. “Come on, I need to rant about a certain pig-headed Hyuuga. I’ll help you clean up the massacre.”

Lee followed her back into the kitchen, half-listening as she complained about her boyfriend while trying to wrap his mind around just how unpredictable this day had been.
Lee had finally kicked Tenten out around midnight, and managed to get a few restless hours of sleep before his early morning training session with Gaara. Thank the gods for coffee.

Gaara was already outside the Nara residence waiting for him, dressed in a long-sleeved red tunic and pants, his gourd noticeably absent. Lee led him to the nearby training grounds, the sun just beginning to warm the morning dew that clung to the ground.

“Yosh!” Lee clapped his hands together and winced, forgetting his injury from the previous night.

“It’s always best to begin any training session with a good warm-up, so let's start with 500 pushups, 250 crunches, and 300 squats! Then we can do a quick few laps around the village before we begin!”

Gaara stared at him, twitching one brow ever so slightly, but mirroring Lee as he got into a plank position on the balls of his feet, palms to the ground.

Lee bent his elbows, keeping his abs tight as he lowered his chest to the ground and pressed back up, a familiar warmth growing in his biceps with each repetition. He fell into a comfortable rhythm, breathing with each practiced movement and keeping his mind purely on the feeling of his muscles contracting and releasing. This was his meditation. There was nothing more than his body and his breath working in tandem, the cool grass against his hands and the morning sun warming his back.

Lee finished his reps and jumped to his feet with a satisfied exhale. He felt more awake already.

“Alright, next-“

Lee was about to propose that they move onto the next exercise when he noticed that Gaara was still slowly doing reps. He seemed to be struggling, eyes squeezed shut and arms shaking at the bottom of the movement as he tried to raise his chest from the ground.

Lee swallowed guiltily. Now that he got a good look, Gaara really didn’t have a lot of muscle on him. Lee had always been too blown away by the force of Gaara’s sand to realize how small his frame was. Perhaps he’d been a bit too ambitious with his training plan.

“Just do as many as you can Kazekage-sama!”

“Just call me Gaara,” the redhead huffed out, letting his chest drop to the ground heavily before rolling over to his back and getting into a sit up position.

“Of course Kaze-, Gaara-san.”

Lee finished his crunches quickly and glanced across at Gaara. He was doing a little better than with the pushups, perhaps something to do with the huge gourd full of sand he used to carry around as a child. Lee was glad that Gaara had switched to a smaller one at his waist, if only to save his back.

“Um, shall we move on to squats?” Lee suggested tentatively.

Gaara lay flat on his back, breathing heavily for a moment before nodding and shakily raising himself to a standing position. By the 75th rep Gaara’s legs were shaking, and Lee decided to put him out of his misery.
“Now let us run some youthful laps around the village!”

Lee bounded ahead, but slowed to allow Gaara to fall into step beside him, legs bucking with the first few steps. By the time they returned to the training grounds after the first lap the sun was rising over the trees and Gaara’s red hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat, a dark patch dampening the back of his tunic.

“That was an excellent start for today,” Lee said, barely winded.

“This was just the warm-up?” Gaara asked between breaths, hands on his knees.

“Well,” Lee wondered how best to put it, “It took a little longer than I expected this morning but perhaps we can use the first few sessions to focus on conditioning before moving into the more technical aspects of taijutsu. I wouldn’t want you to be late for your meetings.” That sounded diplomatic enough.

From behind his mess of red hair, Lee swore he heard Gaara let out a low chuckle.

The Nara household was awake by the time they returned, and Temari insisted that Lee stay for breakfast while Gaara got cleaned up (Lee had barely broken a sweat so there wasn’t much need for him to change). She made no comment about her brother’s exhausted appearance as he silently passed towards the guest room.

“God Lee, what did you do to him?” Shikamaru asked once Gaara was out of earshot.

Lee blushed defensively, “It was just my usual routine!”

“Gaara has always been a long range fighter,” Temari said by way of explanation, placing a bowl of rice in front of Lee with one hand, Shikadai in her other arm. “Kankurou and I were taught basic combat at the academy, but Gaara never had formal training.”

“I am sorry, I did not consider that!”

“It’s good for him to be challenged once in a while.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Shikamaru said with a smirk, getting up from the table. “I’m off,” he said, kissing both Temari and Shikadai on the cheek. Lee averted his eyes to his bowl.

“Here Lee, would you mind holding him for a moment?” Temari asked after Shikamaru was out the door, thrusting Shikadai into his arms. “I need to get the laundry going. You have no idea how many clothes this kid goes through.”

Lee was about to protest but Temari had already disappeared down the hall. Lee and Shikadai stared at each other for a moment, each not quite sure what to make of the other.

“Hello Shikadai,” Lee said, “I’m Lee, it is nice to meet you.”

Shikadai stared up at him from Lee’s lap, one chubby hand in his mouth.

“Are you going to grow up to be a shinobi just like your parents?”

“Thhhhhbbbt.”

“Is that so?”

“Baaa!”
“Hokage, really? You are going to have to work hard to get there but I bet you are really strong already.”

Lee softly pinched Shikadai’s chubby arm.

“Oh wow, you must work out!”

“You’re good with him.”

Lee whipped around, a blush colouring his cheeks at being caught having a one-sided conversation with a baby by the leader of a prominent nation. Gaara sat down at the table and eyed Lee curiously. His hair was wet but still managed to fall into perfectly tousled peaks.

“Gaara, would you like anything to eat?” Temari asked, returning from down the hall.

“Just tea is fine,” He said, arms shaking as he poured himself a cup.

“But Gaara!” Lee exclaimed,” You must eat something after a workout!”

“I don’t normally eat in the mornings.”

“A balanced diet is an important part of a well-rounded taijutsu regimen! You need protein to fuel your muscles! Tell him Shikadai!”

The baby looked at his uncle from across the table with wide, innocent eyes and blew a large spit bubble. Temari smirked from the doorway, watching the showdown.

Gaara narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps something small.”

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Later that day, Gaara safely back with the Naras, Lee stood outside 23 Senju Street, building up the courage to knock on the door. He nervously clutched the bouquet of sunflowers he’d picked up on the way over, hoping it was a good enough hostess gift, as he wasn’t quite sure what one should bring when meeting the potential bearer of one’s child.

Letting out a forceful exhale, he knocked firmly on the door. No turning back now.

He heard a patter of running feet and the door creaked open a crack, two small faces with big blue eyes appearing in the opening.

“Um, hello,” Lee said, tilting his head to one side.

“Are you here to see Mama?” The older girl, probably around eight years old, asked, the younger boy hiding behind her.

Lee bent down slightly to address her.

“I think so, could you get her for me?”

“Soari! Koi-chan! What have I told you about answering the door without me?”
The door finally opened all the way to a woman with loose brown curls and freckles across her nose, wiping her hands on a pink and yellow apron.

“I’m so sorry about that, please come in! You must be Lee.”

Lee stepped into the small entryway and handed her the flowers.

“It is very nice to meet you Hidetsu-san!” He said smiling nervously, “Thank you for having me to your home!”

“Oh how lovely! And please, call me Mai. Saori, why don’t you put these in the nice blue vase.”

The girl grabbed the bouquet in both arms and ran down the hall, intent on her task. The younger boy clung to his mother’s apron, still staring shyly up at Lee. He had the same brown curls as his mother, tousled around his head like a dandelion.

Mai led Lee down the hallway to a brightly lit living room scattered with toys and books. She motioned for Lee to take a seat on the couch and offered him a cup of tea from the pot steaming on the coffee table. The boy clambered into her lap as she sat opposite Lee, still unsure about their new guest. The young girl brought the sunflowers nestled in a thick blue ceramic vase, carefully placing them on the table, the flowers seeming to fit perfectly in the warm, cheerful room.

“Koi-chan, why don’t you play with your sister while I talk to Lee-san. I bet she’d play shinobi with you if you ask nicely.”

Reluctantly, the boy climbed down off the couch and joined his sister on the rug with a set of shinobi soldiers.

“Well,” Mai exhaled, turning back to Lee, “You must have a million questions.”

Lee laughed nervously, “I have barely had time to process that this is actually happening!”

“Well feel free to ask me anything, I’ve done this twice before,” she said reassuringly. “Why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself. You’re a shinobi?”

Lee told her all about Gai-sensei and his teammates, and asked Mai about herself. He learned that her husband, Hiro, was also a shinobi, working in the Hokage’s office, and that Saori was excited to begin at the academy that fall, although Koichi, only four, wanted her to stay home so she could play with him.

“So what made you choose surrogacy?” Mai asked, taking a sip of her tea

Lee furrowed his brows. “I was an orphan so I have wanted a family for as long as I can remember. I have Gai-sensei, and Neji and Tenten now, of course, but it still felt like there was something missing.”

“And you didn’t want to wait until you found somebody to share it with?”

Lee looked down at the mug in his hands. “I’m not very lucky in love.”

There was a brief silence before Lee cleared his throat and changed the subject. “So you have been a surrogate twice before?”

“Yes, and it was an amazing experience both times and I still keep in touch with the families. Hiro and I struggled with infertility when we were first married, so once we were finally able to have
children we wanted to be able to help others would couldn’t. There’s nothing more amazing than giving a baby to someone who’s wanted one for so long.”

Mai smiled, and looked over at her children playing.

“I think this will be my last pregnancy though, I’m almost past the age range that the agency prefers. If you’d like to work with me of course.”

Lee nodded enthusiastically. “I would be honoured if you would help me Mai-san! It would mean so much!”

Mai smiled at him, her eyes crinkling.

“Wonderful! I would love to!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I’m hoping to update this every week or so since most of it is drafted already. Stay tuned!
Over the next week, Lee and Gaara fell into a comfortable routine of early morning taijutsu lessons, followed by breakfast at the Nara’s before Lee escorted Gaara to the Kage building.

After their initial session, Lee made sure to tame down his warm-ups so that Gaara could actually get through them, and began to teach him various fist and leg strikes. Eventually they would move on to sparring, but Lee wanted to focus to make sure they covered the basics first. Gaara was a dutiful student, watching Lee intently and following his form, with Lee giving small adjustments as needed.

“He is truly an excellent student!” Lee exclaimed to Temari at breakfast later that week. “And his fist positioning is much better than when we started. Gaara! Show Temari your fist!”

Temari smirked as Gaara sighed at Lee’s enthusiasm but held out his fist nonetheless.

“See! Almost perfect! Just remember to keep your wrist aligned!”

Lee reached out and held Gaara’s fist in place while he lifted his elbow with the other. “Like this!”

At first Lee had been hesitant to do manual adjustments with Gaara, he was the Kazekage after all and it seemed a bit too familiar, even if they were friends. Lee knew that physical contact was still unusual for Gaara after a childhood of isolation, although he seemed to be getting much more comfortable with it. It was a lot easier, however, to get Gaara to feel the correct position, rather than Lee trying to describe it. For their first few training sessions Lee had gone so far as to ask permission before each adjustment, but after a while Gaara just told him not to bother. Now Gaara didn’t so much as flinch when Lee manoeuvred his arm and wrist, and calmly went back to his breakfast afterwards (another habit that Lee had engrained in him).

“Are you going to BBQ tonight too Lee?” Temari asked.
“Yes! Naruto invited a number of us to join him and Gaara for dinner, I’m looking forward to it! I hope I will not be late though, as I have an appointment at the medical centre to attend beforehand.”

“Nothing too serious I hope.”

Lee’s face turned red. “Oh no, just a check up! Have to stay healthy!”

Lee would be mortified if anyone found out what his appointment was actually for that afternoon.

After their initial introduction, Lee and Mai had met again at the agency to sign all the necessary paperwork and now all Lee had to do was provide his…contribution. It would then be combined with an egg from an anonymous donor and the viable embryo would be implanted in Mai’s uterus. Dr. Morita had explained it as a completely medical process, but it was hard to keep in mind when Lee knew he would be doing that in the middle of a busy medical office.

Trying to put the thought from his mind, Lee quickly inhaled the rest of his breakfast and stood up from the table.

“Thank you again for breakfast Temari-san, we should get going if we are to be on time.”

Gaara nodded and followed Lee out the door, donning his hat.

“Which way would you like to go today Gaara-san?” Lee asked. He had been alternating their routes to the Kage building a little each day so that Gaara could see more of the village on their morning walk. It probably wasn’t necessary but Lee though the change of scenery was nicer than taking the same streets all the time.

“Whichever you’d like.” If Gaara minded the deviations, he never let on.

“Very well, to the right it is!”

Lee led them on a meandering route through one of the residential areas before turning back onto one of the radial main streets that led to the Kage building, the stone faces carved into the rock visible in the distance. Market stores were just beginning to open for the morning, entrances thrown wide to the morning sun as they set up their stands. They were just about to pass a produce stand
when a female voice called out.

“Irasshaimase! Would you like to try a sample of- Lee!”

Lee turned his head at the sound of his name and immediately recognized the black-haired girl in the apron.

“Oh yes, very well, I have been keeping busy!”

Hanako glanced from Lee to Gaara, who had paused beside Lee and was silently taking in their conversation. Lee followed her gaze and gasped. “Forgive my manners! Hanako this is Sabaku no Gaara, Kazekage of Suna. Gaara-san this is Hanako Sato.”

“You as well,” He said in a monotone. “Lee, we should be going.”

“Yes of course! Forgive us Hanako-san but we are on a strict schedule!”

“Please have a sample of our peaches before you go Kazekage-sama,” Hanako insisted, holding out a plate. “They are the best in Konoha!”

Gaara delicately took a slice and bit into the soft flesh, giving a slight nod before turning back towards the main road.
“Good to see you again Hanako-san!” Lee called as he jogged to catch up with Gaara.

“I am sorry for the delay, I should not have stopped,” he said, falling into step beside him again.

“Friend of yours?” Gaara asked, gaze forward.

“We actually went on a date a few weeks ago. Tenten set us up.”

Gaara hummed. “How did it go?”

“Unfortunately I am not her type,” Lee replied. “But she seemed nice.”

“How could she tell after only meeting you once?” Gaara asked, frowning.

Lee thought how best to respond. He doubted Gaara had much experience with dating and how cutthroat it could be. “Well, some girls have certain preferences about looks.” Lee smiled and gave him a thumbs up. “Do not worry though, there are plenty of fish in the sea!”

Gaara scowled. “That’s ridiculous.”

Lee wasn’t sure if he was referring to girls’ preferences or the number of available singles in the world so he stayed silent, the two continuing down the street until the Kage building loomed in front of them.

“I’m sure you could do better,” Gaara said, breaking the silence as they began climbing the stairs to the entrance. “Besides, her peaches were watery.”
“Rock Lee.”

Lee nervously stood up from the hard plastic chair. It was later that afternoon and he was at the fertility clinic for his appointment after leaving Gaara with Naruto. He felt like the eyes of everyone in the waiting room were watching him, as he followed the nurse down the hall, as if they could all tell exactly what he was here to do.

“Here’s the cup for you to collect your sample,” the nurse said matter-of-factly, leading Lee to a small room and handing him a plastic container. She didn’t seem to care that Lee was internally combusting with embarrassment, his face bright red.

“Take as much time as you need and then give it to me when you’re done.”

She closed the door behind him and he stood for a moment surveying the room. It was just like any other medical room he’d seen before; there was a exam table covered with paper, a uncomfortable looking chair, and a small counter with a sink. He could almost imagine he was just in for his annual physical if it wasn’t for the stack of pornographic magazines and tube of lubricant on the counter.

Setting his cup aside for the moment, Lee removed his jounin and carefully sat on the edge of the table, the thin paper crumpling beneath him loudly. This was for the baby, he reminded himself, unzipping his bodysuit and taking it off to the waist. It wasn’t as if Lee had never done this before, it just wasn’t something he did very often. Most feelings of frustration could usually be dealt with by a few vigorous laps around the village, however, on the rare occasion that didn’t work, he could depend on his imagination to conjure up a familiar fantasy.

Closing his eyes and letting the exam room fade away, Lee imagined himself back at his own apartment and let himself feel the weight of two arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him close. Slender fingers tangled in his hair as soft lips brushed against his. Lee had never actually kissed anyone before, but he could imagine that it would be soft and warm, breaths ghosting over each other’s mouths.

When he was younger and first figuring things out he had tried thinking about Sakura, but it had always felt wrong somehow. Even now he couldn’t bring even himself to think about any of the girls he’d be on dates with, there was always just a figure that never seemed to come into focus. They had no distinctive features, just lips and hands and breath that wanted only him.
Lee imagined the kiss growing deeper, a hot tongue pressing against his as their breaths grew faster. Then the lips would trail down, tongue pressing and sucking at the pulse point beneath his jaw and down his neck. He could almost feel the hands slide down from his neck to his back, fingers dancing along his spine before coming around to his stomach, feather-light touches dipping just beneath his waistband to tease him.

Lee felt a twinge from his groin as the imaginary hands dipped below and he reached into his jumpsuit to grasp himself. He began to stroke himself, the lips at his neck trailing lower, hot breath cooling the wet marks as they moved across his collar bone and down his chest.

He was fully hard now as the imaginary lips dipped lower, licking down his abdominals and meeting the hand that was stroking him. Lee sucked in an involuntary breath as a tongue traced a path up his base and a wet mouth closed softly around his tip. The mouth alternated between kissing and sucking, taking him in a little bit at a time with agonizing slowness and Lee stroked himself faster, letting his head fall forward. The tongue dragged itself along the underside of his shaft with each suck, flicking at the tip before the mouth took him in once again.

Lee’s mouth fell open, his breathing coming fast. He imagined the lips at his mouth again as a pair of thighs straddled his own. They lowered slowly and he imagined an enveloping tightness as he slid into that hot body. Lee could feel a familiar tightening low in his stomach as he imagined that body grinding down into him as he thrust, slender arms tight around his neck and a hot face buried in his shoulder. Just in time he remembered to grab the cup as sparks flashed behind his eyes and he came in a shuddering spasm.

He exhaled a long breath as his senses returned to him. A thin layer of sweat had gathered at his brow and at the base of his spine and he shivered as the building’s air conditioning hit his bare skin. He had thought that this process would take a lot longer due to his nerves, but he supposed it had been a while since he’d given in to this kind of release. He carefully screwed the cap onto the container and cleaned up, fastidiously washing his hands and redressing into his uniform.

He never thought that alone in a sterile room would have been the way he started his family, but then he supposed that beggars couldn’t be choosers. He handed his sample to the nurse at the front desk, emphatically avoiding eye contact, and hastily made his way out of the clinic.

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“Lee! You made it!”

Lee made his way through the restaurant to where Naruto, Kiba, and Gaara were already seated, sliding into the booth beside Gaara.

“Are you okay? Your face is all red,” Naruto asked, narrowing his eyes at Lee over his glass of beer.

“I am fine!” Lee said, a little too loudly, pouring himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table. “What have you been talking about?” He asked, trying to get the attention off of him before Naruto asked what he’d been doing.

“I was just asking Gaara when he was going to start popping out some kids.”

Lee choked on the water.

“What?! Naruto that is so inappropriate!”

Naruto shrugged, “I dunno, seems like everyone is settling down lately. Starting the new generation or whatever.”

Gaara fixed Naruto with one of his emotionless gazes.

“As Kazekage I have much more important things to take up my time at the moment.”

“Oh come on, you sure you don’t want a couple of red-headed rugrats running around? I bet there’s lots of girls in Suna who’d love to help you out with that!”

Naruto waggled his eyebrows and Lee noticed a slight flush colour Gaara’s pale cheeks.

“Besides, having kids is great! You should see Boruto these days, he’s sitting up on his own now and he’s finally sleeping through the night, thank god!”
“Like you ever had to get up with him, I bet that was all Hinata,” Kiba jibed.

“I get up!” Naruto protested. “Sometimes…”

“You think one is hard? Try six little ones all vying for your attention!”

“Akamaru’s puppies are not that same as babies Kiba!”

“They need just as much love and stimulation!”

“They poop on the floor!”

Lee chuckled. He missed hanging out with his friends like this. Now that everyone had families of their own it seemed like they only got together as a group on special occasions. He felt himself finally relaxing, the thoughts of the afternoon’s activities moving to the back of his mind.

“What about you Lee? You planning on a second date with that girl from a couple weeks ago?” Naruto asked.

“Uh…”

Lee was luckily saved from answering by Chouji and Shikamaru joining them.

“Shove over Lee, it’s BBQ time!”

Chouji slid into the small booth, propelling Lee abruptly into Gaara. Lee had been keeping a respectful space between himself and the Kazekage, but now with Chouji’s extra bulk their sides were pressed tightly against each other from shoulder to knee.

“S-Sorry,” Lee stammered, trying to angle his body to provide a little more space.
“It’s fine,” Gaara said in a low voice, although Lee could feel how tense he was.

It seemed like they would be stuck in their current position for a while, especially as the waitress began to take their orders. As he got sucked into the conversation around him, Lee tried to relax, but every shift or movement reminded him of their proximity.

Of course, Lee was a very physical person. He loved slinging an arm around his teammates, and he and Gai probably spent an unhealthy amount of time in tear-filled embraces, but this felt different somehow. Lee didn’t think he’d had this much sustained contact with another person ever before and it felt both comfortable and foreign.

Thankfully he felt Gaara relax a little after a while, his shoulder sinking slightly against Lee’s bicep and putting Lee’s mind at ease. He didn’t want Gaara to feel too claustrophobic.

When Chouji left to use the restroom, Lee shifted to give Gaara some space, but it felt suddenly strange. It was as if he one of his sides was suddenly colder than the other and he was almost glad when Chouji returned and pressed them against each other again.

***

The next week went by quickly. Lee and Gaara continued their usual routine of early morning training, and Lee felt that he was much improved since their first session, both in strength and stamina. As the day came when the Kazekage was to return to Suna, Lee made sure to write down a detailed training schedule for Gaara to continue on his training on his own.

“And make sure to focus on your alignment above all! Form first, then power, as Gai-sensei always says!”

“Thank you Lee, I’ve appreciated your help,” Gaara said giving Lee a small smile. “Until next time.”

Lee waved as Gaara and his security force passed through the gates to begin the three-day trip back
to Suna. He was sad to see Gaara go, he had gotten used to seeing him every day and it was strange to return to his apartment alone that morning.

After writing out his mission report, Lee thought an intensive training session would be just the thing get him back to his usual routine since he’d had to modify them lately for Gaara’s sake. He was just about to head out the door when the phone rang.

“Hello, this is Rock Lee.”

“Hi Lee, it’s Mai.”

“Ah, Mai-san! How are you? How did everything go?”

He clutched the phone, eager to hear about Mai’s experience over the last week. In addition to Lee’s appointment, Mai had gone in for a number of tests at the fertility clinic prior to the implantation of any viable embryos.

“I’m great! All my tests went well and they implanted the embryos a few days ago.”

“What!? Already!”

“Yep, and I wanted to give you a call because I just took a test and it looks like I’m pregnant!”

Lee nearly dropped the phone. He could feel a rush of hot tears fill his eyes as his heart began to pound.

“What?” He croaked.

“Congratulations Lee, you’re going to have a baby!”
“That was so amazing! You can see the head and the little arms and legs and everything!”

Mai smiled from beside Lee who was talking non-stop as they walked back from the clinic. It had been two months since she’d given Lee the good news and they’d just come from the first ultrasound. Lee had been in tears for the majority of the visit, ever since the technician showed them the fuzzy images of the developing fetus on the screen and the sound of the baby’s heartbeat filled the exam room. Lee was certainly one of the more emotional fathers that she’d dealt with as a surrogate, but it was incredibly endearing to see how freely Lee expressed his joy. Now he clutched the black and white printout the nurse had given him, looking at it every few moments as if he still didn’t believe it was real.

“It’s pretty amazing isn’t it?” She said. “I still remember my first ultrasound when I was pregnant with Saori. It’s so surreal to think there’s really a little person in there!”

Lee beamed, looking at the ultrasound image again. The fetus was about the size of a kidney bean now, and growing every day. Ever since Mai’s phone call he’d been trying to read everything he could about pregnancy and what to expect but he still couldn’t believe how amazing it was to actually see and hear his baby for the first time.

He was still reliving the moment when he heard someone call his name from down the street.

“Hey Lee!”

Lee looked up to see Tenten waving at him as she and Neji came out of a nearby shop. Lee quickly stuffed the photo into the pouch at his waist. Other than Gai (and consequently Kakashi), he hadn’t told anyone about his plans yet, at first because he wasn’t sure whether or not they would actually happen, and then when it became a reality, because he’d read that the first trimester was when something was most likely to go wrong, so he wanted to be absolutely sure before sharing the news.

“Oh, Tenten! Neji!” He greeted as they approached him. “What have you two been up to?”

“I was just picking up some more sealing scrolls, I’m running out,” Tenten said, indicating the bag she was holding. She glanced at Mai then back to Lee, a curious look on her face.

“Oh, ah, this is Mai Hidetsu, her husband Hiro is a chuunin in the Hokage’s office,” Lee explained nervously. “Mai, this is Tenten and Neji.”

“Hello,” Mai said with a smile. “You must be Lee’s teammates, I’ve heard so much about you!”

“We ran into each other and I was just walking her home!” Although it was half-true, Lee still couldn’t keep the tremor from his voice.

“Why are you hiding a photo in your pouch?” Neji asked, his pale eyes serious.
Lee blanched. “H-hey! No fair using byakugan!”

“Lee, you’re a horrible liar,” Tenten said folding her arms. “Even I can tell you’re hiding something.”

Lee panicked as his teammates stared him down. He had wanted to wait another month before he began telling people, but after seeing the ultrasound images it felt so much more real now. He glanced at Mai and then let out a deep breath.

“Mai is my, uh, surrogate…”

Both Tenten and Neji’s eyebrows raised.

“Your what?!”

“It’s still very early so I didn’t want to tell anyone yet but, here.”

Lee held out the ultrasound picture for his teammates to see.

Tenten’s eyes widened as she grabbed the photo. “That’s a baby!”

“Yes.”

She pointed to Mai’s stomach.

“In there.”

“Yes.”

“That’s your baby.”

“Y-yes?” Lee gave Mai an apologetic look as she stood silently beside him, watching his teammates react to the news.

“W-when? H-how?” Tenten sputtered. “…Why?”

“It’s a little late for that Tenten,” Neji said.

Lee frowned and took the picture back gingerly, tucking it into his vest. This was not the reaction he’d been imagining. Of course he expected a certain amount of surprise at first, but he hadn’t been prepared for that particular question.

“I’m sorry Tenten, I have to get Mai home. Could we talk about this later?”

“Lee…” Tenten said quietly as she and Neji watched Lee hurry down a side street, Mai putting a comforting hand on his back.

***

Lee wasn’t at all surprised to find Neji and Tenten sitting at his kitchen table when he got home a little while later. He should never have given them that spare key.

“Sit down Lee,” Tenten said gently, “We just want to talk.”
Lee sat opposite them, his expression firm.

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Lee sighed, scratching at the back of his neck. “I do not know, I though you might try to talk me out of it.”

“Of course we would have! This isn’t something you just decide to do on a whim Lee, raising a baby is a big deal! And raising one alone is even harder!”

“I know that,” Lee said, narrowing his eyes. “And it was not a whim, I talked to Gai-sensei about it.”

“Gai isn’t exactly one to give advice on having children,” Neji said.

Lee glared at him.

“Why did you need to pay a stranger to do this?” Tenten exclaimed. “If it didn’t work out with Hanako I have other friends I could set you up with! It’s like you’re just giving up!”

“Easy for you to say,” Lee muttered quietly.

“Oh, come on, don’t be like that.”

“You do not know what it is like!” Lee burst out. “I have never been on a second date in my life! Do you know how many times I have watched a girl’s face fall when they look at me? I am sick of it, and I am sick of waiting for my life to start! If I have to do it by myself then I will!”

“Lee-“

“No! You do not understand! You and Neji have each other, Gai-sensei has Kakashi, Sakura has Sasuke and Sarada, and everyone else seems to be happy but me!”

Lee pounded the table, wood splintering under his fist.

“I didn’t know you felt that way,” Tenten said quietly.

“Well you do now.” Lee didn’t meet her eyes. “Could you go please, I am tired.”

His teammates gave each other a concerned look before rising silently. Tenten paused at the doorway, sparing a final glance back at Lee before shutting the door quietly behind her.

***

Lee didn’t sleep well that night. Normally he slept like a rock, but that night he tossed and turned, going over his argument with Tenten and Neji again and again. He was ashamed that he’d let himself get riled up, but his teammates were the closest thing he had to a family and he valued their opinion.

He rolled over onto his back with a huff, trying to find a more comfortable position. It wasn’t like he was going doing something dangerous or stupid, this was a baby, something that should bring excitement and joy. He desperately hoped his teammates would come around, because as excited as
he was he knew he was going to need them; they would be his child’s aunt and uncle after all.

Lee rolled onto his side and gazed at the ultrasound photo that he’d propped up on his nightstand, just able to make out the fuzzy black and white image in the dark. There was so much that Lee had needed to overcome in his life, growing up without parents, his lack of ninjitsu or genjutsu, an injury that had almost cost him his life. This was first time that something had come so easily to him, and no matter what anyone said he just knew it was right. Lee sighed and closed his eyes, willing sleep to come.

***

The next day Lee joined Gai as he took Kakashi his lunch, something his sensei did frequently to make sure his husband actually ate something nutritious. Lee related his argument with Neji and Tenten to his sensei along the way, knowing that Gai’s insight always made him feel better.

Gai had been ecstatic when Lee had told him about the pregnancy, and had a much better reaction to the ultrasound picture than Neji and Tenten had, bursting into manly tears.

“Do not worry my boy,” Gai said as they entered the Hokage’s office, “I am sure they will come around eventually, just give them time.”

“Who will?” Kakashi asked, not looking up from his Icha Icha. Lee was always amazed at how much work Kakashi got done without ever seeming to work.

“Neji and Tenten,” Lee said, still feeling troubled.

“Just a youthful disagreement between teammates, it will soon blow over!” Gai boomed. “You simply need to keep busy in the meantime!”

Lee nodded. “Do you have any missions available Kakashi-san? I’ll take anything.”

Kakashi finally looked up from his book and was surprised to see Lee look so down. His normally bright eyes were ringed with dark circles and his lips were downturned in a frown.

“Actually, I do have one,” Kakashi mused. “I was going to assign Naruto but since you’re here it will save me some time. The Kazekage is arriving tomorrow to continue our discussions and will need an escort. It’s not much action but it’s something to do.”

“Gaara-san is visiting again?” Lee exclaimed, his face lighting up. “I would be honoured to escort him again! Thank you!”

Kakashi was glad to see the drawn look disappear from Lee’s face as he bounded from the room. It was always slightly unsettling when Lee or Gai was unhappy, and Kakashi was glad something as easy as a mission assignment could help.

“That was very nice of you rival,” Gai said, unpacking the two wrapped bentos from his lap. Kakashi stood and stretched before coming around to lean on the armrests of Gai’s wheelchair, bringing their faces close.

“I’m a nice guy,” He rumbled, pulling his mask down and greeting Gai properly.
Lee met the Suna party at the gates later the next day, arriving early and doing one-armed pushups to pass the time, much to the amusement of the guards on duty. Kankurou was joining Gaara this time, and Lee enthusiastically greeted both of them before escorting them to the Nara residence so they could recover from the journey.

Lee arrived back at the Nara residence early the next morning, joining the family for breakfast at Temari’s insistence.

“Look at how big you are!” Lee exclaimed as he noticed a now-five-month-old Shikadai in Kankurou’s lap.

“Yeah he’s growing like a weed,” Temari said pouring Lee a cup of tea. Gaara sat at the end of the table with a small bowl of miso soup, Lee’s breakfast habit seeming to have stuck.

“I know, I have so much catching up to do since Gaara got a whole two weeks of baby time without me last time!” Kankurou exclaimed. “This little guy’s gonna get confused about who his favourite uncle is!”

“You’re the one who agreed to that mission,” Gaara noted in his low voice. “I could have sent someone else.”

“Psh, you just wanted him all to yourself. Now I have to make up for lost time.” Kankurou addressed his nephew. “Can you say KAN-KU-ROU?”

Shikadai gave him a blank look before Temari snatched him from her brother’s grasp, plopping him in his highchair.

“How about DUMB-DUMB?” Temari asked her son, who let out a happy squeal.

“Just you wait, then you’ll be sorry,” Kankurou insisted, stretching lazily in his chair. “So Bowl Cut, I met up with Kiba for a drink last night. What’s this I hear about you knocking up some old lady?”

Lee choked, coughing on his tea and turning a bright crimson.

“Kankurou!” Temari smacked him over the head. “Don’t listen to him Lee, he’s an idiot.”

Lee looked down at the table, eyes wide. He had no idea how Kiba had found out, but then again news in Konoha travelled fast. He tried to put a smile on his face but it must not have been very convincing.

“Wait, you’re not serious?” Temari asked incredulously. Gaara stayed silent but Lee noticed his spoon had halted midway to his mouth.

“Well I would not consider Mai old, she is only 35.”

“Nice,” Kankurou said giving Lee a sly wink.

“NO! No, she’s my surrogate!” Lee exclaimed, his blush reaching his ears.

“Your what?” Kankurou’s face looked blank.
“Someone who carries a pregnancy for another person,” Temari explained. “Wow, Lee, I had no idea.”

“So wait, you knocked up some girl and she’s just going to give you the baby?” Kankurou asked, confused.

“It’s a medical procedure dumbass!” Temari snapped.

“Ooooohhh, so you just had to-“ Kankurou made a rude hand gesture and Temari smacked him again.

“Oh! Stop doing that!”

Lee looked like he wanted to be swallowed up by the earth. He could feel Gaara’s gaze on him from the end of the table but couldn’t bring himself to meet his eye.

“Well, congratulations I guess,” Temari said.

“Yeah, congrats. You made a baby without any of the fun-OW!”

“Uh, Thank you,” Lee said awkwardly. “Gaara-san, we should probably get going if you are ready. I will wait for you outside. Thank you again for breakfast Temari-san.”

Lee swiftly exited the house, sucking in a deep breath of cool morning air as it broke against his hot face. Gaara followed sedately a little later, clad in his robes with his hat hanging at his back.

“Shall we?” Lee said, attempting to regain some of his composure. Gaara hummed in agreement and they set off down the road in silence.

“I apologise for my brother,” Gaara said after a few minutes. “He’s prone to crassness.”

“It is alright, I know the situation is a bit unusual.” Lee kept up a brisk pace, continuing to avoid eye contact. He knew he shouldn’t feel embarrassed about the surrogacy, but then again Kankurou had just alluded to the more intimate details of the process.

“You don’t seem entirely pleased,” Gaara noted quietly.

“Oh no, I am incredibly excited!” Lee insisted. “I just had not expected it to be announced quite like this.” He paused. “And people have not been reacting to the news as I originally thought they would.”

Gaara stayed silent beside him, and Lee felt compelled to go on.

“Tenten and Neji think that I am being too rash, that I should have just waited for this to happen naturally.”

“What do you think?”

Lee sighed. “Maybe I am. But at the same time I feel like it is the right thing for me to do. And Mai has been lovely throughout the whole process so it does not feel quite as strange anymore.”

They continued walking, Lee finally slowing down, and Gaara spoke again.

“It must be very important to you if you’ve been willing to go this far already.”

“It is.” Lee finally glanced down to meet Gaara’s eyes. “Thank you.”
They walked in silence for the rest of the walk until they got to the Kage building.

“I’ve kept up with my training while I was away,” Gaara said as they climbed the stairs.

“Wonderful! Consistency and dedication is the key!” Lee exclaimed, glad for the change of subject.

“I’d like to continue our morning sessions if you still have the time.”

Lee beamed. “Of course! I’ll start working on a schedule tonight!”

Gaara gave Lee a small smile before donning his hat and entering the council chambers.

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“Shikamaru, how did you prepare when you were waiting for Shikadai to come?”

“Prepare?”

It was a few days later at breakfast after Lee and Gaara’s taijutsu session. Lee was impressed with how well Gaara was doing, he had obviously been practicing while back in Suna and Lee had moved him onto blocking and evasion techniques.

While Lee waited for Gaara to shower and change, he was attempting a game of shogi with Shikamaru. Shikadai sat in his father’s lap contently, and as a handicap, his father was letting the baby’s gestures dictate his moves. Lee was still losing terribly.

“Seriously Lee, you think this guy did anything?” Temari asked laughing. “You should have seen him change a diaper the first time, he had no idea what he was doing!”

“Eh, it’s too troublesome to worry about that sort of thing. You figure it out as you go,” Shikamaru said, taking another of Lee’s pieces.

“But I would like to at least know the basics before the baby is born!” Lee exclaimed. “I have not had a lot of practice with young children.”

“Well you’re more than welcome to babysit whenever you’d like,” Temari said sighing. “We haven’t had a night to ourselves in five months.”

“Excellent idea! What about tonight?” Lee asked eagerly.

Temari eyed him warily. “You really want to babysit?”

“Yes! It would be the perfect opportunity to learn!”

“O-Okay, I guess,” She said, glancing at Shikamaru who simply shrugged. “I suppose Gaara and Kankurou will be here if you need help with anything.”

“No-can-do’s-ville, babydoll,” Kankurou said, entering the room with Gaara close behind him. “I’m going out with some of the jounin.”

Temari scowled. “Well at least my ONE USEFUL BROTHER will be here if you have questions,”
She said loudly. Kankurou gave her the finger.

“Wonderful! I am looking forward to it!” Lee exclaimed.

Shikamaru shook his head at Lee’s enthusiasm and examined the shogi board before making one last move.

“Checkmate.”

***

That evening, Lee stuck around after escorting Gaara back to the Nara residence, glad that Temari and Shikamaru could have a night out together and eager to test his child care skills.

“Have fun, try to keep him alive,” Shikamaru said wryly, as he and Temari were heading out the door.

Temari rolled her eyes. “Ask Gaara if you need anything.”

“Please do not worry, I will make sure to take good care of him!” Lee gave an enthusiastic thumbs up, Shikadai in his other arm.

With that the door shut behind them, leaving Lee and Shikadai alone in the foyer. At the sight of both of his parents leaving, the normally content baby immediately began to cry.

Lee bounced him as he’d seen other people do, trying to soothe him with soft words.

“Do not worry Shikadai, Mommy and Daddy will be back soon. But for now you have your Uncle Gaara here, and me, Rock Lee!” Lee held the baby up and gave him a wide grin, which only seemed to make him cry harder.

“He’s probably hungry,” Gaara said calmly from the table where he was reading over some scrolls. “He usually eats around this time.”

“What does he normally eat?” Lee asked, continuing to bounce the fussy child.

Gaara looked up from his work. “Temari usually gives him some pureed vegetables for dinner and then a bottle before bed. They should both be in the fridge.”

Lee grabbed a small container of yellow mush and the smallest spoon he’d ever seen with one hand, continuing to bounce Shikadai with the other.

“Ok! Let us see what we have here,” Lee said, strapping the baby into his high chair and opening the container. “Mmm, looks delicious!”

Gaara glanced up at Lee who was speaking half to himself and half to Shikadai, offering him a spoonful of the puree. Shikadai turned his head as the spoon came near, and again when Lee tried the other side. Frowning, Lee tried once more, only for Shikadai to squeal and throw his hands up in defiance, sending the mush flying all over Lee’s face. Lee blinked as a yellow glob dripped between his eyes and Gaara let out a sudden exhale through his nose, the closest to a laugh Lee had ever heard him make.
“I will be right back,” Lee said, retreating into the kitchen to clean himself off. After wiping his face and cleaning what he could out of his hair, Lee paused in the doorway at the sight before him.

Shikadai stared raptly at Gaara, who had retrieved the abandoned spoon and was feeding him slowly. Gaara’s mouth opened slightly as he offered each spoonful, closing with a low mmm each time it was accepted. Lee had seen Gaara with Shikadai before, but never one-on-one, and he looked surprisingly natural with his nephew.

Noticing he was being watched, Gaara straightened up and cleared his throat, a slight blush colouring his cheeks.

“He imitates facial expressions.”

“Oh! I will have to try that!”

Lee took the tiny spoon from Gaara and settled in front of Shikadai with renewed determination. He offered the baby a spoonful of puree again, opening his mouth unnaturally wide. When Shikadai opened his mouth in response, Lee slipped the spoon in and clamped his mouth shut, the baby doing the same.

“It worked!” Lee exclaimed. Gaara nodded silently, going back to his scrolls.

His new technique mastered, Lee finished the feeding and the rest of the evening continued with relative ease. Lee spent the majority of the night down on the living room floor with Shikadai, playing with his various toys or lifting him up in the air, a game that Shikadai enjoyed immensely and caused him to let out high pitched giggles. Changing a baby was certainly an experience Lee had not been prepared for, he had no idea that something so small could make such a huge mess, but he got through it thankfully without mishap.

Around eight o’clock Shikadai let out a big yawn, rubbing his tiny fists against his eyes. Sensing it was time for his bedtime feeding, Lee warmed a bottle and returned to the table where Gaara had been silently working for most of the night.

“It’s easier if you hold him,” Gaara said without looking up, as Lee was about to place Shikadai into his high chair.

“Excellent, thank you for the tip!”

Lee settled himself into one of the armchairs, cradling the baby on his back and offering him the bottle, which he took eagerly. Shikadai gazed up at Lee as he suckled, and Lee smiled, unable to tear his eyes away from the adorable sight. He felt his heart tighten as he realized that he would be doing this with his own baby soon. Even if Tenten and Neji couldn’t understand his decision, this feeling was reason enough.

After a little while Shikadai’s eyes began to droop and Lee watched as he finally fell asleep. He knew he should probably get up and put him in his crib, but Lee felt like holding the warm sleeping bundle just a little longer. He placed the finished bottle on a side table and settled into the chair more comfortably, unable to wipe the smile from his face.

“-Lee.”

Lee’s eyes snapped open at the low voice. He didn’t know when he’d fallen asleep, but a glance down saw that Shikadai was thankfully still sleeping quietly in his arms.

“You should go home,” Gaara said softly. He bent down and eased his arms between Shikadai and
Lee, carefully transferring the sleeping infant. His face was close to Lee’s, red hair brushing his nose, and Lee could feel his heart beating fast in his chest, although that could have been from waking so suddenly.

“I am so sorry! I did not mean to fall asleep,” Lee whispered over Gaara’s head.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Gaara lifted Shikadai into his arms and disappeared down the hall as Lee extracted himself from the armchair, shaking one arm that had fallen asleep. It was later than he’d thought and tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes from his unintentional nap.

“Are you sure you do not want me to stay in case he wakes up?” Lee asked as Gaara returned, switching the monitor in his hand on and setting it on the table.

“I doubt he will, and Temari and Shikamaru will be home soon. Go get some rest.”

Lee furrowed his brow, unsure.

“Don’t worry, you did well,” Gaara said with a small smile.

Lee blushed at the compliment.

“Thank you. Well goodnight then, I will see you in the morning?”

Gaara nodded, sitting back down to his work. “Goodnight Lee.”

***

Since the night had gone so well, Lee offered to babysit Shikadai once a week to continue honing his skills and give Temari and Shikamaru a regular date night. Between that, the usual breakfasts after taijutsu, and escorting Gaara to and from meetings, Lee felt like he was practically living at the Nara’s.

He was on his way back to his apartment one day when he saw Tenten standing outside, seemingly waiting for him.

“Hello Tenten,” Lee said coolly as he approached his building, not bothering to stop.

“Lee please, I need to talk to you.”

Lee paused as Tenten grabbed his arm. He’d been avoiding his teammates, still sour about their fight.

“Lee, I’m so sorry, I never should have said those things! I was just surprised and worried, you know how much Neji and I care about you.”

Lee looked down into her eyes and felt his resolve crack.

“I know you may not understand my reasons, but I am going to need your support more than ever!” He said, tears pricking the corners of his eyes.

“I know! I’m so sorry, I just want you to be happy!” Tenten threw her arms around Lee’s neck and he hugged her back in relief.
“Thank you.”

Tenten pulled back, after a moment and both of them wiped their eyes. “We wanted to make sure you know how much we love you, so Neji and I have a surprise for you.”

Tenten grabbed Lee’s hand and pulled him up the stairs to his apartment.

“Go ahead,” she said, motioning to the door.

Lee turned the knob suspiciously, easing the door open.

“SURPRISE!!!”

Lee’s eyes opened wide at the number of people crowded into his tiny apartment. A banner with a blow up of the ultrasound photo hung from his kitchen ceiling, a painted pair of legwarmers and a thick set of eyebrows added, with “Welcome Baby Lee!” in giant letters.

“Wh-what is this?”

“Your baby shower of course!” Tenten said, pulling him into the room. “Babies need lots of stuff so I started asking around and then this just sort of happened.”

There was baby paraphernalia everywhere, hand-me-downs from whoever could spare it and a stack of wrapped gifts in the middle of the living room. His kitchen table had been taken over with drinks and snacks, and his friends milled about with their children, chatting to each other. Further in he saw Mai and her husband talking with Gai, and he had to sidestep Saori and Koichi as they ran around chasing each other.

“Congratulations Lee!” Hinata said, as he passed.

“If you have any questions don’t hesitate to ask,” said Sakura, giving Lee a hug.

“Thank you so much everyone,” Lee said tears in his eyes again as Tenten sat him down on the couch.

“Well,” she said, handing him a colourfully wrapped package. “They say it takes a village.”
“Thanks so much Lee, you’ve been a big help.”

“It is my pleasure Mai-san,” Lee said, placing two big bags of groceries down on the kitchen counter. “It is the least I can do! Plus I would not want you lifting anything too heavy.”

At 5 months pregnant, with two small children to look after, and her husband often away on missions, Lee had been visiting Mai at least once a week, wanting to be fully involved in the pregnancy and help out whenever he could.

“Lee-san, look!” Saori exclaimed, running over to him. She put a leaf to her forehead and scrunched her face in concentration, keeping it in place for a moment before it fluttered towards the ground. Saori grinned triumphantly, catching the leaf in mid-air. She had been attending her first year at the academy for the past four months and was eager to show off her newly acquired skills.

“Wow! Way to go! Learning to control your chakra is really hard!”

“Shino–sensei says that once I can get the leaf to stay on for a full minute I can start learning henge no jutsu!”

“Well if you make sure to practice every day I bet you will get there in no time!”

Lee remembered how eager to learn he had been at her age, although she would probably have a considerably easier time than he did. Saori ran off to keep practicing while her younger brother tugged at Lee’s hand.

“Lee-san! Come draw with me!”

Mai chucked as Lee allowed himself to be dragged into the living room and sat at a tiny plastic table covered with paper and crayons. It was pretty amusing to see him perched on the tiny chair, but he didn’t seem to mind as Koichi explained his latest scribble to him.

After putting away the groceries Mai sank down on the couch with a sigh, putting her slippered feet up on the coffee table.

“How have you been feeling?” Lee asked.

“Mostly just tired. The baby’s started kicking though!”

“Really!” Lee exclaimed.

“It’s actually kicking now if you’d like to feel it.”

Lee leapt up from the tiny table, his face beaming.

As he sat down next to Mai she took his hand and placed it on the side of her swollen stomach. Lee held his hand still feeling for any signs of movement. After a moment there was a small flutter beneath the fabric of Mai’s shirt, and Lee looked at her in amazement.
“Pretty cool huh?” She said, smiling.

Lee could only nod, tears filling his eyes as he felt another small twitch.

“Did you want to know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

Lee removed his hand at the sudden question. “Do you know what it is?”

“Not yet, but I could find out at the next ultrasound if you’d like.”

Lee thought for a moment. “I think I would like to be surprised,” he said finally, nodding to himself. “I do not have a preference as long as it is healthy.”

Mai smiled at him. “It’ll be all the more exciting!”

Lee nodded enthusiastically. Boy or girl, he knew he would love his child with everything in his heart.

“Lee-san!” Saori said, clambering onto the couch next to him and breaking him out of his daze. “Do you go on missions like Papa does?”

“Yes, in fact Hokage-sama gave me a mission just this morning!”

“What is it?” Saori eyes were round as she eagerly awaited a new tale of ninja life.

“The Kazekage has requested me as his escort on his visit to Konoha this week!” Lee said proudly.

Saori looked unimpressed. “That sounds boring.”

“Saori! That’s not nice!” Mai scolded.

“But you don’t get to fight any bad guys or explore any hidden villages!” Saori protested.

“True,” Lee said, “But helping to promote peace between villages is part of the shinobi code too. It is a big honour to assist the Kazekage while he’s here.”

“I guess.” Her interest diminished, Saori joined her brother to draw a much more interesting missions than Lee’s.

“You’ve been escorting the Kazekage a lot lately,” Mai said. “What is this, his third visit?”

“Yes, he and Hokage-sama are discussing an important development for both our villages.”

Lee had been extremely flattered that Gaara had specifically requested him this time, and was looking forward to the Kazekage’s arrival. Lee found that he was starting to miss Gaara when he wasn’t in Konoha, feeling a little pang in his chest when he thought of the redhead.

“And you don’t mind the assignments? You seem like the type of person who’d prefer a bit more action.”

“Oh no! Gaara-san and I are good friends, I very much look forward to his visits! In fact I’ve been working on a new taijutsu regimen for our training sessions!”

Mai seemed surprised. “You must spend a lot of time together.”

Lee smiled. “Yes, it is very nice! In fact, I had better get down to the gate, he should be arriving
soon.”

“Of course, don’t let me keep you.” Mai started to get up.

“No, no, please do not get up! I will try to come by again as soon as I can!”

With that Lee made his way out and towards Konoha’s main gate, the memory of his child’s tiny kicks and the prospect of seeing Gaara again cementing a giant smile on his face.

***

The group from Suna was slated to arrive by late afternoon, but by midnight there was still no sign of them. A thick cover of rainclouds had rolled in and the sky had opened up as the sun went down, drenching the village in a cold winter downpour.

Lee was worried. He knew that the travel time between the two villages could vary, but what if something had happened. The shinobi world had been at peace since the end of the war and Gaara was fully capable of defending himself (the ANBU that accompanied him were mostly for show), but he was still a prominent political figure. Out in the open and away from his village would be the perfect time for an assassination attempt.

Lee was about to suggest they send out a group to look for them when he heard the sound of footsteps amongst the rain and a group of sodden Suna shinobi trudged through the gates, some being supported by their comrades.

“Gaara, Kankurou-san, are you alright?” Lee asked rushing forward to meet them with a parasol.

“That trip sucked balls,” Kankurou said, wiping the rain from his already streaked face. In the lantern light both he and Gaara’s faces were drawn, the rings around Gaara’s eyes even darker than normal, and their clothes were drenched, sticking heavily to their bodies.

“What happened?” Lee asked, holding the parasol over their heads as the rain began to soak into his clothes as well.

“Fucking missing-nin got the jump on us as soon as we entered this godforsaken country and it’s been pissing rain ever since!” Kankurou was even more brusque than usual, pulling his hood off and wringing it out. Beside him Gaara remained withdrawn, staring straight ahead as they walked.

“Is everyone alright?” Lee asked, concerned.

“Oh we’re great!” Kankurou exclaimed sarcastically. “Two of our guard are injured, but that’s nothing like what I’m going to do to your Hokage when I show him where he can shove his so-called border patrol-“

“Kankurou!” Gaara silenced his brother with a sharp tone that Lee had never heard from him before.

“Sorry,” Kankurou said lowly.

The rest of the walk was tense and silent except for the sound of rain beating on the parasol. Lee walked the brothers to the door of the Nara residence and rang the bell, standing quietly behind
them before it opened.

“Where have you been?” Temari asked, a look of concern on her face as she took in her brothers’ appearances.

Don’t ask,” Kankurou said as he followed Gaara inside without so much as a glance back.

Temari shared a troubled look with Lee before mouthing a thanks as she closed the door.

***

Lee hesitated for a moment before ringing the bell again the next morning. It had finally stopped raining, but there was still a damp chill in the air and the ground was thick with water.

“Sorry Lee, we should have sent you a message,” Temari said, leading him into where Kankurou was huddled over a mug of steaming tea, a blanket pulled around his shoulders. Shikadai was in his highchair, attempting to direct a spoon towards his mouth with little success, and Gaara was nowhere to be seen.

“Gaara went with Shikamaru to see Kakashi alone early this morning. They’re postponing the talks for a day.”

“Oh of course,” Lee said, “You two must be exhausted from your trip.”

Kankurou snorted. “I have no idea how anyone lives here, I’ve never been so cold in my life.”

“Well you were both pretty soaked through when you got here,” Temari said. “Going from Suna to a Konoha winter in three days is a pretty big change.”

“Sorry if I was a dick last night,” Kankurou said to Lee.

“Language!” Temari reprimanded, although Shikadai seemed too concerned with his motor skills to have heard.

“I mean jerk, sorry I was a jerk last night Bowl Cut.”

“Do not worry about it, you were both tired, cold, and wet,” Lee said with a smile, “I probably would have acted the same under those circumstances.”

Kankurou chuckled, the idea of Lee ever being rude too farfetched to imagine, and pulled the blanket closer around himself. “God da-“

Temari shot him a glance.

“-ARN, it’s cold!”

“I think it’s just you,” Temari said, wiping Shikadai’s face.

“Gaara’s lucky he has those Kage robes for extra warmth, I might have to borrow them when he gets back.”

“You will do no such thing.”
“I have an idea,” Lee said suddenly. “Since you both have the day off, why don’t I take you and Gaara to the onsen this afternoon? You can warm up and relax, plus it is excellent for muscle recuperation!”

“That’s a great idea,” Temari said to her brother. “It’ll stop your whining.”

“Giant bathtub? I’m down. When do we leave?”

***

Konoha’s hot springs were on the southern edge of town, on the other side of the Naka river. In the cool weather the steam rising from the surrounding waters created a low haze that carried a distinctive mineral smell through the air.

Gaara had reluctantly agreed to the outing, but both he and Kankurou were still fairly miserable on the walk over, arms crossed over their chests to keep out the chill.

Lee smiled, as they entered the warm building, glad he’d thought of a way to lift their spirits, and looking forward to it himself. He’d been pushing himself in the past few weeks of training and his muscles could use the soak.

He led them through to the men’s area, and handed out a large and small towel each.

“So what, we just strip and hop in the pool?” Kankurou asked, eying the towels.

“Have you not been to an onsen before?” Lee asked, then immediately kicked himself. Suna was in the middle of a desert, of course they wouldn’t use such a precious resource like water for something recreational.

“You can put your clothes in one of these baskets while we are in and save the large towel for drying off afterwards. You wash and rinse yourself in the first room and then you can go through to the outdoor pool to soak.” Lee explained. “The small towel is to, uh, cover yourself in between if you want.”

“Gotcha,” Kankurou said, beginning to strip off his shirt.

Lee met Gaara’s eyes briefly and gave a nervous smile before turning away and starting to undress. For some reason it wasn’t until this very moment that he realized he was basically going to be naked in front of Gaara. Who would also be naked. He’d been too preoccupied with what a good idea the hot springs were to actually think through the specifics. It shouldn’t be a big deal, he’d been to the onsen with his friends plenty of times, but for some reason he felt suddenly self-conscious.

Keeping his eyes firmly on the floor, Lee undressed and placed his folded clothes in a basket, then walked quickly to the wash area, keeping a firm hold on the towel that now seemed much smaller than he remembered. He made sure to choose a stool in the farthest corner and set about scrubbing himself in record time. Normally Lee enjoyed the ritual, but today he could only sense the two other men as they began washing nearby.

Dumping a bucket of warm water over himself to rinse away the suds, Lee grabbed his towel and speed walked to the outdoor pool. The chill in the air was a shock from the steam of the wash area,
but he waded quickly into the hot water and settled back onto one of the submerged stone ledges. He sank down to his neck and let out a long sigh, closing his eyes and enjoying the enveloping heat.

He opened his eyes just as Kankurou and Gaara emerged from inside, and couldn’t help but feel his gaze pulled to Gaara. The Kazekage always wore long pants and sleeves so it was strange to see the expanse of pale skin that contrasted so deeply with the dark red of his wet hair. Next to Kankurou’s tanned bulk, Gaara was slender and lean, with only the hint of muscle along his thin limbs. Perhaps the most mesmerizing though were the dark pools of his eyes, the piercing jade within meeting Lee’s.

Lee gave a jolt when he realized he was staring and quickly averted his eyes as Gaara and Kankurou removed their towels and stepped into the pool. Thankfully the minerals in the water made it milky enough that anything below was obscured, and the blush that spread across Lee’s face could simply be attributed to the heat.

“Oh sweet shinobi that’s good,” Kankurou exclaimed, settling in across from Lee. Gaara said nothing, but some of the tension seemed to leave his face as he sunk into the water near his brother.

They stayed like that for a while, each silently letting the heat of the water ease the tension from their bodies and warm their bones. Lee could already feel his muscles loosening and he stretched out his shoulders, feeling a satisfying crack as he rolled his neck to each side. He rested his elbows on the edge of the pool behind him, steam rising from his exposed skin, and he let his head loll back on the stone.

“Woah, those are some gnarly scars.”

Lee looked up at Kankurou’s comment and glanced down at his bare arms. He was so used to wearing his long-sleeved uniform and hand wraps that he sometimes forgot how they must look to other people. His right arm was criss-crossed with various marks from old injuries, but his left arm was an entire map of scar tissue, veins of pearly streaked skin running from shoulder to wrist.

Lee laughed, giving him a thumbs up. “Yes, taijutsu is a rough practice, but each one reminds me how far I have come!”

Lee’s expression fell when he noticed Gaara look away, the tension that had disappeared suddenly reappearing in his furrowed brows. Lee slipped his arms back into the water. His scars had never really bothered him but he knew they were a bit shocking to see for the first time, and probably brought up bad memories for Gaara. He silently cursed himself for ruining what was supposed to have been a way for Gaara to relax, not be reminded of his violent childhood.

The three men continued to soak in silence until Kankurou declared himself sufficiently warmed enough to face the Konoha winter again. After redressing, Kankurou chatted with Lee on the way back, seemingly back to his usual self, while Gaara remained withdrawn, walking slightly apart from the other two. Lee kept shooting him worried glances, wanted to say something to reassure him, but as soon as they returned to the Nara house Gaara disappeared down the hallway.

Giving Temari an excuse about confirming their taijutsu sessions, Lee tracked Gaara to a small room at the back of the house where he was tending to a collection of small plants, his head bowed.

“'I hope I am not disturbing you,” Lee said to announce himself.

Gaara shook his head minutely and Lee took a moment to look around the room. There were plants lining the shelves of the room, most ranging in colour from light to dark green, while some stood...
out in purples or fiery reds. The shapes of each plant differed from one to the next; some were short, some were tall, some had sharp buds while some were completely smooth, and each one seemed to have a complex organic geometry that Lee found fascinating.

“I’ve never seen plants like these,” Lee said, peering at one. It had short, triangular spikes that grew in a spiral out from the center and Lee gently touched one of the tips.

“They’re native to Suna,” Gaara said quietly without turning around. “I was hoping to plant them outside in the spring so Temari can have a reminder of home.” He paused. “Was there something you needed?”

Lee stood up from his examination of the strange plant. “I wanted to apologise.”

“What on earth do you have to be sorry for?”

“My scars, I did not mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset. At least not at you.” Gaara sounded suddenly very tired. “I’m the reason you have them in the first place, I should be the one apologising.”

“Yes, but that was years ago, and I already told you, I do not hold a grudge. I was trying just as hard to hit you!”

“I wasn’t just trying to just beat you though, I wanted to kill you. I almost did.”

Lee watched Gaara’s shoulders drop as he sighed.

“Sometimes I think I can never right all the wrongs that I did back then. I don’t know if I even deserve forgiveness,” Gaara said quietly.

Lee stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on Gaara’s shoulder. Gaara looked up at him with such a pained expression that it nearly broke Lee’s heart. He suddenly had an urge to wrap his arms around Gaara and make sure he never felt like that again.

“That person back then was not the real you. You have changed so much since then and have done so many things to be proud of. You never have to ask for forgiveness from me.”

Lee smiled softly at Gaara, a change from his usual toothy grin, and gave Gaara’s shoulder a small squeeze. Gaara looked back at him, intense guilt still apparent in his jade eyes, and for a moment he looked like he was about to say something. Instead he just shook his head and turned his attention back to the plant in his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Woohoo, we're over half way with both the story and the pregnancy! I actually just realized that there are the same number of chapters as gestational months and that makes me strangely happy as it was totally unintentional!

Thank you so much to everyone who’s commented or left kudos, it honestly makes my day and I really appreciate it!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay with this chapter, I had some technical difficulties that required me being without my computer for a week and having to buy a new laptop (Ugh). This chapter was also a beast to edit since past me decided not to draft whole sections of it...
Anyways, we should be back on track now! Enjoy!

Lee was sad to see Gaara return to Suna at the end of his trip. They didn’t discuss their conversation after the onsen and went back to their usual routine, but Lee couldn’t help but feel closer to Gaara now.

Luckily, Lee only had to wait a month before he was once again summoned to the Hokage’s office, now a familiar pattern a day or two before Gaara’s arrival, and his heart leapt with excitement. When he got to the Kage building, however, he was surprised to see Neji and Tenten waiting outside in the hall.

“What are you two doing here?” He asked, jogging up to them.

“Hokage-sama summoned us,” Tenten said. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Yes, but I thought-“

Lee was cut off as the door opened and Shizune stepped out.

“He’s ready for you now,” she said, gesturing for the three of them to enter.

Kakashi sat behind his desk in his white robes, leaning into a fist and looking bored.

“Hokage-sama,” they said, bowing slightly in front of him, Lee still confused.

“I have an urgent mission for the three of you,” Kakashi began, clasping his hands underneath his masked chin.

“A mission?” Lee asked, his thick eyebrows pulling together.

“Yes, there have been a number of attacks taking place along the borders of Fire Country by a band of missing-nin. Ever since the Kazekage and his party were attacked a month ago I’ve had scouts tracking them and it looks like they’ve holed up in Tea Country for the time being. We know the general area that they’re hiding but I need you three to find them and take them out.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama, we’ll prepare to leave right away.” Neji said. He and Tenten bowed again and turned to leave but Lee stayed planted in front of Kakashi.

“Isn’t the Kazekage due to arrive soon?”

“Yes, and this will be his last planned trip so I would like to assure him that this issue is being dealt with by the time he arrives tomorrow.”
“Will you not need me to escort him while he is here?” Lee protested.

“I’m sure Naruto will be glad to do it, they’re good friends. You three are the fastest team so I need this mission to be your priority.”

“But are you sure I cannot-“

“Lee,” Kakashi said sternly, his eyes narrowing. “This is not a discussion. You will act in the best interest of this village and go where you are needed. You’re a shinobi, not a cruise director.”

Lee flushed and bowed his head. “Forgive me Hokage-sama. I should not have spoken out of turn.”

“The three of you will leave tomorrow morning. Dismissed.”

***

After leaving the Hokage’s office, Lee, Neji, and Tenten made plans to meet at the gates early the next morning, and then went their separate ways to make their preparations for the mission.

Lee was ashamed for how he’d talked back to Kakashi, a ninja should never question orders from their Hokage. Although Lee was usually overly formal and polite, it was sometimes difficult to separate the Kakashi he saw lounging around at home with Gai and the Kakashi who was the leader of their village. In Lee’s concern over his new assignment he had momentarily forgotten himself and Kakashi had been right to scold him.

Lee couldn’t help but feel his heart sink at the thought that not only would this be Gaara’s last trip for a while, but Lee wouldn’t be here to say goodbye. It was a five day journey to Tea Country and who knows how long it would take to find the missing-nin.

Lee stopped by Mai’s house on his way home to let her know that he would be away for a while and to make sure there was nothing she needed before he left.

“I am sorry for the short notice Mai-san, but I was only just assigned today,” Lee said, looking a little worried. “Are you sure you will be alright?”

Mai chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m sure I can manage.”

The worry remained on Lee’s face however, which Mai found odd. Normally Lee was bouncing with energy and enthusiasm, but today there was a slump to his shoulders that usually wasn’t there.

“Are you not looking forward to your mission?” Mai asked.

Lee sighed. “Normally I would be but the Kazekage is arriving the same day I leave and I am not sure when I will be able to see him again.”

“Oh that’s too bad, I know you two are close.”

“Yes, I just wish I could have the chance to say a proper goodbye.”

Mai considered the young man in front of her. He really did look down. She was silently glad that Saori was at school and Koichi was napping so she could have a moment to talk to Lee alone.
“Lee, come sit with me for a moment,” Mai said, leading him over to the couch and sitting him down.

“Are you sure that’s all that’s bothering you?” She began.

“What do you mean?”

Mai considered her words for a moment, resting a hand on her swollen belly.

“We haven’t known each other for very long, but we’ve shared a lot in that time and I hope you know that you can talk to me if you want to.”

Lee looked confused.

“Forgive me if I’m wrong, but you just remind me a lot of myself back when Hiro and I were first dating and he was doing longer missions. I used to hate when he couldn’t tell me when he’d be back or have to rush off on a mission without much notice.”

“What?” Lee asked, eyes wide.

“I mean, you talk about Kazekage all the time, and you seem to spend all you time with him and his family while he’s here and then seem so down when he leaves. Maybe there are deeper feeling there.”

“No, no, no, we are just good friends!” Lee protested, his face turning red.

Mai eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then sighed. “I’m sorry, maybe it’s just these hormones making me read more into it. If you’re sure then forget I said anything. I should let you go, you probably have lots to do.”

“Yes, actually I should get going, I have to pack,” Lee said, getting up quickly.

He left Mai’s his face still tinged pink from her inference, but tried to push it to the back of his mind and focus on the mission to come.

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The next morning Lee met Neji and Tenten at the gates, each with a pack strapped to their back and dressed to travel.

“You guys ready?” Tenten asked. Neji nodded and Lee gave her a salute.

“Yosh!”

They took to the trees, leaping from branch to branch and staying within range of each other. It still felt a little strange setting out on a mission without Gai leading the way, but they were jounin now.

As they travelled Lee couldn’t help but let his mind wander back to the conversation he’d had with Mai the day before. He wasn’t exactly sure what made her think that there was something more than friendship between him and Gaara. Yes, they spent a lot of time together, and Lee enjoyed Gaara’s company, but the same could be said for any of his friends, male or female.
Lee didn’t have an issue with same sex relationships, he’d been overjoyed when Gai and Kakashi had finally announced their relationship and had bawled his eyes out at their small wedding, but Lee had never really thought to question his own orientation. He’d had his intense crush on Sakura as a teenager, and even after realizing that she would never feel the same way, Lee had only ever dated girls.

Lee had no idea what Gaara’s preferences were, he’d never known him to be in a relationship and it wasn’t exactly something you just asked the leader of a village. From what Lee had heard, love was a bit of a fraught subject for the Kazekage, despite the mark on his forehead.

The three rested briefly around midday to get something to eat and restore their energy, discussing the best strategy for finding the missing-nin once they got to Tea Country. After setting off one more, they had been travelling for an hour or so when Neji suddenly gestured for them to stop.

“There’s a group up ahead,” he said, his Byakugan activated.

Tenten drew a kunai as she and Neji reached out to feel the chakra signatures, something Lee was always at a disadvantage for.

“There’s some big chakras up there, we should be careful,” Tenten said.

“Do you think it is more missing-nin?” Lee whispered.

Perhaps a small force had stayed behind to ensure no one followed those who had fled to Tea Country. The three of them approached the unknown group carefully, moving silently through the trees in an attempt to remain unnoticed for as long as possible.

“Can you see them Neji?” Tenten asked quietly as they got closer.

Neji peered ahead, his pale eyes easily cutting through the surrounding forest to focus on his target. Lee could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins as he crouched low on a tree branch, ready to move at the first sign of danger.

After a moment Neji let out a breath and turned back to his teammates, his eyes returning to normal.

“It’s the Kazekage’s party, they must be taking this route to Konoha.”

Lee felt his chest tighten, the tension he had just been feeling morphing into something completely different.

“The Kazekage? We should say hello!”

“Lee wait!” Tenten cried, but Lee was already gone, flitting through the trees and dropping down in front of the Suna group in a matter of moments.

“Gaara-!”

A kunai appeared millimetres from his jugular, at the same time as Lee’s hand whipped up to grab the wrist of the ANBU who held it. Around him other kunais were drawn as the remaining ANBU moved to protect their Kazekage.

“Jeeze Lee,” Kankurou said. “Give us a heart attack why dontcha?”

“Oh, I am so sorry!” Lee apologised, laughing as he released the man behind him. “That probably
was not very smart.”

“Perhaps not,” Gaara said from behind his brother, calling off his guard with a wave of his hand and stepping forward. “What are you doing out here?”

“We are heading for Tea Country to take out the group that attacked you on your last journey,” Lee said as Neji and Tenten landed softly behind him.

Gaara’s brows furrowed slightly. “That is unfortunate timing.”

“Yes, I am sorry I will not be able to accompany you this time. I—” Lee paused, unsure what to say. Gaara’s eyes were locked on his and he felt his face grow hot under the scrutiny as Mai’s words echoed in his head. “I…enjoyed our taijutsu sessions very much.”

An unrecognizable expression flitted across Gaara’s face before returning to its usual neutrality.

“You won’t be missing much,” Kankurou drawled. “Just more meetings and then some stuffy gala so everyone can congratulate themselves while getting drunk.”

“I will be sad to miss it,” Lee said directing his words at Gaara.

“Lee, we shouldn’t linger,” Neji said from behind.

“Yes, of course! I am sorry but we must go!”

Gaara nodded. “Good luck.”

Something gnawed in the pit of Lee’s stomach as he realized that this would be the last time he would see Gaara for who knows how long. He hesitated for a moment before taking a step forward and pulling Gaara into a firm hug. Lee could feel Gaara tense up, and was about to pull away when he felt a pair of arms tentatively wrap around his torso.

Lee was a full six inches taller so he had to bend slightly, but Gaara seemed to fit perfectly against his shoulder. The red hair tickled his cheek, smelling faintly of dust, sweat, and something faintly herbal. It was over in a matter of moments, Lee stepping back and clearing his throat.

“I hope you will return to Konoha again soon,” He simply said, hoping his words would convey just how much he meant them as he, Neji and Tenten took once more to the trees.

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They made good time getting to Tea Country, mainly due to having to keep up with Lee’s lightening pace, no matter how many times Tenten asked him to slow down. He’d been lost in thought, his mind on their run-in with Gaara, and so he may have overdone it a bit.

Lee had been trying to grasp what he’d felt when he’d hugged Gaara. He hadn’t been planning on it, but for some reason it just seemed like the right thing to do in the moment. It hadn’t been the same as hugging Tenten or Neji, or even Gai-sensei; he’d felt a swooping in his chest that was exhilarating, and he hadn’t wanted it to end.

Before he probably would have just chocked it up to being overly emotional, but now he couldn’t help think that maybe Mai had been right. Maybe Lee did feel something that he hadn’t even
thought to consider. Holding Gaara like that had just felt so…right. If there was even a chance that Gaara felt the same thing, Lee had to know. He had to get back to Konoha before Gaara left.

The next week went by in a blur. Once they got to the area where the scouts thought the missing nin were hiding, the three split up to do a more detailed search. Knowing that time was not on his side, Lee picked up his pace, knowing that he could cover twice the amount of ground that Neji and Tenten could in the same amount of time.

He found their hideout on the third day of sweeping the area, and radioed Neji and Tenten his coordinates. The team of three made short work of the eight rogue ninja, Lee taking out four on his own after opening the first five gates. In retrospect it had probably been overkill, but he didn’t want to waste any time.

Lee, Neji, and Tenten passed through the Konoha gates four days later, a few hours after the sun had set, dirty and tired. Lee had tried to keep up the swift pace that they’d had on their way out to Tea Country, but the exhaustion from opening the gates had caught up with him. He only hoped that he had bought enough time.

“See, I told you we could get back in only four days!” Lee stated triumphantly, despite his shaking muscles.

Tenten merely shook her head, hands on her knees as she panted. Beside her, Neji’s usually cool face was beaded with sweat and he drew large breaths of air.

“Is the Kazekage still here?” Lee asked one of the perimeter guards, hope and dread fighting through his tense expression.

“Yeah, everyone’s at this gala thing at the Kage building to announce whatever it is they’ve been working on.”

Lee let out a breath of relief and his shoulders slumped forward. He’d done it, Gaara was still here. His vision began to swim and stumbled forward.

Neji put a steadying hand on his arm. “You didn’t have to push yourself so hard.”

Lee blinked and shook his head to clear the dizziness. “I am fine! And since we got back early, now we can all attend the gala!”

“Speak for yourself,” Tenten huffed. “All I’m doing tonight is taking a long shower and going to bed. You should too.”

“I would like to hear what Hokage-sama and the Kazekage have been working on for so long. I will see you both tomorrow to debrief!”

Lee was about to head towards the Kage building when Tenten grabbed the back of his vest.

“Uh Lee, don’t you think you might want to at least shower first?”

Lee flushed as he looked down at his dirty hand wraps and felt the damp patch of sweat down his back. None of them had changed clothes in days.

“Y-yes, a quick wash and then I will be on my way!”

Tenten eyed his current attire. “If you insist on going you might want to change into something a little nicer. It sounds kinda fancy.”
“Of course, thank you Tenten!” Lee cried taking off towards his apartment, his energy somehow renewed.

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Half an hour later Lee entered the main hall of the Kage building. His hair was still wet from his quick shower but he’d combed it back so hopefully it would look intentional. Lee only had one formal outfit, the rest of his wardrobe comprised primarily of his beloved jumpsuits, but he hoped it would suffice. He wore loose black trousers and a black, long-sleeved Tang jacket with gold embroidered dragons at the shoulder and hem.

Slipping quietly into the hall, Lee joined the crowd whose attention was focused on the raised platform at the front of the room. Kakashi was addressing the room, dressed in a black haori over a kimono in shades of grey and Gaara stood at his right, but instead of his usual dark red or black, he wore a deep teal tunic and trousers, with a long pale jade overcoat embroidered in shades of purple, green, and coral. Lee couldn’t tear his eyes away and barely registered what Kakashi was saying.

“-after many long months of negotiation and planning, the Kazekage and I are glad to announce the introduction of the international exchange program for academy students.”

The sound of applause broke Lee out of his reverie and he found himself clapping along with the crowd. His gaze was brought back to Gaara as the Kazekage continued the address.

“While the program will be limited to Konoha and Suna students for the meantime, we hope to expand the program in the future to other locations across the land.”

Gaara scanned the crowd as he spoke and stopped short when he noticed Lee. Lee smiled, giving him a small thumbs up. Gaara cleared his throat and continued.

“We hope that the sharing of cultures and teachings between nations will allow students to have a better understanding of their world and help to encourage peace above all.”

The room erupted in applause and Lee felt a surge of pride. Although much younger than his peers, Gaara exuded a natural sense of authority, and spoke well, his words powerful and inspiring. The crowd began to disperse, and as the Kages descended from the platform councillors gathered around to shake their hands. Lee lost sight of Gaara as the crowd closed around him, and stood awkwardly at the back of the room, unsure what to do next. He realized that past getting back to Konoha in time, he didn’t have a plan.

He felt his initial joy dwindle as reality came crashing down. Gaara was Kazekage and this was a political event, Lee couldn’t exactly take him aside and pour his heart out. Suddenly feeling very tired, Lee found an empty bench in a secluded area and sank down, elbows on his knees.

He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting there when he heard a low voice.

“I didn’t think I’d see you here.”

Lee looked up in surprise to see Gaara standing in front of him.

“May I join you?”
Lee nodded and shifted over as Gaara sat next to him, smoothing his silk coat underneath him. They were silent for a moment as they both looked out into the crowd.

“You look nice,” Gaara finally said.

“Thank you, so do you,” Lee said, flushing slightly. “I was only able to catch the end, but that was an excellent speech you gave. An exchange program will certainly be a great benefit for our villages!”

Gaara hummed, nodding, but didn’t respond further. After a moment he spoke softly.

“I hope you didn’t push yourself too hard to get back so early. Kakashi said you wouldn’t be back for another few days.”

Lee chuckled. “I suppose I am a little tired, but it was worth it to be able to attend tonight.”

“I’m glad.”

Lee could feel how close their hands were resting next to each other on the bench. It was almost a magnetic pull, and he tried not to think about how easy it would be to bring them together.

“I hope you had a good time with Naruto this week,” He said, nervously making conversation. Almost without thinking, his hand shifted, pinky finger twitching towards Gaara’s.

“It was not the same,” Gaara said slowly. “I have come to anticipate our time together.”

There was barely a centimeter between their fingers when Gaara spoke again.

“I…missed you.”

It was like an electric shock as their fingers finally touched, and Lee’s breath hitched. He let out a shaky breath, and shifted the edge of his hand gently against Gaara’s, revelling in the sensation.

“Gaara, I–“

“Gaara! Where the hell have you been!”

Lee and Gaara’s hands jumped apart as Naruto came bounding towards them.

“Kakashi needs you for some photo op or something,” he said. “And then I’m getting you drunk! My treat!”

“It’s an open bar,” Gaara said with thinly veiled annoyance. “And I doubt that would be wise.”

“Whatever, it’s the thought that counts! Lee, how about it? I wanna see the famous drunken fist!”

Lee blushed in embarrassment. Gaara glared at Naruto but rose reluctantly.

“I leave for Suna tomorrow,” he said, addressing Lee. “But perhaps we could have one final taijutsu session?”

Lee’s face fell at the thought of Gaara leaving, but he nodded.

“Tomorrow morning then.”

Gaara followed Naruto back into the crowd, glancing back and meeting Lee’s eyes once more.
Lee slammed his alarm off the next morning, blinking blearily in the early dawn light. He felt like he could have slept for a hundred years, but forced himself to get up when he thought of Gaara waiting for him.

As tired as he’d been from the mission, he’d found it hard to sleep after what had happened at the gala. He couldn’t stop thinking about the feeling of Gaara’s hand pressed against his, and what it meant. At least today Naruto wouldn’t be there to interrupt them. Lee still wasn’t sure what he was going to say to Gaara but he was sure it would come to him when the time was right.

Dressing swiftly, Lee made quick time to the Nara residence. His stomach did a little flip when he saw Gaara waiting outside for him as usual, but Gaara simply joined him and headed towards the training grounds. Lee kept up a steady nervous commentary, distinctly not mentioning the night before. It was almost impressive how long he could talk about the weather. Gaara only offered the occasional hum or nod in agreement.

They went through their usual warmup, Gaara now able to mostly keep up with Lee, having put on a bit of muscle since their first session.

“Ready?” Lee asked once they had finished, dropping into a fighting stance.

Gaara nodded and they were off.

Lee lunged at Gaara, delivering a flurry of basic punches that Gaara blocked easily before jumping away and aiming a roundhouse kick at Lee’s side. He could feel the ache in his overused muscles but pushed through.

Lee grabbed Gaara’s leg and used his momentum to send him flying, but Gaara landed on his feet and attacked again. He wasn’t as fast or as skilled as Lee, but by now they knew each other’s movements well, and could almost sense what the other was planning to do.

Lee dodged a punch, but Gaara rotated the same fist back at the elbow, his knuckles nearly connecting with Lee’s face. Lee swept Gaara’s feet out from under him with a spinning kick and Gaara’s back hit the ground hard, but he rolled away just missing a downward kick from Lee.

As tired as he was, Lee was enjoying himself, this give and take of movements that had become such an integral part of their routine while Gaara was in Konoha. Gaara had taken in everything that Lee had taught him over the past six months, and was doing better that Lee had expected, especially after their first session.

Lee evaded Gaara’s next lunge, grabbing and twisting his arm behind him and pinning his other arm to his side. Lee’s chest was pressed tight to Gaara’s back to keep him immobile and with Gaara’s hair in his face, Lee couldn’t help but be reminded of their meeting earlier that week.

He must have let his grip loosen for a fraction of a second, because the next thing he knew he was flying over Gaara’s shoulder and his back was slamming into the ground. Gaara had one of Lee’s wrists pinned above him, the other by the side of his face, Gaara’s forearm against his throat, knees on either side of Lee’s chest.

Lee could only pant in shock as he tried to struggle, but Gaara held him firm. Lee must have been
more tired that he’d thought to let his guard down so much, but it seemed Gaara had used that to his advantage.

“I win,” Gaara said, breathing hard, a small smile on his lips. Lee looked up at Gaara, black eyes meeting jade, and without thinking, leaned up and brought their lips together.

Gaara jerked back, eyes wide and staring and in an instant Lee rethought every interaction they’d ever had, kicking himself for being so impulsive.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted, scrambling to stand, propelling Gaara backwards onto the grass. Lee kept his gaze on the ground where he stood, unable to meet Gaara’s eyes as an awkward silence stretched between them.

“Sorry. I should go. Have a good trip back to Suna. Sorry.”

Without waiting for Gaara to respond, Lee turned and left hastily, leaving a speechless Gaara sprawled on the grass.
Lee didn’t see Gaara off at the gates after the sudden end of their training session. He couldn’t face him, couldn’t bear to see the expression on the Kazekage’s face that would likely be one of embarrassment, disgust, or both. In one moment of stupidity Lee had just ruined months of building their friendship.

Instead, Lee showered, wrote out his mission report, did laundry, and generally hid out at his apartment until he was sure that Gaara had left the village. He tried to put the memory out of his mind, but it was no use, and he cringed every time it replayed unbidden in his head. He attempted to turn it into a training exercise to test his mental strength. I will not think about this morning for ten minutes or I will do 500 pushups! By late afternoon his biceps were screaming but he didn’t feel any better.

Deciding he could do with a change of scenery and that it was finally safe to venture out, Lee headed over to see how Mai was doing.

“You’re back early,” She noted, ushering him into the living room. Saori and Koichi were over playing at a friend’s house so it was just the two of them.

“Yes, it ended up taking less time than we thought,” Lee fibbed, not going into exactly why a two-week mission had only taken him ten days. “How are you feeling?”

“This kid of yours is definitely going to be a taijutsu master, it’s been kicking me non-stop the last few days!”

Lee beamed at the thought of training with his little one, his son or daughter following in his footsteps. He had experience training someone else now, from his sessions with Gaara, which of course made him think of this morning and the image of Gaara recoiling from Lee. He must have cringed because Mai gave him an odd look.

“Are you alright? You didn’t injure yourself on the mission did you?”

“No, no, I am fine!” Lee tried to assure her.

“Tenten was right, you are a horrible liar.”

Lee sighed. “I just…did something really stupid.”

He told Mai the entire story, from realizing that he did actually have feelings for Gaara, racing through the mission to get back in time, the evening of the gala, and finally the events of that morning.

“I do not know what I was thinking!” Lee groaned, running his hands through his hair. Mai put a hand on his shoulder sympathetically.

“Oh Lee I’m so sorry, I never should have said anything.”

“No, you were right! It just seemed like maybe he felt the same, but obviously I completely misread things.”
Lee held his head in his hands, Mai still rubbing his shoulder.

“I do not know what to do,” He said sadly. “Even if Gaara does not feel the same way, his friendship means a lot to me and I am worried that I have ruined everything.”

“Then make sure he knows that.” Mai insisted. “Why don’t you write him a letter and tell him what you just told me. Let him know how much your friendship means to you and that you don’t want it to end. Sometimes it’s easier to be clear when you write things out.”

Lee considered the idea. He wasn’t the best writer but he truly wanted to apologise properly, since he’d all but run away that morning.

After assuring Mai that he would be back again soon to visit, Lee went for a long run around the village to clear his head, finally letting himself think about that morning and all the moments that had led up to it.

He really had thought that Gaara felt something towards him. He thought back to the little smiles Gaara gave him that softened his entire face and seemed to be just for Lee. Or the deep, intense stare that Lee couldn’t look away from, but felt like it was trying to convey something. Had Gaara not felt the electricity pass between them when their fingers met at the gala? Had Lee really just been imagining everything?

He couldn’t help but remember how Gaara’s lips had felt under his for that brief, wonderful moment. Lee had never kissed anyone before and while he’d always imagined his first kiss to be with a girl, this had felt strangely natural. Gaara’s lips had been warm and softer than he’d expected, and it would have been a perfect first kiss if not for the sudden recoiling.

Lee shook his head. He couldn’t keep thinking about that. No matter how he felt, he needed to make sure that Gaara knew that the kiss didn’t mean anything, and Lee could certainly control himself in the future, no matter how much it might hurt.

Lee got out ink and paper when he got home from his run, finally clear on what he wanted to say.

Dear Gaara,

Please forgive me for my actions during our last training session. You have always treated me with respect and I acted incredibly inappropriately.

I very much enjoyed our time together during your trips to Konoha and it was a great honour to get to know you better over the past six months. I value your friendship a great deal and I apologise if I misinterpreted some of our interactions.

In a moment of weakness I did not consider the consequences of my actions and I promise it will not happen again.

I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Your friend always,

Rock Lee

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After two months, Lee stopped waiting for a response. He already had his answer.

Instead, he focused his energy on preparing his apartment for the new arrival, now only a month away. He set up a crib in the corner of his bedroom and converted his dresser into a changing table, stocking the drawers with diapers and the tiniest clothes he had ever seen. He was incredibly grateful for all the things his friends had either lent or given him, half of which he had no idea what to do with, but he figured he would learn over time.

The rest of his time was spent out on missions, taking anything he could get to save up before the baby came. He was returning from a recent A-rank mission when he ran into Temari as she was out shopping. Lee had tried to babysit Shikadai any week he wasn’t away from Konoha, wanting to keep his commitment even if it brought back unpleasant memories. Thankfully Gaara apparently hadn’t mentioned Lee’s behaviour because Temari never mentioned anything, for which he was incredibly grateful.

“Back from another mission?” Temari asked. “You’ve been doing a lot of those lately.”

“Yes, I thought I should get in as many as I could before going on leave. I am sorry I have not been able to babysit much lately.”

“I understand, you have a lot going on right now.”

Despite her protests, Lee took a grocery bag and walked with her towards the Nara residence, as it was on the way back to his apartment.

“Actually, if you’re around, we’re having a little party for Shikadai’s first birthday on March 31st, you should stop by. Naruto and Sakura and everyone will be there, so it should be a good crowd.”

“Wow, one year old already! I will definitely attend if I do not have another mission!”

As they arrived at the gate to the Nara complex, Temari took the bag Lee had been carrying and paused for a moment.

“I didn’t get a chance to say it before, but thank you for being so kind to Gaara when he was here,” She said. “You two had a rough start but I know he enjoys your company, even if he doesn’t always let on.”

Lee gave a stiff smile to overshadow the guilt he was feeling. “I enjoy his too, and am glad I could be of help.”

Temari smiled at him before turning towards the house. “See you next week I hope.”

Lee nodded and turned back towards his apartment, adjusting his pack with a sigh.

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Fortunately, Lee’s next mission finished just in time for him to attend Shikagai’s birthday party, and he arrived at the Nara residence with a stuffed turtle he hoped the child would like.

“Congratulations Shikamaru!,” Lee exclaimed as the other man let him in. “I can’t believe
Shikadai is already one! Thank you for inviting me to celebrate!"

Shikamaru shrugged. “I’m not sure why Temari went to all this trouble, the kid doesn’t even know where his nose is, it’s not like he’s going to remember this.”

“Because we survived a whole year without killing him or each other.” Temari said, appearing suddenly behind him. “And I want cake.”

Shikamaru skulked away, thoroughly chastened, as Temari ushered Lee in.

“Thanks so much for coming. Grab something to drink and come join everyone.”

It appeared that a one-year-old’s birthday party was more a chance for the adults to get together as there were a surprising number of people milling about the house. Lee joined a small group in the living room who was surrounding a large blanket in the middle of the floor where Boruto, Sarada, and Chocho were playing with each other.

“Lee, you made it!” Sakura exclaimed. “This is going to be you next year, you must be getting excited! When is Mai due again?”

“April 22nd!” Lee beamed. “I just hope I have everything ready by then, I want to make sure I am prepared!”

“I don’t think you can ever be prepared for a new baby, especially your first,” Ino said, little Inojin’s pale eyes blinking up at the adults from his position on her hip.

“Well at least I have almost everything I need, thanks to everyone!”

“We may actually need to borrow some stuff after you,” Naruto said with a grin, sitting next with Hinata on the couch. “Hinata’s pregnant again!”

The group gasped and began talking excitedly, congratulating the couple as Hinata smiled warmly, snuggling into Naruto’s arm.

“This is so exciting!” Lee exclaimed. “All of our children will have the chance to grow up together!”

“And who knows, maybe they’ll all be on teams together some day!” Naruto added.

Lee grinned at the thought. “Now where is the birthday boy?” He asked, looking around. “I have a gift for him!”

“I think I saw him with Kankurou over there a couple minutes ago,” Sakura said, gesturing towards the dining area where another group was gathered.

“K-kankurou’s here?” Lee asked, the blood draining from his face. If Kankurou was here that would mean...

“Oh of course. You don’t think Gaara and Kankurou would miss their only nephew’s first birthday, do you?”

Lee whipped his head around, eyes wide, searching for a flash of red hair. He never would have come if he’d known Gaara would be there. He didn’t want to make things awkward, especially since it seemed to be clear that Gaara didn’t want anything to do with him.

The crowd around the dining table shifted and suddenly there was Gaara, in conversation with
Shikamaru, beginning to make their way towards the living room.

“I am going to get some water!” Lee stated suddenly, turning and quickly slipping behind Sakura and Ino, using them as a shield in an attempt to use every bit stealth he had. He fled into the kitchen, which was thankfully empty, and prayed he hadn’t been seen.

He leaned against the counter, his heart pounding. Why hadn’t Temari mentioned that her brothers would be here? Then again, he probably should have considered it a possibility, but he hadn’t wanted to be rude and not come when she had gone out of her way to invite him.

Lee grabbed a glass from the cupboard, filling it under the tap and gulping it down in an attempt to calm his nerves. This was bad. Lee figured he had three options. Go back out there and pretend everything was normal, go back out there and avoid Gaara all afternoon, or try to slip out unnoticed and apologise to Temari later.

Although Lee was always one to face challenges head on, after the roller coaster he had been through over the past few months, he was emotionally drained and defeated. He just didn’t think he could bear to face Gaara yet. Maybe over time they could get back to some sort of mutual acceptance, but today was neither the time, nor place.

He let out a steadying breath, his decision made. Hopefully everyone would still be in the living room and he could slip quietly into the foyer and out the door. Turning to leave, he froze when he found Gaara standing in the doorway blocking his path.

“You’re avoiding me.” Gaara’s arms were crossed over his deep red jacket, his expression unreadable.

“Oh, G-Gaara, I did not know you would be here,” Lee stammered. “I was just leaving.”

“Yes, well…I did not think you would want…You never responded to my letter, so I thought…” Lee could feel the jade eyes boring into him even as his did his best to avoid them. “…I thought you did not want to speak to me anymore.”

There was the slightest of movement in Gaara’s face as his brow furrowed. “I thought it best if we speak in person.”

The sounds of the party out in the main room seemed to only amplify the silence within the kitchen, both men seemingly unwilling to speak first. Unable to stand the tension, Lee was the first to break.

“Gaara, I am so sorry-!”

He stopped suddenly when Gaara held up a hand.

“I don’t have a lot of close friends,” Gaara began, stepping further into the kitchen. “It takes me a long time to feel comfortable around others and over the past few months I have felt…something like comfort when I am around you.”

“And I know I must have made you feel very uncomfortable that day-!”

“Let me speak.”

Gaara’s serious tone made Lee shut his mouth with a snap.
“I was surprised at how disappointed I was when you were out on a mission during my last visit, but I was equally glad that we were able to have the small amount of time that we did.” Gaara paused. “I didn’t know what to feel when you-“

“Know! It was completely inappropriate-!”

“Lee, please.”

“You have to forgive me!” Lee insisted, stepping up to Gaara and looking down at him with pleading eyes. “I would hate it if-“

“If you would just let me-“

“I promise it will never happen again, or I will do 5000-“

“Lee! Would you just be quiet for a minute!”

Lee didn’t think he’d ever heard Gaara raise his voice before and he blinked in surprise. Gaara had grabbed Lee’s upper arms in his frustration and was now glaring up at him. After a moment that felt much longer, Gaara let out a huff through his nose and pulled Lee down, crushing their mouths together.

The kiss was awkward at first, too much pressure and their teeth knocking together, but Lee was too shocked to care. After regaining his faculties he realized what was happening and began to kiss Gaara back with equal force, turning his head to slot their mouths closer together.

Lee cupped Gaara’s face in his hands, slowing and deepening the kiss as their initial fervour softened and sank into each other. Gaara let a long breath out through his nose, and his grip on Lee’s arms finally relaxed.

They didn’t hear the distant ringing of a phone, or a commotion out in the main room before Temari’s figure suddenly appeared in the doorway.

“There you are Lee-!”

Lee and Gaara quickly broke apart, but it was obvious that Temari had interrupted an intimate moment. Her brow furrowed, but that conversation would have to wait.

“The hospital just called, I guess Mai knew you’d be here. Her water just broke, she’s in labor.”

“What?!?” Lee exclaimed. “She’s not due for another three weeks!”

“You’re more that welcome to tell her that, but I doubt it will make much of a difference.”

Lee couldn’t think straight, his emotions doing a complete 180 from the moment before. He turned to Gaara.

“I-I have to go.”

“Of course.” Gaara nodded, his fingers grazing Lee’s arm.

Lips still tingling, Lee slipped past a suspicious Temari and raced out the door towards the hospital.

Chapter End Notes
What? Another cliffhanger? What ever could happen next :) ?
Also, I realized too late that Shikadai’s birthday is officially listed as September 23rd, but you’ll just have to allow me this one. I’ve also taken some artistic liberties with the ages of the kids, although they’re still all within a year or two of each other.
Thanks again for all the comments, they honestly make my day!
Chapter Notes

It's baby time!

Please note that a tiny human has never come forth from my own loins, but I did try to do as much research as possible for this chapter (let's hope nobody takes a look at my internet history for a while...). Enjoy!

Lee rushed up to the admittance desk at the hospital, eyes wide and out of breath, having run all the way from the Nara’s.

“Mai Hidetsu’s room please!”

The nurse on duty checked the computer. “She’s in room 305 on the Maternity Ward. Are you the intended parent?”

Lee nodded, the label still feeling foreign as the nurse printed out a hospital bracelet and attached it around his wrist to identify him. As soon as it was secure Lee raced up the nearest stairs.


Compared to Lee, Mai seemed perfectly calm from where she was sat up in bed. She had already changed into a pale blue hospital gown, her auburn hair loose around her face, and was hooked up to a number of monitors that beeped quietly in the background. Hiro sat in a chair next to the bed and shared an amused glance with his wife at Lee’s distress.

“It’s okay Lee,” Mai reassured him, smiling. “The doctor has already been by to check us out and both the baby and I are fine. This baby is just impatient to come out! Now come sit down, it’s going to be a while.”

The concerned look on Lee’s face didn’t dissipate but he took a seat on the other side of Mai’s bed.

“We didn’t have the chance yet to talk about the plan for today,” she said. “Did you want to be in the room for the birth?”

Lee blanched. He’d expected that he would be out in the waiting room when the time came. “Oh, I did not think…would that not make you uncomfortable?”

Mai chuckled. “Oh no, you’d be surprise how quickly your sense of modesty goes out the door during labour. Plus it’s an exciting moment for you.”

When Lee hesitated, Hiro spoke up. “Believe me Lee, you want to be here. It’s pretty amazing.”

Lee hadn’t had much chance to get to know Hiro, although he occasionally saw him around the Kage building and spoke to him briefly during Lee’s impromptu baby shower. Hiro was broad shouldered with a square jaw and short black hair, and Lee could definitely see the resemblance now between him and his daughter Soari (it seemed Koichi took more after his mother). Lee was a
little surprised that the older man would be so calm about Lee being in the room during such an intimate moment for his wife, but he seemed so genuine that Lee considered the idea.

“Alright,” Lee finally agreed. “But please let me know if you change your mind at any time!”

Mai’s smile turned to a grimace as she let out a slow breath, a contraction wracking her body. Lee was visibly shaken as he watched her breathe through the pain. In his mind he’d known that this was coming but after spending so much time with Mai over the last nine months it was hard to watch.

After a minute or so the contraction subsided and Mai relaxed back into the pillows. She laughed when she saw Lee’s stricken face.

“Don’t look so worried! It’s going to get a lot worse than that before it’s over, but I’m a pro! It’s nothing I can’t handle!”

The doctor came by a little while later to check on Mai’s progress, and Lee used the time to find a phone to see if someone could stop by his place and grab a few things for him. There was no telling how long he’d be at the hospital until the birth and then he’d be staying a couple days until he could take the baby home. He also made sure to call the mission desk to let them know to take him off the active duty roster. As of now he was officially on paternity leave.

Half an hour later Gai arrived in the waiting room with a duffel bag of Lee’s things.

“Thank you so much Gai-sensei, I had not even though to prepare a bag ahead of time this early!”

“It was no problem at all my boy! How is Mai doing?”

“Amazing, she is so calm about everything!”

“And what about you?” Gai asked, his expression turning serious.

Lee sank down into a chair next to Gai’s wheelchair. “I thought I would have more time to… prepare, I suppose, for this day,” He said. “I do not know if I am ready.”

Gai rested a strong hand on Lee’s shoulder. “Lee, I don’t know a lot of people who could have made the decision you did nine months ago. You have always known what you wanted and went after it with such youthful determination. I know that you have done everything possible to prepare for this moment, even if you do not believe it yet.”

Lee kept his eyes on the linoleum floor, feeling tears pricking the corners of his eyes. Everything had been happening so fast that now that he had a moment to sit and breathe, the significance of the moment was finally starting to hit him.

“One of your dreams is coming true today, Lee. In a matter of hours you are going to be a father and be able to be there for your child for the rest of their life,” Gai continued, his voice thick. “I wish I could have been there for you from the start, but I hope you know now how incredibly proud I am of you.”

Lee looked up to see tears in his sensei’s eyes, which only made his own begin to fall in earnest.

“Thank you sensei,” he managed to get out as the two enveloped each other in a fierce hug. It was such a comfort to have Gai there for support, even for a moment.

“Now get back in there,” Gai finally said, pulling back. “Mai still needs you!”
Lee nodded, wiping his eyes and heading back down the hall.

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Mai’s contractions were about five minutes apart when she arrived at the hospital that afternoon, but began to get progressively stronger and closer together as evening fell. Hiro and Lee did what they could to ease her discomfort, Hiro massaging her back or supporting her in his arms, and Lee on ice chip and cool cloth duty.

Despite Lee’s concern at her distress, Mai wanted to wait for an epidural, preferring to be able to walk around and change positions to control the pain for as long as possible. Lee marvelled at her mental and physical strength throughout the entire process, amazed at how composed she stayed.

Around 8pm, with assurance from the doctor that it was still going to be a while, Hiro left to check in on Saori and Koichi before they went to bed at their grandparents’ house, leaving Lee to man the fort.

“I need a distraction Lee,” Mai huffed out during a particularly intense contraction. “Talk to me.”

Lee wracked his brain for something interesting to take Mai’s mind off the pain as he rubbed her lower back, his mind drifting to the events earlier in the day (which by now felt like weeks ago).

“I, uh, saw Gaara today.”

“Really?” Mai asked between pants. “I didn’t, heh, know the Kazekage was, haaaaa, in town.”

“Neither did I. We were both at his nephew’s birthday party.”

“That must have, ungh, been a bit awkward.”

“At first yes, but then we talked and he…kissed me.”

“What?!” Mai exclaimed.

Lee flushed at the thought, unable to keep the smile off his face. “Yes, it was certainly a surprise.”

“I’m so, unnhh, happy for you!” Mai let said, letting out a moan. “What does this mean?”

“We, uh, did not really get that far,” Lee admitted, his face turning a brighter shade of red.

Mai tried to laugh but it caught in her throat as she cried out and clutched Lee’s hand. “I think it might be time for that epidural,” she admitted as the contraction ebbed, sweat dotting her brow.

As he left to find a nurse, Lee’s thoughts returned to Mai’s question. What did it mean now that Gaara had kissed him? If he hadn’t had to rush off to the hospital what would have happened? It certainly seemed like Gaara felt the same as Lee did, but did that mean they were together now? How could they even be if they lived in different villages?

Lee pushed the questions to the back of his mind as he was finally able to track down a nurse. Fifteen minutes later held Mai’s hand as the epidural was administered, trying his hardest not to look at the size of the needle being inserted into her spine. Thankfully Mai was much more comfortable afterwards and was able to get a bit of rest. Hiro returned a little while later and he and
Lee took turns resting and checking on Mai as the night turned late.

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Lee felt like he had only closed his eyes for a moment when there was a hand on his shoulder.

“Lee, it’s time,” Hiro said. Lee jolted awake to see that there were now a number of people bustling about the room, checking monitors and setting up equipment.

The bottom of Mai’s bed had been removed, replaced with a set of stirrups, and a large surgical lamp that had been brought down from the ceiling. A nurse draped a surgical sheet over Mai’s lower half for privacy (for which Lee was extremely grateful), and helped to position her in the stirrups.

“Are you dad?” The doctor asked Lee as she pulled on a set of gloves and a surgical smock.

Lee nodded mutely, standing at Mai’s side and gripping her hand.

“Okay then, let’s have a baby!” The doctor settled onto a rolling stool at the end of the bed and adjusted the lamp. “Mai, with your next contraction I want you to take a big breath and hold it as you bear down. Nurse Fumi will count it down for you.”

The nurse watched the monitor until the next spike began to appear. “Okay, here comes a contraction. Now big breath, and ten, nine, eight -“

Mai pushed as the nurse counted down, then immediately got her to take another deep breath and push again. Mai collapsed back into the pillows as the contraction ended, gripping Hiro’s hand in one of hers and Lee’s with the other.

Only a minute or so later another contraction came and Lee’s heart was in his throat again as Mai strained, eyes clenched tight. Lee felt himself holding his own breath, almost feeling like he was having an out-of-body experience. He had been waiting nine months for this moment but couldn’t quite believe that it was suddenly happening right in front of him.

“I can see the head,” the doctor remarked after the fourth set of pushes. “Just a few more and this baby will be out.”

Mai was exhausted, sweat dotting her brow, but she took another deep breath and continued, her grip on Lee’s hand like a vice.

“I think we’re going to have this baby on the next push,” the doctor commented from the base of the bed.

“Just one more and you’re done,” the nurse urged as Mai furrowed her brow with one final push, Lee subconsciously lending her all of his strength in that final moment.

“And - it’s a boy!”

A rush of commotion, and suddenly there he was, messy and alive and real. The tiny, red-faced infant was lifted onto Mai’s chest and Lee could only look on in shock, speechless as tears streamed down his face and his son took his first breaths, letting out a series of high pitched cries.
“Hi baby,” Mai cooed, in tears herself. “Oh Lee, he’s perfect!”

The nurses wiped the baby down as he bawled, and clamped the umbilical cord where it was still attached.

“Would you like to cut the cord dad?” The doctor asked, handing Lee a pair of scissors. He took them numbly and cut between the two clamps, finally severing the tie that Mai had graciously nurtured for so long.

The baby was quickly whisked away to be fully cleaned off and checked, and Lee finally found his voice.

“Th-thank you,” He managed to get out, pulling Mai into a hug. “Thank you so much!”

They held each other for a moment, crying together, before Mai pulled back and sniffed. “Go hold your son.”

As the doctor finished up with Mai, a nurse returned with the baby clean and swaddled in a blanket, handing him to Lee.

“Congratulations!”

Lee cradled him in his arms a little awkwardly at first, almost afraid he might break such a tiny thing. The baby made small gurgling noises as he scrunched his round face, but his big dark eyes were instantly trained on Lee. Lee felt like his heart might burst as he looked down at his son, tears still streaming down his face.

“Did you want to do some skin-to-skin?” The nurse asked after a moment. Lee nodded, still unable to tear his eyes away from the bundle in his arms, and let himself be led to a chair by the window.

Lee reluctantly let the nurse take the baby for a moment as he took off his shirt and hand wraps. He’d read about skin-to-skin contact and how important it was, especially after birth. It helped to develop a bond between parent and child, as well as regulate the baby’s temperature, breathing, and heart rate. Plus after going through the stress of birth, it was calming for the baby.

The nurse unwrapped the him from the blanket and gently laid him against Lee’s bare chest Lee instinctually put a calming hand on his son’s back. He couldn’t believe how impossibly soft and warm that new baby skin was as it squirmed against him, everything a new sensation.

Lee’s thumb gently stroked the soft black hair on his son’s head as it rested underneath his chin as tiny fists clutched at Lee’s chest, fingers curling and uncurling. Lee had never felt anything so amazing in his entire life.

“Congratulations Lee,” Hiro said from Mai’s side. He kissed her forehead from where she was lying back in the bed, clearly exhausted but smiling as she watched Lee, her final journey as a surrogate complete.

“Do you have a name for him?” She asked.

“I was thinking of Metal,” Lee said, not taking his eyes off his son.

“Metal Lee.”

The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon, and it washed over the occupants of the room, bathing them in the orange glow of a new day. Lee could only stare at the tiny thing in his arms,
the weight on his chest a warm and solid assurance that from today his life would never be the same.

***

Name: Lee, Metal  
Sex: M  
Birth Date: April 1  
Time: 5:24am  
Weight: 6lbs 2oz  
Length: 18.5”  
Birthplace: Konoha, Land of Fire
Lee spent the next two days at the hospital until both Mai and Metal could be released. Mai was transferred to a double room so that Lee could have a place to sleep, despite his protests that she have her own room, Mai insisting that she wouldn’t be the one needing to get up at all hours when she went home.

Lee was secretly grateful for the help from Mai and the hospital staff as he got used to caring for a newborn, helping Metal get used to bottle feeding every few hours, changing his diaper, and swaddling him properly. Even though he’d had some experience babysitting Shikadai, it felt completely different with something so tiny and new.

Hiro brought Saori and Koichi during the afternoon of the first day to see their mom and gawk at the new baby. Thankfully, since Mai had been through the surrogacy process before, they understood the fact that the baby would not be coming home with them. Saori was especially glad of that fact when Metal started crying halfway through the visit, stating that one little brother was plenty.

The next day, once both Mai and Lee had been able to get a bit more rest, Tenten and Neji stopped by to meet the newest member of team Gai. Neji looked appropriately uncomfortable when Tenten insisted that Metal wanted to be held by his Uncle Neji, but Lee was able to catch a small smile on the Hyuuga’s face when he though no one was missing.

The best moment by far though was when Gai and Kakashi came by later that afternoon.

“This is Metal,” Lee said, trying to contain his emotion as he placed his son into Gai’s arms. Gai seemed speechless for once, eyes full as he looked down at what was for all intents and purposes his grandson for the first time.

Metal was surprisingly alert, eyes wide and searching before finally locking onto Gai’s face, which only made Gai cry even harder.

“I guess this one’s cuter than a puppy,” Kakashi admitted, peering over his husband’s shoulder.

Gai managed to compose himself after a little while, and he and Kakashi stayed until Metal began to fuss, Gai assuring he would be by again once Lee was home to help with the ‘noble endeavour of nurturing a new youthful spirit!’

Once they had gone and Metal had been fed and put down in his bassinet, Lee flopped down in a chair, exhausted after the whirlwind of the day.

“You’re certainly going to have lots of people willing to babysit,” Mai remarked from the bed.

Lee chuckled, laying his head back and closing his eyes. “Yes, I do not think that is going to be a problem.”

“Your sensei is so sweet, Metal is going to have such a good grandpa. And it was so nice of him and Hokage-sama to bring flowers, they’re beautiful.” Mai gently touched the petals of one of the blue hydrangeas from the vase on her bedside table.
“Oh, that reminds me!” Lee sat up and rummaged around in his duffel bag for a moment before pulling out a small, wrapped box and handing it to Mai.

“For me? You didn’t have to get me anything!”

“You have been so wonderful this entire time,” Lee insisted, his thick eyebrows drawing together. “I wanted you to know how grateful I am.”

Mai smiled fondly at the young man in front of her before unwrapping the gift, unveiling a slim black box and carefully opening it.

“Oh Lee…”

Inside was a delicate gold necklace with a small diamond set into a round setting in the center.

“I was a little worried when things began so early that I would have to exchange it for a March birthstone,” Lee admitted, “But thankfully it worked out in the end!”

Mai carefully clasped the chain around her neck, the diamond glittering where it hung just below her collarbone.

“Thank you Lee, it’s beautiful,” she said, pulling him into a hug.

“Thank you.”

***

All too soon the next morning came, and it was time for Lee to take Metal home for the first time. He and Mai shared a long hug before he left, both emotional over the bond they’d formed over the last nine months.

“Please feel free to come by any time!” Lee insisted. “I want Metal to know how much you did for us as he grows up.”

Mai nodded, tears in her eyes. “If you have any questions or need a babysitter, just give me a call.” She cupped Lee’s cheek fondly. “You are going to be such a good dad.”

She gave Metal a kiss on the forehead before hugging Lee again. “And let me know how everything else goes,” she whispered in his ear.

Lee blushed. Shikadai’s birthday seemed like a lifetime ago with all that had happened over the past few days, and he’d barely had time to think about what had happened with Gaara. Lee had no idea if Gaara was even in Konoha anymore- he barely knew what day it was.

After a final goodbye to Mai and her family, Tenten and Neji helped Lee get back to his apartment and get settled. Luckily Lee had already prepared his place for the most part, despite Metal’s early arrival, but it still felt incredibly strange to have a baby in his apartment. It wasn’t until after his teammates left and he was finally alone with Metal that he felt the weight of everything. He was a father. He had a son. They were a family now.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and held Metal up in front of him.
“Well, my little leaf, I guess it is just you and me now.”

***

The first few days were tough, even with Gai, Tenten, and Neji coming by at regular intervals, but it was worth it. Lee was utterly and entirely in love with his son.

He loved his tiny little fingers and toes, his mess of black hair, his big, dark eyes. He loved Metal’s tiny little frown, or the way he would stick his tongue out when he was hungry. Lee loved how Metal would look up at him during every feeding and then fall asleep in his arms. It almost made up for all the diapers, and there were SO MANY DIAPERS.

But then there were the tiny little onesies. Lee especially loved the green one that Gai had bought, complete with little orange legwarmers that Gai had made out of socks, even if they made it more difficult to get Metal undressed in the middle of the night. Lee had never appreciated snaps so much in his entire life. In fact, he debated integrating them into his own uniform (he may have been a little delirious when he’d had that thought).

Even with all the help, there were still times when Lee started to feel overwhelmed and began to doubt himself. One night just after Metal turned a week old was particularly bad, no matter what Lee did, Metal would not stop crying. He wasn’t hungry, or wet, or hot, and wouldn’t settle down long enough to sleep. Nothing seemed to soothe him, and at points Lee was practically in tears himself, he was so frustrated.

He almost regretted insisting that he could handle nights on his own. Gai-sensei and his teammates were so wonderful during the day, bringing meals and giving him breaks so he could sleep, but Lee knew that he’d eventually need to learn to do things on his own. Plus they all had their own responsibilities to deal with- Tenten and Neji were still running missions, and Gai was teaching taijutsu at the academy during the week. Unfortunately it happened that both ended up coinciding on the one day that Lee needed help the most.

He was finally able to get Metal to settle down long enough to sleep for a little by late morning (either that or Metal had simply tired himself out from crying), but just as Lee was about to lie down for a nap one of his neighbours slammed their front door and Metal began wailing again.

By the late afternoon Lee was nearing the end of his rope. He didn’t know what to do, and was starting to worry that something was really wrong. He was bouncing Metal in his arms to no avail, debating whether he should call Mai or even Sakura for help when there was a knock at his the door. He’d been worried that the crying was going to irritate his neighbours so he took a deep breath before he opened the door, ready to apologize, Metal still screaming in his arms.

“Gaara!”

Lee blinked in surprise. Gaara looked composed as always, if a little uncertain, standing on Lee’s doorstep dressed simply in his dark red tunic and pants. Lee, on the other hand, was wearing a rumpled t-shirt and sweatpants covered in various unidentified stains, his normally sleek hair sticking up at odd angles, and if his expression wasn’t enough to go by, the dark circles under his eyes certainly described his state of mind.

“Is this a bad time?” Gaara asked.
“No, no, please come in!”

Lee desperately wished he’d had time to tidy up. He was normally very neat, but at the moment it seemed like every surface in his apartment was covered with burping blankets, pacifiers, and empty bottles.

“Please excuse the mess,” Lee said, embarrassed that this would be Gaara’s first impression of his apartment. Thankfully Gaara only seemed to take a cursory glance around, his attention on Lee and the upset infant in his arms.

“What’s his name?”

“Metal,” Lee said over the noise, still bouncing to try and soothe his wailing son. “I am sorry, he will not stop crying. I do not know what is wrong with him.”

“May I hold him?”

“Are you sure? He is especially fussy today.”

Gaara gave a slight shake of his head and Lee handed Metal over hesitantly. Gaara cradled him so he was resting on his stomach over Gaara’s forearm, rocking him gently and stroking a soothing hand over his back.

“Temari used to do this for Shikadai,” Gaara explained, as Metal’s cries began to slowly quiet, before calming completely.

Lee let out a shaky breath, relieved, and then ashamed as he felt the prickle of tears in his eyes.

“Sorry,” he said, scrubbing at his face. “It was a difficult night.”

Gaara furrowed his brow. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Oh, I am fine,” Lee insisted, managing a weak approximation of his nice guy smile.

“You are not.”

Maybe it was the exhaustion, or maybe it was the intensity of Gaara’s gaze, but suddenly Lee’s expression crumbled.

“I cannot do this,” he whispered, half to himself, eyes on the floor, as tears began to fall in earnest. “I thought I could handle it on my own, but-“

“You can.”

“I cannot even comfort my own son-“

“Lee.” Gaara was using his Kazekage voice now. “You are exhausted and overwhelmed, and Metal can probably feel it.” There was suddenly a comforting hand on Lee’s arm, steady and grounding. “I know a little about what sleep deprivation can do to your mental state.”

Lee managed a shaky laugh, wiping at his eyes.

“Tell me what you need,” Gaara said, his voice low.

“This helps,” He said, finally meeting Gaara’s eyes. “And perhaps a shower.”
“A shower and a nap.” Gaara’s expression was firm. “Go. We’ll be fine.”

As if to emphasize his point, Gaara walked further into the apartment with the now quiet baby, leaving Lee no option but to comply.

He made his way towards the bathroom, the sudden quiet of the apartment strange. Turning on the shower, he shed his day old clothes and stepped into the hot steam. He tipped his face under the spray, letting it run through his hair and down his back as he let out a deep sigh.

Knowing that Gaara was waiting, he tried not to linger too long, as amazing as the water felt, so after washing he quickly dried himself and dressed in a fresh set of clothes. He flopped heavily onto his bed, burying his face in his pillow and savoring the feeling of just lying down after being awake so long. He didn’t want Gaara to have to be alone with Metal if he was still fussy, so he wouldn’t sleep long. Just a quick power nap, thirty minutes tops.

***

Lee’s eyes opened slowly, blinking against the light streaming through the window. He pressed his face further into his pillow, clutching it to himself as he slowly woke. He hadn’t slept that well in days, and already felt a million times better. Rolling and stretching lazily, he glanced at his alarm clock, hoping he hadn’t slept too long.

6:18am

Lee jolted upright, grabbing the clock to get a better look. 6:18am?! He’d slept more than twelve hours.

Lee scrambled to his feet and out of his bedroom, his brief sense of contentment replaced with alarm.

“You slept.”

Gaara sat on the couch, a book on taijutsu open in one hand and Metal asleep on his chest.

“Gaara! I am so sorry! I did not mean to sleep so long!”

“I’m glad you did, you looked like you needed it,” Gaara said, putting down the book and standing up.

“But I made you stay here all night! Was Metal much trouble? I did not even hear him!”

“He woke up a few times so I fed him, but then he went right back to sleep again. He probably needed it as much as you did.”

Indeed Metal seemed contently asleep even as Gaara transferred him into Lee’s arms.

“Let me put him down and I will be right back,” Lee promised, taking Metal into his bedroom and settling him into his crib. Thankfully Metal did not wake, and Lee closed the door quietly behind him, grabbing the monitor.

Gaara was sitting quietly again on the couch when he returned, and Lee could feel the other man’s eyes follow him as he came to sit next to him.
“Thank you for staying, you did not have to,” Lee said, glancing at him but unable to keep his gaze for long.

“I didn’t mind.”

They were silent for a moment before Gaara spoke again. “He looks just like you.”

Lee smiled. “Yes, although I do not know if he will be as happy about it when he is older.”

“He’s lucky.”

Lee felt his cheeks flush. He was fully aware that this was the first time they had been alone since what had happened in the Nara’s kitchen, but he wasn’t quite sure how to bring it up or what he wanted to say. He still didn’t fully understand his feelings, but he knew that he had been glad when Gaara kissed him. Now that Gaara was sitting here beside him the only thing he could think about was that he wanted to do it again.

“Gaara,” Lee began, breaking the silence that had stretched between them. “Could I…Would it be alright if I kissed you?”

He finally met Gaara’s eyes and was surprised at the uncertainty in them. He was nervous for a moment that the answer would be no, but then Gaara head nodded a fraction.

Lee could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he eased himself a little closer, their shoulders brushing together as he slowly leaned in. Their first two kisses had been sudden and eager, but this time just before their lips touched, Lee hesitated. Their eyes locked, some unspoken message passing between them before Gaara closed the rest of the space and brought their lips together.

Lee’s eyes fell shut and he let out a long breath through his nose he hadn’t realized he’d been holding as he sank into the kiss, the rest of the room falling away. Gaara’s lips were soft and warm under his as they moved each other, slow and intent.

Their first kisses had been instinctual, neither thinking much, but now Lee kissed Gaara with purpose, bringing a hand up to cup Gaara’s jaw, his thumb gently tracing the pale skin of his cheek. In response Lee felt Gaara’s hand come up to the back of his neck, fingers tangling in the short hair there and pulling him closer as the kiss deepened. Gaara had completely overwhelmed Lee’s senses, but still he wanted more, wanted to be closer, wanted this feeling to last forever.

They finally parted for air, foreheads pressed together as they each took steadying breaths.

“What is this?” Lee asked, the words barely a whisper between them. Gaara just shook his head against Lee’s before leaning up to meet Lee’s lips again. It felt so incredibly right, like Lee should never not be kissing Gaara, like they should have figured this out a long time ago.

There was a sudden crackling of noise on the monitor, and both turned to look at the offending device, breaking their kiss. Metal stirred, making a few mewling noises before quieting once more. Lee relaxed and turned to capture Gaara’s mouth again.

“-Lee-“ Gaara said against his lips.

“He will sleep for a little longer,” Lee said between kisses.

“It’s alright,” Gaara said, pulling back to press his forehead against Lee’s. “I should go, Kankurou will be wanting to leave soon.”
Lee’s face fell. “You are returning to Suna?”

“Yes.”

They were both silent, their sudden reality made all the more clear as Metal stirred again on the monitor, letting out a few half-hearted cries.

“I don’t know when I will be back,” Gaara said quietly. “But whatever this is…I can wait. Can you?”

It was painful, but Lee knew that there was really no way around their current situation. Gaara was Kazekage, he needed to be in Suna, and Metal was Lee’s entire world right now, and his whole life and support system was in Konoha. Lee felt the beginning of tears in his eyes at how unfair it was, but then stopped himself.

Nine months ago he’d wanted a family, and now he had a son. Nine months ago he had given up on anyone ever wanting him, and now he was sitting here kissing Gaara. None of his dreams may have gone the way he’d originally imagined they would, but he had always found a way to achieve them. It seemed that no matter the obstacle, Lee could overcome anything life threw at him as long as he had enough determination.

Gaara was still looking at Lee, awaiting his answer when Lee finally let the tears he had been holding back fall and nodded.

He would wait.

Chapter End Notes

To be continued in Degrees of Separation. Coming (hopefully), fall 2019.

Aaaaahhhhhhh, I can't believe it's done! I've never written anything this long in my life and it is such an amazing feeling for it to be complete!

A huge thank you to everyone who's read, left kudos, or commented, it really means the world to me. None of my friends are into any of this so all the support has been amazing!

A big thank you also to ManaBanana for letting me borrow Lee's nickname for Metal, I think it's adorable!

I do already have a sequel outlined for the most part, so I'm hoping to get that drafted up and going soon!

Finally, a request for all fellow writers. I'm always looking for ways to improve, so if you have any comments or suggestions about my writing please let me know in the comments. As long as they're constructive I'm open to them!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!